FUNERAL ELEMENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE IN THE 16TH - 17TH CENTURIES. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FUNERAL ELEMENTS IN RUSSIA AND MOLDOVA

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Abstract: The article analyses the types, forms of observation of funeral rituals in the Eastern Europe in the 16th – 17th centuries. Also it focuses on common and distinct features in the carrying out funeral ceremonies by Russian and Moldavian population.

Key terms: funeral, burial form, afterlife, Russians, Moldavians, Eastern Europe.

The funeral rite: forms of funeral rites;
Funeral factors: species
Funeral remembrance service: a ritual feast

Elements of funeral ceremonies in the Orthodox world have their roots during a pre-Christian epoch. The question as to what happens to a person after his/her death and where the boundary between life and death is, exists in all civilizations and it is treated by all religions. Basically everyone tries to unravel the poser of death on his/her side, but everyone intersects in one point of view – death is shrouded with secrecy and it is inevitable. Throughout the history of mankind there was a set of questions in concerning funeral ceremony – the way one has to act when a person dies and how relavites should perceive the burial. The daily practice of the funeral ceremonies has been completely subordinated to traditional beliefs and it was commonly considered, that a soul, in the instant of leaving the body, becomes immortal.

Conceived as one of the major family ceremonies, the funeral ceremony was also an important public event. The form of burial, in the given period, practically, everywhere was identical – the body
was buried in the ground. Considering the various differences among the funeral ceremonies, one can also trace important common features. It reflects for instance the human faith in the afterlife, that dead people will somehow live after burial and that "in the next world" those things which one used during their lifetime (weapons, instruments of work, clothes, ornaments, dishes, etc.) will still be necessary and valuable.

As examples of funeral ceremonialism forms of burial in Russia and in Moldova shall be presented.

The description of a funeral ceremony in the concept of the Russian culture, conferred by N.I.Kostomarova: “the Death of a person was accompanied by treasured customs. The Russians believed that dying among one’s family members, surrounded by their collective memory, was perceived as a heavenly fortune. Feeling the approach of death, the Russians made a will, divided their fortune and for the serenity of their souls, they started to make kind deeds. As charitable affairs, worthy in the great moment of death, the distribution of the benefaction, investment and donation gifts for the monasteries … deliverance of the slaves … the payment and forgiveness of the debts were considered… As soon as a person made his/her last breath, people used to put a bowl with sacred water and one with porridge or flour. It was considered to be some sort of remains of paganism, custom that existed not only in the Russian culture, but also at the Tatars. The dead man was washed with warm water, he was put on a shirt and wrapped up in a white coverlet, or a shroud; also he was put on shoes or boots, and his hands were being put crosswise … his relatives went to collect clergy, and thus the custom required that each ecclesiastic invited to the burial, was to be sent a gift which usually consisted of vodka, honey and beer. The body was laid on a table while the coffin was being prepared. Ordinarily the coffin was wooden, both for the rich, and for the poor … when a coffin was to be lowered in the tomb, the cover was raised, and everyone was to approach to the dead man’s body and kiss it… The wife was supposed to cry and wail, and as for the wailers, they had to show their craft all together. The priest yielded the dead a dismissal document.

The certificates of the contemporaries are among of the main sources on the given subjects. Fletcher's and Olearius’ records sketch a picture of a funeral ceremony in the 16 – 17th centuries in Russia: the mourning for the dead person began in the house and quite often proceeded at the carrying out of the body. The dead was washed, dressed (according to Fletcher, in clothes in which he commonly used to wear: a caftan, trousers, boots, a hat and so forth; according to Olearius, however, - the individual was dressed in white linen clothes, probably specially prepared for the funeral, and red boots); as was earlier mentioned, the dead man’s hands were put crosswise and the body, was placed in a wooden carved coffin.

In Moldova, the funeral ceremonies have been described by Dmitry Kantemir. He has devoted the given question a separate chapter « About customs of burial in Moldova:” Moldavians bury dead men according to established church rules. As soon as someone dies, he/she is washed with warm water, until the body cools down. The dead man is dressed in his best and new clothes – laid down on a bench in a big room or a corridor. However, Moldovans do not hurry to bury the individual in the first day; they wait three days, in order to avoid incidentally burying him/her alive, fallen unconscious through illness.

Once they hear the sound of the bells, all the neighbours gather and grieve together with the relatives of the deceased; in the day of funeral they come again to lead the defunct to the church, ahead of the procession there are the priests, then the relatives and after the fulfillment of "the passage", the departed is buried on a church cemetery. If a boyar of a military rank dies, then on his horses a black cloth is being put and ahead they bear his military ammunition …

If the boyar held a high state post, the procession is accompanied by the governor himself, with the retinue … up to the tomb … then within three days in the Divan (the state counselling body) no one is appointed to his seat.

The mourning was perceived variously: if a peasant died, then his sons should have their heads uncovered for at least half a year, even if it was during a winter time, and they were also not to shave or have their hair cut… Knowing ahead did not prevent the compliance with the custom of forty days. Nowadays, however, nobody honours this ritual; people only wear black mourning clothes and let their hear grow.

When a brother of a young girl died, according to the tradition she had to cut a ringlet of her hair and on custom, cut off a ringlet of the hair of the deceased and bind it to the cross; throughout the year she had to watch over the ringlet so it would not fall down; otherwise, she would have to cut another coil of her hair and tie it again to the cross.
They (the Moldovans-L.Z.) generally, go to the tomb of the defunct every Sunday during the first year and mourn them; wealthy people hire wailers who come to the tomb and sing the special funeral songs combined with verses in which burdens of their lives are mentioned; for example, life is compared to the thin string which has been torn off by death … and as though to tell the late, that it was offensive, that he/she has left the world, nothing saying anything 6.

As already mentioned above, the funeral in Moldova took place on the third day. However, in Russia, it occurred on the 8th or even the 9th day after the death of the person, especially during the winter period. «Particularly, the notable and the rich, were not “committed” to the earth in the first day after their death. The body was kept in the cold “vibe” of a church, sometimes for eight days; at this time the clergy served daily the liturgy and the requiems. At last, on the eighth day, the late was given away to the ground» 7.

The coffin was carried to the cemetery accompanied by a great parade with candles 8. At the tomb, the coffin was once again opened, the funeral liturgy was finalized and the priest, according to Olearius, gave the deceased a passport signed by the patriarch 9.

One of the brightest and full pictures of Russia of the beginning of the 18th century, the epoch of the reign of young Peter I, was depicted in the book of the Dutch artist, ethnographer and writer, de Bruin (1652-1727). This skilled traveler and observer has seen and recorded several things during his trips around the country 10.

Chapter XI, to a large extent, has been devoted to the description of the «customs of the Russians at their marriages, births and funerals … » de Bruin, illustrates the way the funeral procession of the solvent townspeople took place. «Their funeral ceremonies occur as follows: the body of the defunct is kept in the house and on the eve of the ceremony, important people are invited, such as fellow countrymen of the late, then the most part of the merchants and some other friends living in city or the given village.

The invitation was done by two persons, related to the deceased, appointed already for this kind of social occasion, or elites from the family of the defunct. They were being dressed in long black cloaks, with a weeper on their hats. Even though the carrying of the deceased was ordinarily done at 2 o’clock in the afternoon, the “commitment” to the earth itself took place, during winter time, at night and as for the summer period, it occurred in the late part of day, as well.

As for the escort, one was to pick fifteen or sixteen mourners and ten to twelve carriers; they were all to be married people, dressed in black long cloaks, which, as a matter of fact, were stored and available for this particular occasion, in churches. The mourners were to go on the right side. The closest relatives of the deceased and the carriers of the coffin exchanged solemn bows with the people, invited to the ceremony. The carriers had their hats fastened with a piece of a weeper and the other piece was put on their shoulder; sometimes, they were given white gloves as well.

On two tables prepared in two different chambers, there were various refreshing drinks, and all the invites were treated constantly with wine … sugar pastry… Before the carrying of the body out of the house, the carriers were usually given gifts, which consisted of silver spoons, having the name of the late cut out on it 11.

Memoirs, diaries and notes of foreign missionaries represent a valuable source regarding the customs description. Tens and hundreds of missionaries, diplomats, merchants, travelers have reflected in the diaries and memoirs a life, religion and customs of different people. Moldova is not an exception in the given case. Marko Bandini, for example, after visiting the country in 1644, left an interesting message in what concerns, notably, the funeral ceremony. «They (the Moldovans-L.Z.) believe in the souls of the dead and according to the conventional popular beliefs, on Great Thursday, their parents, grandfathers and great-grandfathers come to their doors for meals; for this reason, early a notch, a father or a mother of the family, makes a fire in front of the house, puts a stool covered with a pure fabric, puts bread, meal and drinks on it, so that the deceased ancestors can calm their souls and spirits» 12.

The notes of another missioner of the middle of 17th century, Paulo de Aleppo, who has left a detailed description of customs and traditions of Moldavians in the specified time interval, represent an exceptional interest. He has notably devoted the given matter a separate chapter, XVIII: “Funerals in Moldova”, in which he brings forward specific cases.

Primarily, he described his attendance at the funeral meal with the patriarch: «… if the big bell has rung out, it usually means that someone has died. If the family wishes to bury the late in a monastery then they ask the priests (special – L.Z.) to collect all the city clergy, with the ring of the bell, to the funeral. It only happens though, when the deceased is a wealthy and influential man; if the
defunct was a poor man, he would be buried without the peal and nobody would know. After that 6 priests dressed in philos, with two deacons and a censer, go to the house of the late »13.

In the respective description, a distinguished attention is paid to the peal. It is generally agreed, that the peal has a symbolical character, whether it regards a certain holiday, mourning, etc. In the Christian world, one had to inform of an individual’s death using a specific mourning alarm, irrespective to whether it was the city or rural environment. In the respective case, the social status of the late was being emphasized, which was notably noble.

Further, Paulo de Aleppo depicts a direct procedure for the funeral ceremony; in what regards the Moldovans, a burial for them took place in the following manner:

“They (the Moldovans-L.Z.) used to traditionally bury the deceased on the second or third day..., with their face uncovered; the defunct was surrounded with candles, which burnt night and day. Any priest who arrived (to hold the funeral service-L.Z.) of the late, read the Gospel from the beginning until the end, multiple times, until the funeral took place, eventhouth fifty priests or deacons come along; they all did that for hefty reference (which they were later given).

...the deceased is carried on a stretcher, the priests, holding the candles, lead the procession... and under the sound of the peal, they take the defunct into the church. And then the silence reigns. The patriarch wears the mantle... and stays at the head of the deceased, who is lying with his/her face uncovered and the icon on their chest; and according to the custom, the deacon gives the patriarch a censer, and, with a crucified gesture he censers the incense of the deceased and the doors of the altar, saying "God blessed", and then he begins the service " outbreak". He burns the incense on the right side, then the left one and on the sight of all the priests and laity who are attending the ceremony, then censers the incense around the stretcher again and as he turns his face toward the sunrise, he crosses himself three times...saying „Forgive us, O Lord”»14.

Furthermore, Paulo de Aleppo writes, that this procession was led by the patriarch of the bishops, also twice and the funeral service was held until the „kissing of the late”15. A distinguished attention the author pays to the custom (which is respected nowadays as well), „there is a tradition, which says that the wife, children and the relatives of the defunct, should kneel while the Gospel is being read”. Afterwards, the prayer for forgiveness of the sins is read, with an icon on the chest of the deceased, which is directed to the east...the icon is kissed... Two of the late’s relatives, stand at the defunct’s feet and share references with all the invites and the poor...in wrapped scarves (specially sewn -L.Z.). When two boyars arrive, by two, respectively to their rank, the deceased is carried away from the church, toward the cemetery and burried.

If the deceased is wealthy enough, everyone is invited to the funeral meal. A bowl with “kolivo” and candles are brought, while the priest says: Blessed Lord," Forgive us, O Lord "... mentioning the name of the deceased ... reads the prayer, and the guests take the kolivu (kutyu), and pray for the deceased”16.

Here I would like to draw attention to a feature that is a regional-geographical characteristic, the so-called reference. In countries all over the Eastern European region or the Balkan zones, while burying the deceased, alms were being given, especially to the poor. But only in Moldova, the custom of the „references” was expanded, and it is important to mention that it survived the time, of course, having been altered up till the present, but on the intrinsic or symbolic level.

The “reference” reflects the gifts, which are given at the funeral ceremony to the relatives and distant family. It necessarily includes a full set of household items, which were used by the late while living. These include: carpets, cushions, blankets, a table laden with kitchen utensils and containers, as well as food and drinks, garments, towels, pots, buckets, etc. They depend on the defunct’s position in the society, the richer the family, the more substantial the references are. The respective custom is quite expensive, that is why the Moldavians prepared to this event (the death or the funeral ceremony) in advance. References were purchased ahead of time and kept in a specially reserved place of the house, known only by the close ones. Often, the funerals in Moldova cost no less than weddings or the christening.

When young people died, they were buried in wedding attires: the girl wore a wedding white dress, whereas the young man was dressed like a groom.

In general, the so called “tree of life” was made; a branch of a tree was taken and decorated with things, such as clothing, footwear, headgear, which were carried at the funeral procession, and after the burial, were given for reference, above the grave.

The young people were pined with wedding bunches with black ribbons, which symbolized, apparently, that the future of the deceased was cut short by death. Funeral songs were also
accompanied by the same versification about how happy would the future of the young girl or boy have been (family, home, kids), but "death chose for them another way (another world), another house (a dark grave)."

Children were buried according to the generally established customs, with abundant references and "tree of life", which symbolized a deep sorrow of parents. The numerous references, in some way, reflected the provision of all children in need, in the after life world.

The already mentioned, Paulo de Aleppo, described the mourning customs in Wallachia, as well. Stressing that the religious funeral service is very similar with that of the Moldovans...at great expense...the sound of the peal rang for the defunct...the priests and deacons were in the house of the deceased..in appropriate clothes and holding candles, that were to be handed out..as well as the alms...to all the invited and including the poor...while reading the prayer.17

"In Moldova, Wallachia and in the country of the Cossacks, all the Christians were buried in coffins made of planks (wooden-L.Z.)18.

A similar situation was typical for Russia, confirmed by the contemporary sources: ,,funeral procession in the summer period took place with the aid of carriages or the horseback, due to the impossibility of walking. Coffins were made primarily from oak tree"19.

Generally, funeral ceremonies in the Christian zones, whether Orthodox or Catholic, (in countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Moldova or Walachia) submitted changes only regarding the decoration, which was, as a matter of fact, constantly changing, accordingly to the prevailing forms of jewelry. The deceased was taken rarely to the cemetery, as the established local tradition considered that the late had to be carried in one’s arms. Therefore, funeral supplies remained the same as before, ie which included a stretcher, coffins, funeral veils and fabric. The coffins were notably made of wood, as well as stone, burnt clay or metal. (of copper, tin, lead). The way they were decorated is very similar to the contemporary one20.

In the funeral ceremony there were several important items to be observed and followed, such as decorative elements, that were significant during the life of the deceased.

For instance, the soul of the defunct, separted from the body, was perceived as something dressed in its best clothes and covered with special veils.

Funeral veils, until the end of the XVIIth century, were made in the old-fashioned way in the shape of an oblong rectangular scarf, but since that period, people began to sew them using a few pieces, so that it would count as to cover the whole coffin, with their edges touching the ground when it was carried away. The robes were also made out of diverse fabrics- wool and silk, velvet and brocades, with the colour diverging as well, although the dominating one was black22.

For centuries, the funeral meal- the feast was one of the most important parts of the funeral service at the Orthodox people. Funeral meals were plentiful and were by no means ascetic by nature23. The orwell was celebrated immediately after the funeral, which was particularly emphasized by the foreign missionaries:"the funeral takes place and ends with a feast"24.

The funeral meals and the memorial services or ceremonies for the deceased were held and celebrated on the third, fifth, ninth and the 20th day. On the fortieth day, a solemn funeral memorial feast was being arranged. Relatives were to order a religious service ,,for the repose of the soul" and visit the tomb at the cemetery25.

The fortieth day for the Orthodox people has a very deep symbolic meaning and is attached with forty days of mourning, which is considered to be the most consistent.

It is believed that at that time the soul is between heaven and earth, ie between the former earthly life and its ascension to the sky (in heaven or hell). This period is particularly strict in the observance of mourning.

It was natural for the relatives of the deceased to wear mourning clothes, usually black, without any jewelry or decorations. Apart from all of the above mentioned funeral rites, in the house of the deceased, it was traditionally established to leave, daily, on the table of the late’s house, meals and drinks; in the houses of the poor, it was common to put a piece of bread on the top of a glass. It was also imperative for a candle to constantly burn. It was also commonly considered, that prayers read for the rest of the defunct, the given alms, sacrifices and funeral feasts would ease the rise of the soul to heaven.

It was forbidden to asperse the deceased. Up until now, the following expression concerning the late is preserved: “Nothing bad or nothing at all”, the mourning held (depending on the case or age- children, spouse or parents) for years in some cases.
A particular importance is given to the so-called memorial days, in the Orthodox world - the Soul Saturday (the last before the Carnival and the week after Easter). In these days, it is conventional to order religious services for the rest of the soul, organize funeral ceremonies and make generous gifts and donations to charity institutions (or references in Moldova).

There are memorial church records concerning the defunct in every house and family, so that all deceased family members would be mentioned when a memorial service is being held.

Summarizing all the above-mentioned information, I would like to emphasize the similarities in burial customs and rituals, characteristic for the Orthodox people in Eastern European countries:

1. washing the body;
2. the dressing in new, clean clothes;
3. mourning of the relatives and the grievers;
4. the funeral ceremony not in the first day (usually on the third);
5. requiem service at home and at church;
6. instantly, the body is put on a bench, and afterwards in a coffin;
7. burial in the coffin;
8. the coffin is more often carried on the shoulders and rarely in a carriage;
9. the deceased is covered with a funeral veil;
10. the reading of the Gospel in the church is read and honoured, as well as the “last kiss”;
11. after the lowering of the coffin in the tomb, the sharing of the alms (in Russia); (in Moldova - the reference);
12. after the funeral ceremony it was imperative to have a funeral feast;
13. at the funeral feast, ritual meals are to be eaten (kutya, porridge or specific tortillas) and particular drinks (kisel, beer, mead, wine);
14. the burial took place exceptionally at the cemetery, except the suicide cases;
15. the mourning was respected (3, 9, 40 days, half a year, etc)
16. the commonly known day, the memorial day(s), or the parental Saturday;
17. the distribution of alms and donations on the graves;
18. established tombstones (crosses made of wood and stone), plates, inscriptions;
19. Pomelniki/funeral services in the churches (the book with records of the deceased in the family, genus);
20. Graves of his parents and ancestors considered as sacred;
21. Suicides and criminals were buried separately, because they were not considered worthy to be buried in the cemetery.

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