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# NOTIONS OF «GOOD» AND «BAD» DEATH IN THE SYSTEM OF SLAVIC BELIEFS

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## IZVLEČEK

### **Koncepta “dobre” in “slabe” smrti v verovanjih Slovanov**

Ljudske opredelitve “dobre” in “slabe” smrti so povezane z opozicijo naravne in nasilne smrti. To idejo lahko zasledimo že v prvotnem slovanskem korenu \*- мръть ‘uničiti’ in predponi \*съ- ‘sebstvo’, ‘dobro’. V ljudski kulturi so bile cenjene želje po dobri smrti. Po ljudskih verovanjih dobra smrt pomeni: umreti naravne smrti, ob primernem času, na primernem prostoru in v družbi bližnjih sorodnikov. Tiste, ki so umrli “dobre” smrti, so imeli za častljive prednike - v nasprotju s tistimi, ki so umrli “slabe” smrti. Slednji se ne morejo preseliti na drugi svet in postanejo škodljiva demonična bitja. Ljudje so poskušali neutralizirati usodne posledice “slabe” smrti s posebnimi obredi. Glavni obred je bil poskus umrlemu zagotoviti njegov delež zemeljskih blagoslovov (hrano, obleko, simbolično pokristjanjevanje, simbolično poroko itd.). Praznoverje o “umrlem, ki hodi” je najbolj stalen del slovanske mitologije.

**Ključne besede:** smrt, pogrebne šege, mitologija, umrli

**Key words:** death, funeral rites, mythology, deceased

Ethnologists studying folk cultures have reasonably observed that understanding of the inevitableness of death is not a biological trait of human consciousness (in contrast to common for the man and animal universal sensations connected, for example, with hunger or sex appeal), i.e. such information is obtained not due to instinct but in the process of concrete social communication. It means, that the ideas concerning the man’s mortality and supposed life hereafter belong to the sphere of culture. Correspondingly, every ethnic culture creates its own special image of death. However, the history of ethnologic research until quite recently lacked thorough investigation in such most important segment of traditional culture as the system of beliefs and customs connected with death. Thus, Polish ethnographers have reasonably observed that in Slavic research «the ethnography of man’s dying is an extremely poor section of ethnology and, first of all, as specialists are prevented from thorough study of the phenomenon of death by their own taboo» (PSL, 1986 N 1-2: 57). The fact that the theme was to

a great degree tabooed until recently is confirmed by facts from Moscow higher educational institutions: attempts to suggest to linguistic and folklore students from the Moscow State University for diploma paper topics concerning lexical and phraseological studies about death, agony, funeral, - used to provoke inner protest and negative attitude both in students and their professors.

Hidden fear of death and utterly negative attitude to it have lead the man of the modern civilization to hushing up the very theme of death and post-death existence. In this connection, we may recall that nowadays it is a widely spread custom to keep children from participating in funerals and discussing problem connected with death; it is also considered improper to introduce the theme during social contacts; it is also considered wrong for a person to get ready for his own death etc.

It is quite different in folk culture. Though death inspires natural fear by its incomprehensibility and the idea of the end of earthly existence, nevertheless, death is interpreted only as a transition from one state to another, from one world to another. It's known that people belonging to the traditional culture used to tranquilly and light-heartedly get prepared to their own death, used to expect meetings with late departed relatives, believed they would frequent their home and the living members of the family etc. In many places of Slavic world a considerate head of family would prepare his own death-clothes and the coffin (and sometimes also for the wife and the eldest son) beforehand. It was a custom with Northern Russians to present to a relative or a close friend with a coffin made by oneself, and such present was highly valued and was thankfully accepted with no prejudice at all (Логинов 1993: 123). Wishes of «good» death (as well as wishes of good harvest, cattle increase, house-hold prosperity) were an adopted speech stereotype and constituted the basis of the positive verbal-formula in the system of traditional well-wishing. The estimation of a death as «good» or «bad» was one of the main concerns of the ethnic society, as death was never looked upon as a strictly family event: it was considered that the general well-being of the village depended on the utmost realization of all the standard regulations concerning the situation of dying and burial.

So what, according to the folk beliefs, is «good» death? In short, the following characteristics of this notion are essential: the death must be «one's own» (i.e. natural, easy, not violent); it must happened at «one's own» time (i.e. at an appropriate age); in «one's own» place and among «one's» relatives, and then all the customs accepted in «one's own» society should be observed during the burial.

The definition of «good» death, as linguists have proved, is present in the very word *смерть*. According to etymological data, the Slavic root \**сѣ-мѣртъ* should be correlated with Old-Indian *su-* meaning 'one's own, beneficent, good' and Indo-European *mrt* 'death' (Фасмер 1971, т.3: 686).

So, according to Slavic beliefs, «one's own» death is non-violent death, happened at an old age, when man's potential of vitality is exhausted. The Russian expression *избыть свой век* means 'to fully expend one's vital force allotted by destiny'. The deceased by such normal death were considered to safely pass to another world and become respected ancestors, while people *не изжившие своего века на земле* stay

after their death as an active harmful force which intruded in the world of the living people at an inopportune time. It is essential that, according to folk beliefs, lifetime as a certain amount of vital force is distributed between all the members of the community, so the deceased «до срока» (i.e. before his own time) is, due to his unexhausted vital force, dangerous for the living; however, a person who lives to a great age is harmful too, because he - as Russians used to say - *заедает чужой век (или зажился, живет не свой век etc.)* (Седакова 1990: 55).

The ultimate border of age for a human life was considered to come with old age, when productive force, as well as ability to labour, was exhausted, with the signs of old age, white hair and infirmity. Sometimes a change of one's height served as a criterion of such border: it was believed that before death one grew shorter.

Besides defining the death as non-violent (natural), it's taking account of special calendar or day-time as «good for dying». For example, autumn and winter, the great yearly holidays were considered to be the most appropriated season for the old people to die. At that time, they said, the border between this and «the other» world was open; and during the month such was the «good» period of the waning moon; and during the day-night time - the night.

«Good» (or «one's own») death was also correlated with the idea about «one's own» space of dying: any death outside home was considered «not one's own». Polish ethnographers working in the Podlyasye district (Polish - Byelorussian border) noted peasant's fear of the town hospital inspired by the apprehension to die there (out of home). So relatives tried to bring home the hopelessly ill in order to let them die in «their own place» (Drabik 1994: 16). According to Byelorussian beliefs, such people who died beyond home or village borders should not be pray at home but the funeral repast should be held at the place of burial (i.e. the deceased out of home be a sudden death should be buried at the place of the death - Federowski 1897: 337).

To die in «one's own» place also meant to die in the property selected space, which was specially actualized in the situation of a lasting agony: a dying person unable to part with life for a long time, was transported to make his agony easier, into the floor, the straw, sometimes - into «the red corner» (*красный угол*) under the icons or, vice versa, nearer to the exit, to the threshold or to the stove. If a person died in «his own» place, then normally it happened in the midst of «one's own» relatives who were obliged to observe the regulations of behaviour accompanying death: lighting the candle, bidding the farewell to the relatives, bringing the neighbours at odds with the dying person so that they could forgive each other etc. Violation of a number of rules by those present could cause difficult death of the relative: such could be premature (before final death) bewailing, an ungranted wish of the dying person, an unsettled quarrel or debt etc. Connections with living people that had not been finally broken were believed to prevent the person from easy parting with life. The actions of those present had to make the soul's transition to the other world easier, as well as to take obstacles out of its way: silence during agony was strictly observed, it was forbidden to make noise and cry loudly, *чтобы не сбить душу с пути* (so that the soul does not lose its route), not to tarry it in the earthly world; they tried to avoid mentioning the dying per-

son's name, used to satisfy all his wishes, so that he does not go off to the other world with an ungranted wish; to make one's agony easier (according to folk explanation - *чтобы пропустить душу*, i.e. «to let the soul though»), they used to unfasten the clothes, open the windows, the door, the damper of the stove, drill a hole in the ceiling, raise the tie-beam, knock out some roof-planks.

In folk mythology concepts of «good» and «bad» death are closely connected with the division of the defunct into *чистых, праведных* («clean, righteous») and *нечистых, вредоносных* («un-clean, harmful» - in D. K. Zelenin's terms - *заложных*) deceased. According to general Slavic beliefs, the «un-clean» deceased cannot finally pass into the other world, cause harm to the living people, remaining in the earthly space, become «walking» deceased, vampires, demonic beings (ЗЕЛЕНИН 1911: 354-424). That's why such harmful effects of a «bad» death had to be neutralize by special ritual actions. For example, the Slavs widely observed the prohibition to bury «un-clean» deceased in the village cemetery; they had to be buried in «no man's land» (i.e. belonging to neither of the neighbouring villages), neglected land or swamp. Among the customs that had to prevent «walking deceased», there should be pointed out such ones, the meaning of which is to make the dead body unable to move: they were buried without footwear or with tied legs; sinews under their knees were cut; hells were pricked; the whole body was tied with red thread. Other magic actions served the same end: they put a scythe or a sickle into the neck of the harmful deceased or they placed sharp metal instruments; the body was pierced through with an aspen stake; the grave was laden over with a heavy log or a stone; turning coals were spread on the grave, a fire of aspen wood was made on the grave etc.

However, the measures of the defense from the «walking deceased» were not restricted to the methods of symbolic threat and aggression acts; observation of the customs, according to which the deceased had to be given the part of earthly welfare, they had not received during their lifetime, was deemed to be not less effective. Thus, the tradition common for all the Slaves to organize a symbolic wedding for unmarried young deceased brought about introduction of some wedding ritual elements into the funeral rites (they made wreaths for the deceased, a wedding free was decorated, wedding songs were performed, a symbolic «bridegroom» or «bride» for the deceased was selected from those present etc.). Unique data have been registered in Mikhailovgradsky strict in Bulgaria about a quite recent real wedding (at the church or at home but with certain participation of a priest) of a deceased to a stone or a tree, i.e. to objects symbolizing the spouse. While burying an unmarried young man, they used to put a stone tied with a woman's kerchief to the left side of him and while burying a young girl they used to place a stone with a cap on it to the right side. Other variants of the custom are wedding a young man to a stone and a young girl to a bramble branch. The folk explanations of the custom are: «the unmarried deceased - either a young man or a girl - must be married at least to a stone, otherwise he will not be able to pass to the other world (Гарнизов 1991: 249).

Taking into account the motif of giving the deceased his proper part of all the earthly welfare was the most stable pivot of the ancient burial ritual, then it's clear that

it was as important to provide the deceased with a spouse by means of a symbolic wedding, as to give him a «home» - coffin, food, clothes, household objects etc.

The presented data show that the most archaic concepts about «good» and «bad» death were correlated with the idea of biological death coinciding with the end of «one's own life term», while further relationship between the living and the dead (*clean* and *un-clean*) depended on the proper observation of the funeral and remembrance rites, the most essential one being provision of the deceased with all the things that were necessary for him.

So, according to Slavic folk beliefs, the category of harmful «un-clean» deceased, consists of: 1) those who died of «not his own» death; 2) those who didn't break finally before his death relationship with the living (i.e. not having received their own «part» - a name, a christening ceremony, a spouse, a certain things, absolution, proper funeral and leave-taking etc.); 3) those who had been in contact with the evil spirits during their lives (sorcerers, witches, people with «double souls»). It is most essential for the sphere of concepts that people of the traditional culture not so much feared the fact of death as the «revival» of the deceased. Superstitions concerning such harmful deceased who cannot finally pass into another world, turn out to be nearly the most stable part of the Slavic mythological system.

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