

THE STORY OF A FUNERAL HOME: RITUAL MODERNIZATION AND ITS RECEPTION IN A TRANSYLVANIAN VILLAGE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a brief re-study of funerary rituals in a village inhabited by Hungarian Roman Catholics in Romania. Since the completion of long-term fieldwork there in 2003 and 2004, the construction of a funeral home and the emergence of local companies, offering full service for funeral receptions, have led to considerable changes in the course of funerary rituals. Rites that were traditionally carried out in the home have been moved to the public sphere, and tasks traditionally fulfilled by people nurturing social ties to the family of the deceased have largely been taken over by the service sector. Since funeral rites are intricately intertwined with cultural beliefs and values and with the management of social relations, these changes are more than technical. By focusing on how people reacted to the changes imposed on them, this study emphasizes their agency in constructing the ritual dimensions of their lives.

Keywords: funerary rituals, modernization, ritual change, adaptation.

INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a brief re-examination of funerary rituals in a village inhabited by Hungarian Roman Catholics in Romania. In 2003–2004 an eight month study

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examined the social role of the family dead through the various channels of communication that connected them to the living – death rituals being one among several. Since the time of that fieldwork, however, there have been significant changes in funerary rituals. While in 2003 people were buried after wakes in homes, where the rituals involved considerable help from kin, neighbours, and friends, the last few years have witnessed the construction of local funeral homes in the municipality. The introduction of the funeral home, which was an initiative of the local parish priest, was accompanied by other ritual innovations, most notably in the field of rites concerning communal solidarity. Since cultural patterns, social systems, and rituals are intricately intertwined, such top-down or enforced ritual changes offer ample material to study. This paper will be limited to studying the reactions of locals: how people come to terms with ritual changes imposed on them, how they react to and negotiate these changes, and how they fill new rituals with meaning more suitable for them. Since reactions were not univocal in the community, the paper will also try to show the different values governing divergent opinions. The arguments are based on the experiences of continuous visits to the field over the years¹, and a focused, three week fieldwork conducted on ritual change in 2015.

THE SETTING

The municipality under study is located in the Eastern Carpathians in Romania, meandering in the long and narrow valleys of a river and its tributaries for circa 15–20 kilometres. In 2003 it had a population of about 5 300 – a number that has since remained stable. Due to its peculiar layout, the township is naturally broken up into several villages called *pataks*², whose inhabitants have a sense of local identity. This inquiry focused on one of these villages, the largest in acreage and in population, which is called Patak in this paper³.

Due to its peripheral and upland location, the municipality, like the entire region to which it belongs – has always been relatively poor. Agricultural production has long been limited to animal husbandry, mainly of cattle, while crops were limited to subsistence farming. Although the development of a railway line

¹ After finishing fieldwork in 2004, I returned to the village almost every year: first to supplement my material, and then, from 2010, to make research on other topics. The length of these visits ranged from a week up to a month.

² Meaning stream or creek in Hungarian.

³ In keeping with ethical and responsible practice in Cultural and Social Anthropology, the community in this study has been identified by a pseudonym. Public disclosure of the ritual practices and the attendant conflicts reported in this study could lead to increased tensions within the community and therefore the pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of individuals and the interests of the approximately 2700 of its inhabitants. Interested researchers may contact me for further information.

and reforms in land ownership at the turn of the 19–20th century led to the arrival of timber companies to the region, subsistence farming remained a major means of living. This was the case until the socialist era, when the majority of the local male workforce was absorbed by factories in neighbouring towns, with farming maintained for family consumption and as supplementary source of income. After 1989, the region has experienced the social and economic changes typical of post-socialist countries: unemployment grew rapidly and people reverted to agricultural production. In spite of the fact that privatization of forest land and the loosening of state control over logging offered a new source of income, most households found it harder and harder to make ends meet. By the mid-2000s the villagers increasingly felt the negative impact of the disintegration of Romania's food-processing industry, which was reinforced by the country's entrance in the European Union. As a consequence of new food production and safety regulations, the marketing of local agricultural products became difficult or unprofitable. Logging was halted due to a considerable decrease in forest area and stricter government controls. Households tried to cope with these difficulties by capitalizing on two possibilities EU accession offered them: international migration and agricultural subsidies. An ever-growing number of people – male and female, young and middle-aged, single and married – work abroad. Most are engaged in seasonal agricultural work in Germany or (to a lesser extent) in Hungary, while the most fortunate men work in construction or logging in Austria, Germany or Scandinavia. In addition to money earned outside Romania, agricultural subsidies provide the only other major source of income, with only a few households that are resourceful enough to engage in agricultural production that is profitable or in other kinds of enterprises. Subsidies, therefore, are the main incentive for keeping many locals in agriculture, including those who spend some time of the year working abroad. Although the changes outlined above are undeniably substantial, their impact on local social relations are not yet fundamental. While the circles with which individual households cooperate have slightly shrunk, people still heavily rely on their social networks in their farming, ritual, or everyday activities.

The layout of the municipality had a bearing on ecclesiastical life and practices of pastoral care as well. Until 2006, it formed one Roman Catholic parish, with the parish church and the priest's house being located in the village that serves as the township's administrative centre⁴. There are two additional churches – both in Patak – one of which was enlarged in 2000. The township also has three cemeteries, one by the parish church and two in Patak, but those in Patak are located at considerable distances from the two churches there. Although the parish had a curate assisting the parish priest since the 1970's, the size of the community,

⁴ The Roman Catholic church is the only denomination in the municipality. Before the Greek Catholic Church was banned in Romania in 1948, however, a part of the population was Greek Catholic, and several families have close kin ties to Eastern Christians living in the neighbouring municipality.

the number of churches and the distances to be covered complicated pastoral work. The solution was the division of the parish in August 2006, when a new rectory by the enlarged Patak church was finished. Since then the priest who had been in service in the village for decades took charge of a newly established, independent parish.

It was he who initiated the construction of two funeral homes before the split of the parish, in 2005. His aim in doing so was to modernize local funerary rituals⁵. In the case of Patak, however, his plan did not come easily. It was hard to find a big-enough site in or near the larger cemetery due to its topography and the uncertain ownership of the land around it. Finally, the dilapidated building of a former sawmill, owned by the most prominent entrepreneur of the village and situated over 500 meters from the cemetery, was converted to a funeral home. The renovation of the building was slow; when the first corpse was taken to the funeral home in December 2011, it looked more like a garage than a place for religious rituals. Although there is still work to be done – most notably, a refrigerated morgue to be added – by 2015 the building operated as a proper, ordained church with a sanctuary, a bell-tower, and regular masses⁶. Thus, instead of a simple funeral home, the community received an additional church, one halfway between the other two.

THE FUNERAL HOME AND ITS IMPACT ON FUNERARY CUSTOMS

The people of Patak's reactions towards the new funeral home are related to the changes it brought to local funerary rituals. Traditionally, funeral activities lasted for three days. A couple of hours after death, the corpse was washed, dressed, and laid in a coffin placed on a bier, which was set up in the best room of the house⁷. The bier was customarily decorated with hand-woven and richly embroidered bed sheets. A wooden cross and a burning lamp were placed at the head of the deceased, and candles and flowers at the feet. The lamp and the candles have ritual significance, as their light is thought to protect the soul of the deceased on its way to the afterworld. A wake was held on both nights that the dead stayed at home, when relatives, friends and neighbours gathered by the body to bid farewell and to pray for the soul. The wake, which was called *praying*, lasted only a couple of hours, and upon their departure visitors were offered cake and drinks as alms for

⁵ It is interesting to note that locals merge the construction of the funeral home with the other regulations the EU has imposed on them lately: it is widely believed that funeral homes are an EU requirement. To my knowledge, however, no such regulation exists, neither in the EU, nor in Romania. Romanian legislation has only approved of a long prepared Act on cemeteries in 2014, which prescribes the establishment of air conditioned funeral homes only in the case of newly established cemeteries. In the last few years, however, there has been a clear tendency to build funeral homes in Transylvanian villages.

⁶ The new church was ordained on 5 November 2015, its patron saint being Saint Emeric of Hungary, son of Hungary's first king, Saint Steven.

⁷ If someone died in the hospital, the corpse was prepared by the hospital staff.

the soul of the departed. The deceased was usually left alone after the wake, and in most families no one, not even close family members, kept vigil by the body. During those days the home of the deceased was the site of intensive – often parallel – activities: the house was cleaned and large quantities of food were cooked for the funeral reception, while visitors were coming and going and the wake was going on. All these activities, along with many others not confined to the realm of the house, were carried out with a considerable assistance from kin, neighbours and friends.

The house of the deceased was the site for much of the funerary ritual as well, including the funeral mass. This in itself was a relatively recent development. According to local people, the funeral procedure in Patak traditionally involved three stages: the priest came to the house for the deceased, escorted the body to the cemetery and interred it, and the next day celebrated the funeral mass in the church. In 1973, however, the funeral mass was merged with the rest of the ritual process at the request for a prominent family, in order to make it more convenient for everybody. After that, funerary ritual consisted of two stages: the mass at the house, then the funeral procession escorting, often on foot, the body to be buried in the cemetery. Transport of the coffin in the procession was by whomever the family asked for this purpose. After the burial, all the guests – or, in the case of families with fewer resources, a selected set of guests – were invited back to the house of the deceased for a funeral reception.

Since the advent of the funeral home, the house of the deceased has ceased to be the main venue for ritual activity. If someone dies at home, the corpse is still washed and dressed there, but it will be moved to the funeral home within a couple of hours⁸. If someone dies at the hospital, the body is taken directly from there to the funeral home. According to the standard procedure, the body is kept there for two days, and wakes are held on both evenings. On the day of the funeral, a funeral mass is celebrated in the funeral home, after which the coffin is taken to the cemetery by a richly decorated horse-drawn carriage that belongs to the funeral home.

A collateral effect of the funeral home has been a trend in the community to have the funeral reception organized by one of two local catering companies in either the village “house of culture” or in the school near the cemetery. The phenomenon is not new; some families held their funeral feasts at the house of culture already in the 2000s, but these cases were exceptional and the food was prepared at home with the assistance of the usual circle of helpers. Use of the catering companies, however, became widespread after the funeral home was opened. A little less than half of the families opted for the services of these companies and invited all participants to the reception, while the other half gave a smaller, traditionally prepared funeral meal at home⁹.

⁸ People who die in the evening or later are usually kept at home for the first night, and are only taken to the funeral home the next day. In this case, the corpse stays there only for one evening.

⁹ In a sample of 41 funerals, 18 funeral feasts were organized by the catering companies. By the time of this study, 134 people had been buried from the funeral home.

While the funeral reception and the site of the rituals have changed, the introduction of the funeral home has left the rites themselves practically intact. Lay practices accompanying dying and the preparation of the corpse have remained the same.¹⁰ As before, the corpse stays on the bier for two days, the bier in the funeral home is accompanied by a cross, a lamp, candles and flowers as before, the two wakes are still held, and alms are distributed to the participants. Since the official church ritual for funeral has not changed either, the deceased are provided with the same spiritual assistance as previously. The changes initiated by the funeral home, then, could be termed as merely technical: they moved much of the activity from the private sphere to the public one, thus making it simpler and more convenient for the bereaved, participants and priest alike. Yet the reactions of the people of Patak indicate that these changes were in fact more than technical.

LOCAL REACTIONS: CONFLICTING VALUES AND NEGOTIATIONS

Reactions to the funeral home in Patak were diverse from the start. As in other places (*e.g.*, Kilianová, 2010: 748) most people welcomed it for practical reasons, but there were critical voices as well. Some were unhappy with the financial contributions they were asked to make and quite disappointed with the building itself: they thought the old sawmill was not decent enough and too far from the cemetery. Opposition came to a head in 2014, when a small group of villagers took legal steps to have the priest removed. They did not succeed, above all because by then the majority had grown to like the building after its transformation into a proper church. People now praise both the building and the convenience it has provided.

Other complaints about the funeral home and the changes it has triggered are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and social values. There were a number of mostly elderly people – especially at the beginning – who had strong feelings against being taken to be buried from a “strange” place, that is, from outside their home. The reasons for this were complex, and had to do with the strong, intrinsic bond between the home – house and courtyard – and its owners.

First of all, the thought of being left alone in an unfamiliar place made people psychologically and metaphysically uneasy. A widow in her late seventies said that her late husband was so afraid of the possibility that he made her promise to take him to be buried from the house:

He was so afraid... “My good Lord,” he said, “if I die before you, please don’t let them take me to the funeral home. Why did we suffer,” he said, “why did we starve, if I cannot stay at home dead for two days.” Poor man, he always told me this. So. And God listened to him, for the funeral home was still unfinished when he died.

¹⁰ For a detailed analyses of these rites, see Hesz, 2012a.

As can be seen from the excerpt, the old man escaped the fate of which he was afraid. His and others' fears were deeply rooted in beliefs concerning death and the fate of the soul. They believe that the separation of the soul from the body is a gradual process during which the soul lingers around the body until the funeral and keeps returning to the places where it lived at least until the first memorial mass is celebrated six weeks after the funeral¹¹. Even if by definition people know that death separates soul and body, they treat and refer to the unburied dead as living people: they say the dead can hear and see what happens around them, and they say the deceased sleep at home, when they refer to days preceding the burial. From this perspective, being laid out in the funeral home entails a premature experience of being deserted and alone, something people want to avoid. Although no one explicitly said so, fear of being alone might also have to do with worries that are metaphysical. Death is a dangerous transition, and in the liminal phase between death and interment the soul is held to be vulnerable to attack by the devil or other demons. Since these attacks could be warded off by religious ritual, or more generally by human presence, for some people being left alone in the funeral home could mean being left unprotected. It has to be noted that in Patak concepts and practices regarding the dead are – as they were in 2003 – quite varied. There were many beliefs, official and vernacular, “in the air,” and people shifted among them according to the context¹². They often discussed these views, arguing about the validity of certain beliefs or the orthodoxy of certain practices, and the funeral home provided ample opportunity to consider the concepts about the fate of the soul after death. During a family gathering well before the funeral home was opened, the widow quoted above expressed her fear of being left alone in the dark, cold, and deserted building. Her teenage granddaughter, who lived in a nearby town, immediately dismissed the old woman's fears by saying she should not mind it, because being dead she would not feel anything. Both laughed, but the old woman had lingering doubts.¹³

Protests against the funeral home also refer to another kind of intimacy between people and their homes. People's lifelong work creates a strong bond between them and their house and its courtyard, which is seen as the centre of the Patak farm. People work at the farm and for the farm, they devote all their physical and mental energies to maintain it, improve it and pass it on to the next generation.

¹¹ Local concepts and beliefs of death, the dead and the afterlife are widely known in Roman Catholic and Eastern Christian Europe, but for the lack of space, I will refrain from detailed references.

¹² This has been emphasised by many anthropologists working in very different sociocultural contexts (see *e.g.* Davies, 1997; Lewis, 1986; Geertz, 1960; Huntington-Metcalf, 1991). People are aware of the heterogeneity of concepts and worldviews, and discussions about their validity is common practice (Bell, 2002; Hesz, 2012b).

¹³ To round the story off, I should mention that by 2015 the same widow was a fervent supporter of the funeral home, and never mentioned her fears when we spoke about the changes it has brought to funeral procedures.

Through sweat and pain, people become inseparably attached to the home place. This attachment is expressed in many ways. When locals talk about people who, for certain reasons, had to leave their homes, they always lament the work and effort these people invested to the place, without being able to enjoy its outcome. A woman who had had a very difficult marriage once said that from time to time she had considered divorce, but rejected it because she would have had to leave behind everything she had worked for. This bond between house and person is also a driving force for the ritual obligations towards the dead: while people should care for all their dead relatives, they are especially responsible for the former owners of their houses. Should they fail to live up to this obligation, the dead could strike them with death, illness or economic misfortune. One can argue that, in addition to the fears mentioned above, it was this very deep sense of belonging to one's home, that made certain people reject the funeral home¹⁴. When the dying man in the quote talked about struggling and starving, he was referring precisely to this idea.

Houses are not only the sites of people's struggles, but also the fruits of their labour. To have a house decent enough for the funeral ritual is an indication of a hardworking and honourable life. This message emerged in statements against the funeral home in which people claimed they had worked hard enough to have enough rooms, so they do not need another place to be buried from. A 56-year-old woman recounted about a late acquaintance: "At first they didn't want to be buried from the funeral home, no and no. He said they had added so many rooms, I don't remember how many, that he wouldn't let them take him to the funeral home." People with this attitude considered their houses as symbols of their social status and were proud to open them to the public when the time came.

Positive reactions and supporting arguments for the funeral home, however, favoured it precisely because it removed most activity from the home. Apart from mentioning practical reasons – the house did not have to be rearranged, less work had to be done at home etc. – most people stressed how happy they were at not having to have so many people in their houses. They were especially pleased to escape the critical eye of the public, stating that many people only came to see what they have in the house and to criticise the household and the way the funeral rites were prepared:

[The funeral home] is good, because it may turn out so that you don't have time to paint your rooms, the walls are cracked, there are spider webs. You don't think of death, and you don't have time for cleaning. Then those who come to the wake in the evening have their eyes on the ceiling, on the beam, on the wall, they are not there to pray but to look around. To look around. And then they go and talk about it. About

¹⁴ Seeing the relationship between the living and the dead as an exchange is an almost universal belief through space and time (see *e.g.* Barraud *et al.*, 1994; Geary, 1994; Goody, 1962; Kenna, 1976; Oexle, 1983; Sutton, 2007).

how your house looked. Then isn't it better at the funeral home? There's no place for mocking over there.¹⁵

These arguments also reveal different attitudes towards privacy, norms and social control. People who preferred to be taken for burial from their homes were ready to open up their private sphere to the wider public, and accepted community control as a natural aspect of their lives. Supporters of the funeral home, on the other hand, rejected excessive social control and valued privacy over display. Many people also welcomed the standardization the funeral home offered: the decoration and the ritual accessories were the same for everybody, thus funerary rites were less likely to display social differences. Some also appreciated the controlled environment of the funeral home: the time frame of the wake was set, so families did not have to cope with guests who overstayed as in the past, and since everybody left at the same time, the distribution of alms was easier to manage and consumption could be held within reasonable limits. On these matters the local discourse was in accordance with that of the priest, who brought up the same arguments in favour of the funeral home.

Since those who rejected the funeral home for the reasons discussed above were elderly, it would be tempting to attribute different attitudes to privacy and social control to generational differences. In reality, however, there are and were just as many, if not more, older people who welcomed the changes brought by the funeral home. In theory those who wanted to have their wakes at home could do so and could be taken to the funeral home only for the funeral ceremony. It does not appear that anyone has chosen this option. What some families did – and still do sometimes – is to keep the dead at home for the first night for a wake there. In most cases they do so when the deceased lived far from the funeral home and close associates, friends and neighbours are too old to get to it. In these cases the first night wake at home is not a rejection of the funeral home, but rather a practical solution.

LOCAL REACTIONS: REINTERPRETATION AND APPROPRIATION

Another new ritual introduced by the priest, called wreath-money, became by far the most debated change connected to the funeral home. It is a kind of "ransom." In lieu of a wreath or flowers, people are asked to bring an optional financial contribution on arrival at the funeral. Part of the money covers the costs of 10 masses for the salvation of the deceased, while the rest goes for the construction and maintenance of the funeral home or other parish needs¹⁶. The

¹⁵ Woman, aged 72.

¹⁶ These masses were not celebrated by the local priest, but by priests who serve in smaller congregations and therefore have less income. The transference of votive masses within the church is common practice as an act of welfare.

custom was unknown in the community, although the priest claimed it had been in practice for decades in his hometown nearby. He sought to replace wreaths and flowers because he thought that due to their ephemeral nature they were a waste of money, and their disposal was irksome. In contrast, if the money spent on flowers were donated for memorial masses and for the needs of the parish, it would serve the real interests of the dead and the community. While people understood these arguments, they were deeply critical of the priest's initiative and hotly debated the issue in their various daily interactions. They talked about being ashamed to ask relatives and friends coming from other villages to bring money instead of flowers and wreaths; asking for money instead of the traditional gifts was simply unacceptable and indecent in their eyes. They also claimed that the money collected should be given to the family of the dead. According to their logic, wreaths and flowers were gifts to the dead, therefore their monetary substitution should go to the dead, or in this case their families, and not the church. In line with this, many commented that the priest did not have the right to divert that money from the family, and interpreted his act as a sign of avarice.

Despite all criticism, the number of donors and the amount of the money collected has grown steadily. Donations range from 5 to 20 Romanian lei, and are correlated to the closeness of the relation between the donor and the deceased: people usually give 20 lei or more to those to whom they felt close. The amount of money collected per funeral varies greatly, from several hundred to one thousand five hundred lei or more¹⁷. The money is collected at the door of the funeral home by someone close to the bereaved family, and the donors' names and the sum they have given is added to a list that the priest read out, until 2014, at the end of the mass. By that time the lists had become so long that the priest and the church council decided to announce only the final sum. Parishioners supported the decision; as a woman in her 40s said: "There's no point in stressing how much so-and-so gave after the donations have been made. It is quite unnecessary to go into details, especially at a funeral, that so-and-so gave this much and so-and-so gave that much". Her point seems to be demonstrated by the fact that the sums of the donations have not decreased since the priest stopped reading out the donors. But as can be seen, these offerings and the amounts given do matter to people.

In 2014 the custom of wreath money evolved yet again as people started to collect money for the families of the dead in parallel with wreath-money. The practice was initiated by one of the opponents of wreath-money; it was at the funeral of a man who had long been ill, and whose family was in financial difficulty. Upon arrival at the funeral home, people were asked whether they wanted to give their offerings to the family or to the church, and the donations were listed separately. As it turned out, roughly one third of the money was donated to

¹⁷ 10 Romanian lei was about 2–2.5 euros in 2015. As for comparison: masses for the dead costed 20 lei, people usually gave 200–300 lei per couple as wedding gifts, and the standard daily wage was 50 lei.

the family, and the widow also received as much if not more money at home. Although not all the people in Patak supported the initiative, it was copied on at least three other occasions. By the time of this fieldwork in the early summer of 2015, the priest had put an end to this practice, but it has been reported that it goes on privately: instead of being collected at the funeral home, donations are given directly to family members. Further inquiry would be needed to learn how widespread this practice has become, or is becoming, but its emergence is already in itself significant as an instance of how people adapt top-down ritual innovations by the authorities.

It is tempting to interpret the way locals started to use the custom of wreath-money as an attempt to replace the social functions of the funeral procedure that were weakened by the introduction of the funeral home. It is intrinsic to funeral rituals to display, reinforce, or loosen social relations (see *e.g.* Douglass, 1969; Strathern, 1981; Cohen, 1985), and pre-funeral home burials offered ample opportunity for both the family of the deceased and the people around them to do so. It was an honour to be asked to perform the various ritual roles – to bear the flags, the crosses or wreaths, to hold the candles by the side of the coffin, or to carry the coffin – and there is evidence that families often used these roles very consciously to reinforce the social bonds they valued. People around the family of the departed could reinforce these bonds by offering various kinds of assistance during the funeral and in its preparatory phases, or by simply showing up at the wakes and the burial. It was a source of pride if one had many helpers and many people attended the funeral, because it demonstrated the family's social embeddedness. Assistance and attendance were guided by the logic of exchange, and were intricately integrated into exchanges of objects, labour, or other everyday services, and thus had far-reaching effects in social relations. The introduction of the funeral home, together with the growing involvement of the service sector it has entailed, has clearly curtailed ways to express loyalty and support to the bereaved family.

There are also clear signs that the custom of wreath-money has taken up the function of indicating social bonds: the amount of the donation varies according to the closeness of the relation, and the fact that it was made public has significance. After coming home from a funeral ceremony, a man mentioned that the priest forgot to read his name among the donors, and although he dismissed the matter as unimportant, he returned to the matter more than once during the conversation. There is also an instance in which a woman, who could not manage to make it to a funeral, sent the wreath-money with a neighbour and asked her to put her name on the list of donors. And for the family the amount of money collected as wreath-money is a matter of pride, just as the number of participants at the funeral ceremony and the number of helpers at the house were a matter of pride before.

It can be argued, however, that the utilization of the custom of wreath-money to display social ties is neither an intentional substitute of former customs, nor a

conscious way of resistance to modernization and the changing values of social life in general (Cohen, 1985), even though some locals did complain about people growing apart and being less willing in general to help others. While it is true that there is less extra-familial help needed to perform the funeral, there is still enough room for assistance, especially if the funeral reception is held at home. According to data, the closest friends and neighbours are still actively involved in the preparations of the funeral procedure, so the reformed ceremony does provide an opportunity to reinforce social relations, even if to a smaller circle of people. What happened then was that locals instinctively interpreted the ritual innovation of the priest in terms of the logic of former practices. The wreath-money was, after all, a gift given to the deceased, even if a larger part of the donations went to the church. Thus the custom has naturally lent itself to the demonstration and display of the closeness of relations.

The emergence of financial aid to the bereaved family was then the result of the combination of this reinterpretation of the wreath-money and the resistance against the priest for taking gifts intended for the deceased. By starting to collect money parallel to the collection of the wreath-money, locals appropriated the ritual practice imposed on them, and – to paraphrase Shaun Malarney in regard to the reception of state reforms of funerary rites in Vietnam – inserted their own values into it. (Malarney, 1996: 556) This direct financial support to the family of the deceased had the unintended consequence of monetizing ritual assistance. Money as a gift for the bereaved was not part of the funeral previously. It often happened that the family was given some financial aid to cover the costs of the ceremony, but in these cases the donors were either very close kin – mostly siblings of the dead – or the sum was given as a loan or as a recompense for various kinds of previous assistance from the deceased or their families to the donors. Only one exception to this is known, when people collected money at the funeral to help a poor and old couple whose soldier son died tragically in the turmoil of the 1989 Romanian revolution.

It is too early to say whether this innovative practice will continue. The fact that people started to give money to the bereaved privately, outside the confines of donations at the funeral home, and that the sum of money donated on these occasions – often up to 50 lei – exceeded the amount usually given as wreath-money shows that it is coming to be a custom independent of the wreath-money. The priest's negative reaction only encouraged this procedure by forcing direct donations to the family into the private sphere. To date, as far as it is known, such financial aid has only been given to families the community with economic difficulties, but it has the potential to expand its scope to all families and become an integral part of all funerals. An important force behind such tendencies might be the predominance of reciprocity in all interaction in Patak. One of the beneficiaries has already said that she would give the same amount of money to her donors, when someone died in their families – regardless of their financial state. On the other hand, there are people who oppose the practice of giving money to the

bereaved family, considering it inappropriate. Thus there is an equal possibility that in time direct financial aid to the family will drop out of Patak's funeral practices.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the case of the funeral home in Patak shows, top-down ritual innovations are never a one-way process. The authoritative introduction of a ritual change – or of a ban on existing rites – triggers complex processes in which several actors, from the representatives of authorities to the different factions of the local community, take an active role. Although the introduction of the funeral home into the ritual sequence of the burial has been by far the most significant ritual innovation for decades, negotiations over beliefs and ritual practices are something people are used to. The local funeral procedure in Patak, as in other communities, consists of official church rituals and vernacular practices in domains where the official rites provide insufficient consolation and social support. In this sense, death-related concepts and practices lie on the frontier between church and lay practice, with some of them becoming subjects of tugs-of-war between the clergy and the locals. Apart from condemning certain vernacular concepts about the dead as superstitious, especially those that attribute a kind of physical reality to the dead in the afterworld, the practice the local priest most wanted to eliminate was the funeral reception held after the funerals. According to local beliefs, the funeral meal has an eschatological bearing on the departed soul's fate, as the food consumed and the prayers of the participants ease the deceased's sufferings in Purgatory. The priest, on the other hand, sees the funeral reception as a futile act of conspicuous consumption that puts an unnecessary economic burden on the family of the bereaved. He argues that the slice of bread and the glass of brandy distributed at the cemetery gate after the burial would have exactly the same effect on the salvation of the deceased as a full reception. Although his reasoning has been incorporated into local discourse, the funeral reception, as we have seen, continues, becoming even more expensive when organized by the catering companies. The reasons for the priest's failure are those symptomatic of top-down ritual innovations in general. As Donald Sutton has pointed out in regard to Confucian funeral reforms in China, people accept or resist ritual innovations to the extent that these innovations fit their beliefs and serve their emotional and social demands. (Sutton, 2007) In Patak people maintain the funeral reception in part because it is deeply embedded in the context of local beliefs concerning the relationship between the living and the dead. When people talked about their motives for having a funeral reception, they said that the dead "deserved" to have a decent funeral feast. Another powerful reason is social expectations. They mentioned that they would be criticised if they omitted a reception. Thus people's emotional obligations to the dead and social pressure kept the funeral feast as a custom, despite the economic burden it entailed.

These forces were also at work when people reacted to the funeral home and creatively adapted to the changes it has brought about. For some, fear of departure from the home and loneliness provoked resistance. And it was the obligations to the dead, coupled with the social urge to express belonging and social relations that lead first to the reinterpretation to the custom of wreath-money, and then to the new practice of financially supporting the bereaved family. The process of ritual change was far from straightforward; repeated action and reaction lead to an outcome originally unintended and pushed the funeral rites towards monetization. Nor was it a simple two-sided opposition between the community and the priest; the community itself was divided over the changes, which were subject to constant negotiation. And while people debated these changes, they discussed the social values – what is decent, what is not, what is the scope of social control, should one obey religious authority – that provide the cornerstones of everyday community life.

All this leads to the correlation between ritual change and social change. Anthropologists tend to understand rituals not only as reflections of sociocultural contexts, but also as active forces in constructing these contexts – hence their utilization in attempts to reconfigure societies. (see Malarney, 1996; Bell, 1997) As Catherine Bell has argued, rituals are not magic tools in the sense that they will not change existing social and cultural structures only by themselves. They will, however, orient “people toward ideals, the mere articulation of which must be a first step in their embodiment and realization”. (Bell, 1997: 235) In Patak there is nobody, and certainly not the priest, who would consciously promote individualism over the much-praised solidarity of village communities. Yet by transferring most funeral activities from the private to the public service sector, the funeral home and the changes it has triggered have the potential to reinforce the impact of other changes – most notably the growing presence of seasonal migration and technical modernization of farm-work – that may orient people to this direction. Whether this will be the case, it remains to be seen.

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