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Traditional Textiles in Transylvanian and Danubian Mourning Rituals

by
Joyce Corbett

The role of textiles in the folklife in the regions of Eastern Europe known as Transylvania, Transdanubia, and Eastern Slovakia is vividly present in the rituals of human life passages. This portion of Eastern Europe, comprising a part of the former Austro-Hungarian empire, is bounded by Russia and Poland on the north, former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria on the south, Austria on the west, and the Black Sea on the east. These mountainous regions multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic, are both buffers and viaducts for ancient and recent cross-cultural influences. The continued presence of archaic historical elements of costume provides a living textile history rewarding close examination.

The connection that links the village community of the living with the village community of the dead is mysterious, magical and fraught with danger to the uninitiated. The uses of material objects in rituals specific to the occasion include textiles and costumes and are essential to guarantee two requirements. The first is that the deceased obtains safe passage from earthly life into the afterlife where he/she will remain, happy and content. The second requirement is that those left behind be secure from haunting and consequent actions of an unhappy spirit, who may return bent on mischief and destruction. It is these two requirements which keep funeral rituals in place and embedded in their social context.

Only special and significant textiles and dress are used in traditional death rituals. These include household textiles used for the vigil and the funeral, the coffin pall and the deceased's shroud, as well as the proper form of dress for the mourners. The clothing that the body is dressed in for burial is also of great importance.

A notable example of mourning dress was found in Somogy County, Hungary, as late as the 1970's. This was the "white mourning" worn by elderly village women who formed a kind of lay women's group whose duties included the funeral vigil and procession, as well as maintenance and decoration of the graveyard. The long white linen costume worn by these women is identical to that found in Renaissance costume books in Germany and Italy labeled as "widow's dress." Its exact counterpart in black has been worn in convents in Romania until the present. Other examples of white as mourning dress appear in numerous 19th and 20th century folk costumes. In some examples in Germany, the white veil completely covers the costume underneath. In other folkloric sources, the white veil is worn over a black garment. White mourning as funeral dress appears to have long been a trans-European fashion, with historical antecedents in the Byzantine court, and even in Roman mourning clothing.

A related costume known as "half-mourning," combining a white headveil with a black

garment, became highly fashionable in 19th century European court dress. This style has lasted well into the 20th century in folk dress, examples having been found as far west as Great Britain. This combination of white veil and black dress was standard processional wear for almswomen in Europe in the 1600's.

The persistence of archaic headdress forms in village costume is the hallmark of funeral dress. Headdress styles which may have completely disappeared as a part of regular folk costume often remain unchanged when required as part of a ritual. The village of Cicmany in central Slovakia provides a fascinating example of a Gothic "horned" headdress. Mourning rituals in this highly decorated village make use of a "wailing wall" and white grave decorations.

Black as a preferred color for mourning costume has been well documented since the 15th century in European court funerals. It only became the norm in village dress during the 19th century in Hungary and Slovakia. In Transylvania and some parts of Slovakia, mourning costume conforms only to a more sombre, dark color scheme, with fewer floral ornaments. This toned-down version of the normally cheerful costume mirrors the wardrobe specified by the status of widowhood.

Textiles accompanying the funeral vigil or wake are specific for the occasion. Since the funeral vigil is usually held at home, extra precautions must be taken to assure its protection. Mirrors are cloth-covered, clocks are stopped, and windows are closed. In 1996 in Slovakia, I visited two different exhibition rooms showing funeral vigils. In Cicmany, the cloth covering the mirror was white; in the north, in Stara Lubovna, the cloth mirror-cover was black. In this room, the "deceased" was laid out on a striped red and white cloth. In Transylvania, the usual pall cover resembled a woven tablecloth, blue and white or black and white being preferred. One European medieval illumination shows an abbot laid out on a wooly sheepskin; however, it was probably the usual white or undyed linen which accounts for most funeral palls. Linen was generally considered to be a "pure" form of woven goods, and closely related to the earth due to its origin, unlike animal fibers.

The proper dress for the body appears, across Eastern Europe, to be age-related. Infants and children usually are dressed in white, either in baptismal or first communion clothes. White flowers and ribbons properly accompany the funeral procession. An older person who passes on will be dressed in his or her "best" clothes. These clothes may be purchased well ahead of the needed time and kept unworn for the occasion. A young married woman, even one who has died in childbirth, may be buried in her wedding dress, and a young married man in his "best," or wedding, suit. This practice was carried to the U.S. by Eastern European immigrants even in this century. I have been told of several family funerals of this type by Hungarian and Slovakian family members. In addition, unmarried women could be buried in wedding dresses, including some of rather advanced years. Curators of funeral photographs in the U.S. have often been puzzled by the large number of "deceased brides."

The funeral shroud is still used in regions where interment is the practice. It is, in the village, always white; although not always of linen.

Another category of death which must be solved satisfactorily in a ritual way is the death of a young man or woman who has not married. Such a premature death, whether natural or accidental, is considered a great tragedy, since the person has died unfulfilled or led an 'incomplete life'. In order to remedy this situation, a ritual wedding is performed. The funeral proceeds with the costumes, banners and burial procession exactly as if for a wedding. This tradition is well established in Transylvania, where it still takes place. In some places, a stand-in speaks for the deceased, and a representative is chosen for the marriage partner. In other places, the deceased is considered the "Bridegroom of Heaven" or the "Bride of Heaven." In every case where black would accompany the corpse, white or wedding clothing is substituted.

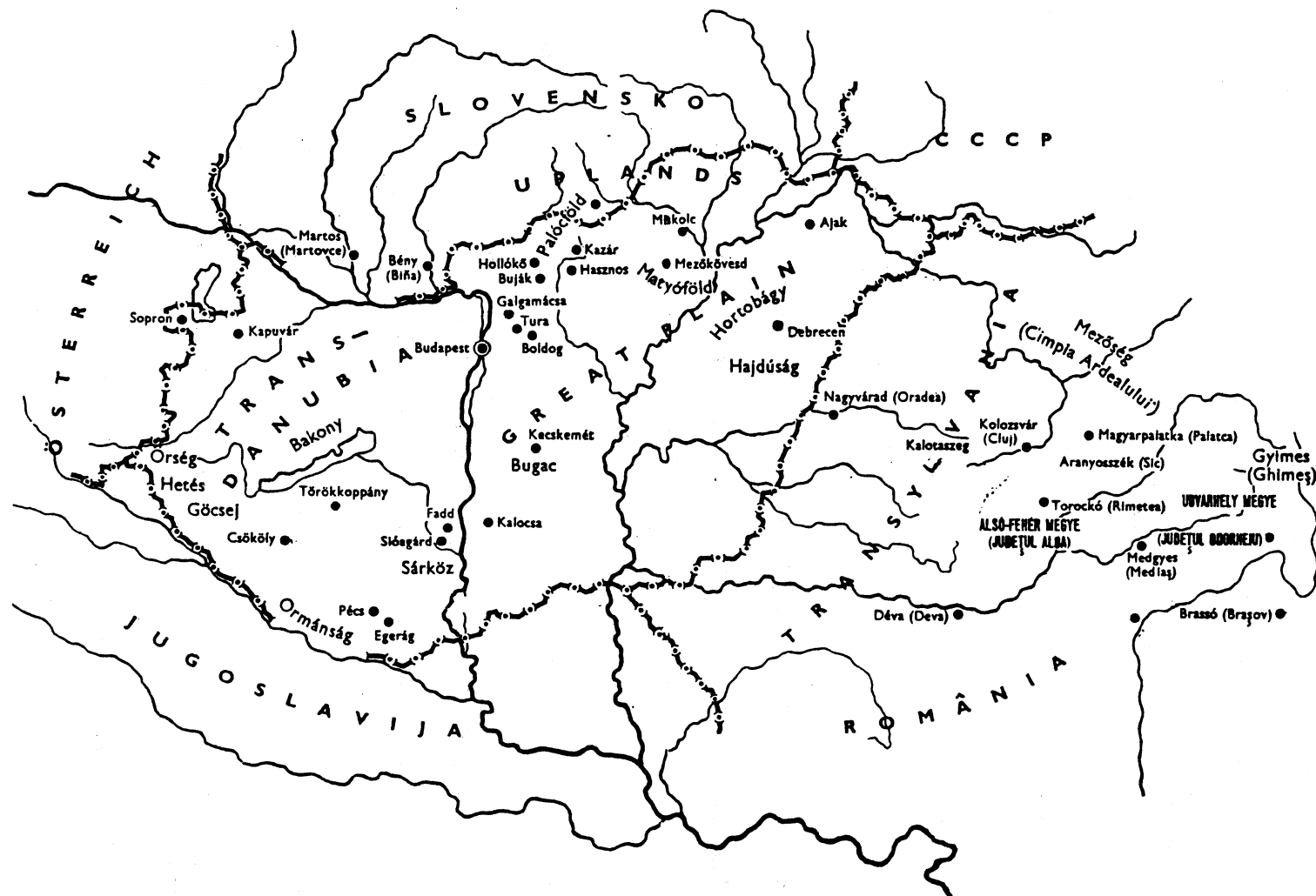
Grave decoration consistently follows the other elements of the funeral itself. A young person's grave is decorated piled high with flowers, and a young man's grave is decorated with a tree covered with ribbons and flowers. There is some documentation for graves in Romania decorated with the clothing of the deceased. This appears to be a rare custom.

A final type of funeral ritual should be mentioned here in this context. The "death goddess" or "morena" is a doll-like effigy, carried by the young girls of the village in procession; after which it is thrown into a stream. This spring ritual is still a part of the living folklore of Slovakia, and was practiced until recently in Hungary. The "morena" is made of straw, dressed like a young girl, festooned with paper ornaments and "disliked objects," all symbolizing the old year, celebrating the triumph of spring and renewal over winter and death. Due to their ephemeral character, few examples of these dolls survive, but those older ones in museums show the doll dressed in white. Recent photographic documents show the doll in a white apron, and more recently, with no white garments. This custom has become more of a children's festival in recent years, and its enactment far less serious; somewhat like the celebration of Halloween in the United States.

In conclusion, we can say that no clear geographic pattern emerges which accounts for the survival of certain textiles and costumes used in mourning rituals in Eastern Europe. The factors of geographic remoteness or the lack of urbanization and modernization, as well as the inherent traditionalism and conservatism of some village cultures, are the main contributing factors. These survivals should be viewed as more than mere geographic oddities and anachronisms. They are certainly the remnants of a much larger, pan-European tradition, which through continued use in a ritual setting remained viable and functional for many centuries.

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MAP OF TRANSYLVANIA, ROMANIA; HUNGARY; AND EASTERN SLOVAKIA.



White mourning. Csököly, Hungary, 1926.

Right: Praying women in white, Košeca Valley, Slovakia, ca. 1930.
Photo: Karol Plicka

Left: Half mourning. Exhibit, the Slovak Ethnographic Museum, Martin, Slovakia.
Photo: J. Corbett, 1996.



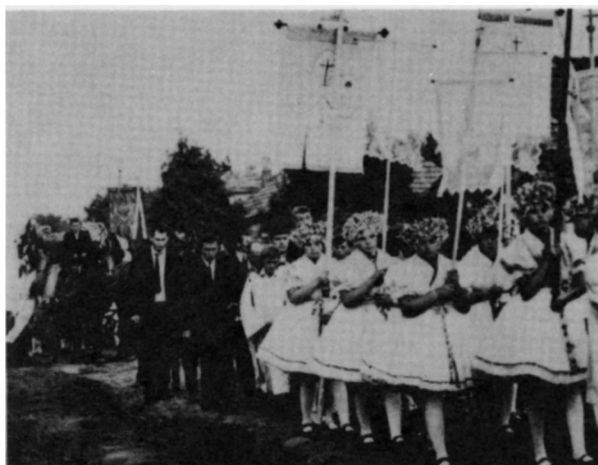


Right, above: Headdress of an older woman, ca. 1364.
(in *Gothic Woman's Fashion*, op. cit.)
Left, above: Headdress of an older woman, Čičmany,
Slovakia, ca. 1930.

Left, below: Exhibit, Funeral vigil; Open Air
Museum, Stará Ľubovňa, Slovakia.
Photo: J. Corbett, 1996.

Right, below: Exhibit, Funerary objects; Čičmany,
Slovakia.
Photo: J. Corbett, 1996.





Above: Funeral procession for "Heaven's Bridegroom",
Rimoc, (Bezirk Nograd), Romania, 1970.
Photo: Péter Korniss.
Below: Death goddess spring festival, Vrbov, Slovakia,
1934.
Photo: Karol Plicka

