

The Ecological Funeral: New Ideas in Contemporary Lithuania

Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė

PhD, a professor and a chief researcher at the Department of Cultural Studies, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

E-mail: rasa.raciunaite-pauzuoliene@vdu.lt

Abstract: The article examines ecological funerals in contemporary Lithuania. The present study focuses on content and visual analysis of funeral celebrations taking information from the contemporary Lithuanian mass media and social media networks, as well as the websites of seven funeral companies. The field research is based on digital material gathered by the author in 2021-2022.

I am interested in changes to funeral customs over the latest decade, approaching the subject matter through three key research questions: What factors motivate Lithuanian citizens to decide on an ecological funeral? What changes to the traditional funeral are the most ecologically sustainable? What has the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic been on people's ideas about ecological funerals?

Keywords: ecological funeral, contemporary Lithuania, Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The increasing challenges of climate change and the general public awareness of ecological matters are the main reasons motivating humanity to change stubborn customs and lifestyles. New ideas about ecological lifestyles, which

are becoming increasingly popular worldwide and serve as an incentive to responsible consumption oriented towards preservation of nature, are gradually penetrating the sphere of the funeral. In the future, sustainable funeral rituals that help to preserve nature could become new habits, and even turn into customs.

This article begins with a brief discussion of the performance of funeral rites in contemporary Lithuania. It continues with factors motivating Lithuanian citizens to opt for ecological funeral and concludes with a discussion of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the diffusion of ecological ideas.

The performance of funeral rites is linked to coping with loss, transition, remembrance, and regeneration (Fulton 1995; Metcalf, Huntington 2010; Robben 2010; Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2014), with funeral rites playing a significant role in the grieving process. Over the last decade, secularisation, cultural creolisation, and individualisation in Western Europe have led to a degradation of traditional religious rituals, while the personalisation of rituals has become more popular (Mitima-Verloop, Mooren & Boelen 2021; Holloway et al. 2013). Today, performing individual rituals can also play an important role in the grieving process. People use various verbal and nonverbal ways to express condolences in the digital world. The bereaved can light candles, write memorials and send flowers from home as alternative digital forms of the funeral process. Thus, the creation of meaningful individual rituals can be useful as much as collective funeral ceremonies in ancient agrarian societies. Today, funeral rituals help people to release emotions and serve important psychological functions in regard to separation and integration of loss (Johnsen, Fjærestad 2020).

According to psychologists, the majority of bereaved people experience the most intense emotions between three months and two years post loss, long after the funeral (Mitima-Verloop, Mooren & Boelen 2021). In this period, when social support decreases, different rituals can be helpful in coping with the loss of a loved one (Castle & Phillips 2003). Jason Castle and Phillips L. Williams emphasize that post-funeral rituals, such as lighting a candle, visiting the grave or listening to music the deceased liked are very helpful. Such grief rituals facilitate adjustment to bereavement and can have significant positive outcomes for participants (Castle & Phillips 2003). The study by Huibertha Mitima-Verloop, Trudy Mooren & Paul Boelen (2021) examined the importance of the evaluation of the funeral and the use of grief rituals in relation to grief reactions over time. Although the funeral and rituals were considered helpful,

no significant association between an evaluation of the funeral, the use of grief rituals and grief reactions was found (Mitima-Verloop, Mooren & Boelen 2021).

This paper aims to investigate the impact of ecological ideas on contemporary Lithuanian funeral traditions. I am interested in the problem of changes in funeral customs over the last decade and discuss the factors that have influenced these changes. In addition, we attempt to find answers to certain questions: What factors motivate Lithuanian citizens to decide on an ecological funeral? What changes to the traditional funeral are the most ecologically sustainable? What has the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic been on people's ideas about ecological funerals?

Methodology of digital research

In this paper I present digital research into ecological funeral celebrations in contemporary Lithuania. The present study is focused on content and visual analysis of funeral celebrations from the contemporary Lithuanian mass media and social media networks (such as Facebook and YouTube), as well as the websites of seven funeral companies. The field research draws on digital material gathered by the author in 2021-2022 on funeral celebrations in the Lithuanian mass media and social media websites. A qualitative approach is used to analyse visual and content data from these digital source.

In addition, I used participant observation. While conducting the field research I observed and participated in seven funerals which took place between 2019 and 2022. In six cases participation was in-person: the researcher acted as witness at funerals of her relatives or colleagues. One ceremony, which took place in November 2020 in the UK, was observed online, connected to the funeral company broadcasting it via its website. The remains of the deceased were cremated in all seven cases observed. Six funerals were held following the liturgical rite of the Roman Catholic Church, including bidding farewell, the cremation of the body, laying down the urn at the funeral home or crematorium, celebrating Mass and praying for the deceased in a Catholic church, seeing off the urn and burying it in a Catholic cemetery with the participation of a Catholic priest. An inseparable part of such funerals is religious chanting at the point where the urn is being laid down and at the point of seeing off, as well as at the moment of burial. In six cases the cremated remains were placed

in ecological urns made of natural materials, either wood or clay. Almost all the urns were decorated with Christian symbols, for example a cross or hands in prayer. The funeral homes decorated the urns with a wreath or bouquet of white flowers (chrysanthemums, roses, callia flowers).

The UK funeral, observed online, was organised following a humanist atheist funeral ceremony. The funeral included plenty of elements pertaining to an ecological funeral: an ecological wicker coffin decorated with a bouquet of red flowers that was cremated at the end of the funeral ceremony. The funeral began with a piece of music that included the sounds of nature and bird song. The musical prelude was followed by a video of lupin fields, and later the sounds of harp accompanied by a quiet female voice. The funeral ceremony included the biography of the deceased, his scientific activities. Farewell speeches were delivered by his British colleagues, in addition to a farewell speech transmitted online from Australia, as the number of in-person participants was restricted because of the pandemic. Later, texts prepared in advance and adjusted to the funeral ceremony were read, and at the end of the event Mozart's Requiem was played. With the last sounds of the Requiem, relatives and colleagues bid their final farewells. At the end of the funeral ceremony the coffin was taken for cremation in the same building.

The field research included seeing three exhibitions of art works at the crematorium in Kėdainiai by Algis Kariniauskas, a deceased artist and the *When Dreams Come True* exhibition by Aleksandra Stankevič. In addition, we attended *Ex It*, an art installation in Kaunas by Japanese artist Yoko Ono dealing with existential issues of life and death.

The digital ethnographic analysis draws on visual and content material from funeral commemoration websites, focusing on photographs, images, video clips and written texts placed on the site. In order to read and contextualise visual images, I use Marcus Banks' visual methodology, which emphasizes the element of readership and is concerned with the social rather than the individual construction of meaning. Visual anthropologists understand the content of an image as an internal narrative, while Banks employs the external narrative as a social context that produces the image (Banks 2001; Banks, Zeitlyn 2015).

Ecological funeral rituals

Every year world fashion houses introduce new clothes collections and dictate new trends. Likewise every year funeral businesses organise international exhibitions of funeral requisites, which dictate new fashions. The latest funeral fashions and trends are introduced at international exhibitions and are assimilated around the world. The current tendencies underline the ecological aspect and individuality. Recently funerals have been strongly oriented towards the preservation of nature, ecological ways of living and responsible and sustainable consumption, and therefore the sphere of funeral services contributes to the rapid increase in the number of sustainable solutions.

Today's post-modern societies prefer ecological funeral rituals based on cremation, where the ashes of the deceased are placed into ecological urns made of cellulose, coconut husk or pressed peat. Ecological awareness is the main reason people worldwide prefer 'green' funerals. One form of this is the so-called tree graveyard, which sees the ashes of the deceased mixed in a biologically decomposable container with seeds of a certain tree native to the area of burial. One of the newest forms of ecological burial is the drying of the remains to powder which is later used as compost. Green funerals like these enables carbon, greenhouse gas emissions and environmental pollution to be reduced (Lee et al. 2022).

Although funerals are perhaps the lifecycle rituals least susceptible to change, they have recently undergone drastic change inspired by the spread of ecological ideas. Cremation can serve as an example. Currently, 78% of the Lithuanian population consider cremation to be more aesthetic and ecological, and to cause less emotional pain. More and more people seek to make the urns or graves of their relatives more individual by adding personal traits. For example, the urn could be decorated with symbols reflecting the hobbies of the deceased. Lately funerals have become more flexibly and openly include innovative solutions, such as 3D printed urns (*Rekviem.lt*, 30/05/2022). People hope that in the future they will be allowed to print urns themselves using recyclable material, thus giving rise to more original designs and reducing the cost, as well as making for more sustainable consumption.

Another change which occurred during the two-year period of the pandemic is broadcasting cremations ceremonies and burials online (Miliūnaitė 2021).

This allows relatives and friends to watch the funeral in a way that substitutes for their physical participation, which has always been considered very important psychologically and emotionally. In the circumstances watching the ceremony online became a reasonable way to express one's sympathy for the deceased.

As ecological funerals and cremation become more popular, less attention is paid to luxury and the details of the decor when laying out a corpse.

What factors motivate Lithuanian citizens to decide on ecological funerals?

What factors motivate Lithuanian citizens to decide on ecological funerals? How is the information concerning cremation as a more ecological process than the usual burial spread? One of the factors effecting the choice of an ecological funeral is public education, which is promoted by funeral companies, the Kėdainai crematorium, international funeral business exhibitions and art installations.

The Lithuania crematorium ordered an investigation which was carried out by BERENT Research Baltic. Based on data from this investigation, 60% of respondents were inclined to choose cremation as a more acceptable disposal method than burial. Forty-four per cent of those who had chosen or were in favour of an ecological urn or coffin, also discussed the availability of cremation services. (Ekologiškios laidotuvės 2022)

The Lithuania crematorium, which is located in Kėdainiai in the centre of Lithuania, spreads the message by organising excursions around their enterprise, educating people, organising exhibitions in order to attract visitors, displaying the ecological coffins, made of natural materials, that are used for cremation, and dispelling myths of pollution and bad smells as the outcome of the process. (Ekologiškios laidotuvės 2022) In addition, they promote the idea that the traditional burial is less ecological than cremation. When burying a coffin a substantial amount of metal (for example lead) plastic, paint, synthetic clothing, etc., remain in the ground (Ekologiškios laidotuvės 2022).

Relatives can follow the coffin at the crematorium in Kėdainiai to the place of cremation and watch the process on a computer monitor or through a window (Sudeginimas laidojant: 2022) (Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2. Kėdainiai crematorium. Photo: <https://www.lrytas.lt/verslas/rinkos-pulsas/2017/08/01/news/kedainiu-krematoriumas-keicia-prekes-zenkla-ir-pradeda-teikti-naujas-paslaugas-2099399>.

The Ex It installation, by world famous Japanese artist Yoko Ono, is another example of new ecological funeral ideas in Lithuania. Her installation was presented in 2022 at the interwar architectural building in Kaunas as part of Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022. One hundred wooden coffins with trees growing out of them accompanied by the sound of living nature transmitted the message of the consequences of war and natural disasters, a metaphor for resilience, hope and the vitality of nature (Lieponė 2022). The installation “communicate[s] in a different way and invoke[s] understandings in a way that words alone cannot” (Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2019: 65). This installation is a good example of spreading new ecological ideas in the contemporary ‘overheated’ and unstable world (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Ex It installation by Japanese artist Yoko Ono. Kaunas, 2022. Photo by R. Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė.

Today, relatives of the deceased attach more importance to the aspect of ecology, and people themselves express the wishes for such funeral arrangements as the tendency grows and people have more information on sustainable funeral alternatives.

Cemeteries cover vast areas, especially in the environs of bigger cities, and with time this approach becomes unsustainable. In addition there is the problem of increased mobility, meaning that as a result of emigration the relatives of people living far from their homeland have no possibility to take proper care of burial places.

The solutions to this issue, and related issues, can vary. One contemporary suggestion is to scatter the ashes of the deceased on specially arranged plots of land in the graveyard. Remains utilised in this way pollute the ground to a lesser degree and require less land. In future such scattering of ashes will rise in popularity, especially among those who do not have family graves, as permission to scatter ashes in this way is relatively new. Previously some people had illegally scattered ashes on the shore of the Baltic sea near the so-called Dutchman's Hat, in Klaipėda region, or at other water bodies.

The law regulating the burial of human remains in the Republic of Lithuania specifies that “cremated human remains are to be buried (kept) in the grave in the cemetery or placed in a niche in the columbarium, while the ashes of the cremated remains are to be scattered in the plot of land assigned for the purpose in the cemetery, in the Baltic sea within a distance of no less than 5 km from the shore, or in rivers, except for urbanised territories and beaches” (LR ŽPLI SPI, No. X-1404 ch. 15, part 2).

Today there are three methods of burial in Lithuania: 1) burying the bodies of the deceased in coffins by placing them in the ground, 2) keeping the coffins with human remains or urns with cremated remains in columbaria, 3) scattering the ashes of the deceased in legally established places. Furthermore, new tendencies evolve: in the future ecological forest cemetery will be established where unembalmed bodies will be buried, dressed in clothes of natural fabric, or placed there after cremation in biodegradable urns. No tombstones will be erected in such forest cemeteries, and the graves will be marked with a simple stone plank or small stone.

In addition to funeral change relatives are now also choosing a shorter laying out for the corpse and bidding adieu, shortening this period from three to one day, or even a few hours, for example from 2 to 4 hours if there is an urn to be buried, and a day if the body is to be buried in the ground. We can presume that this is because of the fast pace of life and for financial reasons (the price of the funeral depends on the period of laying out the corpse).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the diffusion of ecological ideas

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the pace of our lives and sowed some confusion and uncertainty. Under the conditions of pandemic, death became an integral part of our everyday lives. In addition, the pandemic period changed the guidelines for funeral ceremonies limiting the number of participants, removing certain rituals or shortening their length. These restrictions were legitimised in Lithuania between February, 2020 and May 1, 2022, when the government declared pandemic conditions no longer applied after 81.36% of the population had been vaccinated or had developed immunity after recovering from Covid-19.

Thus, funeral celebrations received great attention in contemporary Lithuanian society. During the pandemic people died in hospitals or nursing homes without their loved ones, without being able to say goodbye. Families were prohibited from visiting those suffering from the disease and from having contact with their bodies after they had died, and neither did those dying have access to religious services such as confession or the assistance of a priest. During the pandemic period people were constantly compelled to accept prohibitions and adapt to new situations; for example, accepting digital alternatives of funeral celebrations when physical proximity was impossible and having the remains of the deceased taken care of only by employees of funeral companies.

After the outbreaks of the pandemic, funeral companies were compelled to adapt to newly introduced restrictions and to take into consideration the wishes of the bereaved, and thus had to introduce new services.

Innovative Lithuanian funeral companies offered different eco-friendly ideas and services. One of them (Funeral home Balta drobulė 2022) was ready to take care of the body after the person died and hand the urn over to relatives of the deceased; to select an ecological urn and to plant a tree on the grave of the deceased or in some other place; to provide psychological support; to give a white sheet as a present not only to warm the family members on Christmas Eve, but also to be used whenever they were eager to embrace the remembrance of their loved one; to buy a ticket for the relatives and invite them to the theatre or a concert that reminded them of the deceased; to invite the family of the

deceased and his/her friends to a memorial evening and take care of all the details (Funeral home Balta drobulė 2022).

Other funeral companies, such as the *Tyla* funeral home in Šakiai, a town in south western Lithuania, offered a service that included the planning and arrangement of the funeral, preparing the hall for the laying out, taking sanitary care and dressing the deceased, supplying devotional articles (rosary, religious picture, candles), keeping the body in the morgue, pallbearers, gravediggers and cantors, seeing the deceased off to the cemetery, managing the funeral documents and social payments, transporting the remains of the deceased, supplying a coffin or an urn, providing the services of flower arrangement, cremation, burial, hosting at the funeral reception, preparing video and photo presentations for the relatives to share the memories of the deceased person's (*Tyla* funeral home). The *Tyla* website states: "Our mission is to help you at a difficult time in your life". Other mottos are even more encouraging: "Let the seeing-off be a bright reminiscence, full of meaning and positive energy" (Balta drobulė funeral company).

New ideas about funeral arrangements come from Western Europe or the US (Laidojimo idėjų 2019). Funeral fashion is introduced via international exhibitions organised by funeral service companies, films, or fiction depicting individualised rituals of visitation and seeing-off ceremonies.

Some funeral companies, for example *Sielų upė* (2021), have suggested they will keep the urns of the deceased for up to a year without charge if relatives are abroad. The service became extremely popular during the quarantine period when family members were prohibited from entering the country. Some companies offered family members professional psychological support.

Decoration of urns

Apart from descriptions of the services provided, funeral home websites also present different images of urns. For example, they suggest decorating the urns with images of the cross, hands held in prayer, angels, a tree, tree leaves (especially maple and oak) flowers, birds, butterflies, candles or other symbols. Quite often the urns are decorated with nature motifs and their surface may imitate moss or bark. Thus, the impression is that the ashes of the deceased become a natural part of the environment.

The pandemic has modernised the seeing-off ceremony, abandoning some long-standing customs. Instead of honouring the deceased, laid out in a funeral home with a bunch of flowers or a wreath, people limit themselves to a smaller bouquet or a single flower. New initiatives of sustainability and eco-friendly processes have emerged, for example more people decide on ecological urns. Some funeral homes, such as Tylos namai, offer hand-made oval ecological urns created by Lithuanian ceramists, each of which is unique and decorated with different patterns reminiscent of eternal life. They are intended for a columbarium or for burial in the ground (Tylos namai 2022). The choice of material – stone, wood, etc. –, for the coffin or urn reflects how close the deceased was to nature (Aukštuolytė /2021)“.

Remembering the deceased in funeral homes and social networks

When visiting the funeral home friends and relatives see slides of the deceased, listen to his/her favourite music in the environment coloured the way he/she liked it. Today people wish the seeing-off to be more personalised and up-to-date. Visitors share reminiscences, photos, listen to the music their late family member liked. Instead of inviting cantors to chant traditional Christian songs instrumental music – a violin, a flute, a saxophone or a guitar –, is played.

The pandemic has given rise to the phenomenon of writing posts on social media networks, especially on Facebook. Quite often such posts include important information concerning the details of the funeral, for example Holy Mass celebrated with the intention of the deceased, and provide the possibility to publicly offer one's condolences. It is not seldom that such social media networks publish a photo of the deceased and a short obituary including people's reminiscences. In addition some of the deceased's friends share religious pictures or symbolic signs related to the funeral including their condolences or commentaries.

Changes in funeral etiquette

Today not only has the mode of burial changed, the same can be said of funeral etiquette. The traditional clothing of the deceased is substituted by clothing reflecting his/her character or preferences and matching the person's accessories.

Funeral halls are bright in the hope of diminishing grief. For example, Ligamis, a funeral home in Vilnius, proposes a preliminary funeral plan, i.e. the client arranges his or her funeral ahead of time and also pays for it. (*Ligamis Funeral 2022*)

Ecological tendencies of tending cemeteries

Today when honouring their deceased people are more inclined to feel the rhythm of nature and translate into reality ecological ideas, decorating graves and observing traditions led by references to nature. When decorating the graves some people use natural articles such as leaves from a tree, dry flower bouquets or wreaths, small branches, cones, etc. A tendency to substitute plastic flowers with natural chrysanthemums or heathers on All Saints' Day is noted. The plants have become especially popular lately because of their sustainability, and the earlier they are planted the better they root, then having survived the winter they come out in spring.

People keep changing their customs and are becoming more eco-minded. One can note the tendency for a moderate number of candles to be lit on the grave. To help with this florists recommend that people buy a stone or ceramic candle holder (*Kapinių tvarkymo mados 2022*). With time the tendencies of sustainable consumption are taking hold more deeply, for example people use fewer artificial flowers and candles and are more mindful when sorting out trash related to cemetery visits.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest the following conclusions. Firstly, the content and visual analysis of webpages presenting ecological funeral commemorations, as well as popular mass media websites, has shown that the last two years of

the Covid-19 pandemic greatly affected funeral ceremonies. Due to pandemic restrictions, funeral rites have become shorter, simpler, more environmentally friendly. During the pandemic, cremation became especially popular and gradually replaced burial of the body. Some funeral rituals, such as cremation, Funeral Mass, and even the funeral ceremony, were broadcast online. Using the method of participant observation, we noticed that funerals could be postponed due to the closure of borders and other restrictions for up to half a year or even a year.

Secondly, the new fashion trends for ecological funeral rituals have spread due to migration, secularisation, the pandemic, the inclusion of individual values and the creativity of the human being.

Thirdly, ecological ideas for funerals aim to reduce the environmental pollution caused by funeral activities and adopt some new environmentally friendly burial rituals.

To sum up, future sustainable funeral rituals that help to preserve nature, and new environment-friendly funeral patterns, could become new habits and turn into customs.

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Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė, PhD, is a professor and a chief researcher at the Department of Cultural Studies, Vytautas Magnus University. Her research explores issues of cultural and religious identity, family and gender studies, the rites of the lifecycle, urban and visual anthropology, and migration.