

Article

Empty Night: Kashubian “Home Liturgy” in the Context of Death

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic field research and thanatological literature, this article analyzes the continuing, but rapidly disappearing, Kashubian custom of bidding farewell to a deceased member of the local community known as “empty night”. Its essence is the night prayer vigil in the house of the deceased, performed by neighbors and relatives. The prayer consists mainly of singing religious songs on “the last things”—in particular about purgatory, human fragility, God’s mercy, and the Passion of Christ. The efforts of the orants are motivated by the concern for the salvation of the soul of the deceased, that is, the shortening and relieving the purgatorial punishment. The centuries-old tradition of “empty night” has been rapidly disappearing over the past 50 years as a result of both economic and social transformations, the gradual erosion of living faith, and the abandonment of the priority of salvation by younger Kashubians. The progressive medicalization of life and change of the approach to death play a crucial role in weakening the tradition of the ancestors. Thus the traditional “empty night” becomes a relic of “tamed death,” giving way to its tabooization and the illusion of “technological immortality”.



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1. Introduction

The mystery of death and the question of what is “beyond” have always fascinated people. Therefore, many cultures known to us have left behind relics of burial rituals testifying to the belief in the existence (although in various forms) of man after death. Christianity, referring to God’s revelation, offers a specific vision of human life. The Kashubians, the inhabitants of the Pomeranian Voivodeship, whose rituals related to death are the subject of this paper, have been associated with the Roman Catholic Church for 1000 years. The custom of “empty nights,” namely, the night prayer for the deceased before the burial, does not belong directly to the Church rituals. Home vigils for the dead are not mentioned in any church book. However, it is almost certain that for centuries, Catholic priests fostered the formation of their parishioners so that the Slavic heritage could be transformed into a Christian tradition.

Apart from fragmentary and sparse historical references illustrating the reaction of the Church to abuse and vices, there are, unfortunately, no data on the evolution (formation) of the local funeral practices into a “Catholic” version of vigil for the dead. The ethnographic data encompass the period from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century (Fischer 1934; Lorentz 1934; Łęgowski 1991; Tetzner 1892). On the other hand, stationary ethnographic research on rituals related to death and funeral were conducted in Kashubia only in the 1980s and 1990s. It seems that the original Slavic funeral vigil—under the influence of the Catholic pastoral ministry—was gradually transformed into a significant element of popular piety (Long 2005, pp. 7324–33; Christian 2005, pp. 3150–53; Roszak and Tykarski 2020).¹ Since in the history of religion it is believed that the funeral rite “reveals”

¹ The term “popular piety” is sometimes applied interchangeably with “popular religiosity” or “religion of the people”. However, they are all imprecise and debatable. W. A. Christian (2005, *Folk Religion*, p. 3150) notes that if we wish to understand peasant religion, it is essential to “live it”. “Lived religion” is rarely articulated as formulas or definitions, as a ritual is its language of expression.

eschatological beliefs (Thomas 2005, pp. 3233–41), it may be inferred that the participants of the rituals related to death and funeral represent the traditional model of the Catholic faith. Therefore the changes in the scope of the rituals of death celebrated by a given community are combined with—less visible but real—processes articulating a belief in *ta eschata*.

This article is an attempt to answer the question why the traditional Kashubian funeral vigil is disappearing so quickly. Is this process influenced by civilizational and cultural factors, or rather transformation in religion and faith professed by Kashubians? The research relies on original ethnographic field research conducted by the author from 1988 to 1999 and in 2015, participant observation, and ethnographic (focused on Kashubia), historical and thanatological literature. In addition, the religious nature of the “empty night” ritual necessitates theological interpretation to present a comprehensive vision of this phenomenon.

An inherent feature of human culture is its changeability. In the past, recognized and researched by historians and archaeologists, these changes have been gradual, and specific cultural features displayed far-reaching stability. Religion used to be one of these “stabilizing” features, not only in the case of the mostly Catholic Kashubian ethnic group. Nowadays, however, the social and cultural transformations have “accelerated” significantly. According to some researchers, these are radical economic changes, the rapid “invasion” of technology into the everyday life of all members of society, the unprecedented ease of exchanging thoughts, ideas and all kinds of cultural “goods” in the “global village” (the internet), the widespread migration of people, intellectual content, and lifestyles (Bauman 2000). Sociological research on religiosity in Poland indicates that there is a growing tendency to individualize and privatize religion (Mariański 2006, pp. 28–48, 109–16; Mariański 2016, pp. 157–202; Beckford 2008). The family and intergenerational cultural transmission are experiencing an acute crisis. As a result, small and large local communities (nations, tribes, ethnic groups) have been subjected to intense pressure from new, ideological and technological universalism, which denotes the erosion or even gradual elimination of their traditional ways of life, cultural and religious identity, and social structure (Kreft 2019; Totaro and Ninno 2014, pp. 29–49; Beer 2009, pp. 985–1002; Angwin 2018; Danaher 2016, pp. 245–68; Goban-Klas 2018, pp. 43–55; Zybortowicz 2015, pp. 28–57; Perszon 2019a, pp. 149–56; Carr 2012). Representatives of local, in this case Kashubian, culture may effectively act for their own community and culture, and the development of the latter using digital tools. However, this does not apply to the phenomenon of “empty night” as part of popular piety².

Intensive cultural transformations also affect Kashubians, who before the outbreak of World War II were considered an ethnic group with a strong cultural (Kashubian language and the whole sphere of rituals), religious (traditional Catholicism combined with “rural” or agricultural everyday life), and local identity, based on language, family, tradition, mentality, and hierarchy of values. Rural life, imbued with religion (liturgical and ritual calendar, celebrations of Sundays and holidays, daily family and rural devotion, religious brotherhood, bond with the local parish), was “naturally” oriented towards eternal life. Such a cultural formation is a continuation of previous models of social life. The Kashubian countryside (in particular the rural communities far away from city centers) preserved, at least partly, the model of the medieval society (Swanson 2002, pp. 92–103), which did not separate religious life from the “secular” sphere. All dimensions of existence were closely integrated with the religious content shared by the entire local community. This characteristic feature—at least in some of its manifestations—survived the devastating effects of World War II (1939–1945) and decades of pressure from Communist ideology (1945–1989). Cultural transformations have also affected the Kashubian rituals associated with death and funeral. Ethnographic studies published at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Franz Tetzner, Izydor Gulgowski, Adam Fischer,

² The author conducts research on the religiosity of young people in Kaschubia every few years. The most recent survey, which was conducted in Jastarnia and Lipusz in 2017 and included 123 respondents in total, indicated that Kashubian teenagers spend four to five hours online every day. Only 9% of them are familiar with the details of Kashubian “empty night” or participated, at least partly, in it.

Tadeusz Lehr-Spławiński) and later (Bożena Stelmachowska, the seven-volume *Dictionary of Kashubian Language* by Rev. Bernard Sychta) due to methodological reasons presented folk piety only incidentally. Therefore, we do not have a reliable and comprehensive vision of the beliefs and rituals that the Kashubians practiced in the context of death and funeral 100 years ago. Fragmentary documentation makes their reconstruction almost impossible. It also applies to the prayer vigil, typical of Kashubian rituals concerning death, celebrated on the eve of the funeral ceremony, known as the “empty night”.

It may be assumed that the ethnographic research conducted by the author (in 1989–1999) in almost all of Kashubia, aimed at determining the form of this rite at the beginning of the 20th century, provided satisfactory data both in terms of the current state of popular piety concerning death and the reconstruction of its condition in the first half of the 20th century. A large part of the respondents (approximately 30%), that is, the leaders of local religious services and mortuary piety, remembered “empty nights” from the 1930s themselves (Perszon 1999). The results of the ethnographic field research carried out at that time quickly gained historical value due to rapid cultural changes.³ They were supplemented by research conducted in 2015 (interviews and recordings conducted with 111 folk singers in 33 towns in the districts of Kartuzy, Kościerzyna, Puck, and Wejherowo), focused on the so-called musical (singing) folklore.⁴ Since the end of the 1990s, traditional model of vigil rituals and related beliefs have been rapidly disappearing in Kashubia.

2. Traditional Model of Vigil

It might be assumed that the night vigil in the house of the deceased existed in Kashubia before the beginnings of Christianity in Pomerania. Over time, the Slavic form of mourning the dead was invested with Catholic content, referring to the models popularized by orders in the early Middle Ages. In European (not only Slavic) cultures but also in the Middle East, public mourning of the dead (the so-called *placzki*—weeping), mourning music, expressive gestures, inflicting wounds, and sprinkling ashes on their heads were the integral elements of a funeral (Fischer 1921, pp. 205–17; Rush 1941, pp. 163–69). Early Christianity, polemicizing with pagan customs, forbade these practices. The impropriety of practicing pagan mourning traditions concerning the dead *planctus* and *nenia* by Christians was discussed, among others, by Tertullian, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyprian of Carthage, John Chrysostom, Basil, Hieronymus, and Augustine. Instead of the ostentatious mourning, singing psalms, hymns, and praying for the dead, especially during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, were introduced. The European Middle Ages, which shaped the culture and customs of the people (in particular through the influence of religious orders), recommended the *Officium pro defunctis* for the deceased. Gradually, the pagan vigil for the dead turned into a Christian home liturgy and its continuation in the cemetery (Rush 1941, pp. 151–62). Kashubian “empty night” may be (although there is no direct evidence for it) the continuation of an ancient Christian tradition of celebrating death as a “passage”; firstly, in religious communities and then throughout all Christianized societies.

Ars moriendi and the traditional funeral, shaped over the centuries, constituted an integral part of a culture in which Christianity was not so much a religion (distinguished from other sectors of existence), but a “way of existence” (Ryan 2012, pp. 969–70). The model of a cohesive, though diverse “Christian” community functioned throughout the Middle Ages. Religion (the Church), state, family, economy, and education formed one body, i.e., *Christianitas* (Swanson 1993, pp. 251–68). The relationship between culture and the Gospel and the process of inculturation of the latter, which requires patience, are analyzed

³ Ethnographic field research was carried out in 162 towns/villages and included 534 people. The most “valuable” sources of information are local leaders of rural piety, who conduct services (Rosary, the Litany of Loreto prayed in May, the Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus prayed in June, funeral singing, and non-liturgical prayers in the church). They preserve a living prayer and ritual tradition in their communities. See (Perszon 1999, pp. 17–18).

⁴ Luzino, Dąbrówka, Robakowo, Kochanowo, Kębłowo, Barłomino, Sychowo, Kamienica Królewska, Załakowo, Gowidlino, Staniszewo, Kępa, Stażki, Sianowska Huta, Kartuzy, Warzno, Rębiska, Szemud, Grabowiec, Donimierz, Strzelno, Darzłubie, Lipusz, Zielony Dwór, Klukowa Huta, Danachowo, Zakrzewo, Linia, Pomieczyno, Hejtus, Łączy Dół, Barwik, Sierakowice, and Puzdrowo.

by Joseph Ratzinger (2004, pp. 45–55). This “baptized” *modus vivendi* encompassed the whole family life and permeated the mentality of the rural community, as well as regulated attitudes and behavior. Since the village was a “family of families” and social control was comprehensive (total), inhabitants could count on the solidarity of the community only if they acted in the right, or traditionally sanctified, manner (Donati 2019). According to all older respondents, this type of social relations and approach to religion was present in Kashubian countryside before 1939. This did not imply the perfect homogeneity of the rural environment, but it undoubtedly favored conformist attitudes in line with the expectations of all the inhabitants. It is also increasingly difficult to determine whether such a form of popular piety led individual members to a deepening of their faith or promoted only external and formal adherence to socially shared beliefs and rituals. Studies by liturgists (Bouyer 1963, pp. 63–77) and anthropologists (Zuesse 2005, pp. 7883–48) emphasize the ideological (cognitive) dimension of ritualistic activities. Anthropology also analyzes the social (integrating and community-affirming) goals of rituals. Difficulties in the thorough Christianization of the rural population in the Middle Ages (and later on) are described, among others, by Vauchez (1993, pp. 97–102), Le Goff (1980, pp. 107–21), Ryan (2012, pp. 961–64) and in reference to Poland by Kracik (2012, pp. 190–258).

2.1. Participants and Leadership

Until the mid-20th century, the home death model dominated in rural Kashubia. The family and neighbors participated in the last moments of life unless someone died suddenly. Preparation of the body, its storage, and daily services were held in the house of the deceased. During the first two evenings after death, mourners prayed the so-called rosary. Neighbors and family, usually several dozen people, used to come for the evening prayer conducted by a lay leader. It consisted of one mystery of the Holy Rosary, the Litany of Loreto and Salve Regina. Even 30 years ago, the family made an effort to have a man preside over a deceased man and a woman to conduct the service for a deceased woman (Perszon 1999, pp. 184–92). The prayer vigil lasted throughout the night on the final evening before the funeral when the whole village and relatives gathered in the house. The tradition of funeral vigil at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was practiced not only in the former territories of the First Polish Republic but also in many European countries, for example, in Germany, France, Austria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Łęgowski 1991, pp. 61–65; Fischer 1921, pp. 205–17; Biegeleisen 1929, pp. 349–54).

According to respondents, the essence of the funeral vigil in Kashubia may originate from “pagan lamentations”. These included religious singing, sometimes, depending on the leader’s creativity, interrupted by praying a rosary. This scenario is also implemented today. Mourners (mostly men) perform each song divided into two groups, i.e., responsorially. The man who presides over the singing is asked beforehand by the family to lead the “empty night”. Before the singing starts, the cantor announces the title and number of the song and intones it. As each song is treated as a prayer, it is customary to end each multi-stanza canticle with the word “Amen”.

For at least 300 years (Kustus 1979), village inhabitants known as leaders, guides, or singers have played a significant role in shaping rural religious life. They were characterized by profound piety, had unquestionable authority in the local community, organized local annual services, and were engaged in parish life. In the Kashubian tradition, they were—especially in the context of rituals related to death and funerals—mainly men.⁵ Male leadership over local services, including pilgrimages to local shrines in Wejherowo,

⁵ These laymen who received formation in family piety and Roman Catholic liturgy presided over the services in the parish church. They were responsible for such services as the Way of the Cross and Bitter Lamentations (*Gorzkie Żale*), adoration at the Holy Sepulcher in Lent; Holy Rosary preceding the Holy Mass, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary on Sundays throughout the year (in some parishes also every day during Advent). In their home villages, they conducted the so-called May services (singing the Litany of Loreto near roadside chapels and crosses) and services at the deathbed and funeral. Until recently, they also held the first station of the funeral liturgy in the house of the deceased and sang songs during the procession to the church and from the church to the cemetery. They were the leading singers during the celebrations at the Calvary of Wejherowo and during pilgrimages to local shrines.

Swarzewo, and Sianowo, may be related both to the biblical and Roman model of *pater familias* and the persecution of the Catholic Church by the Prussian State during the so-called Kulturkampf. It was very severe and many parishes were deprived of priests. First, on 11 March 1872, the Prussian School Supervision Act denied the Church any influence over education. Then, on 4 July 1872, the anti-religious law excluded the Jesuits, Redemptorists, and the Ladies of the Sacred Heart from the Reich. In May 1873, Minister of Worship, Adalbert Falk, introduced four May Laws in the Landtag of Prussia on the education and employment of the clergy, papal jurisdiction in the Reich, disciplinary measures against the Church, and disaffiliation from the Church. In 1874, the law on the administration of Church estates was passed (the government confiscated the property of “illegally” staffed establishments), and the law which allowed for the expulsion of clergy who violated the May laws from the Reich. In 1875, Prussian authorities introduced registry offices and compulsory civil marriages. All religious orders were abolished, except for those caring for the sick. Pius IX declared the laws void and excommunicated those priests who obeyed them. It has to be emphasized that there were very few of them. Priests ordained contrary to German law were not allowed to fulfill their duties. Approximately 1000 parishes were deprived of their pastors and 9 bishoprics were vacant. Archbishop Mieczysław Ledóchowski from Poznań was sentenced to 5 years in prison for not obeying the May laws. In 1882, the anti-church restrictions were relaxed, only to be finally lifted in 1887 (Zieliński 2004, col. 205–7). The lack of priests meant that the so-called first singer was in charge of the pilgrimages. This was the case not only in Pomerania, but also in Silesia, where lay Catholics organized pilgrimages to Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, Częstochowa, St. Anna Mountain (Góra św. Anny) and Piekary (Wyczawski 1987, p. 237; Górecki 1994, pp. 42–53). However, it is worth remembering that the Roman Ritual before the Second Vatican Council provided for the presiding over the funeral liturgy (specifically at home and at the cemetery) by a layman. Similar regulations can be found in the funeral ritual revised after Vatican II.

During the vigil, the orants ate two meals; in wealthier homes, they were usually treated with alcohol.⁶

2.2. Hymns

Cantionals (hymnals), known as *kanteczka*, used during singing, were systematically printed in the second half of the 19th century; however, the majority of Kashubians knew many songs by heart.⁷ Cantionals were frequently published and republished by the publishing houses in the Bishopric of Culm and by private persons or parish priests, which proves their considerable popularity.⁸ It coincided with the elimination of illiteracy in the second half of the 19th century.

The repertoire of songs performed during the “empty night” was broad, and at the same time—due to local traditions—varied. Its differentiation, even between nearby towns

⁶ According to informants, this practice, leading—sporadically—to scandalous cases of getting drunk—was the main reason why local priests had reservations about the “empty night”. The problem of excessive alcohol consumption in the context of funerals (in particular during funeral feasts also called wakes) attracted the attention of the Church in Poland as early as the Middle Ages. Bishops at successive synods (starting with the Gniezno synod in 1407–1411) forbade priests from participating in funeral meals, where they repeatedly abused alcohol. *Strawa*, the original term for the funeral feast celebrated by the Slavs, was described by the Latin historian Jordanes in the 6th century, at the occasion of the funeral of Attila, chief of the Huns (Labudda 1983, p. 70). Polish Christianity probably inherited the habit of excessive drinking during a funeral meal from the Slavs, who used to feast and sing *carmina diabolica* on the graves of the deceased (Fischer 1921, p. 205).

⁷ On the relation between oral and literary tradition, see (Mills 2005, pp. 6842–46). In Kashubia, three religious songbooks are commonly used: *The Collection of Devout Songs* (1871), reissued in Pelplin in 2015; (*Nowy Kancjonał* 1908) and its illegal reprints in the 1980s; since 1993, a much shorter songbook (Perszon 2019b), which previously had several editions has been used. In Kościerzyna, Oliwa and the district of Wejherowo, the so-called *Kalwaryjki*, i.e., *The Way to Heaven* (1717); subsequent editions were published in 1785, 1796, 1811, 1833, 1861, and 1885; other editions in Wejherowo (1866), in Poznań (1871), in Pelplin 1877, 1885, and 1901 (Kustusz 1979, p. 38) were also popular. The German colonization in the 13th century contributed to the creation of the Polish devotional songs. The clergy, who wished to preserve the identity of the Slavic people, translated Latin texts into Polish. At first, the faithful in the churches sang a daily prayer and catechism (including the Decalogue), and in the 14th-century Polish songs were used for particular periods of the year (Bielawska 1980; Wit 1980).

⁸ The songbooks, although without notation, contained over 1000 songs, intended for singing during the Holy Mass, Church services of the liturgical year, and “for home use.” It seems that the second half of the 19th century was the period of the flourishing of folk religious singing in Pomerania and Kashubia.

or villages, must have been associated with the preferences of local singers, i.e., leaders of funeral piety. These differences may be due to the taste and skills of local organists. It was they who, from the 1870s onwards, popularized the singing of many songs based on sheet music (Mazurowski 1870) included in Szczepan Keller's *The Collection of Pious Hymns*. It is worth adding that during the night vigil—due to time constraints—only 30 songs, at most, were always used. It consisted of hymns to the Mother of God and Divine Providence, Catechism works, songs about the lives of saints, songs dedicated to Angels, about the Passion of our Lord, eschatological songs (individual judgment, final judgment, heaven, hell, especially purgatory), didactic hymns on the vanity of life and the power of death (*vanitas vanitatum* theme). They express all the richness of the Church's faith, but above all, reflect on death and the fleeting nature of life. They emphasize the equality of people in death and eternity and remind us of the *carpe diem* principle (in the sense of "let's do good as long as we have time").⁹ The songs presuppose a specific concept of human person and his relation to God.¹⁰ The motif of the sung "remembrance" of the Passion and Death on the cross of Jesus Christ and the co-suffering of His Mother is also present. The *imitatio Christi* theme was already dominant in the late medieval *artes moriendi*. According to Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg, it consists of seven elements of Christ's Passion: *oratio* (prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane), *sudatio* (bloody sweat), *remissio* (forgiveness for persecutors), *ploratio* (weeping), *clamatio* (loud calling), *commendatio* (offering the spirit to the Father), and *traditio* (willingly giving the spirit to the Father) (Włodarski 1987, pp. 122–23). The singers actualize—as Mircea Eliade puts it—*illud tempus*, the salvific events performed by the Son of God, applying them to the death of their compatriot and the suffering of the bereaved family.

2.3. The Priority of Salvation

By participating in the "empty night," the singers manifest and bring about a community of living faith. Although they are not aware of it, they constitute a relic of the true *communio christianorum* in a formalized, divided, and atomized society. The social effort of night prayer realizes the communal nature of the Church, understood as the true brotherhood in Christ, and at the same time manifests the solidarity of the neighborhood community with the bereaved family. For many generations of Kashubians, the main drive (moral obligation) to gather at the house of the deceased was a profound belief in the power of fervent prayer. A particular value and power were attributed to community prayer, offered selflessly for the deceased brother or sister.¹¹ Singers of the "empty night" somehow continue to "struggle" for the salvation of the soul of a deceased person who has not yet reached their final destination.¹² The central idea of community prayer is the Catholic belief in Purgatory, that is, the "intermediate state" between condemnation or salvation. It assumes the existence of life after death (immortality of the soul and its relation to the body), and resurrection. A belief in purgatory also implies the idea of judgment at

⁹ The Baroque eschatological songs flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries and the Catholic teaching about Purgatory was emphasized in the polemic with Protestantism. The Jesuits made a significant contribution to the dissemination of the Polish mourning songs (Nowicka-Jeżowa 1992, pp. 293–329; Kolbuszewski 1986, pp. 49–56).

¹⁰ A man comes from God and goes back to God. Our earthly existence is thus perceived as a "way" (*transitus*) fraught with dangers which leads to eternity and death is the painful and dramatic gate to it (Nowicka-Jeżowa 1992, pp. 71–141).

¹¹ This opinion was expressed by all the leaders, namely "guide-singers" of the "empty night". It is worth remembering that the older generation of Kashubians believe that prayers and Holy Masses before the funeral are particularly "effective". This belief suggests that the deceased has not passed away for eternity yet, but, as Arnold van Gennep (1960) puts it, is in "suspension" or a liminal phase. The belief in the presence of the soul of a deceased person near "their" body is confirmed by the customs related to the preparation of the body, the dressing, and the uninterrupted vigil over the corpse until the burial (Perszon 1999, pp.150–84).

¹² The first stage of this struggle is Christian death, celebrated in the context of the fight between angels and evil spirits, as Kashubians believe that the soul "goes to God" only when the priest throws the handful of earth onto the lid of the coffin, the repentance and prayers offered earlier are effective (Perszon 1999, p. 184; Włodarski 1987, pp. 68–133).

the time of death and the responsibility of the individual person to God. Purgatory brings with it the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins.¹³

It is necessary to add that during the night vigil at the body, the mourners observed the deceased. The observation was essential to reveal, for example, the symptoms indicating, at least potential, vampirism. Older informants remembered incidents recalled by their ancestors, which could not be rationally explained. Thus, in the past, people who dressed the corpse protected it against vampirism “just in case” by placing a brick, stone, fishing net, or a piece of woolen cloth and three crosses made of candle wax in the coffin (Perszon 1999, pp. 168–78; Meyer 1956, p. 155). According to old Kashubians, this pre-Christian custom as well as the belief in vampirism were severely condemned by the clergy. Therefore anti-vampire rituals were performed in secret.

Until the 1990s, the “empty night” ended in the morning when the coffin was closed, and the family bade farewell to the deceased and set off for the church. At dawn, the mourners sang the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, had breakfast, and then prayed the next part of the Rosary. Until the 1970s, in the villages located far away from the parish church, the so-called first singer performed the rites of the first liturgical funeral station in the house of the deceased. He also led the singing during the funeral procession to the church.¹⁴

3. The Crisis and Decline of the Village Funeral Ritual

At the beginning of the 1980s, both the participants of the prayer vigils and the outsiders observed the rapid disappearance of the old habit of celebrating the “empty night”. Older respondents indicated the multiple causes of the crisis of the death rituals at the home of the deceased.¹⁵ Thirty years ago, the gradual “reduction” of this tradition in its several dimensions was commonly observed. It became customary to shorten the “empty night” (people sang songs only until midnight), or to abandon it in general.

3.1. The Ecclesial Factors

The erosion of the social significance of the pre-funeral vigil led to a decreasing number of younger people participating in the ritual. There was a considerable reduction of the singing repertoire, i.e., abandoning the performance of many “typical” mourning/funeral songs in favor of the most popular ones. Until the 1990s, new songbooks and cantionals were not published and most local clergymen did not express any support or interest in preserving the ritual. The vast majority of clergymen (with some notable exceptions) did not participate in the Kashubian death ritual celebrated at home. The construction of the funeral chapels in churches radically changed the structure of death celebration in villages transferring pre-funeral prayers (i.e., the rosary and the 1st funeral station conducted according to the Catholic ritual) to the parish church.¹⁶ The fact that pre-funeral prayers were moved from the house of the deceased to the chapel rapidly eliminated the old customs and radically changed the relationships between neighbors.

¹³ Le Goff describes the development of “purgatory” theology and practice in Christian Europe (Le Goff 1986). The whole older generation of Kashubians strongly believe in purgatory and pray every day “for the souls in purgatory”. A manifestation of this form of religiosity is the offering (at least several times a year) of the Holy Mass for deceased relatives. Schouppé’s work is a comprehensive monograph on purgatory written in the 19th century, based, among other factors, on the visions of saints (Schouppé 1973).

¹⁴ The information is gained from all older respondents. In the village where the parish church was located, a priest conducted the celebration of the first station “in the house of the deceased”. He usually walked to the house or was driven in a horse-drawn carriage. Since the 1970s, lay leaders have less frequently celebrated the first funeral station, as the vast majority of clergymen could reach the place themselves by car.

¹⁵ The custom of organizing an “empty night” was common in Kashubian villages at that time; the inhabitants included in the interview practiced it to a greater or lesser extent. It was only occasionally celebrated in cities such as Wejherowo, Kartuzy, Kościerzyna, Reda, Rumia, and Bytów.

¹⁶ The construction boom in parishes was triggered by the Solidarity revolution (1980–1981), which forced the communist authorities to “loosen” restrictions on the Catholic Church. Funeral chapels were built in almost all parishes at that time. Some of them were adapted to store the bodies of the deceased.

3.2. Medicalization of Life and Dying

An important factor in weakening the home liturgy has been the increasing hospitalization of the dying (i.e., the so-called hospital death) and storing the remains in a hospital morgue (Castells 2013, p. 473; Feldmann 2010, p. 33). It is accompanied by a gradual erosion of faith in eternal life and a prevalent disregard for salvation/damnation, especially among a younger population.¹⁷ The younger generation of Kashubs displays an increasing ignorance of both Christian anthropology and Catholic “eschatological imagination”, which were evident for the older generation (Perszon 2019a, pp. 313–31). A similar trend may be observed in the countries of Western Europe (Stephenson 1985, pp. 32–35; Hick 1976, pp. 92–95; Vovelle 1983, p. 717; Minois 1998, pp. 174–90; Hofmeier 1974, pp. 13–23). For younger people, eternal salvation offered by faith is no longer a priority. It seems that personal prosperity, fulfillment, and life comforts are more important, whereas religion does not appear to be subjectively important (Borowik 2016, pp. 10–11; Zemło 2013, pp. 293–319). Therefore, health, physical and mental fitness, and bodily beauty dominate in the hierarchy of values. Preoccupation with health is frequently linked with the rejection of suffering and its salvific dimension (Nisbeth 1984, p. 121). Old age and disability are repulsive and become “improper” (Aries 1992, pp. 572–76; Aries 1984, p. 72; Vovelle 1983, pp. 704–7). The crisis of the Kashubian traditional way of coping with death is also significantly related to the contemporary social attitude of “escape” from death, treating it as “taboo”, a reality that “is not talked about”. The literature on the subject even mentions the so-called pornography of death (Gorer 1979). Paradoxically, the social “denial” of death clashes with its “over-representativeness” in television programs and film productions (Aries 1992, pp. 549–90; Kolbuszewski 1997, pp. 7–16; Gorer 1979, pp. 197–203; Ratzinger 1986, pp. 85–87; Feldmann 2010; Kurowska-Susdorf 2019, pp. 229–31). An important factor in the atrophy of almost the whole “home liturgy” centered around death and funeral in Kashubia is also frequently an oblivious attitude, typical of modern societies, which leads to the “marginalization of death”. It is linked to the cult of youth and a specific “religion of health”.¹⁸ The dream of “technological immortality” is accompanied by the assumption that death is the worst thing that can happen to a human being (Szewczyk 1996, p. 33). Nuland (1994, p. xiv) observes that “we have created the method of modern dying. Modern dying takes place in the modern hospital, where it can be hidden, cleansed of its organic blight, and finally packaged for modern burial. We can now deny the power not only of death but of nature itself. We hide our faces from its face, but still we spread our fingers just a bit, because there is something in us that cannot resist a peek.”

3.3. Modernization of Rural Life

It is worth emphasizing that, broadly understood, economic and social factors significantly weakened this form of popular piety. There are several vital elements of the transformation in which the Kashubian community has been participating for several decades, which should be taken into account. Firstly, it is a gradual but permanent disappearance of a typical rural community whose inhabitants work in agriculture and create a specific type of culture based on tradition. In the post-war years, it was first destabilized by compulsory collectivization by Communists, then by the widespread phenomenon of the so-called peasant workers, i.e., the owners of smaller farms employed in the industry. The relatively quick industrialization of the region (especially the Tri-City: Gdynia, Sopot, and

¹⁷ The latter factor, i.e., the weakening of faith in the Catholic *ta eschata*, was considered by many respondents to be the most important. The crisis of faith in the last things among Catholics in the West has been observed for several decades (Vovelle 1983, pp. 717–22; Gallup and Proctor 1982, pp. 58–71; Szewczyk 1996, pp. 17–28). Moreover, in the pastoral practice of the Church, there is a “softening” of those elements in eschatology which could “frighten” the faithful (Kselman 1993, pp. 82–85; Harpur 1992, pp. 244–46; Vorgrimler 1993, pp. 328–53). Thirty years ago in Kashubia, people were aware of the destructive influence of mass culture promoting comfort and a consumer lifestyle. Some of the older informants attributed the rapid disappearance of the Catholic *ars moriendi* and the social, in a sense liturgical (referring to liturgy of the domestic Church) prayer for the dead to the spiritual laziness of the younger generation: “young people are not willing”, “they watch TV too often”.

¹⁸ Manfred Lütz (2012) suggestively argues that the social “expulsion of death”, i.e. its removal from human consciousness, must be associated with the universal medicalization of life at all its stages. “Faith” in medicine and the subordination of all life to it lead to a radical rejection of suffering and the illusion of immortality. He even speaks of the “religion of health,” which—in place of eternal salvation—has become “the highest value”.

Gdańsk) attracted large groups of young people who moved to growing cities. Education performed a similar function with vocational and secondary schools becoming available for more young people and, since the 1970s, universities. Thus, urban life naturally signified the advancement of civilization. Since the 1970s, many villages, due to their favorable communication location, have turned into suburban housing estates.¹⁹ One should also mention the importance of the development of tourism and related services.²⁰ Rapid and comprehensive transformations taking place in the social (external) context coincided with the evolution of family life. A special role in this respect should be attributed to the expansion of the so-called mass media. In the 1960s, almost every household possessed a radio, whereas in the 1970s, television sets became popular. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Internet, which exerts the most profound impact on children and adolescents, has started to play the dominant role. The consequence of the electronic “invasion”, offering content radically alien to the local tradition, leads to the growing cultural and spiritual uprooting of the young generation.²¹ No wonder that the first “victim” of the new model of thinking and living are those forms of community involvement that are absent from the “media space”. Having no institutional support they have been gradually eradicated.

If we take into account that the rite of “empty night” appeared—as a pre-Christian ritual—and later on flourished in Kashubia for hundreds of years as a result of a deep and patient evangelization of the mystery of death and local funeral customs, then its rapid disappearance signifies not only a change in social ritual behavior but also a more profound transformation. It may imply—at least to some extent—the de-Christianization of the broadly understood context of death and ideas about the afterlife.²² It is also worth recalling the apt comment on the utter disregard for the piety of the people (and the diversity of prayer forms) in the process of preparing and implementing the new funeral rites of the Catholic Church in Poland.²³ This happened despite the explicit recommendations of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (1974, pp. 1–5). It seems that a sin of omission was committed at the stage of preparing the Polish edition of the new funeral rites (1976). The bishops in the dioceses which had cultivated the old religious tradition (such as the Culm Diocese) did not make any effort to include it in the official funeral rites.

The organization of funeral ceremonies, adapted to the aspirations/mechanisms/expectations of modern society, relies on “services” offered by funeral professionals and so far by the Catholic clergy. The autonomous (thoroughly religious and dictated by love) activity of the family of the deceased and the neighborhood community is significantly reduced to the role of a passive spectator in this model of “coping” with death.

4. Conclusions

The research interviews conducted in 2015 and six participant observations allow for several, comments. The “empty night,” which was previously taken for granted in

¹⁹ In Kashubian villages, the inhabitants live in housing estates (in detached houses) and are self-employed mostly in services or are salaried employees. The fact that the village becomes a center of local administration plays a significant role in its “urbanization”. This process refers to such villages as Żukowo, Banino, Bolszewo, Gościcino, Rekowo, Luzino, Sierakowice, Chwaszczyno, Szemud, Kielno, Somonino, Lipusz, Stężyca, and Linia.

²⁰ Many towns and villages at the Baltic seaside and in the Kashubian Lake District have turned into tourist and leisure centers, which radically destabilizes the local culture.

²¹ The research conducted by the author among young people in Jastarnia and Lipusz in Kashubia in 2017 (the survey included 123 people) showed that the lower-secondary school students spent 3.5 to 4 h browsing the Internet every day. Several respondents spent 12 hours online per day (Perszon 2019b, p. 154). Miczka (1997, pp. 363–74) writes about virtual “violence” highlighting death and “virtual postmodern deconstruction of immortality,” which is another version of what Philippe Aries defined as the “reversed death”.

²² The context of celebrating the rituals of popular piety is crucial, as it gives them special significance. The change of the social context makes the ritual redundant and incomprehensible (Christian 2005, p. 3150).

²³ Jacek Kolbuszewski (1986, pp. 49–56) observes that—unlike in the dioceses of the German-speaking countries or Italy—funeral ritual intended for Poland completely ignored the heritage of faith contained in the beautiful (making use of “paraphrased” psalms) songs of the “time of death”. Such a decision must, in his view, weaken the Christian significance of the funeral and the mystery of death. Even though the documents of the universal Church postulate the inculturation of the Gospel by “incorporating” it into a specific culture, *The Order of Christian Funerals* (1998) in Poland disregards the rich regional traditions, prayers, and songs which accompanied the dead. The exception is the “station in the house of the deceased”.

Kashubia, has been rapidly disappearing in the last few decades. The pace of change is faster in highly urbanized regions, although there are exceptions to this rule.²⁴ The rural regions, dominated by centuries-old indigenous inhabitants, are the most resistant to the erosion of tradition. Interestingly, they also display more engagement in religious practices, both obligatory and optional. The continuation of the “empty night” also depends on the determination of local singers. The reduction of “empty nights” thus acquires a profoundly territorial dimension. The process of gradual limitation of the repertoire seems to be more important as the custom of religious singing in families has practically disappeared.²⁵ The young generation usually cannot sing anymore, which results from the disappearance of the transmission of cultural tradition in the family. “Empty night” has never been a liturgical or church ceremony. Successive generations of Kashubians pursued it because they were able to absorb and assimilate political, economic and cultural changes in the community. The scope and force of the transformation they face in the 20th and 21st centuries is unprecedented. As a result, local piety, devoid of institutional support, is clearly in a losing position. In a society where the dominant attitude is the individualization and privatization of religion, and the emancipation of the individual becomes a desirable factor, the creative continuation of tradition is significantly impeded. The direct impact on this state of affairs—among the factors indicated above—is not the transformation in faith itself (weakening of the “temperature” of faith in eternal life, the possibility of condemnation, etc.)²⁶ or changes in the way of life (working outside the home, the prevalence of electronic media) but the mechanisms of how modern society functions. It seems that it operates through specialized institutions and favors, also in the sphere of religion and coping with death, individual (personal) choices and preferences²⁷. These mechanisms are visible in a new and widespread funeral practice in Kashubia. The elimination of “home death”, commissioning the preparation of the body, its storage, and its transport to a funeral parlor, and finally placing the body in a chapel instead of keeping it in the house is convenient for the family. Although it is costly, funeral preparations are performed by professionals. By adopting the mechanisms of modern society with its far-reaching specialization also in the field of funeral celebration Kashubians eliminate the traditional home/family/rural liturgy. A reversal of this trend is difficult to imagine. It seems that the Catholic Church is the only subject that could attempt to “re-tame” (Ph. Aries) death in Kashubia. However, in order to achieve this, pastors and organists would have to face a real challenge. Concern for the continuation and development of a centuries-old practice of the “empty night” has to go against modern social trends. It would be necessary to “re-invent” a pastoral form that would be adequate and attractive to contemporary Catholics. A step towards reversing the disappearance of the “empty night” would be the inclusion of popular piety in the formation of candidates for the priesthood in Pelplin and Gdańsk dioceses and the involvement of bishops in the new edition of funeral rites. Finally, it is necessary to convince the lay faithful and clergy that adequate funeral religiosity must take into account well-established and proven patterns of local culture. Throughout the centuries, the lay faithful in Kashubia have incorporated the mystery of human death into the Paschal Mystery of Christ using singing. This form of prayer somehow naturally “creates” a living Church and allows people not only to articulate the pain (drama) of death but, above all,

²⁴ A close-knit group of singers exists, for example, in highly urbanized Luzino (7000 Inhabitants). It is worth mentioning that “empty night” has never been practiced on the Hel Peninsula. In 1995–2015, the disappearance of this custom was confirmed in the Puck region except for Mechowo, Darzłubie, and Strzelno, in the Łębork area (where it occasionally occurred in the past), in the Wejherowo region (except for the parishes in its south-west part), in the entire Bytów region (except for Bytów), and to a large extent in the area of Kościerzyna.

²⁵ The interviewed informants do not know the music to the songs performed 20–30 years ago. For example, in Warzno the songs such as “On my mortal bedclothes,” “Immeasurable riches of his grace,” in Klukowa Huta; “Hail Mary,” “To those who are dying of thirst,” “O Mary, the salvation of our souls,” “The Virgin above the choirs of angels,” “At the times of the starost Marcyan,” and “O, Father full of mercy”. In Darzłubie, Dziemiiany, and Lipusz, the repertoire performed by the singers has been significantly reduced in the last years.

²⁶ Herbert Vorgrimler (1993, pp. 328–53) writes about the reinterpretation of the concept of hell in twentieth-century Catholic theology, which “upsets” traditional Catholic doctrine. M. Vovelle (1983, pp. 719–21) notes the crisis of Catholic preaching about the last things.

²⁷ The dynamics of cultural transformations, generated in particular by universal participation in the World Wide Web, significantly limits the adequacy of sociological analyzes. Cf. Cox (1984, pp. 181–90).

to proclaim the hope of salvation. Today, this way of celebrating death is almost lost. Is it gone forever?

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