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ROADSIDE MEMORIAL SIGNS FOR VICTIMS OF TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

Summary

Wreaths, crosses and memorial slabs and plaques are a widespread and common feature of landscape along the Yugoslav roads. These signs of fatal accidents are a cause of deep concern to police and traffic authorities and, for different reasons, to tourist authorities. The proportions that the practice of marking the sites of fatal accidents in this way has assumed in recent years can be judged by the considerable yet ineffective efforts to eradicate it through public criticism in the mass media and by the fact that legislation is contemplated to ban this custom. In either case, the counteraction is prompted by the undesired effects of this practice and not by the intentions and motives of those who erect such memorial signs.

Roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents represent a peculiar feature of our modern culture. They are very closely linked with some characteristic developments of modern life, such as the rapid growth of the volume of traffic and general technological development, then the growing need for human communication on the widest possible scale (by communicating the message of the tragic event to those who do not belong to the victim's immediate social circle), and finally man's need to express his attitude towards the kind of death — in a traffic accident — that modern living brings in its wake. Roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents are a modern version of customs surrounding death and dying — customs whose many variants reach back to distant and more recent past.

These roadside memorial signs are of many kinds and they appear in various forms. They are made of different materials, with varying decorative or functional additions, and of different sizes. Some of them carry verbal messages and others do not. Verbal messages themselves show considerable variation in content and length. According to their various characteristics, roadside memorial signs could be classified in different ways — e. g., according to type or form, according to the type of message, according to the style of visual expression, and according to certain other criteria. Classification according to type or form yields four major groups: wreaths, crosses, memorial plaques or slabs, and monuments. However, this fourfold classification is not unexceptionable: one might object, for instance, that wreaths cannot be regarded as a separate class because they are often found as decorative additions to crosses and memorial plaques. Hesitant about calling the wreath a separate »form«, I have settled for the term »kind« or »type«, but even in that terminology I could not remain fully consistent. One might talk about the shapes of supports for wreaths, but then one must remember that most of them are improvised structures, often simply objects already found on such sites whose original purpose was quite different. The problem of classification becomes even more intractable in

the case of signs combining different types or appearing in forms which can be regarded as transitional.

Certain added elements are sometimes found near the memorial signs to serve special purposes. They include additional supports for wreaths, parts of automobile wreckage, obituary notices and other texts, and food and drinks. The area surrounding some of the memorial signs is carefully landscaped: pathways are built from the road to the memorial sign, bushes are cut, pieces of stone removed, and in some cases fences are put up. Trees are often planted near such memorial signs, for decorative for some other purposes.

People visit memorial sites regularly, bringing new wreaths and fresh flowers and lighting candles. They are cared for in the first place by those who have erected the memorial signs and who usually visit them on anniversaries of the death of those that they commemorate and on All Saints' Day. Professional drivers who happen to pass by a sign commemorating the death of a colleague also stop there. In the parts of the country where the Orthodox religion predominates, the victim's relatives visit the site of the accident on specified dates after his death and leave there food, drinks, cigarettes, and other presents.

Such roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents are put up not only by relatives and friends: social and political organizations and government agencies have also adopted the practice, as witnessed by the roadside memorial signs for the high-ranking politicians Boris Krajačger, Slobodan Penezić-Krcun, and Svetolik Lazarević. All procedures in connection with such signs are highly formalized: there is a fully worked out protocol procedure surrounding their erection, ceremonial unveiling, and visits to commemorate the anniversaries of death of those in whose honour they have been put up. Such events are also publicized and they certainly stimulate private individuals to cultivate similar practices. Their influence is felt both in the growing popularity of the practice and in the forms of ceremonial behaviour on such occasions.

Apart from the roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents, memorial signs are also put up on other sites where fatal accidents have happened (unrelated to traffic) — in places where someone has drowned, or been killed by lightning or electricity, or died in a fall, even in places where someone has been murdered. Some of the memorial signs are recent, but some date many years back. The idea behind them and their purpose have not changed much in time. In Slovenia, for instance, we find memorial plaques and stones for those killed by lightning in 1875 and 1905, for a person who fell under a horse cart in the forest and was killed in 1903, for a man who fell from a wine press and died in 1868, and for a woman who drowned in 1873. Memorial signs for victims of drowning are found in other parts of the country, especially along the coast (for instance, on the island of Solta, dating back to 1937 and 1941). Memorial signs for victims of murder also have a considerable tradition (in the districts of Konavle in 1847 and earlier, in Serbia in 1892, and in Slovenia in 1881), which extends into the more recent period (e. g., in Slovenia in 1923 and 1929).

Roadside memorial signs can be related to the so-called *krajputaši* roadside monuments commemorating Serbian soldiers killed in the nineteenth and twentieth-century wars. These monuments, carved by village stonecutters, were usually placed along roads and at major junctions. (The monuments for Slobodan Penezić-Krcun and Svetolik Lazarević are in fact based on the *krajputaši* model.) The earlier monuments and the modern roadside memorial signs share certain characteristic features: they are both intended to honour and keep alive the memory of the dead person, they are both located along the road, and they both seek to communicate their message to those who pass by. The same basic idea seems to have inspired the makers of all memorial signs from the earliest to the most recent examples. That same idea can be traced even further back into history, namely to those Bogomil tombstones for which their inscriptions make it clear that they were not meant to stand on the grave of the dead man whose memory they honoured (an example of this kind is the memorial stone for the mediaeval military leader Radivoj Oprašić). Such memorial stones are not tombstones, just as the *krajputaši* and the modern roadside memorial signs are not tombstones either. (The relationship between *krajputaši* and Bogomil tombstones, or rather memorial stones, has been noticed and described by several authors.) Most *krajputaši* and memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents share one feature, and that is their location along the road. Some other monuments are in many respects the same as *krajputaši* (in terms of their shape, material, construction, textual message, and place and time of appearance) but they are not located along the road. However, they share one feature with roadside memorial signs, and that is the fact that they mark the place of someone's death.

Quite obviously there is a connection between a tombstone and a memorial sign commemorating the dead man but not placed on his grave. Further research is needed to determine what these phenomena have in common and in what ways they differ. Similarities are easily observed, but differences are also important though they are sometimes neglected in ethnological literature (for instance, in the interpretation of tombstones over the so-called empty graves).

In discussing the characteristic features shared by all roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents one should not lose sight also of yet another frequent kind of memorial structure, namely, monuments to fallen Partisans and victims of Fascism. Some of these monuments are placed on sites where the Partisans died during the war, but many stand along roads and on road junctions. These monuments, too, carry the message of death and commemorate the dead.

The present article reports the preliminary results of a research into the nature of roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents; work on this project is continuing and further results will be reported later. On the basis of the preliminary description, classification and comparative analysis of the collected material, it seems safe to conclude that a full understanding and interpretation of roadside memorial signs as an ethnologically relevant phenomenon will necessitate study at two levels — synchronic and diachronic.

At the diachronic level it will be necessary to observe the continuity of traditional methods of marking the place of someone's death, including similarities and differences in the forms, purpose, message, visual expression, and other characteristics.

At the synchronic level, roadside memorial signs will be studied from different aspects, each of which will require a different approach.

On the one hand, it will be sociologically interesting to examine for whom such memorial signs are erected, who erects and maintains them, to what extent the practice is connected with the family circle, or with larger communities or groups (e. g., occupational groups) or even whole social strata and classes. On the other hand, attention will have to be paid to the influence of the global system. (We have already noted that opposing trends coexist in the global system: the fact that this phenomenon has been institutionalized and accompanied by a certain ritual conflicts with the negative attitudes towards it and with attempts to eradicate it by means of public criticism and appropriate legislation.)

The psychological approach will have to concentrate on two groups of population: people who put up and maintain roadside signs and drivers. With the first group we shall try to learn their motives for this practice, and with the second group we shall examine the effects that roadside signs have on them.

The communicative aspect of this phenomenon will be explored in the light of information theory. Attention will be paid to types of communication, messages, senders and receivers.

It will be important to find out whether regional differences exist in the frequency of occurrence, shape, or any other characteristics of roadside memorial signs and to determine the causes of these differences. Certain regional differences have already been observed in the preliminary stage of this research.

Finally, in studying roadside memorial signs for victims of traffic accidents the creative aspect, or the visual expression, cannot be left unexamined. For that reason, the aesthetic approach to the phenomenon under investigation will also be needed.

(Translated by Vladimir Ivir)