“He should stay in the grave”: Cultural Patterns in the Interpretation of Near-Death Experiences in African Traditional Religions

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ABSTRACT: A wide-ranging survey of ethnographic, explorer, and missionary literature demonstrates that although historical accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) are attested in indigenous African societies, they are comparatively rare. Correspondingly, there is also a scarcity of mythological narratives of journeys to afterlife realms and a comparative lack of concern with afterlife speculation per se. Instead, the literature reveals that many African peoples had marked concerns about potentially malevolent influences of ancestral spirits, shamanistic focus on spirit possession and sorcery, and precipitous burial practices limiting the occurrence of NDEs. NDEs were sometimes seen as aberrational, suggesting that individuals would have been reluctant to relate them. In such cultural environments, NDEs could scarcely have played a significant role in contributing to afterlife conceptions.

KEY WORDS: African traditional religions; near-death experience; afterlife beliefs; shamanism; culture; experiential source hypothesis

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Despite a great diversity of cultures and beliefs across the African continent, many of the traditional religious belief systems of Africa share some general commonalities (see Bond, 1992, p. 3; Idowu, 1973, p. 78). Two common characteristics were a general lack of preoccupation with afterlife speculations and ethics systems that were unconcerned with prospects of postmortem judgment (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 263; P’Bitek, 1971, p. 85). In cases in which afterlife concerns were central to a religion, the focus was on how the actions of ancestor spirits might impact the living (Wiredu, 1992, p. 148). A few societies actively disbelieved in life after death, whereas others stated simply, “we do not know” (Bond, 1992, p. 6).

The literature nevertheless contains many examples of beliefs in spirits leaving the body at death, remaining nearby for a number of days, and then, after burial, departing (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 264) “to another state of existence” (Mbiti, 1990, p. 153). The spirit was seen as a “psycho-physical . . . analogue of a body” that could appear to the living as an apparition (Wiredu, 1992, p. 139). Beliefs in component-souls were not uncommon, typically comprising the Breath or animating life-force that dissipates at death; an Ancestral Guardian Spirit that simultaneously lives in the spirit-land and inhabits the individual on Earth; a Destiny Spirit or “spark of the Creator” that returns to the deity at death; and the Self, Personality Spirit, or “Real Man,” the consciousness of which becomes either a ghost or an ancestor spirit (Mbiti, 1990, p. 156).

It was typically believed that spirits reached the other world by undertaking a long, difficult journey and crossing a cold, dark river. Funerary rituals enabled the spirit to integrate in the community of ancestors, and offerings ensured that they had food on the journey and gifts for the ancestors (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 78–79, 156). Being close to the divine, ancestors gained power that they might use to help the living (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, pp. 263–266).

Although beliefs in post-mortem judgment, reward, and punishment were rare, criminals, witches, sorcerers, those who broke taboos, and those who died of particular diseases were believed to become harmful, wandering spirits, alienated from their communities (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 271). In many cases, individuals had to meet certain conditions during their lives in order, upon their deaths, to join the ancestors, including “good moral conduct,” living to old age and dying a natural death, having offspring, and especially receiving proper funerary rites (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, pp. 263–266). Deities or the “court of the ancestors” had the power to bestow upon certain
individuals a divine-like state of being. Generally speaking, however, neither judgment nor reward was expected, and it was believed that afterlife fates were the same for most people (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 79, 156, 158–160). Spirits continued to play an important role in the community (Wiredu, 1992, p. 143).

Beliefs in a heavenly paradise are occasionally found in the literature, however, involving “a happy, unending reunion with their folk who are waiting for them on the other side” (Idowu, 1973, p. 188). The people of some cultures, such as the Luhya, Banyarwanda, and Igbo, believed that spirits of the dead went to an underworld. Others, such as the San and Mamvu-Mangutu, held diverse conceptions of souls living “in the air, the sun, moon, or stars” and in “woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains, or just around villages” (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 78–79).

The other world was commonly seen as a mirror image of this one (Rowley, 1877, p. 90), where status, professions, environment, hierarchies, and general activities were maintained (Mbiti, 1990, p. 157). Going to the other realm was often seen as a return home after visiting Earth.

After four or five years, personal identities and community bonds faded, and spirits were seen no longer as “people” but as “things.” They then entered a state of “collective immortality,” exchanging their “humanness” for “full spiritness” (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 78, 158–159). Beliefs in reincarnation were widely attested, particularly as snakes or other animals. Some people considered it a punishment not to be reborn (Parrinder, 1974, p. 138).

The influence of Christianity on indigenous African religions began as far back as the 1st century, though missionaries arrived only in the late 15th century. European colonialism, including the slave trade, led entire African societies to become fragmented and to lose their cultural identities (Idowu, 1973, pp. 78–79). By the late 19th century, Western missionaries (such as Kidd, 1904, p. 81; Rowley, 1877, p. 15) were writing that European influence was so pervasive that it was impossible to know exactly what earlier African cultures believed. Furthermore, Muslim influence began in the 8th century and expanded to such an extent in the 16th and 19th centuries that northern Africa became wholly Islamicized (P’Bitek, 1971, pp. 53–54; Ray, 2000, pp. 143–144, 169).

In a wide-ranging and thorough examination of missionary, explorer, and early ethnographer accounts of African traditional religions across the continent, I found comparatively little material on the afterlife and few accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs). In the
following discussion, I will analyze the documentary accounts in relation to shamanic otherworld journey practices and to afterlife beliefs, myths, and funerary rituals. It should be noted, however, that such distinctions may not always have been culturally appropriate; some “myths” may have been taken as fact. Deathbed visions, spirit possession, mediumship, and reincarnation were all widely attested, though I found no descriptions of afterlife experiences or conditions communicated through such means. It should also be noted that many of the accounts were sometimes inaccurate and colored by Christian worldviews, imperialist agendas (P’Bitek, 1971, p. 52), and racist beliefs that Africans were semi-mythical “wild men”—a notion that helped to justify the slave trade (P’Bitek, 1971, p. 35–36). Serious anthropological study of African cultures began as late as 1930, then swiftly declined (P’Bitek, 1971, p. 105), meaning that sources about early African indigenous religions are far from ideal. For greater readability, in my syntheses of many of the accounts, I provide the entire page range of the primary source rather than citing a page number after each quotation within an account.

Near-Death Experience in African Societies

Most extant accounts of indigenous African NDEs are brief and lacking in detail. The earliest is from Angola in the mid-17th century, reported by missionary Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi (cited in Thornton 2002, p. 75). Cavazzi wrote simply that a Mbundu woman returned from death after being sacrificed, because “her services in the Other World were not needed.” The papers of Swedish-American historian Amandus Johnson (cited in Thornton 2002, p. 75) contain references to Mbundu NDEs from 1922. Johnson described individuals who had “risen from the dead” after visiting the spirit world, Kalunga, which was ruled by the creator deity Soba Kalunga and was reserved for “those judged worthy.” Historian John K. Thornton (2002, p. 75) considered these narratives to be explanations for Mbundu afterlife beliefs, and sociologist James McClenon (2006, p. 23) likewise saw them in an experiential source theory context. The Nyakyusa of Tanzania and Malawi were also said to have derived certain afterlife beliefs “from persons who ‘died’ and returned,” including that people who had committed suicide had to explain to the spirits in the other world why they had killed themselves (Mackenzie, 1925, p. 298).

Dutch West India Company merchant and slave trader Willem
Bosman (1704, pp. 384–385) related an account from the Kingdom of Whydah, modern-day Benin, in which “an old Sorceress” told of “strange things concerning Hell” after claiming “to have been there in person.” She saw “several of her acquaintance there” along with a previously deceased “Captain of the Blacks” being “miserably tormented.” This account served to confirm her people’s (supposedly pre-Christian) beliefs in an underground hell where souls of “the wicked and damned are punished with fire.” A German missionary told explorer William Winwood Reade (1874, pp. 361–362) of an Akan funerary sacrifice he witnessed at Akropong in Ghana. According to ritual custom, a woman was stripped naked, though the attempt to kill her was unsuccessful, for she was only “stunned, not killed.” She awoke to find herself surrounded by corpses. She went to the council elders to explain that “she had been to the Land of the Dead and had been sent back because she was naked.”

A 19th century English trader, Richard Edward Dennett (1898, pp. 133–134), reported a Bakongo NDE. A man died after being struck by lightning, then revived to tell how he had been carried up to the realm of the god Nzambi Mpungu, a land of plenty, with “great plantations and rivers full of fish.” He remained for a few weeks until Nzambi Mpungu asked him if he wanted to stay, but the man decided to return to Earth. According to missionary G. Cyril Claridge (1922, pp. 288–289), Bakongo afterlife beliefs originated in out-of-body experience (OBE) phenomena. He cited accounts of individuals having such experiences and seeing their own bodies “as though stark dead” from outside of them. In some accounts, souls visited their own funerals, and in others they traveled to earthly and supernatural places. One man was reportedly followed by a “wizard” to “the country of the dead” where he witnessed a cannibalistic witchcraft ceremony (Claridge, 1922, pp. 152–153). According to 19th century accounts, the Bakongo believed that individuals suffering a prolonged death were “being interrogated on the threshold” of the next world. In one case a man was “sent back for his identity card” (MacGaffey, 1986, p. 73). The Bakongo believed that death is “reversible and may happen several times to one individual,” so returning from the dead was seen only as “remarkable rather than miraculous” (MacGaffey, 1986, p. 53). A 20th century Bakongo account should also be mentioned. A man who had not converted to Christianity died and found himself at the Zaire River. “Across the river several people appeared and said, ‘you must not die; there are too many orphans to care for.’” They gave him
knowledge about certain plants that would cure infertility in women, and he returned to his body (Janzen & Arkinstall 1978, p. 196; McClenon, 2006, p. 24).

In a widespread Nandi account from Kenya, after falling into a river, a man died and found himself in “a strange country” similar to Earth. Spirits told him, “Your time has not yet come when you should join us. Go back to the earth.” They struck the ground, somehow causing the man to lose consciousness, and he revived near the place where he had fallen into the river (Hollis, 1909, p. 41).

Missionary Donald Fraser (1914, p. 126) reported an NDE from the Tumbuka of Malawi in which a man died then recovered while his body was being prepared for burial. He described how he had traveled along a road “to a great village where the people lived without marriage.” They would not speak to him, except to tell “him to be gone, for he was not wanted there.”

British missionary Robert Keable (1921, pp. 527–529; cf. McClenon, 2006, p. 30) recounted the NDE of a Basuto man from South Africa. The man died and traveled along a road until he came to a fork. A guide appeared and led him along a path, but the man grew suspicious at the guide’s “villainous countenance.” He called for help, and a man with a cross on his head appeared and scared the guide away, then told the NDEr that he was on the path to hell, and instructed him to go back the way he had come. The NDEr did so, returned to life, and immediately went to a catechist to convert to Christianity. Because the catechist was not supposed to baptize except “in extremis,” he instead put the sign of the cross on the man’s head. The man died again that night, traveled to the same crossroads, but took the other path. This time he was sent back because he did not have a cross on his head. Although the catechist had made one, it was not a sign of complete conversion via baptism and so did not appear on his spirit form. The man persuaded the catechist to baptize him, then died a third and final time. Keable saw this case as evidential, claiming that the NDEr did “not know enough of Christianity” to have understood that he was not “officially” a Christian after being given the initial sign and only learned of his incomplete Christian status through paranormal means during his NDE.

Keable (1921, pp. 529–530) also described a Basuto man whose conversion to Christianity and religious authority as a prophet both originated in his NDE. He returned from death after three days, when his funerary preparations had been completed, though he felt he had been away many years. He recounted how he had traveled to a river
he could not cross and had gathered with other spirits on the bank. Spirits from the other side of the river made regular trips to select new souls to join them. They told him that only when his knees had hardened from kneeling in prayer would he be selected. He learned to pray and finally crossed the river, then arrived at “God’s throne” where he was “ordered to return to earth” in order to teach repentance. Though previously illiterate, God gave him the power to read the Bible, which he demonstrated once he returned to life. He also had newfound healing and prophetic powers as well as knowledge of many prayers. This prophet who “died and rose again from the dead” drew large crowds and effected the conversion of many people. Many others, however, refused to convert because they themselves had experienced no “dream” or other “supernatural occurrence” persuading them that they should do so (Keable, 1921, pp. 522–523).

A District Commander of Kenya, J. A. Massam (1927, p. 195), recorded an Elgeyo narrative in which a man died, left his body, and returned to it as it was about to be buried. He claimed “that he had been up above, and had seen wonderful herds of stock belonging to the sun, “Assis” [supreme deity], and lesser herds belonging to the rain god ‘Elat.’” He was told by inhabitants of the other world that his only hope of remaining there permanently was to kill a man back on Earth. He did so a month after his return to life, then died in jail. The account seems to conflict with Elgeyo afterlife beliefs in intra-clan reincarnation and the continued existence of ancestors on Earth.

British missionary William Charles Willoughby (1928, p. 99) recounted four NDEs from the Tswana of Botswana. In the first, Willoughby’s “house-boy” was so overcome with grief at the death of his brother that he “went away.” He met his brother as well as father and uncle. The latter told him that he must return to Earth to be with his mother. The boy concluded, “they sent me back with great peace,” and he revived with “new life.”

A Tswana elder recounted an NDE he had had in his youth (Willoughby 1928, pp. 100–101). He died and left his body while his grave was being prepared, then traveled to a beautiful, radiant city full of shining spirits, where nothing “could cause stumbling or disaster.” He met “a superb man” who “told him to arise and depart, and so he returned to earth.” Later in life, the man had a second NDE while his body was being prepared for burial. He insisted that he had not been delirious on either occasion and denied the possibility of Christian influence. He stressed that in every generation there were individuals who were thought to be dead but had recovered before burial and that
many of them had seen what he had seen, though they knew nothing of Christianity. The existence of the kind of afterlife he described was, according to him, common knowledge among the Tswana, as was “the radiance of the town and its inhabitants.” He further noted “that it was not a rare thing” for people to have deathbed visions of deceased relatives who told them to “arise and depart”—that is, to return to Earth.

The fourth Tswana NDE was a distressing one (Willoughby, 1928, pp. 101–102). A lapsed Christian convert claimed to have died and gone to the spirit realm where she experienced an intensely painful “flame of fire burning in her breast.” She saw a deceased aunt and cried out for water but was given none. Then she met Jesus who made the pain vanish and explained that the fire was punishment for drinking alcohol—“Kafir-beer”—which drives away the Holy Spirit. On her return, the woman was shown a rock painted yellow, black, and white, though she was not told the meaning of it. She was, however, told “that she would die before sunset; and she did.” Willoughby (1928) suggested that the imagery of the woman’s experience resulted from pain cause by her inflamed lungs, from her predilection for drink, and from a sermon she had attended.

In the NDE of a Nuer man of south Sudan during the 1950s (Johnson, 1994, p. 317), Gik Cam Jok returned from death and claimed that he had met the prophet Ngundeng Bong (1830–1906). The prophet told him that it was not yet his time to die but that he would come back to the spirit world “when things were finished”—evidently a reference to the decades-long Civil War, for Gik Cam Jok died shortly after it ended. The Nuer were notably resistant to Christianity and were little influenced by missionaries until the 1940s.

Trader, hunter, and translator David Leslie (1875, pp. 120–121) wrote of Zulu accounts of “people who have died and come back again.” One man told of his brother who returned to life after his own funeral and described having visited a realm of abundance. He met his cousin “who had died a long time before, who told him to go back immediately,” and who warned that if he ate any food he would have to remain in the spirit world. He woke up in his body, thinking “ah! what a delightful country I have been in,” then “seemed continually to mourn for the good things he had left; would speak to no one, and wandered about as if he did not belong to us.” Interestingly, the narrator interpreted his brother’s experience as explaining why people rarely return from the dead: The chances of meeting a relative are slim, and it is more likely that one will meet a stranger and be given food.
In addition to accounts of NDEs, certain afterlife beliefs and ritual practices reveal knowledge of the phenomenon. The Ewe of Ghana and Togo believed that the soul (edsieto) could depart from the body leaving it in state of apparent death (Ellis, 1890, pp. 106–107). On rare occasions, “the soul returns after such an absence, and then the man has been in a swoon or trance; more generally it does not return, and then the man is dead.” In light of this knowledge, appeals to the dead to come back are always made immediately after death; and, generally speaking, it is only when the corpse begins to become corrupt, and the relatives thereby become certain that the soul does not intend to return, that it is buried.

Among the Kagoro of Nigeria, afterlife beliefs also had an NDE context. At death, the soul “leaves its bodily case and travels towards the stream which divides this world from the next.” If the ancestors spirits “think it is time that the person died, the soul is allowed to cross, but if not, they drive it back to the body, and the sick person recovers” (Tremearne, 1912, p. 170).

Though not technically an NDE, an account of an Ekoi woman of southeastern Nigeria is also worth mentioning (Talbot, 1912, p. 231). When she was buried before she had actually died, her spirit appeared to her people and admonished them: “My soul had but gone away for a time, and I only died after its return, because I could no longer breathe in the earth.” This account was cited as proof that the soul is immortal and separable from the body during trance states when it can travel to other worlds.

Myths, Legends, and Near-Death Experiences

Some narratives have fable-like qualities, such as animal characters, and show strong indications of secondary elaboration and narrative devices, such as citing evidence of the journey’s genuineness and stressing lessons or morals. They were, nevertheless, taken as factual and are thus more properly considered legends. Appearing to be midway between documentary NDEs and afterlife journey myths, they provide rare insight into the gradual cultural and narrative assimilation of accounts of such experiences. For example, in a Zulu narrative told to British missionary Henry Callaway (1868, pp. 317–320), a man named Uncama followed a porcupine to the underworld while trying to stop it from ruining his garden. He passed a pool, crossed a river, then entered a dark tunnel. It gradually became light, and he emerged
in an underground "great country" with "mountains, precipices and rivers" as in the upper world. He saw dogs and people as well as smoke from villages. Suddenly afraid, Uncama decided to return home where he found his wife in mourning for him and preparing his funeral.

Some examples also lack NDE contexts, despite describing journeys to the spirit land and bearing clear similarities to the phenomenon. In a Zulu narrative from Natal (Fynn, 1824–36, pp. 32–34), a man named Bandla was taken by a lion to an underworld realm of abundance and joy, where people continued their earthly activities. He met deceased relatives, former wives, kings, and spirits who sang and danced. The spirits questioned Bandla about why he was there, then instructed him to return to his people to teach them "that death was only a sleep from which they again rise to live in happiness." One of his spirit-relatives scratched his eye in order to provide proof of his story to people back on Earth. He was also told where he would find a goat to sacrifice on his return journey, and the information turned out to be true. Bandla's account was believed not only by his own people but also by other local tribes, and he became a favorite of local rulers. He was seen as "peculiar" and "his account of the world below is still believed by his countrymen as an undoubted truth." The myth exists in different versions, attesting to its lasting popularity (Grout, 1864, p. 136; Shooter, 1857, pp. 270–271). According to American missionary Josiah Tyler (1891, p. 97, 107), Zulu "knowledge of Hades" originated in the testimony of a hunter who followed a deer through a hole in the ground to the realm of the ancestors.

An account from the Kikuyu of Kenya (Routledge & Routledge, 1910, pp. 243–244) was similarly taken as factual: It was provided as an explanation for indigenous afterlife beliefs and was said to have happened to the informant’s brother’s friend. The man followed a porcupine to a realm of "bad people" who lived in "very cold" conditions without clothing. They restrained the man and kept him in the underworld for "many years." He eventually escaped through a tunnel beneath a tree, though he was pursued "until he came to a fire" which prevented "the bad people" from capturing him. He returned to his village, told his people what he had experienced, and died a few days later.

In a narrative from the Efé of Sudan (Schebesta, 1936, pp. 194–195), a man followed an animal into a cave and then through a "side passage" to a river and a banana field. He met a woman from his village who had been put to death for sorcery. She asked if he was there because he had "fallen asleep," and he explained that he was lost. The
woman offered to lead him to the village of spirits (Lodi), but he asked how that would be possible, considering that he was not dead. Nevertheless, joined by the woman’s husband, they proceeded to Lodi. When the spirits there also asked if the man had “fallen asleep,” the husband replied that he was “only on a journey,” and they all danced together. After three months, the spirits visited the man’s village and saw his wife mourning him. Distressed by this, the man wanted to return to Earth and after another month was allowed to do so. The spirits gave him gifts, accompanied him back the way he had come, and left him at the outskirts of his village where a feast was held to celebrate his return. The narrative served to explain afterlife beliefs, demonstrating that it was accepted as factual.

Other accounts are more properly to be considered myths, characterized by lengthier and more elaborate descriptions, more complex plot elements, semi-divine or otherwise supernaturally distinctive protagonists, and a function to explain some natural or cultural phenomenon. Those involving journeys to afterlife realms often have NDE features and may reveal distant cultural memories of the phenomenon. In an example from the Ga of Ghana related around 1858 (Werner, 1925, pp. 208ff), a boy named Ananute followed a rolling palm-nut into a rat hole and encountered three spirits who had never bathed: one black, one red, and one white. They asked Ananute why he was there, then gave him yams and told him to cook only the peels and discard the rest. The peels became whole yams, and the spirits gave him some to take back home with him. They also taught him a song but forbade him from ever singing it. Ananute made further trips to the underworld for more yams, until one day his father Anansi (the Spider) followed. Ananute sang the forbidden song and “burst from above, and broke down, then his head was cut off, and he also died, but still he went on singing!” The spirits brought him back to life, but when he resumed singing they beat him. When he told his village what had happened to him, he was exiled.

In an example from the Mbundu of Angola in 1894 (Chatelain, 1894, pp. 249–250), the netherworld deity Kalunga-ngombe took a man named Ngunza to the other world for four days to see his recently deceased brother. Ngunza saw that life there was similar to that on Earth and that his brother was “much happier where he was” and did not wish to return. Ngunza returned with the gift of seeds for cultivation. A contemporary account (Chatelain, 1894, pp. 225–227) told of a doctor and his little boy who traveled through a grave to an underworld village to find the recently deceased queen. When they did, she
prophesied that the king would die within a few years, then gave the doctor an armlet. Upon return, he presented the armlet to the king as evidence of the encounter with the queen. The king died a few years later as prophesied.

In a Yoruba myth (Ellis, 1894, p. 139), a boy went to “Deadland” to ask his mother where he could find her necklace. Upon arrival he had to pay a door-keeper and was not allowed to touch anyone. He found his mother, she asked him why he had come, and he explained. She told him where to find the necklace and asked him to make “frequent offerings” to her when he returned to Earth. When he returned, the necklace was found where his mother said it would be.

Among the Khoikhoi of South Africa, the culture-hero Heitsi-Eibib was said to have died and returned multiple times (Quatrefages, 1895, pp. 205, 212–216). In one narrative he was flung repeatedly into the cavern of ancestors but escaped each time, and in another he returned “healthy and well” after eating poison. Some people considered him to be the supreme deity Tsui-goia, and he was said to possess the abilities to shape-shift and read the future.

In a myth of the Baganda of Uganda (Roscoe, 1911, pp. 465–467), Mpobe the hunter followed his dog through a tunnel to a spirit world similar to Earth. The dog led him to the death deity Walumbe, who asked Mpobe where he had come from and what he had experienced so far in the netherworld. When Mpobe explained that he was lost, Walumbe told him to return to his home—but warned him on punishment of death never to tell anyone that he had been to the other world. When Mpobe returned, he told his mother of his journey and was subsequently killed.

A narrative from the Chaga of Kenya from around 1909 (Werner, 1933, pp. 51–52) involved a man who went to kill the sun-god Iruwu in revenge for the death of his sons. While waiting for sunrise to reveal the path to the other world, Iruwu’s entourage appeared, “shining like fire.” They took the man to Iruwu, who asked him where he came from and what he wanted. When he explained, Iruwu offered to allow the man to shoot him with his arrow, but the man declined. Iruwu then told him he could take his sons back, “but they were so beautiful and radiant that he scarcely knew them,” so the man decided they should stay with Iruwu. The god sent the man back to Earth, rewarding him with riches, more sons, and a long life. Werner (1922) found this after-life with the sun-god “remarkable,” “for as a rule the Bantu think of their dead as living underground” (p. 53). Such unique characteristics that run contrary to local beliefs may suggest that the narrative was
rooted in an actual NDE involving encounters with radiant entities, “beautiful” deceased relatives, and a benevolent being of light who instructed the individual to return, followed by positive aftereffects.

In another Chaga narrative from around 1914 (Werner, 1933, p. 93), a girl named Marwe wanted to escape her parents’ wrath after she neglected the family crop. She committed suicide by jumping into a pool, then entered another world. She met an old woman and some children in a hut, and though she was told she could rest, Marwe helped the children in their work and refused to eat anything. Eventually she decided to return home, and the old woman asked Marwe, “Shall I hit you with the cold or with the hot?” The girl chose cold, and the woman instructed her to dip her arms and legs into a pot. When she pulled them out, they were covered in bangles. The old woman gave Marwe a beaded Petticoat and told her who her future husband would be. When Marwe returned to life, she married the man after curing his disease and later brought him back from death. She thus received a prophetic vision that turned out to be accurate and returned with supernatural healing powers as “fruits” of her experience. In another myth (Werner, 1925, p. 196), a man passed through a gateway to the other world and saw his deceased children. An old woman made him choose between returning through the “sewage-door” or the “sugar-cane door.” The former would ensure his safe return, though the latter would result in being burned while entering his home through the fireplace.

In an Ekoi myth about the “beginning of the world” (Talbot, 1912, p. 229), when people died they were taken in a dream-state to the realm of creator/sky deity Obassi Osaw. Sometimes “he would make [them] alive again and send [them] back to earth, but such men on their return could never tell what had happened to them.” Obassi thought that people are afraid of death because “they do not know that perhaps they may come to life again. I will tell them that sometimes such a thing may happen.” He sent a duck to Earth with the message that a person “may come to life again,” but he also sent a frog with the message that death is the end of existence. Because the frog arrived first, “when a man dies, we cannot see him again.”

Another Ekoi myth (Talbot, 1912, pp. 18–20) told of a boy named Mkpaw who followed his father to the other world. Facing the sun, he offered two eggs to the “Male God and Female God.” Chicks hatched from the eggs and accompanied Mkpaw into the sky. An old woman covered in sores asked him why he had come. He washed her sores in exchange for information on how to recognize Obassi Osaw at the house where he “sits in judgment.” Mkpaw proceeded to Obassi, who
showed him his deceased parents and friend. Obassi gave Mkpaw a box that would make anything he wished for appear, warning him to never leave it open or allow a woman to touch it. When he sent Mkpaw back to Earth, a friend’s wife touched the box, and both Mkpaw and the friend died. The myth functioned as a lesson in the proscribed handling of religious articles.

Further religious ritual practices were explained by reference to otherworld journeys. One (Talbot, 1912, p. 34) told of a boy who followed a drumming sound to the spirit world where he learned how to make sacrifices to cottonwood trees. He was then reanimated and returned to Earth. Another (Talbot, 1912, pp. 46–48) told of a dormouse who followed a palm nut to the underworld, then returned with a magic drum that contained spirit images used in the Egbo secret society. The attainment of different kinds of wisdom was also attributed to otherworld journeys. One myth (Talbot, 1912, p. 238–241) explained the origin of tomatoes. A woman went to the spirit world after inadvertently marrying a ghost, and her deceased sister gave her tomatoes to eat before sending her back to Earth. Another myth (Talbot, 1912, pp. 100–101) told of a man who followed an antelope “down a great hole” to the underworld where he was captured by ghosts. He was freed after showing kindness to spirit children, and he returned with knowledge of the language of animals.

Finally, a myth of the Luhya of Kenya (Wagner, 1954, p. 44) explained that people in the distant past used to return from death after four days. When a certain boy did so, his mother “told him that he had died and should stay in the grave.” The boy returned to death but placed a curse on the people so that the dead remained dead.

**Shamans, Prophets, and Otherworld Journeys**

Whereas shamanic practices in most African societies focused on possession and sorcery, some were characterized by themes and contexts highly reminiscent of NDEs. Indeed, some accounts even suggested that NDEs were being induced deliberately through ritual activities.

Initiation into the Kongolese Catholic religious society known as Kimpasi involved a ritual death and resurrection, brought about by cutting off the individual’s circulation with tight bonds. Upon revival, or “rebirth,” initiates were believed to be possessed by a friendly spirit who would stay with them throughout their lives (Thornton, 1998, p. 57). In 1704 Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, a medium in the cult, died during a week-long illness and “revived from the dead” (Thornton,
possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony who gave her religious and political instructions. Kimpa Vita continued to “die” every Friday in order to commune with God in heaven over the weekend. Her possession gave her supernatural abilities and led to the foundation of a Christian-indigenous syncretized religious revitalization movement called Antonianism. She taught peace during a time of European cultural persecution, slavery, and political turmoil, and she predicted an impending apocalypse (Thornton, 1998, p. 160). Other members of the movement replicated Kimpa Vita’s experiences, repeatedly dying and reviving (Thornton, 1998, p. 148). Such characteristics together with an NDE context are common in religious revitalization movements across cultures (see Shushan 2016, 2018).

In 1921, Bakongo prophet Simon Kimbangu died and returned to life after three days. Although there is no description of an associated NDE, the fact of his return was fundamental to the founding of his Kimbanguist Church, and he was believed to have the power to raise the dead (Janzen & MacGaffey, 1974, p. 60). The Bakongo also had a secret “brotherhood” called the Death and Resurrection Society in which people with physical disabilities underwent simulated death before being “raised from the dead” fully healed (Claridge, 1922, p. 190). In another secret society, the initiate was considered dead for up to three years, during which time decomposition allegedly advanced until only a single bone remained. When “brought back to life” the initiate was reintegrated into society (Weeks, 1914, pp. 159–164). The Ila of Zambia told “of people who have actually returned in the flesh,” facilitated by a drug that caused the dead to rise after three days (Dale, 1920, p. 103).

Zulu shamanic figures generally attained their status following a prolonged illness and being thrown into the sea, during which they had visions of wandering to visit the ancestor spirits (Grout, 1864, pp. 158–159). Religious practitioners gained the status of prophet after reviving from “a comatose condition...and when the person regains consciousness he is wont to declare that he died, went to the spirit-world and was sent back with a message to men” (Willoughby, 1928, p. 126).

In the Idiong secret society of the Ibibio of southern Nigeria, initiates were “killed” in order to “journey to the town of the dead and there learn the future” (Talbot, 1926, p. I.192). Among the Fon people of Benin, during ceremonies for “apprenticeship in mystical life,” the initiate danced wildly until he collapsed into a state of apparent death. After eight days, a “resurrection” ceremony was held at which time the
initiate was reborn with godlike powers (Zahan, 1979, pp. 131–132). The famous explorer Sir Richard Burton (1864, p. 104) described Fon shamanic practices in which “priests” would go into a trance in order to descend to the underworld, and upon return would describe what they had seen. British entomologist J. A. Skertchley (1874, pp. 463–464) wrote of “medicine men” who claimed to have visited the afterlife realm of Kutomen in order to rescue the souls of the dying. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin, in secret societies such as the Egungun and Oro, shamans were chosen based on the belief that they had “risen from the dead” (Ellis, 1894, p. 107).

The Ashanti of southern Ghana told of a shamanic healer who went into a trance state seeking a remedy for death. He warned his people not to conduct his funerary rites, even though he would appear dead. Nevertheless, after six days they buried him, preventing him from returning with the secret of immortality (Ray, 2000, p. 97). Similar accounts are known from the Congo Zambesi region, where people believed that certain men would rise from the dead and become “another human being” who was immortal (Melland, 1923, pp. 151–152, 166). In a narrative from the Batanga of Cameroon, a “witch” left her body “to attend a witchcraft play.” Her husband smeared cayenne pepper on her body, thus preventing her from returning, and she soon died (Nassau, 1904, pp. 328–329).

A 1938 account from the Teke people of Congo and Gabon described “the visionary death of one Jacques Ngoya . . . who journeyed several days to the land of the dead” and returned with new ritual and moral strictures. He encountered his deceased brother who taught him dances and gave him a new set of rules to convey to his people on Earth “for their salvation and well-being.” The rules combined indigenous and Christian ideas, including helping the sick, feeding the poor, not committing murder or theft, and abstaining from sexual activity for four months (Fernandez, 1982, pp. 302–303).

The tradition with the most NDE parallels is the Bwiti religion of the Fang people of Gabon. It combined local ancestor-based traditions with syncretistic Christian-indigenous religious revitalization elements as well as use of the hallucinogenic drug iboga. The effects of the drug are said to correspond to NDEs to such an extent that psychologist Süster Strubelt (2008, p. 33) equated the two experiences, categorizing them as “ibogaine-induced” and “natural” NDEs. Indeed, consuming massive amounts of iboga is potentially dangerous, sometimes resulting in death (Fernandez, 1982, p. 475). At least some experiences may therefore have been actual NDEs caused by
life-threatening dosage of the drug. However, the Fang themselves differentiated between iboga experiences and those resulting from illness: Unlike the latter, the former yielded “fruits” in the form of a “therapeutic result” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 478). Initiates emerged from the experience with new understanding, joy, patience, tranquillity, conviction (Fernandez, 1982, p. 462–463), and re-orientation to the afterlife (Fernandez, 1982, p. 382–383)—which the Bwiti considered the “original and final place” where one was purified and restored to “pristine conditions” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 491). Iboga also purportedly endowed the initiate with miraculous powers such as healing and spirit communication (Fernandez, 1982, p. 437–438). A founder of one branch of the religion allegedly gained the ability to facilitate resuscitations (Fernandez, 1982, pp. 293, 302).

Bwiti was intended to allow initiates to “be born into the unseen and thence come to know death and the land beyond” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 381), effected by iboga which enabled the soul to “break free and journey off to Bwiti” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 471). In numerous accounts collected 1958–1960, the most common features were seeing deceased relatives, floating or flying along a path, and encountering “greater powers.” Other common features were leaving the body, traveling through a forest, crossing rivers, going “to the sky” and to places of unusual brightness, and being instructed to change one’s “lifeway, to join Bwiti, or to work harder” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 303).

One woman was sent back to her body by a man with a spear who asked her, “Where are you going? You are not dead” (Fernandez, 1982, p. xx). In another account, a man saw the body of his living brother lying on a road. The road led to a vast desert where his father appeared to him “in the form of a bird” and led him back to his body, reassuring him that he would look after him in life. His brother died shortly thereafter, making his experience premonitory (Fernandez, 1982, pp. 478–479). Another man went to the other world and saw the chicken that was sacrificed during his Bwiti initiation (Fernandez, 1982, p. 482) before encountering Eyen Zame, the indigenized Jesus, “shining on a cross.” The man proceeded to “a house of glass on a hill” which belonged to the goddess Nygingwan Mebege, whom the Bwiti identified with the Virgin Mary. Inside was his brother and two other men dressed in white, writing the man’s history and his new initiate name. Eyem Zame was considered to be “the first of the dead,” ruler of the spirit world, and “the one who showed men and women how the spirit could leave the physical body . . . and still return to it” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 457). His experiences served as a model for drug-induced
journeys to the realm of the dead, and his return or “resurrection” symbolized “the knowledge of life in death and death in life” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 517).

Another initiate met his deceased grandfather who told him to look into the sun, which revealed the path to Eyen Zame. Eyen Zame refused him entry to the other world because his skin was black, and “all the dead are white.” In a rather idiosyncratic account, the initiate encountered an iron barrier that black people could not pass. In the distance “it was very bright,” and there were “colours in the air.” His father descended “in the form of a bird” and gave him his new name and the ability to fly. They then crossed a river where people dressed in white greeted them, and they met a man with hair in the form of a “bishop’s hat,” a long beard, a red cross tattooed in his neck, and his beating heart visible in his chest. The initiate looked at the moon and saw a woman there with a bayonet through her heart “from which a bright light was pouring forth.” The spirit of his father then told him to return to Earth (Fernandez, 1982, pp. 479–482).

The Fang claimed that all their “rites, songs, and dances have come to Bwiti in visions received from the land of the dead” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 649). Chapels were decorated to reflect how “things are really done in the land of the dead” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 382), and the iboga experience was seen as an “authentic source of moral code” (Fernandez, 1982, pp. 302–303). In particular, it was the encounter with deceased ancestors “that conclusively convinces them of the worth of their religion” (Fernandez, 1982, p. 540).

The Fang ancestor cult bore some similarities to Bwiti. While villagers danced and sang about death and the soul leaving the body, initiates would eventually collapse into unconsciousness, and the ancestors would take them “up the road of death.” They traveled halfway to the spirit world to gain knowledge of the “miracles” there, then returned with the ability to communicate with the ancestors (Fernandez, 1982, pp. 259–263).

**NDEs as Dangerous Aberration**

That NDEs were known in some indigenous African societies is clearly demonstrated by the documentary accounts summarized above, alongside references to the phenomenon in ritual contexts and apparently in myths. Given the extensive literature review undertaken for this research, however, it is also clear that accounts of African NDEs are scarce, as are indigenous statements that afterlife conceptions origi-
nated in them. This situation is in marked contrast to that of indigenous Native American and Oceanic societies (Shushan 2016, 2018). To some extent, the difference can be accounted for by religious systems that focused on the continued influence of ancestor spirits on the living rather than on speculation about life in other realms. However, an analysis of African attitudes towards death in general, and towards the notion that the dead can return to life, leads to a deeper understanding of this tension between afterlife conceptions and NDEs.

Rather than being seen as positive, transformative, spiritual experiences, NDEs were rather more often seen in terms of other dangerous extraordinary phenomena such as possession and evil spirits. Those who revived from apparent death were often treated with mistrust and hostility. Among the Tanala, such a person was immediately strangled or stoned to death, for it was believed that the body had been animated only by the life force, not by the soul (Linton, 1933, p. 165; Sibree, 1880, p. 291). It is thus unsurprising that although there are Tanala references to individuals returning from death, there are no accounts of associated NDEs. The Zulu NDEr described above was almost put to death on suspicion that he had been revived by witches (Leslie, 1875, pp. 122–123). When the Akan human sacrifice victim returned from unconsciousness, her request to be killed again was willingly granted (Reade, 1874, p. 362). There was an “unspeakable horror of a dead body” in South Africa (Kidd, 1904, p. 76), and a reanimated corpse would have been even more horrific. When one man awoke during his own funeral, everyone in attendance fled in terror (Kidd, 1904, p. 247). Individuals who revived in the Khoikhoi culture were sent away to “die again” (Lichtenstein, 1812, p. 319). Congo Zambesi shamans were careful to forewarn their people that they would revive from apparent death, so that they could begin their “new existence without trouble” (Melland, 1923, pp. 151–152). When trying to recount his NDE, the Tumbuka man’s words were drowned out by his people “for he was too uncanny” (Fraser, 1914, p. 126).

In more recent times, a Kongo NDEr reported that when he revived, the mourners gathered around his body fled and that “it took them hours to accept me again as a member of the living community.” He added that no one is ever “willing to associate or be in the same company with the dead.” A second Kongo NDEr described his wife’s terror at his return and her subsequent fear of him (Bockie, 1993, pp. 89–90). In a Zambian study, researchers found that NDEs were believed to result from malign forces, “bad omens,” or witchcraft. Despite the presence of familiar NDE features, many NDErs themselves
“interpreted the event as somewhat evil,” believing that they were “bewitched” (Morse, 1992, p. 121). Such dynamics are consistent with the preponderance of NDEs with negative elements reviewed above, including two—Akan and Tswana—that were overtly hellish. The Tumbuka man was ignored in the other world then sent away because “he was not wanted there” (Fraser, 1914, p. 126), and the Mbundu woman was rejected because her services were not required. The Elgeyo man was told he must commit a murder on Earth if wished ever to remain in the other world.

Otherworld journey myths served to justify this stigmatization of NDEs, characterizing them as aberrational, against divine authority, or otherwise unwelcome. As with NDErs, the protagonists were often punished or “killed again” for the transgression of coming back from the dead. In the Baganda myth, Mpobe was killed for telling his mother that he had visited the netherworld (Roscoe, 1911, p. 467). In a Lotuko myth explaining why people do not return from the dead, a child was killed by his angry father after returning to life (Cunningham, 1905, p. 370). In the Luhy narrative of a similar function, the boy who returned from death was driven away by his mother because “he should stay in the grave” (Wagner, 1954, p. 44). In the Ga myth, Anansi was expelled from his village when he told of his otherworld journey (Werner, 1925, pp. 208ff). In the Eko myths, one woman was killed in the other world for being unkind to spirits; another was warned in the spirit world not to tell anyone of her experience; the man who learned the language of animals died after telling his wife about it; Mkpay died after his return when a woman touched the box he was given in the other world; and Obassi sent his son to the other world in order to kill him. Obassi also decreed that the few people he allowed to return from the dead “could never tell what had happened to them” (Talbot, 1912, p. 231).

It is also significant that the message Obassi wanted to convey to people was the possibility that they “may come to life again” rather than any notion of a future life in the spirit world. Indeed, the prevalence of myths explaining why people do not return from death is striking. The Ila had three, alongside a fear of spirits of the dead, and afterlife beliefs that bore little relationship to NDE phenomenology (Dale, 1920, pp. 118–119). Examples are also known from the Tswana (Brown, 1926, pp. 163–164, 167), Sotho (Casalis, 1861, p. 242), and Lotuko (Cunningham, 1905, p. 370).

Although such narratives may indicate awareness of NDE phenomena, they actually reinforced the notion that returning from the dead
is aberrational. Otherworld journey myths thus provided a culturally sanctioned way of stigmatizing NDEs. NDE testimonies conflicted with established attitudes towards the idea of returning from death and were not deemed significant enough to greatly impact African afterlife conceptions. The conceptual prohibitions on NDEs reflect the fact that the few extant narratives so often lack detail. Some people even stated that they knew nothing of the spirit world because no one had ever been there—for example, the Kikuyu (Routledge & Routledge, 1910, pp. 243–244) and Mbuti (Turnbull, 1965, pp. 249ff). This fact further reinforces the notion that NDEs were not typically sources of knowledge about the afterlife in African traditional religions.

According to Ikenga-Methu (1987, p. 263), the worst possible afterlife fate in African religions was to become “a wandering spirit, cut off from the community.” The Ibo had a fear of disembodiment (Leonard, 1906, p. 152) and believed that “when the soul leaves the body . . . nothing can be done to bring it back again” (Leonard, 1906, p. 141). The Tanala believed that the souls of sorcerers and other evil people were rejected from the afterlife community and became malevolent wandering ghosts on Earth (Linton, 1933, p. 160). Beliefs that witches could leave their bodies and harm people were common (Idowu, 1973, pp. 175–176).

With few exceptions, such as in the Bwiti religion, the transgression of the finality of death was acceptable only in particular religious leaders believed to have supernatural powers—as among the Ashanti, Ewe, Fon, Fang, Mbuti, and Lango. This acceptance was apparently due to beliefs that untrained individuals—including spontaneous NDErs—were unequipped to deal with such experiences and risked unleashing dangerous spirits on the community. Moreover, a democratization of such experiences may have been perceived as threatening to the authority of shamanic leaders. It is significant that following Kimpa Vita’s return-from-death experience, it was her possession that held religious import. Indeed, her experiences while “dead” were left unrecorded. Nevertheless, although her revival led to a widespread new religious movement, she was ultimately burned at the stake on suspicion of being a witch possessed by a demon. Likewise, the Lamba explained return-from-death cases in terms of possession rather than NDEs (Doke, 1931, p. 258), corresponding to their “very hazy ideas” about the afterlife that were inconsistent with NDEs (Doke, 1931, pp. 231–232). Such dynamics have persisted over time, as evidenced by the 1970s Zulu shaman Dorcas, whose possession by her deceased grandfather overshadowed the OBEs she had during an illness. It was
the possession experience that led to her becoming a shaman (Kalweit, 1984, pp. 88–89). Even reincarnation was sometimes seen in terms of possession involving ancestor spirits inhabiting new individuals (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, pp. 267–269; Mbiti, 1990, p. 160).

There is also a correlation between possession trance and the occurrence of slavery (Greenbaum, 1973, p. 54). Erika Bourguignon (1973, p. 11) found that the greatest incidence of possession trance worldwide could be found in Sub-Saharan Africa, where slavery was known in 78% of societies. Also relevant here are notions of zombies: the belief that sorcerers can remove a person’s soul then reanimate and enslave the body. Although thought to reflect traumatic memories of slavery (Ackermann & Gauthier, 1991, p. 478), such beliefs are also associated with witchcraft and contribute to the overall pattern of return-from-death occurrences being seen in aberrant, fearful terms.

Funerary rituals sometimes included deliberate measures to prevent the dead from returning or to ward off some other misfortune caused by the body. Such practices all but precluded the possibility of NDEs. The Baka of Cameroon bound the body immediately upon death and sewed it into a sack prior to burial (Rowley, 1877, p. 92). The Ovaherero of southern Africa broke the corpse’s back before burial to “prevent mischief” (Theal, 1910, p. 186); and according to missionary Robert Moffat (1842, pp. 306–308), southern Africans in general would kill individuals at the first sign of “approaching dissolution in fainting fits or convulsive throes.” An unnamed West African society broke every bone in the body to ensure that it was dead (Nassau, 1904, p. 234). The Lozi of Zambia conducted burial immediately after apparent death, while the body was still warm (Nassau, 1904, p. 228–289). The Bantu practiced such hasty funerals that premature burial sometimes occurred (Kidd, 1904, p. 247). This phenomenon was also reported for people neighboring the San, as evidenced by reports of individuals recovering and “getting out of their sepulchre” (Arbousset & Daumas, 1852, p. 364).

In addition, attitudes toward the dying would often preclude efforts to facilitate recovery. A pronounced resignation characterized by “remarkable composure” was often reported in cases in which death seemed inevitable (Fernandez, 1982, p. 236). The Ibo reportedly sold elderly women in order to fund their ritual burial, considered to be more important than their final days on Earth (Basden, 1921, p. 118). The Ibibio reportedly poisoned the elderly if they survived while younger people died, believing they were sapping their youthful strength (Talbot, 1926, p. 511). The Elgeyo barely fed the elderly
and scarcely mourned them, and Massam (1927, pp. 213–214, 218) believed that husbands did not mourn their wives. Missionary Ruth B. Fisher (1911, p. 54) saw a dying Baganda girl being neglected and was told that her fate was for the deity to decide.

Nor was such radical acceptance reserved only for others. When Moffat (1842, p. 135) attempted to “rescue” an old southern African woman who had been abandoned alone to die, she resisted, explaining that it was their custom. The Nyakyusa and Baganda would commit suicide for any number of trivial problems that arose in daily life (Fisher, 1911, p. 54; Mackenzie 1925, p. 298). Romanian anthropologist Dominique Zahan (1979, p. 46) cited examples of individuals volunteering for human sacrifice, cheerfully awaiting execution, and abandoning the elderly to die of starvation or to be eaten by wild animals.

These types of practices were due largely to concerns about witchcraft and malevolent spirits (Fernandez, 1982, p. 236; Nassau, 1904, p. 231; Rowley, 1877, p. 89). The Bantu would “flee in terror” from a dying individual (Kidd, 1904, p. 244) and abandoned the person in order to avoid the inherent dangers that surrounded death (Theal, 1910, p. 186). The Khoikhoi would refuse to rescue a person in danger of death and would “even turn and throw stones at him,” for misfortune was considered to be contagious (Lichtenstein, 1812, p. 319). Corpses were often regarded as sources of pollution, and individuals were careful to avoid touching them (see, for example, Moffat, 1842, p. 135).

Conclusions

The factors outlined above all help explain both the scarcity of African NDE accounts and the divergence from NDE themes in African afterlife beliefs. Such practices and attitudes would do nothing to facilitate the occurrence of NDEs, nor the transmission of accounts of experiences, nor their incorporation into local afterlife beliefs. As seen in the more recent Kongolese and Zambian studies, such dynamics have continued in more recent times, demonstrating that hostility to the notion of revival from death is a culturally continuous phenomenon that impacts the reception of NDEs in various African traditions.

The fact that people who returned from apparent death were often suspected of witchcraft or possession meant that accounts of NDEs would not have been accepted as evidence of what happens when people die. Indeed, fear of such suspicions would have inhibited individuals from disclosing their experiences in the first place. On the contrary, instances of individuals reviving from death would have validated
existing witchcraft and possession beliefs. The content of the experiences was both theologically irrelevant and potentially threatening to the status quo of the religious hierarchy. Although the authority of some healers or shamans was grounded in the fact of their return from death, reviving with new religious teachings about the afterlife was uncommon.

Given the diversity of African cultures, there are, of course, many exceptions, as seen above. It can be no coincidence that African cultures that had more positive interpretations of NDEs also had generally more positive, NDE-like afterlife beliefs—alongside less precipitous funerary practices and less prominent fears of malevolent spirits, disembodiment, the dead, and the prospect of their revival. The Ewe, for example, appealed to souls of the recently deceased to return and buried bodies only when decomposition had begun (Ellis, 1890, p. 106). As noted above, Ewe beliefs reveal knowledge of NDEs, and shamanic practices included journeys to the spirit land. Ewe afterlife conceptions include such NDE-like elements as OBE, traveling to another realm, ancestor spirits, borders, and the possibility of return. A similar combination of factors is also found in the Fang (Fernandez, 1982, p. 236), Bakongo (Dennett, 1898, pp. 133–134), and Tswana (Brown, 1926, p. 98) examples. All stated that their afterlife beliefs originated in visits to the otherworld and also took precautions to prevent premature burial. This confluence of beliefs and practices reveals greater openness toward the possibility of the dead returning to life, willingness to accept NDEr testimony, and an interdependence of experience and belief. Still other cultures had more fluid, ambiguous, or evolving afterlife beliefs, which corresponds to diverse funerary practices and to both positive and negative ideas about the dead and the possibility that they can return—including the Zulu (Callaway, 1868, pp. 52, 246–247; Grout, 1864, pp. 137–148; Shooter, 1857, pp. 238–239, 165; Tyler, 1891, p. 211), Nandi (Holli, 1909, pp. 70–71; Huntingford, 1953, pp. 137–138), and Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1956, pp. 35ff, 144–154; Johnson, 1994, p. 317).

Nevertheless, African afterlife beliefs that did correspond to NDE phenomenology may have had their ultimate origins in such experiences. NDE-like concepts were sometimes present without any record of a corresponding NDE or shamanic afterlife journey narrative. The Lozi, for example, lacked NDE narratives and otherworld journey myths, though their afterlife conceptions included a divine light-filled realm, borders, and an evaluation of one’s earthly life—alongside fearful attitudes towards death and foci on reincarnation and ancestor
spirits (Prins, 1980, pp. 128–129; Turner, 1952, p. 54). The case was similar with the Luo Adhola of Uganda (Ogot, 1972, pp. 124–125), the BaManianga of Congo (Idowu, 1973, pp. 104–105), and the Lamba whose afterlife beliefs included darkness, ascent, encountering supernatural entities and deceased relatives, returning to the origin point, having a renewed subtle body, and peace and harmony (Doke, 1931, pp. 231–232). Such thematic, conceptual consistencies may point to some distant historical NDEs. It cannot be ruled out, however, that they were simply borrowed from neighbouring cultures or, in some cases, from Christianity or Islam—any of which, incidentally, may have grounded their own afterlife beliefs in historical NDEs.

It should also be noted that the greatest number of both NDEs and afterlife journey myths came from Bantu language cultures (cf. Theal, 1910, p. 184; Werner, 1933, p. 9), followed by Niger-Congo language cultures—of which the Bantu family is a sub-group. Correspondingly, Bantu/Niger-Congo groups also shared a comparatively more fluid and flexible attitude towards death and the afterlife. As Willoughby (1928) generalized, for the Bantu, “hallucinations of the ecstatic and of the entranced are taken as revelations from the spirit-world” (p. 99).

The significance of NDEs being attested at all in societies with such antipathy towards the very concept should not be overlooked, for their existence clearly reinforces that the experiences were not the result of prior expectation. As has been shown with contemporary Western NDEs, people have the experience regardless of their prior death or afterlife beliefs (Holden et al., 2009). It should also be stressed that although NDEs were often feared at the community level, this does not mean that they lacked spiritual meaning for those who had them. The early literature contains a few personal testimonies concerning the feelings NDErs had about their experiences—most notably from the Tswana, Zulu, and Fang. As with the modern Kongo accounts, they reveal positive spiritually meaningful interpretations of the phenomenon. (Bockie, 1993, pp. 89–90).

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