

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Near-Death Experience in Indigenous Religions** by Gregory Shushan, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 304 + xi pp., \$99.00 hc (ISBN 978-0-19-087247-2); Kindle ed. \$97.99 e-book.

Gregory Shushan, Honorary Research Fellow at the Religious Experience Research Centre of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, has produced an important study of near-death experiences (NDEs) in the indigenous societies of North America, Africa, and Oceania. The book has in-text citations, notes collected at the end of the volume, a reference list, and an index. It opens with a Foreword by Allan Kellehear. In the first of five chapters, “Exploring Near-Death Experiences across Cultures,” Shushan explains that he takes an experiential source approach to NDEs. He observes that there are similarities between conceptions of the afterlife, shamanic journeys, and NDEs cross-culturally, and he poses a series of questions to guide his presentation and analysis:

- Do ideas about the afterlife commonly originate in NDEs?
- What role does culture play in how people experience and interpret NDEs?
- What is the relationship between shamanism and NDEs?
- How can we best account for both the cross-cultural similarities and differences between the afterlife beliefs of various cultures?
- In light of both religious and experiential diversity, what are the implications of the cross-cultural evidence for theories that NDEs indicate an actual afterlife? (p. 2)

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In the remainder of Chapter 1, Shushan deals with these issues in more detail and confronts the nature of his sources. Shushan searched the World Cultures database of the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), a large, classified archive of materials on over 200 indigenous societies, but it is clear that he perused a research library with substantial holdings as well. He focuses on accounts that reveal a minimum of influence from missionaries or other foreign culture agents. Most of the NDEs he catalogs were collected by travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators, beginning in some areas in the 16th century, but come predominately from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Very few derive from more recent ethnographic fieldwork.

In addition to NDE accounts, Shushan surveys legends and myths with NDE-like themes, especially Orpheus myths, which tell of the retrieval of souls of deceased persons from an afterlife realm. He also covers the experiences of shamans and similar practitioners who use ritual techniques to enter altered states and journey to a spirit world for purposes of what is called "soul retrieval," assisting souls that have left their bodies due to illness or trauma to find their way back to their bodies.

Chapter 2, "North America," is organized by region, Eastern Woodlands, Arctic and Subarctic, Southwest, Great Plains and Great Basin, Northwest, and California. Shushan's sources include numerous accounts that fit the model of modern NDEs as well as Orpheus-type myths. Typically, the accounts involve travel in a discarnate realm, crossing a river, and encountering spirits in a land of the dead before return to the living. Shushan pays close attention to the ways a culture's beliefs are reflected in its NDEs, emphasizing that "there is a symbiotic relationship between Native American afterlife beliefs and related extraordinary experiences" (p. 85).

In Chapter 3, "Africa," Shushan concentrates on the sub-Saharan part of the continent. It likewise is organized by region: Western, Central, Eastern, and Southern. Compared to his North American material, in his African material Shushan found fewer NDE accounts but more otherworld-journey motifs in legends, myths, and shamanic experiences. Moreover, NDEs were reported mainly by speakers of Bantu languages. Shushan speculates that the paucity of African NDEs is due to a fear of death that made African peoples dispose of some bodies prematurely.

Chapter 4, "Oceania," similarly is organized geographically, with sections on Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia, and Australia. The sources on Polynesia and Melanesia revealed shared patterns in the

relationships between NDEs, afterlife beliefs, and shamanic practices. The nature of the afterlife was said to be known from the experiences of people who had come near death and returned to tell the tale. In contrast, NDEs were reported rarely from the indigenous societies of Micronesia and Australia, and ideas about the afterlife were not attributed to NDEs in those places.

Unfortunately, despite its impressive scholarship, this book is vulnerable to a significant methodological criticism. Shushan's comparative approach went out of fashion in anthropology over a century ago, partly because it was used to arrange cultures in evolutionary sequences of development that scholars in the discipline no longer recognize as valid. The comparative method is shunned also because it entails pulling cultural features out of context and because it makes it all too easy to discern patterns one wishes to see while overlooking phenomena that do not meet one's expectations.

When comparison is undertaken in the manner Shushan undertakes it, surveying the presence of a trait with only cursory attention to the conditions of its absence, the risk of overgeneralizing from one's findings is even greater. To overcome these problems, anthropologists have turned to formal cross-cultural studies that involve hypothesis testing. The HRAF archive Shushan searched for NDE accounts is associated with a Probability Sample of 60 cultures, one from each of 60 "culture clusters" that are known or presumed to have no recent historical connection. Probability Sample societies are considered statistically independent, and sophisticated studies may be conducted with them (Davis, 1971; Matlock, 1993, 1995; Somersan, 1981, 1985). Shushan, however, chose not to frame a theory and test hypotheses with the Probability Sample but, instead, pursued the comparative approach using the materials the HRAF archive provides.

One consequence of Shushan's tight focus on NDEs and shamanic journeys is the misleading impression that indigenous knowledge about an afterlife comes primarily from them. However, as he remarks, "where NDEs are lacking . . . there is also a correspondence between afterlife beliefs and other types of extraordinary experience" (p. 242). Even in cultures from which NDEs are reported, NDEs are not the exclusive means by which the living learn about the world beyond. In many indigenous societies, one's spirit is thought to leave one's body during sleep, and dreams that involve out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and travel through a discarnate realm are not uncommon (Linton, 1935). Information about spirits and their world may come also through deathbed visions and other apparitions, medium-

istic communications and possession, and memories of the period between death and reincarnation (Matlock, 2017).

To his credit, Shushan gives examples of these other types of experience and comments on them in relation to afterlife portrayals. Nonetheless, he argues that ideas about the afterlife commonly originate in NDEs. To make this conclusion stick, he would need to show a statistical correlation between NDEs and afterlife knowledge that differs from or surpasses knowledge gained through other types of experience, but he does not even attempt to do this, and the extent to which NDEs inform afterlife beliefs cross-culturally remains an open question.

More generally, Shushan appears not to appreciate the manifold roles spirits play in indigenous cultures. He begins his final chapter, "Interpretations, Implications, and Conclusions," with the statement that,

If cultural context does not allow for the expression of near-death experiences (NDEs), narratives of them will be rare. This correlates with a lower degree of concern about an afterlife, as most clearly reflected in the differences between North America and Africa. (p. 200)

But Africans are by no means unconcerned about an afterlife. On the contrary, ancestral spirits are vital to the ongoing life of tribal societies throughout Africa (Fortes & Dieterlen, 1965; Ige, 2006; Mbiti, 1989). One cannot infer from the relative absence of NDEs a lack of interest in spirits of the dead or of the nature of their world. This stricture applies not just to Africa but globally.

In *Primitive Culture*, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1871) observed that, in connection with beliefs in life after death, apparitions, dreams, mediumistic trance, and other phenomena were mentioned frequently alongside what are now called OBEs and NDEs, and he proposed that these experiences had suggested the postmortem survival of the spirit. Once established, Tylor thought, the spirit concept was generalized in some places to nonhuman animals, to features of the landscape, to inanimate objects, and even to words and names. Tylor labeled this perspective *Animism*. He regarded Animism as the world's most primitive religion, although it is probably preferable to think of animism (lower case) as a worldview rather than as a religion.

The basic premise of animism is the existence of a spirit world parallel to the world of embodied persons, together with the possibility of interaction between the denizens of the two realms. The animistic outlook is a universal characteristic of indigenous cultures (Da-

vis, 1971; Matlock, 1993, 1995; Somersan, 1981, 1984) and thus has a broader currency than shamanic journeys and NDEs have. Shamanism is practiced and NDEs occur within the context of animistic spirit beliefs, but shamanic journeys and NDEs are not the only inspiration for spirit beliefs or for insights into a spirit domain.

These issues resonate through Shushan's closing discussion, although they are never brought to the fore and tackled directly. Rather, in this part of the book, Shushan is concerned with various topics related to NDEs, which he appears to believe he has shown to play a central role in the "religions" of indigenous peoples. He discusses the function of NDEs in indigenous revitalization movements—which may be connected to dreams and mediumistic communications, not only to NDEs—and the relation of NDEs to shamanism—which, again, is associated with a variety of vision experiences, not only with NDEs. A large portion of the chapter is devoted to consideration of different explanatory models for NDEs, including the connection between cultural evolution and "neurotheology," sociopsychological speculations, and interpretations that include survival. Shushan (pp. 227–228) notes that the experiential source approach is compatible with both a cultural constructionist and a survivalist interpretation of NDEs and avoids (pp. 235–236) taking a stand on the question of whether NDEs suggest survival more strongly than not.

Although I believe that Shushan overstates the position of NDEs in indigenous ideas about the afterlife, I agree unquestionably that NDEs are one of the principal sources of those ideas, and this is a point worth making to a readership unacquainted with the relevant anthropological materials. Moreover, in bringing this collection of NDEs together Shushan has advanced the study of non-Western NDEs immeasurably. Previously, only a few dozen NDEs from tribal societies had been reported in the NDE literature, but thanks to Shushan, scholars now have hundreds and, as a result, can more clearly see their patterns.

Kellehear (2008, 2009) observed that some of the signal features of Western NDEs, such as passing through a tunnel into a bright light, are much less common in non-Western NDEs. This observation is confirmed in Shushan's collection. Kellehear noted further that a distinguishing trait of state-level as opposed to smaller-scale non-Western societies was the presence of a life review in the former, but absence in the latter. In a recent journal paper (Matlock, 2017, p. 227), I added two additional ways NDEs reported from state-level non-Western societies differed from those of small-scale societies: In the former, the deceased found themselves in some sort of celestial heaven, whereas

in the latter, the land of the dead most often lay on the same plane as the terrestrial world or beneath it. When the land of the dead was in the heavens, as in many of the NDEs Shushan (2016) reported in connection with North American revitalization movements, typically there were indicators of prior missionary or other contact influences on the society. Also, more spirits of nonhuman entities and fewer of deceased human beings in NDEs are reported from state-level societies than from small-scale societies. These contrasts between the NDEs of small-scale and state-level non-Western societies are supported in Shushan's examples as well.

It is tempting to ascribe the differences in the patterns of NDEs from small-scale vs. state-level societies to differences in social organization, although there is no obvious reason for such a correlation, and Shushan (pp. 221–225) shows that it does not fit the data. The patterns of NDEs in small-scale cultures are all the more striking in appearing across different types of experience. At the same time, there is a recognizable structure to NDEs that transcends culture, uniting Western and non-Western NDEs (Kellehear, 2008, 2009). Significantly, there are consistencies in structure and content between NDEs and interlife (intermission) experiences in reincarnation cases (Matlock, 2017; Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016). These consistencies make it look as if the answers to these puzzles may lie, after all, with the experiences of discarnate consciousness streams rather than with biological constraints. Understanding the whys and wherefores of the cultural consistencies and variations in NDEs and intermission experiences is, to my mind, the biggest challenge facing the field of near-death studies today. By placing in the record a considerable tranche of new NDEs, Shushan has done the field a tremendous service, and his book is not to be missed by anyone seriously concerned with NDEs.

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