Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in a Melanesian Society

Dorothy Ayers Counts
Department of Anthropology
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

The texts of three near-death experiences, one vision, and one dream by Melanesian villagers are presented and analyzed with regard to their cultural context. Comparison of these experiences with those reported from North America and India suggests that while they have common features (such as the appearance of apparitions, and visions of paradise), their interpretation is structured by cultural expectations.

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1980 I read Raymond Moody’s Life After Life (1975) and Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson’s At The Hour of Death (1977). I wondered if experiences such as those reported in these books are shared by the New Guinea people with whom my husband and I have done field research since 1966. So, when I began preparing to return in 1981 to Papua New Guinea, one of the subjects I planned to investigate was whether the Kaliai people of West New Britain have near-death experiences, and, if so, what form these experiences take and how they are interpreted. This paper is a report of that research and a tentative attempt to explain my findings.

The Melanesians with whom I work live in the Kaliai electorate of the north coast of West New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea. They have been missionized by the Roman Catholic Church since 1949, and many of them are, at least nominally, converts to Catholicism. The Kaliai mission established primary schools throughout the Kaliai area so that almost all of the coastal people born

during or since the 1950s have had some formal education. Schooling has been much more problematic for the people of interior Kaliai. Although the people of Kaliai have undergone rapid change since the end of the Second World War, their customary rituals are still in place, and people say that they initiate their children, celebrate marriage, and mourn their dead in much the same way as did their grandfathers. People also share a cosmology that is similar to those reported for other Melanesian peoples. This cosmology rests on assumptions about the nature of the human spirit and the process of death that are much different from those made by people of European and North American societies, and contains elements that are compatible with near-death experiences such as those reported by Moody (1975) and by Osis and Haraldsson (1977), and with out-of-body experiences such as those discussed and described by Ian Currie (1978).

First, the concept of a unitary human spirit or soul is alien to them. They have been introduced to the notion of “soul” by Christian missionaries, and the word has entered their vocabulary as the Tok Pisin term,\textsuperscript{2} sol. The Kaliai assume that the human spirit is two-faceted. In the Lusi language, spoken by about 1,000 coastal Kaliai people, the two facets of the human spirit are the -tautau, “spiritual essence,” and -anunu, “shadow” or “image.” Illness occurs when one of the spiritual components is separated from the body and cannot reunite with it. If the separation is permanent, death results. The complex notion of spiritual being is expressed in these two Lusi terms, which are used interchangeably by people who are discussing ghosts or spirits.\textsuperscript{3} No animals have this spiritual component, while it is a part of all living human beings, including the fetus and the mentally incapacitated. Either aspect may leave the body of one who is ill, and either the “spiritual essence” or the “image” of a dying individual may be seen by others several miles from the still-breathing person. People disagree about what happens after both aspects of the spirit leave the body. From comments that informants made in 1966 and 1967, I conclude that many Lusi once believed that one or both aspects of the spiritual component of the deceased person remained near the body until it decomposed (Counts and Counts, 1974). In 1981, after fifteen additional years of Roman Catholic influence, the same consultants maintained that the unitary sol goes to be with God immediately after death. Only if the surviving kin fail to pay to have a final Mass said for the deceased would the soul remain near the grave. It is my opinion that this latter belief, introduced by the Roman Catholic Church, exists simultaneously with the assumption
that one aspect of the spiritual component of the deceased person remains near the community where he lived. This would explain why, in 1981, villagers attempted to contact the spirit of a young man who had been dead about a year in an effort to learn who had killed him with sorcery.

A second concept critical to an understanding of the Kaliai notion of near-death experience is the conceptual content of the indigenous notion of death. It is widely reported that the understanding of life and death held by Melanesian people is quite different from our own. As long ago as 1912, William H.R. Rivers observed that the boundaries of the term mate, a term found in many Melanesian languages and which is usually translated as "dead," are not the same as ours. The category of mate includes the very sick, the very old, and the dead. Furthermore, it is a state that may last for years, as people become socially disaffiliated, and it is not separated from life in the way that we consider death and life to be apart. To the Melanesian, Rivers argued, "... existence after death is just as real as the existence here which we call life ... Further, life after death has the same general aspect as life before death" (reprinted in Slobodin, 1978, p. 21).

The Lusi speaking Kaliai, with whom I am most familiar, share this notion that death is a process rather than a single event. There are widely known signs that physical termination has occurred; however, death is a process, it may begin long before the physical signs are manifest, and, within reasonable bounds, it is reversible. In Kaliai the physical stage of the dying process usually begins with unconsciousness or "partial death" and moves on to "true" or "complete" death. A dying person may return to life at any time, including after he is truly or completely dead, but not after the body has begun to decay.

The dying process is well advanced if the person's breath smells of death (an odor that is referred to as being salty or sweet), if he stares without blinking or shame into the face of another person, if he is restless, and if he loses bladder control. Death is complete when breath stops, when heartbeat ceases, and when the eyes and mouth open (the spiritual component leaves through the eyes or mouth, or occasionally the anus). The corpse is usually uncovered for public viewing until it begins to bloat. Then it is wrapped in pandanas mats. The dead body usually becomes tight and rigid within several hours, but sometimes this does not occur, and occasionally people are buried whose limbs and body are still flexible. Adults are usually buried between twenty-four and thirty-six hours after phy-
sical death is understood to have taken place.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

When I returned to Kalai in 1981, I asked my consultants if they knew of anyone who had died and returned to life and who could remember what had happened to them while they had been dead. I was told of a number of people, including young children, who had returned to life after dying, but of only three men who died and returned, and remembered the experience. These were Kalaii-defined deaths and were not verified by a physician or by advanced medical technology. I was also told of two other persons who had not died but who had reported having experiences that were similar to those of the returned dead. I interviewed both these men as well as the men who had returned from the dead. Because the content of their experiences is similar to the content of the near-death experiences, I include them here.4

Frank

Frank is the most highly educated and acculturated of the men who had a near-death experience. He has been headmaster at the Kalai community school and was, in 1981, serving as Member of the Provincial Parliament from Kalai. His near-death experience occurred while he was campaigning for election to this office. He became ill and fell asleep on another man's bed, a bed he subsequently came to believe had been ensorcelled. The next morning he began to suffer from a pain that began in his toe and shot to his head. During the day the pain became much worse, and the next morning he was unable to walk or to eat. His brother carried him to the Kalai clinic, where the nurse gave him an injection in his leg. The next day, when he was no better, he asked his kin to carry him to the beach and place him under a canvas lean-to, a clear sign that he expected to die. The following day he died. His story follows:

I think I died for about five minutes. I saw a group of aulu [ancestor spirits] who showed me a road. I followed it and saw a man with white skin and long white robes, a beard and long hair. He was bright, as though there were a flashlight focused on him, and although he did not light up the area around him, his light seemed to be directed at me. He had large hands which he held up, palms toward me, blocking the road. He moved his middle fingers, motioning me to stop, and stared at me. Then he motioned to me to turn around and come back.

Then Alois [a fellow villager who had died some time before] cut my
leg and spit ginger on it. It was as though I were asleep, but my eyes were open. I saw a group of men singing and dancing and an old man whose name was Kasiru. He said to me, "Who do you think did this to you? You climbed mount Kavilvil and your knee is tight so you must die." Then the others scolded him for poisoning [ensorceling] me and they made a song which has in it the words Kasiru and "knee is tight." When I came to myself I remembered the song and I have taught it to others.

Although I will discuss below the cultural context of this and the other experiences, for purposes of clarification I should note here that spitting ginger on a wound is a traditional healing practice, especially when a wound becomes infected as a result of sorcery. Ginger is thought to have great healing power, and some types, those that are especially potent, have a spirit associated with them.

Andrew

Andrew is a young man who lives in the Anem-speaking interior village of Bolo. His death occurred at the small hamlet of Vuvu, which is located about a kilometer from Bolo. His experience, which was well known throughout the Kaliai area, was thought to be especially remarkable because during his vision he saw the spirit of a woman whose death had occurred shortly after his and about which he could have had no knowledge.\(^5\) His experience was also remarkable because, according to local definitions of death, he was dead for several hours. His kin had gathered, pigs for his first funeral feast had been killed and the meat was being prepared for division, and his grave had been dug before he returned to life. Shortly after Andrew's death occurred at Vuvu, the wife of the lay minister of Bolo took some food to the young boys residing in the Bolo men's house. She was returning to her own house when she collapsed and died in the village square. She did not recover and was buried the next day. It is this woman whom Andrew reports meeting during his near-death experience. After Andrew recovered from his illness, one of his legs was withered, and he now walks only with the aid of crutches.

The day I died I was very sick and was sleeping in my house. I died at noon [when the sun is high] and came back at six o'clock that afternoon [at dusk]. At the time I died there was a woman who hadn't died. She cooked food and distributed it. But when I died my spirit met hers on the road.

When I died everything was dark, but I went through a field of flowers and when I came out everything was clear. I walked on along the road and came to a fork where there were two men standing, one on either
road. Each of them told me to come that way. I didn't have time to think about it, so I followed one of them.

The man took my hand and we entered a village. There we found a long ladder that led up into a house. We climbed the ladder but when we got to the top I heard a voice saying, "It isn't time for you to come. Stay there. I'll send a group of people to take you back." I heard his voice, but I couldn't see his face or his body.

I walked around trying to see him, but I couldn't. But I saw the dead woman that I had met on the road. I saw her leave me. I wanted to call out, "Hey, come back!" but I couldn't, for this house turned in a circle. I couldn't see the man who talked to me, but I did see children lying [on platforms] over the doors and windows. As I was walking around, trying to see everything, they took hold of me and took me back down the steps. I wanted to go back to the house, but I couldn't because it turned and I realized that it was not on posts. It was just hanging there in the air, turning around as if it were on an axle. If I wanted to go to the door, the house would turn and there would be another part of the house where I was standing.

There were all kinds of things inside this house, and I wanted to see them all. There were some men working with steel, and some men building ships, and another group of men building cars. I was standing staring when this man said, "It's not time for you to be here. Your time is yet to come. I'll send some people to take you back. You cannot stay. This woman you saw coming here, it was her time and she must stay. But you must go back."

I was to come back, but there was no road for me to follow, so the voice said, "Let him go down." Then there was a beam of light and I walked along it. I walked down the steps, and when I turned to look there was nothing but forest. I stood there and thought, "If they have started mourning for me, I won't go because the voice said 'Stand there and listen. If there is no mourning and no dogs howling, you go back. But if there is mourning you come back.'"

So I walked along the beam of light, through the forest and along a narrow path. I came back to my house and reentered my body and was alive again. I got up and told my father of my experience, for he didn't realize what had happened. I died at noon and came back at six o'clock. I spent a long time wandering around this house before they sent me back.

**Q:** When you were a spirit, did you see your body?

**A:** No, I didn't see my body. I just came back, and when I got up I was well and told everyone what had happened.

**Q:** Were you sorry or happy to come back?

**A:** I wanted to go back there. It's a happy place, and I wanted to go back, but I couldn't. See how my leg is crippled here.

*Luke*

Luke is an elderly Anem-speaking man, originally from an interior Kaliai village, who has spent many years working as a laborer on Iboki plantation, which is located on the Kaliai coast and is the only
commercial plantation in the area. He now lives in a small house on the plantation grounds. This interview was conducted by David Counts.

I had gone to get areca nuts at the village of Kandoka, had come back through the village of Lauvori, and had bathed in the Vanu River when I fainted. I lay there in the sun until my daughter, Ann, found me. She told me to get up and helped me walk back home where I went to bed. I was unconscious for two days and a night. They put me on a litter and carried me up to the aid post at Rigiala. While they were carrying me, my arms began to shake and they said, "Hurry! Carry him to the aid post!"

When I finally got to the aid post, unconscious, I was put in one of the two wards. But when the staff saw me they said, "He's already dead!" So the men brought a pig intending to have my death feast and to bury me the next day.

I was gone. I was no longer conscious of that place. I had gone. A dead kinsman of mine, Raul, and my uncle Bill came down and I saw them. They said, "Come on, let's go." We followed a wide path that starts on the other side of the government rest house and aid post in Salki Village. It was a really wide path, and we followed it to a village. There were houses lined up side by side on either side of the path. Underneath they were barred with rails that ran parallel to the ground. We wanted to go inside one of the enclosures, but after my companions entered the bars closed up, leaving me alone outside. I stood there looking under the house, watching while they went up into the house by a ladder that was pulled up behind them.

Once the ladder was pulled up and the house was closed, I stood looking around for a while, and then I started up the path, taking a left-hand fork. I was alone because the two men who had come for me were gone, so I left the houses and just wandered along.

After a while I came to a place where there were houses with verandas that were absolutely packed with people; they were as thick as leaves. There were also magnets, like manhole covers, lined in a row. These magnets were scales, and as I came to them, and was recognized by the people, a loudspeaker announced, "This is a place for sorcerers. Sorcerers come here for judgment. Here is someone for trial. Don't speak to him. Just watch what he does."

I heard the loudspeaker from the roof of the veranda. I walked in front of the first men and they clapped their hands lightly and pointed for me to go sit down on the scale. But I didn't sit down; I stood up on it. After standing there for a while, I stepped back down to the ground and all of them applauded, and motioned me to the next one. They told me to sit on it, but once again I stood on it, and as I stood there the people on the veranda began to clap. When I had stood on all the scales, the loudspeaker said, "Here's Manlan! Manlan, open the door here and let this important man come and sit down. Let him smoke and chew betel."

Manlan came carrying a key. He went up on the veranda and opened a door, and the loudspeaker said, "Come on up and sit down." I did. Then the loudspeaker said, "Here is a sorcerer from Aikon Village." He tried to go up the steps. Manlan waited inside for him and opened the door for
him, and the loudspeaker said, "All right. Come on up." But he couldn't. The magnet on the scale held him fast.

Then the loudspeaker said, "Aruari!" and a man came carrying a crowbar, and all the spectators clapped. He used the bar and pried the man's legs free from the magnet. When he was free the loudspeaker said, "All right, you go and chew betel. We see you as a little boy. But you were a leader in your village. You had a reputation, so you go and sit and chew betel and smoke."

As he climbed up the steps, everyone slid over to let him pass. He walked along the long veranda that joined the houses until he found a place to sit down. Then they gave him tobacco and lit it for him, and when he'd finished smoking, the loudspeaker said, "All right. Speak for yourself, pitiful man. You had a big reputation, but you came here and the men captured you and held you as if you were a small boy. Speak now!"

The man said nothing. He just kept smoking. After a while, the loudspeaker said, "Aruari, bring knives!" As this was said, there was a huge dish filled with knives. Aruari ran inside and got the knives and brought them to ten men. Each of them took one and they began to chop him up.

The open mouth of a large pipe came out of the ground nearby as they chopped him up. The pipe quivered and they started an engine underneath the ground. It rumbled and roared "Rrrrrrr," and the ground shook. They threw the parts of the man into the pipe and I could hear the bones crunch "Brrrs! Brrrrs! Brrrs!" It boiled and three puffs of smoke came out. When it finished boiling, the flesh of the man was put into two enormous dishes. The loudspeaker said, "Aruari, here's the food." So Aruari carried one dish and another man, Amole, carried the other one. As I watched, I wondered, "Where are they taking the flesh of this man they've ground up?" I stood up and watched as each of the men carrying a dish placed it underneath a house. I looked up and I saw Mount Andewa and a ridge leading up to the peak, and I noticed the coconut fronds waving. I looked back at the food, and I saw a large dog eating the meat from one of the dishes. When I looked at the other dish, I saw a huge pig eating there. The dog finished eating first, but the pig continued to eat while the dog looked on, licking his lips. I watched for a while, and then once again I glanced toward Andewa where I could see the coconut fronds waving. When I turned back again to look at the pig, I saw that the dog was a long stone lying there. And I thought, "What's happened to this dog that it's now a stone?" Then I looked at the pig, and the same thing had happened.

After this, the loudspeaker spoke again saying, "When you were in your village you claimed to be an important man. But in this little place you have been eaten up by a knife, a dog, and a pig. And now fire will utterly destroy you." When the loudspeaker had finished, a fire blazed up and destroyed the remains.

Then I began walking and I found my daughter, Maria, who had died. She was putting areca nuts into a large basket. When it was full, she put the basket on her head and I asked, "Where did you get the areca nuts?"

"I got them in the village here."

Then I saw my grandfather with her, so I asked my daughter, "Who's that with you?" I was trying to trick her, because I really knew who it
was. She replied, "This is my ancestor here." Then she said to me, "Papa, here's some areca for you. Bring your towel here." (When I died I carried a towel.) So I gave her the towel and she put it on the ground and filled it to overflowing with areca nuts. Then she got a rope and tied it up and said, "There! Take your areca nuts and go."

As I watched, my daughter turned and followed her ancestor along the path, and I grieved for them and tried to follow them, but the path disappeared. So, heartsick, I turned away. I thought, "Well, I'll go get the areca nuts my daughter tied up." I picked up the towel with the nuts in it and stood looking at the path when I saw a woman coming. Her tongue was hanging down to her chin and her eyes were bloody. She was carrying a knife and was coming to stab me. So I ran until I reached the aid post. I went in and I yelled, "Help! All of you get up. Chew some of this areca." All of the nurses were astonished. "My Lord! This dead man is talking!"

Then they asked me, "What happened?" I replied, "There was a spirit woman carrying a knife who was trying to stab me, and I ran all the way back here." While I was talking, I could hear the spirit woman chopping at the planks of the aid post, striking at the walls around. I said, "You wait until you see this woman, the one that chased me." Then I went and sat down on a bench. All the time I sat talking I could hear this woman cutting at the planks. They built a fire and we talked until we could hear the cows lowing. Then I said, "Bring me some food and some water." I washed out my mouth, and when the food came, I ate it. I wanted some pork, but they told me that I couldn't have pork, I should only have vegetable food.

And that's all.

OTHER EXPERIENCES

The following two experiences, of Jakob and Wallace, are not near-death experiences: one is a dream, but the other may be an out-of-body experience, a vision, or an experience of hypnagogic imagery. I should make two points before presenting Jakob's vision.

First, the woman, Gagandewa, whom Jakob wants to meet, is the heroine of a pelunga, a myth that people believe to be based on fact and to recount events that really happened. Gagandewa is a spirit woman who lives in a village on Mount Andewa, the home of the dead. The myth recounts a time when, because of the marriage of Gagandewa to a mortal, social relationships were possible between humans and the spirits of Andewa, and people were able to see the Andewa village. Now when people go to Andewa, all that is visible is forest (and a helicopter pad recently installed by a scientific survey team). The reason Luke placed emphasis on his ability to see coconut fronds on the ridge leading to Andewa in the preceding account is that coconut palms are a sign of human habitation. On Andewa, no signs of occupation are visible to human eyes, but while he was
dead Luke was able to see evidence of the spirit village that is invisible to the eyes of the living. David Counts and I have recorded Jakob's version of the story of Gagandewa and have for years discussed at length with him and with other Kaliai the significance of the events recounted in it. Jakob's preoccupation with meeting Gagandewa may, therefore, be partially attributable to the interest that we have shown in the story. The complete text of this myth is in Counts (1982); an analysis of the cultural context and an interpretation of it is presented in Counts (1980a). Jakob was the primary source for the versions of the story retold in these publications.

The second point is that Jakob had obviously thought a great deal about the nature of his experience, and he had emphatically rejected the possibility that it was a dream. He enumerated the following differences between his vision and normal dream state:

(1) It took place while his family and he were sleeping near their gardens, but he felt his spirit leave his body, a feeling that is not normally part of a dream.

(2) He was aware of minute details, such as the texture of the foliage around him and the litter on the path beneath his feet, details one does not attend to in a dream state. He says that he noticed this detail while he was having his vision, and that during the experience he rejected the idea that he was dreaming. The thought that he might be having a dream occurred to him at that time because of the fantastic nature of the things that were happening to him.

(3) He was aware of the color of things.

(4) He could look about himself in the same deliberate way that a person in an ordinary state of consciousness would stare with curiosity at his surroundings.

(5) He was thinking rationally and critically during the experience. The experience, he says, had none of the bizarre and illogical character of a dream state. It was, "Like a dream, but it was different too. It was as though I left my body and went on a journey."

Jakob's vision is similar to the experience of hypnagogic sleep. According to Alcock (1981), this is a common phenomenon that is experienced by most people sometime in their lives during the period between wakefulness and sleep. For example, a person who is just drifting off to sleep when he hears the telephone ring and gets up to answer it only to discover he was mistaken, has experienced a hypnagogic image. It is characterized by:

"1. Colors, lights, geometric forms."

"2. Vivid and detailed images of faces and objects. . . ."

"3. Landscapes and scenes of unusual grandeur and beauty"
The hypnagogic experience is unlike a dream in that the person is convinced it is real. Some participants also see their own images during the experience, and their participation increases as they move into deeper levels of the hypnagogic state (see Foulkes and Vogel, 1965, cited in Alcock, 1981). Alcock cited Palmer’s (1978) argument that hypnagogic imagery is the most likely way of accounting for out-of-body experiences, and suggested that many dying persons, especially those who have near-death experiences, likely pass through this psychological state.

Because the text of the interview with Jakob is quite long, I have summarized it.

When his vision started, Jakob found himself with a lame fellow villager, Karl, who was carrying his walking stick. (Karl denies having shared this experience.) They decided to enter the mangrove swamp to fish, and because it was dark, they lit a pressure lamp. While they were fishing they heard a large canoe enter the swamp, and, fearing that they might encounter hostile Kove who occasionally come there to fish, they put out their lamp and made their way to the other edge of the swamp where there was solid ground. When they got there they found a large paved road going up onto Mount Andewa. They did not relight their lamp, for it had become as bright as day. There were car tracks on the road, and they decided to try to get a ride if a car came by, for Karl was tiring quickly. They continued walking until finally they heard roosters crowing and they came to a village. There they found two of Jakob’s kinsmen, both deceased, who greeted them and asked why they were there. They explained, and as they sat talking, Jakob looked around and saw that there was an outer village with houses made of thatch in the usual manner, and an inner village with houses that were new, bright, and shiny. Jakob then noticed a pile of food, taro and bananas, and since he was hungry he asked his kinsman, Narai, for something to eat. His kinsman refused, saying, “No! You can’t eat one of those bananas. If you should eat it, you couldn’t return home. You would have to stay here.” Jakob protested that he was very hungry and that the statement was ridiculous, but Narai refused. Then Jakob asked how his kinsman had grown such large taro, for the corms were much larger than anything in Jakob’s garden. Narai replied, “You understand, in the place where you now live everything is small. But here everything is large. Our village is large, and so is our taro.”

They were sitting and talking when a bald man appeared and reacted with anger when he saw Jakob (no more mention is made of Karl) sitting there. He insisted that Jakob leave, and when Jakob
refused, he left saying that he would do something about it, for Jakob did not belong there. Then Jakob asked Narai to show him the house where Gagandewa lived, for by this time he realized that he must be in the spirit village on Andewa. Shocked, Narai refused, advising Jakob that the woman was a powerful spirit to be avoided.

Jakob then asked Narai to show him more of the village, but Narai replied that he would soon have to go to work. Surprised, Jakob questioned his kinsman and learned that all of the village residents worked for wages and that pay was differential depending on how long a person had been there. Narai earned one hundred and fifty kina a day, but another young man from Jakob’s village who had died only two weeks before admitted that he made a daily wage of only fifty kina.

Once again the angry bald man came, this time with soldiers, to drive Jakob away, and so Jakob’s kinsmen agreed that they would take him back to a place where he could find his way home. After a series of adventures growing out of Jakob’s insistence that he be allowed to meet Gagandewa before he returned home, he found himself once more in the spirit village near Narai’s house. Looking about him, Jakob realized that there seemed to be a gap between two of the houses in the village. He asked Narai to show him what was beyond the gap and at first Narai refused. Finally he and another kinsman took Jakob by the arms, and they walked between the two houses. Then, Jakob says:

> We didn’t take many steps. From the middle of those houses we took only three steps, but when I looked around I could see for miles.

> “Narai, is that what it’s like?” I asked.

> “Yes!” he said.

> I saw speeding cars, I saw flowers lining the roads, I saw multiple-lane highways crossing and recrossing each other. There were so many cars that I was confused. I saw men and women walking along, and cars running, but there were no collisions, no accidents. It was a beautiful place, a good place without mistakes. I saw nothing wrong, I heard no children crying. The place was illuminated by a strong light that lit up the flowers and the houses so that the colors were brilliant and clear. It made my eyes pop out. I asked Narai, “Narai, where does that light come from?”

> “It doesn’t have a source. It’s just there.” I looked and as far as I could see, until they were tiny in the distance, there were houses. Then I looked behind me, but the thatch houses weren’t there. I asked Narai, “Narai, we only took three steps. Where are the thatched houses?” Narai laughed and said, “I already told you. This is a big place. The thatched houses you’re asking about are a long way away.”

> “A long way? How did we get here? Where are we?”

> “Do you think that time and distance are the same here as where you
live? No! It is not the same here. Time and distance are different here. It doesn't matter whether something is far away or near. Here they are the same."

I looked but I couldn't see the edge of the forest. All I could see was the city and the light. There were no trees or grass. Once again I asked Narai, "Narai, when we are down on the beach and we look up here, we see forest and mountains and huge rocks. If we try to climb up to Andewa the way is steep and we are afraid of falling. Where is all that?"

He replied, "It's here. This is the mountain. But when you see it from down there it seems to be rough and steep. When you come here you can see that it's not so. There are no mountains. There is no jungle. It's all clear and settled."

Jakob stood there in wonder, so that he did not notice that he was being surrounded by a group of people who took hold of him and began turning him around until he was "spinning like the propeller of an airplane." Then he was in bed in his little shelter at his garden. He awoke his wife to tell her of his adventure, and she laughed and told him that it was only a dream. However, Jakob is certain that his experience was no ordinary dream and that if his spirit had eaten food or if he had stayed in the spirit village, he would have died. His experience has changed him, he says, for now he has seen the land of the dead and he no longer fears death.

Wallace

Wallace says that his experience was a dream. I include it here because it shares elements with some of the near-death experiences and with Jakob's vision, and because a number of Kaliai consider Wallace's dream to provide a glimpse into the world of the dead. Wallace is an Anem speaker who lives in the coastal village of Karaiai.

At the beginning of my dream there were many of us, but I became separated from the others on the road. I wanted to follow them, but I didn't know which way they had gone, so I went inside a door. I thought I'd find the way if I went through that door, but I didn't. Instead, where I was there was sunshine, and it was light in the distance, but in between it was dark. I felt my way along the road and finally I came to a clear place on Mount Andewa.

As I walked along I realized that my older brother, who is dead, was there. He was sleeping and, as it was dark, I too lay down to sleep. When it became light I saw that it was indeed my older brother. He left, and I realized that I was alone.

I had been sleeping near a glass wall which surrounded Andewa and the village inside, while there was bush outside the wall. I could look through the glass and see men inside. I got up, and suddenly I found myself on the inside.
There were two men standing there, and as I approached them, I recognized them. One of them took his knife and they said, "Come on. Let's go now." One of them went first, I came second, and the other man came last. As we walked I saw that the place was tidy and very nice. There were flowers and the short coconut palms with the red nuts planted along a wide road, and there were many smaller roads with flowers planted along the edge, just as white people plant flower borders along their streets. The sun wasn't strong. It was as though it was covered by a cloud so that the light wasn't bright or hot. We walked along a ridge until we came to my mother's house. My mother was sitting on her veranda, and when she saw me she said, "Say! Why did you come here with those men?" She went inside her house and got a box, which she put outside on the veranda. I climbed up and sat down on the veranda, but she went back inside her house so that I didn't see her again. We sat there for a while; then the two men said, "Hey! Let's go."

As we walked they said, "Let's go see where those who have drunk fish poison or who have hanged themselves stay. We'll show you where they live." We went to the place where they lived and sat down. They said, "Watch them. It won't be long until lunch."

When the cook rang the dinner bell they all came running to get their food from her. They snatched food from each other and ran with it so that nobody got to eat properly. And their homes weren't any good. They lived in half-finished houses of thatch or metal, and their settlement wasn't inside the wall. Rather it was outside on the edge of the jungle. Their place was swampy, so that they had made paths through the mud with logs and limbs, and these paths led from one house to another. When they had finished eating they sat around, and some of them started singing. Then one of them saw us and they tried to kill us. They got their spears and clubs and rocks and came after us, so we ran away.

We ran until we came to a huge breadfruit tree growing at the edge of a river. The fruit was about a half a meter long. I started to sit down when I saw a man: his jaw was hanging down onto his chest and his eyes were huge, like something out of a nightmare. We ran away from him, back inside the wall, and we began walking down the road back toward where we had started. Eventually we met another road where there were many people. There was much smoke, the sounds of engines and of men hammering, and there were many cars running back and forth. We went inside a house and sat down, and I asked the owner, "Say, I've heard that when we die we'll all go into the fire. Is it true?" He replied, "No! It's just a parable. When we die we go to work." Then he asked, "When you came, did you see a big road?" We replied that we had indeed seen a highway covered with smoke and he said, "That's it! That's where all the sorcerers are. We don't work. We just relax, and in the afternoon they bring us our food. All we have to do is to relax and eat. They have to work and provide the food." We sat there a while; then he said, "Do you know that man from Lolo who had two wives? Well, he doesn't speak his own language any more. Now he speaks Anem. When we are alive we speak many languages: Kaliai [Lusi], Kombei, Bariai, Lolo. But when we die we come here and we all speak one language."

As we sat there talking a woman came and sat down beside us,
She began to scoot over toward us and we moved away from her on the bench until I was at the very end. Then the bench tipped over. The other end flew up and I fell onto the ground, and then I was awake.

DISCUSSION: CULTURAL CONTEXT

While it is not appropriate to include lengthy ethnographic description in this paper, a few comments placing the experiences in cultural context will make them more understandable to the reader who is not familiar with Melanesian custom and society. I have already mentioned the use of ginger in curing ritual, especially when the problem is sorcery-induced infection or illness. As is the case with other peoples who do not have ready access to modern medical technology, most Kalaii experience death while they are still relatively young. They cannot expect to die of old age, as we do. Death most commonly strikes children and adults in their prime. People die of trauma, infections, acute illness, childbirth, and childhood disease. Understandably, then, they do not consider death to be the natural conclusion of the life cycle in most cases. Instead they search for an external cause to explain why death occurs, and the usual explanation is sorcery. With only one or two exceptions, all the Kalaii whom I know firmly believe that sorcery causes illness and death. If there were no sorcery, my Kalaii friends insist, there would be no premature death. In general, sorcerers are men who are antisocial members of the community. They are considered to be greedy, violent, vindictive, unpredictable men, often from outside the local community, who readily use their knowledge of magic as a source of power and to terrorize others in order to have their way. The problem is exacerbated for the Kalaii by the fact that they feel powerless to deal with the problem. Before European contact, villagers could band together and kill a sorcerer. Today such action results in conviction for murder. National law does prohibit sorcery threats, but the punishment for conviction of the offense is a few months in jail. Then the enraged sorcerer returns to his village determined to avenge himself on his accusers. It must seem to many Kalaii that the only justice they can expect is from supernatural sources: thus the judgment and punishment of sorcerers in Luke’s near-death experience and in Wallace’s dream.

Although there was no pre-contact notion of the judgment of the dead for their sins, the dead did not all share the same fate. However, the significant differential was not the way in which people lived—not their moral standards—but the way in which they died. Suicides,
especially, were thought to become fearsome ghosts who, as in Wallace's dream, were outside normal spirit society and were dangerous to the living. The spirits of suicides were condemned to stay outside the spirit community, a menace to the living, and the familiars of sorcerers (see Counts 1980b for a detailed discussion of suicide).

In Andrew's near-death experience, Jakob's vision, and Wallace's dream, the land of the dead is perceived as a happy place. It is, however, not the pleasant garden reported by Moody (1975) and by Osis and Haraldsson (1977). Instead it is a land that is described as having factories and wage employment. It has an appearance that reminds me of the view approaching Los Angeles from the air. This view of the land of the dead is consistent with the belief complex known as cargo belief (see Counts 1972, 1978, and Counts and Counts, 1976, for detailed discussion of cargo belief and activity in Kaliai). Briefly, cargo belief involves the assumption that whites may not be fully human but may be, instead, spirit people or returned ancestors. Their possible nonhuman status derives from their appearance, for spirit people are thought to be pale or white, and from their technological superiority. Many Melanesian people, including the Kaliai, seem to assume that humans do not create their culture (see Lawrence, 1964, for an excellent discussion of the evolution of a similar cargo belief on the Rai Coast of New Guinea). Instead, language, knowledge, and technology are given to humans by the spirits and/or the ancestors. This is true for whites as well as for Melanesians; therefore, the goods that whites possess must be created by the spirits, ancestors, or God (depending on the content of the particular belief system) in the land of the dead, which is rich with divinely given technology. The rituals that develop from cargo belief are intended to persuade the spirits or God to give villagers the same goods and technological knowledge that they have already given whites. Paradise, the land of the dead, is a place of factories, automobiles, highways, airplanes, European houses and buildings in great numbers, and manufactured goods. One man's smoggy freeway is another man's heaven!

Finally, the Kaliai do not recognize the same boundaries between the empirical and nonempirical world that most North Americans do. Spirit beings of many kinds inhabit the forest, and things that seem to belong to the empirical world may, in fact, be spirit beings in changeling form. Beings that one meets in the forest may appear to be animals or humans, but they may in fact be spirits who are potentially dangerous. Boulders of unusual shape may once have been spirit beings who changed their form to stone, but they possess
the power to return to their original form, as did the dog and pig seen by Luke.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the most interesting questions for an anthropologist who wishes to study the phenomenon of the near-death experience are, How much of the content of such experiences is culturally derived? and, Do these experiences have common qualities that cut across cultural differences? Obviously, three near-death experiences that occurred during deaths that were not verified by trained medical personnel, one vision, and one dream from a Melanesian society are insufficient to warrant any profound general conclusions. Nevertheless, these cases do represent a start in the collection of cross-cultural data, and they do permit some tentative observations.

First, some of the experiences common among the people interviewed by Moody (1975) and Osis and Haraldsson (1977) were not reported by my consultants. 8

(1) In no case did a Kaliai look down upon his sleeping or dead body.

(2) No one reported feelings of strong emotion or of floating in space.

(3) No one said he experienced a feeling of exaltation shortly after death or before having his vision or dream.

(4) No one reported hearing a loud buzzing or ringing sound or music at the beginning of his experience. 9

(5) There were no reports that people felt as though they were moving at great speed through a long, dark tunnel. Instead, all of my informants journeyed by foot on a wide path or road. All but Frank and Andrew specifically traveled toward the mountainous interior of New Britain, and three of my informants saw or went to Mount Andewa and the village of the dead.

(6) Only Frank, who is the most highly educated and acculturated, and the only English speaker, reported seeing a man with white skin and long beard and dressed in white robes.

(7) No one mentioned having a new body, and the only unusual power mentioned was the ability to see evidence of spirit habitation on Mount Andewa. Jakob's ability to see and travel long distances was a result of the unusual nature of the spirit world and not an artifact of a new and especially powerful body.

(8) No one spoke of having feelings of love, joy, and peace during his experience, and only Jakob volunteered that as a result of his
vision, he no longer fears death. Andrew did express reluctance to return to life and pointed to his withered leg, an artifact of his nearly fatal illness, as giving him reason to regret his return.

Second, there were similarities as well as differences between the Kaliai experiences and the typical near-death experience. The data from Kaliai, when compared with the evidence collected by Moody (1975) and by Osis and Haraldsson (1977), suggest that there may be features that are shared cross-culturally by those who have experiences that are variously known as near-death, visionary, out-of-body, or hypnagogic experiences.

(1) While on the journey, each person saw an apparition of some sort. Some apparitions were deceased persons known to the individual having the vision and included a daughter, a mother, an ancestor, unspecified kinsmen, a neighbor who died after the subject, and fellow villagers. Others seem to be derived from mythic or religious symbolism: Gagandewa in Jakob’s vision; the ancestor spirits and the white-skinned, robed, bearded man seen by Frank; the monsters seen by Luke and Wallace.

(2) People are reluctant to awaken or to return to the world of the living, for the place that they perceive as being the world of the dead often is a pleasant, happy place. However, the content of paradise varies and seems to be culturally defined. People apparently experience the land of the dead as having desirable aspects that are unobtainable, or at least not ordinarily experienced in this life. North Americans and Europeans see a beautiful garden, while Kaliai find an industrialized world of factories, highways, and urban sprawl. Notice that whereas North Americans do not report going to hell or being judged for their earthly behavior, and Indian notions of karma are only vaguely suggested (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977), some Kaliai do experience a judgment in which the individual having the vision is vindicated, while others who are hated and feared (specifically sorcerers) are punished.

Clearly, near-death and other types of visionary experiences are widespread cross-cultural phenomena that share some basic features. Also, clearly, the way in which people interpret these experiences is influenced by the expectations that they have learned from the cosmological and philosophical teachings of their particular culture. The culturally structured nature of these experiences is consistent with the explanation that out-of-body and near-death experiences are the result of a psychological state known as hypnagogic sleep. The Kaliai data presented here suggest that this, rather than an objectively experienced “life after death,” is the most
reasonable explanation for the phenomena. This is, however, only a small sample of cross-cultural data and, as I indicated earlier, no profound conclusions can be drawn from it. Obviously there is a need for researchers to collect cross-cultural data so that it will be possible to begin to separate the culturally derived content of these experiences from the content that is shared by people regardless of their heritage.

NOTES

1. The field research for this paper was conducted between June and September, 1981, in West New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea, with the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Waterloo. Interviews were conducted in Tok Pisin by myself and by my husband, David R. Counts.

2. Tok Pisin is the trade language spoken by almost all people of West New Britain. Much of its vocabulary is English derived.

3. The term -anunu also means "dream" (anunugu,"my dream") and "reflection," while -tautau incorporates the notions of "essence" and "self." The edible meat of a coconut is niu aitautau, the fleshy part of a woman's breast is aituru aitautau, and informants say the portion of something that is called aitautau is its "true" or essential part. The term aitau also means "himself," "herself," or "itself," as in aitau irai, "he struck himself," while taugau may be glossed "myself" (taugau ngaraugau, "I struck myself").

4. In order to protect the privacy of my consultants, I have changed the names of everyone but Jakob. Jakob's experience draws heavily on the myth of Akro and Gagandewa, and he is cited in other publications as being the source of the text of this myth (Counts 1980a, 1982).

5. One explanation for the appearance of this woman in Andrew's vision is that while Andrew lay dead, the news of her death came to Vuvu and the villagers attending his body began to mourn and to discuss this second tragic event. If we interpret Andrew's death as a comatose state rather than as clinical death, it is possible that in that state he continued to receive and process information that affected his vision, including information about the death of the woman in the nearby village. This rests on the supposition that Andrew's attendants
confused a comatose state with death. Not having been present at the event, I am unwilling to assert unequivocally that this was the case. Kaliai are ordinarily very clear about the signs of physical death.

6. There are no paved roads in Kaliai. There is a dirt track leading from the coast to the mission with its associated school and aid post a mile inland. There are no other roads that would be suitable for automobile traffic, only dirt paths linking villages with each other and going to the gardens.

7. The kina is a Papua New Guinean unit of currency. In 1981 one kina was worth about $1.45 U.S.

8. My methods may, in fact, make my data non-comparable to that collected by Moody (1975) and by Osis and Haraldsson (1977). I did not describe to my consultants the content of the typical near-death experience as reported by these researchers. Nor, with the exception of the questions included in my interview with Andrew, did I specifically ask my consultants if their experience included episodes that were consistent with the episodes reported in the typical near-death experience. I was reluctant to probe for these characteristic events because, in my experience, Kaliai are eager to provide me with the data that they think I want and I feared that such questions might suggest the “right” answers to my informants.

9. The sounds of the sorcerer-cruncher and the loudspeaker in Luke’s vision do not seem to be equivalent in type or content to those in the accounts of Osis and Haraldsson (1977) and Moody (1975).

10. It is unclear to me whether the white skin of Frank’s apparition owes its appearance to Frank’s Christian training (most pictures of the Christ figure that I have seen on the walls of New Britain missions portray him as having white skin), to the traditional belief shared by many Melanesians that the spirits of the dead have white skin, or, of course, to the possibility that Frank actually was met by a white-skinned being.

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Requests for reprints to:

Dorothy A. Counts, Ph.D.
Department of Anthropology
Faculty of Arts
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario
Canada N2L 3GI