ABSTRACT: Analysis of eight Kongo near-death experiences (NDEs) from Central Africa supports the argument that universal features exist within this experiential form. Respondents described leaving their bodies and journeying to afterlife realms, encountering boundaries, and communicating with spiritual beings. Some accounts reveal culturally specific elements, implying that expectations shape perceptions. NDEs seem related to shamanism, humankind’s first religious form, since NDEs contain the same elements as waking visions unrelated to the threat of death. Comparisons of Kongo accounts with two Basuto narratives from Southern Africa extend this argument. The theory that NDEs have a shamanic basis has evolutionary implications since shamanism provides greater survival advantages to those with genes allowing dissociation, hypnotic capacity, and religiosity. Shamanic healing, practiced over many millennia, would have increased the frequency of those genes.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Kongo; Congo; shamanism; ritual healing theory.
Morse and Perry, 1992; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sutherland, 1992). Comparisons of NDE reports over many eras reveal that culturally specific elements and transformational impacts vary over time (McClenon, 1991, 1994; Zaleski, 1987).

This study contributes to this body of knowledge by discussing eight Kongo NDE accounts from Central Africa and comparing these texts to two Basuto NDEs from Southern Africa. Analysis supports the argument that NDEs have physiological bases parallel to those generating shamanic visions. This does not mean that NDEs are "invalid" or do not reflect spiritual realities; such arguments are beyond the scope of historical or textural analysis.

*Kongo* refers to ethnic groups, the BaKongo or people of the Kongo, prevalent within an area divided since 1895 among the Republic of Congo, formerly French Congo; the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, and before that, Belgian Congo; and Angola, with Cabinda, formerly a Portuguese colony. The term *Congo* refers to these geographical areas. The history of the BaKongo spans eras of severe deprivation and social crisis associated with slavery systems, colonial exploitation, and postcolonial social and economic crisis. Many generations prior to European contact experienced reductions of population of 50 percent or more due to drought (Miller, 1988). Encounters with the Portuguese, beginning in 1482, led to a merchant capitalist era and destabilizing, exploitative slave trade (Edgerton, 2002; Miller, 1988). Creation of the Free Congo State (1885–1908) by King Leopold II of Belgium resulted in the death of about 10 million people, half the indigenous population. Belgian and French colonial rule led to continued social instability, exploitation, and economic underdevelopment (Edgerton, 2002; Forbath, 1977; Hochschild, 1998). Independence in 1960 brought tyranny, corruption, police brutality, hunger, malnutrition, civil wars, and ever-shorter life expectancy (Edgerton, 2000).

**Indigenous Religions**

John Kelly Thornton (2002) mentioned two NDEs, the first collected by Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, a Portuguese Capuchin friar who arrived in the Congo in 1654. Cavazzi told of "a woman who had been sacrificed, but returned from the dead to report that her services in the Other World were not needed" (Thornton, 2002, p. 75). The second story was heard by Swedish-American Amandus Johnson, who carried out ethnographic work in Angola between 1922 and 1924:
In 1922, Amandus Johnson heard stories, said to have been first told by people who had “risen from the dead,” who described the land of the dead called Kalunga, ruled by Soba Kalunga, where those judged worthy were admitted after their death. (Thornton, 2002, p. 75)

Thornton (2002) did not otherwise discuss NDEs, but provided these cases to illustrate why BaKongo believed in an afterlife. This line of argument coincides with David Hufford’s (1982) experiential source theory, the idea that folk religions are shaped by the firsthand anomalous experiences people tell one another. Folk religious beliefs are passed down over many generations, yet are continually recreated orally by people talking to each other. People describe apparitions, paranormal dreams, waking extrasensory perceptions, out-of-body and near-death experiences, psychokinesis, and spiritual healing – perceptions creating beliefs in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities (McClenon, 1994, 2000, 2002a, 2002b).

Portuguese explorers first encountered the BaKongo in 1482. The Kingdom of Kongo, founded in the 14th century, was a complex, hierarchical society whose religion reflected its structure. BaKongo believed that a powerful deity governed the universe, corresponding to their king, who had the power to execute people. Their society also supported magical practitioners who performed a variety of supernatural tasks for the general good. Some of these practitioners provided protection from witches or sorcerers who used magic for evil purposes. Although Portuguese explorers converted many BaKongo to Christianity soon after first contact, indigenous beliefs remained prevalent and, over time, the impact of Portuguese Christianity declined.

The previously mentioned 17th-century Kongo NDE account mirrored popular conceptions of the indigenous afterlife, which, although differing among localities, portrayed it as similar to life before death. As with medieval Chinese and European NDEs, the BaKongo believed in a special land, governed by a particular ruler, with entrance to the land dependent on a judge’s decision, concepts reflecting earthly political and social structures.

Heavenly realms developed by medieval societies, whether European, Asian, or African, differed from those of hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherer NDEs, such as those discussed by Allen Kellehear (1996), included cosmic geographies but lacked hierarchical social structures. The hunter-gatherer NDEr traveled to a distant land of the afterlife, a domain corresponding to the experiencer’s Earthly realm. This experience was parallel to a shamanic vision in which the shaman, in
trance, visits the spirit world. Some Kongo NDEs had hunter-gatherer forms, but others included the idea of a judge who determined those to be admitted to the heavenly realm.

Two non-Christian Kongo NDEs, collected in the 20th century, tended to be equivalent to shamanic visions in that they did not mention hierarchical structures but provided information valuable for healing. One experiencer reported:

I was a young man with two children. Then, in one month, four deaths occurred in my clan. In the next month there were five deaths. I became ill next, and when I died, I found myself at the bank of the Zaire River [va simu Nzadi]. Across the river several people appeared and said, “you must not die; there are too many orphans to care for.” They told me about three plants, which cure women suffering from barrenness. When I awoke from my death, I vomited peppers, which to this day I do not eat. (Janzen, 1978, p. 196)

This story includes the idea of a “barrier,” in this case the river bank, common within some NDEs. The NDEr was assigned a particular mission, in this case care for orphans, and provided with medical information, elements common within shamanic visions.

The second story was not actually an NDE but a vision associated with death with a form typically included within the NDE literature. This account also illustrated similarities between NDEs and shamanic visions:

I was out tapping palm wine when word reached me that my wife, away at a funeral feast in a nearby village, had succumbed. I was dumbfounded, and in disbelief I set out to fetch her body. Suddenly a voice - like the voice of God - spoke. I beheld a beautiful garden, and beside the path, three plants. The voice told me to take the plants, for they would raise my wife. I took them, and raised her with them. Suddenly, I knew all the plants of the forest. (Janzen, 1978, p. 197)

This account exemplified a form of shamanic calling or initiation. The experiencer traveled to an “otherworldly” realm and gained information valuable for treating the living, and as a result became able to perform shamanic roles.

**Christian NDEs**

The introduction of Christianity by Portuguese missionaries brought about a religious system that integrated Christian concepts
into existing indigenous paradigms. Due to the lack of priests, Christianity diminished in importance until the 1800s, when Christian missionaries reintroduced their religion. In 1921, Simon Kimbangu, a BaKongo teacher, launched what eventually became the Kimbanguist Church, an indigenous form of Christianity based on his spiritual healings and visions. After only a few months, Kimbangu was arrested by the colonial government and sentenced to death, a sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Although he was incarcerated for the remaining 30 years of his life, his movement grew and presently includes more than a million members. After independence from the colonial powers in 1960, officials relaxed the ban on innovative religions and many "prophetic" churches were launched. Typically, prophets demonstrated their authenticity through visionary experience and spiritual healing (Andersson, 1958; Edgerton, 2002).

Many prophetic visions had NDE forms. Wyatt MacGaffey provided an example, taken from a prophet's text:

In 1966, I fell into a coma, and people brought blankets for my funeral; but then I saw a bright, dazzling light, heard a heavenly choir singing No. 461 ["Many troubles here on earth, we suffer from sicknesses, our tears pour down O Spirit, come to help us!"] , and I awoke to find that I had acquired exceptional intelligence, so that no witch could get past me. (MacGaffey, 1983, p. 211)

Such experiences triggered profound beliefs, sufficient to launch the visionary's career as a prophet. These prophets devised ideologies and rituals that fit the indigenous folk beliefs of their Christian congregations. This often included witchcraft beliefs: the prophet's experiences granted power to detect and combat witches.

Simon Bockie's (1993) book, Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief, explained why modern Kongo Christians believe as they do, combining indigenous and Christian beliefs. His text included four NDE-type experiences. The first included four NDE core features: cosmic terrain, encountering others, judgment, and return to the body:

I do not know the time I left this world. According to what I was told by my "mourners," I stopped breathing around 9:00 in the morning and began breathing again around 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon. In the meantime I was going somewhere but had no idea of my final destination. I was walking very fast. I saw different things: mountains, trees, grass, palm trees, and people all over the road who were going in the same direction I was going. I saw nobody returning from where we were going. Some were just sitting by the
side of the road not knowing what to do. Others were still hanging on at a snail’s pace: they were very tired but could not get help from anyone. Everyone was concerned with his own situation. There was no sympathy for others.

As I was physically strong, I kept speeding up. The men and women I saw were ordinary people. It was a long journey. Finally, I arrived at a summitless mountain, that is, a huge mountain reaching up beyond human sight or estimation. Hundreds of people were just lying down there because they did not know what to do next. Suddenly, I became depressed myself, but a moment later the name of Jesus Christ came to my mind. Without wasting time, I cried out lustily: “Jesus, help me!”

With his help I jumped over the top of the mountain and surprisingly found myself in front of a group of individuals who had nkanda wamoyo, the book of life. To be admitted to that world, the name must be found in that huge book. Before being allowed to pass, the name must first be checked and even when it is written in the book, they are to be sure that indeed the individual’s time to go there has come. They speak to everyone in his mother tongue. I was amazed to be asked in Kikongo with a Kingoyi accent, “Nki Wizidi?” (Why are you here?). ... I honestly said that I did not know how I got there. My whole body was hurting and suddenly it cooled off and I saw myself in the road which had led me to this place.

They checked my name in nkanda wamoyo. It was there but, unexpectedly, they told me that though my name was there it was not my time to go. They suggested that I return where I came from, but I was less than enthusiastic about their idea. My reluctance was perhaps due to the fact that I did not have enough strength to walk back the same distance. Just as I was having second thoughts, one of them said, “Tala mwan’ aku Marie telamane yandi mosi mukutomba” (Look, your daughter Mary is standing helplessly alone looking for you). She was just one year old. Turning my head to see my daughter, I suddenly found myself back in the middle of a weeping crowd. Completely surprised, I wanted to ask them why they were wailing, but could not. ... [Later] I told them that contrary to what they thought, I was not dead but had gone somewhere I did not myself know. They were incredibly amazed and awed. (Bockie, 1993, p. 88)

The respondent mentioned the “book of life,” a phrase noted in another Kongo NDE. Christianity introduced and emphasized literacy among the BaKongo and books are an important cultural introduction. Bockie noted that this particular respondent, although a Christian, firmly maintained his traditional beliefs. The man’s NDE indicated that, as expected by many BaKongo, indigenous beliefs did not prevent Christians from being accepted into heaven, an assertion less frequently advocated by European missionaries.

Bockie (1993) provided other NDE cases illustrating how the experiencer’s culture may have shaped perceptions. One NDEr had
converted to a Christian sect that regarded tithing as particularly important:

Even as the doctor spoke, the man stopped breathing. Minutes later, his body was cold. Alone now, the wife began to weep until her eyes were red and swollen. She spent most of the night beside her husband... [He awoke to] ask his wife why she was crying. He just told her that he had been in a strange but peaceful world. He was walking very fast without knowing where he was going. Though the road was very wide, it was more difficult to walk than one would wish, because there were too many people going in the same direction. He did not talk to any of them. After walking for a long time, he found himself in front of a huge door with Jesus standing in the middle. Jesus greeting him and told him that he was expecting him that night, but unfortunately he could not let him in as his record of monthly offering to the church (kalati kia minkayulu) was not up to date. Jesus then ordered him to return and pay his due to the church before being admitted to this new world. It must be noted that the religious sect to which he belonged is very strict regarding offering to the church. He was disappointed to leave the paradisal atmosphere he was already enjoying. But had he the power to argue with Jesus? Looking back, all he saw was his wife weeping. He was quite confused; while it had ... taken hours to get there, it did not take him a minute to return to this room at the hospital. He begged his wife to go home and get his monthly record. ... She was accompanied by tata Aaron Wanimbu, a mbikudi (literally, prophet) from the same religious sect, who lived near the hospital. They went to the house to get the offering record. After tata Wanimbu paid with his own money what the “returnee” owed the church, they went back to the hospital where the husband was eagerly awaiting his record of offering. Tata Wanimbu handed it to him, and in a matter of minutes he was dead, to everyone’s amazement. (Bockie, 1993, pp. 92–93)

This story illustrated culturally specific characteristics. Within the vision, Jesus demanded payment of the monthly offering, an action supporting the sect’s belief in tithing, behavior considered less important among other denominations.

Bockie’s final case illustrated how experiences may draw on folk beliefs while failing to coincide exactly with the experiencer’s preconceptions:

She was a devoted Christian even before her first death. This death came as a surprise. She became briefly sick and died. ... As one point she was sleeping, but she was not positive whether it was at this time that she left this world or the “unknown.” ... All of a sudden she was enroute to her final destiny without, however, being aware of it. As her existence was never interrupted, she rejected the use of the verb “to die” in our talk because, as she often put it, “How can I claim that I
was dead when in reality I never was? I moved from one place [world] to the other without any interruption. It was an automatic move." On her way she saw countless numbers of people heading in the same direction. She saw hardly anyone who was resting. What she saw did not impress her, for it was the same kind of scene she had always known in her lifetime; that is why she did not think the spiritual world is in the sky, as Christianity teaches.

Walking as fast as she could, she finally arrived at a place where she was unable to move any further. It was the end of the road. People there were holding nkanda wa moyo, the book of life. As her name was in the book, she was allowed to pass. She found herself in the middle of the most beautiful city; it was very clean. All the houses were small but beautiful. To obtain the key to her room, she was referred to a man named Abraham and then to a certain Peter, who was to give her the room. She had hardly spoken to Peter when he told her that the room he was supposed to give her was already reserved for another newcomer. He then asked her how she had gotten there, since it was not yet her time. She could not tell him anything, for she did not know herself how she had gotten there, that is, she had not part in it. But Peter would not listen. He urged her to return to where she had come from. Captivated by the beauty of the city, she begged him not to send her back. But it was to no avail. When he invited her to look back, suddenly all she could see was the coffin in which she was being laid down. Surprised, she called out, "Why have you put me in this coffin? I am not dead." The mourners were astonished and speechless. (Bockie, 1993, p. 94)

The NDEr expected some type of demarcation between life and death but found none, indicating that NDEs do not always reflect experiencers' expectations (and do not always have a "border" element). This and the other Kongo NDEs are equivalent to shamanic visions in that they describe otherworldly features in worldly terms; the elements of the spirit world are parallel to those of the Earthly plane. In this regard NDEs are similar to prophetic visions, involving travel to the spiritual world where the experiencer gains insights.

Many prophetic visions do not entail the threat of death but show all the elements of a NDE. For example:

During the night of 8 March 1955, while in a leaden sleep, I heard a voice outside briskly calling, "Isaac." As soon as I replied I saw myself suddenly leaving the house, although the door remained intact. Outside I stood facing a man who said, "Follow me," which I did. On the road we took we entered an immense forest before crossing a very large expanse of grassland in the middle of which I saw a crossroads and a man coming towards us. ... Fixing his eyes on me he said, "Follow me," and I obeyed. On arriving at the top of a small hill he showed me a deep well of very pure and clear water in
which I saw beautiful fish swimming. ... Look, he said, “in this water you will find your good fortune. When you need clothes, you can get them here. When you are hungry or wish to feed strangers, come here.”... My companion led me past the well to where we saw a great river like the Congo ... While he prayed ... a great light opened and I know that he was asking God for the heavenly dew and the blessing on me. ... Then I went a little way and saw a road, and women on the road fetching water, and ... I was astounded. After much thought I grew calm ... I realized that I had seen a vision. Thereupon I went to the house in which I had been sleeping but found the door shut on the inside so that I could not open it. Standing out there in front of the door ... I rapped on the door so firmly and with such a bold air that my friend opened it without asking me whence I came. I went back to bed. (Janzen and MacGaffey, 1974, p. 66)

This account described travel to otherworldly realms but made no mention of death. Demarcation between physical and spiritual travel was unclear since the respondent later found himself, in a normal state of mind, outside his locked house, suggesting that he physically traveled to an actual place.

Mark Fox (2003) tested the hypothesis that crisis NDEs, involving the threat of death, were equivalent to noncrisis accounts, where the threat of death was not present. He identified 32 crisis cases and 59 noncrisis cases in his sample of 91 “NDE-like” British accounts. He determined that “the average number of Moody's original fifteen NDE elements in the crisis and non-crisis accounts examined were 3.3 and 2.9 respectively, a difference of only 0.4” (Fox, 2003, p. 325). His data implied that NDEs do not require physiological processes associated with death. I conducted a similar analysis, comparing 22 crisis experiences to 5 noncrisis experiences (McClenon, 2006a, 2006b). In parallel fashion, the data revealed little difference regarding frequency of NDE features between samples. These studies imply that the special condition of the threat of death contributes to labeling NDEs but does not define their nature.

The Congo cases coincided with these findings. The two “noncrisis” cases, the man whose wife was dying during his vision and the previous case, had NDE elements equivalent to those within the crisis cases.

**Basuto (Southern African) Cases**

Robert Keable, a British missionary among the Basuto in Southern Africa before World War I, published various “miraculous” dreams and
NDE accounts. Keable was assisted by a “catechist,” an African familiar with the Christian doctrines, who described the following events:

The catechist was summoned to a distant village by a man who had been ill, had “died,” and had returned to life. The man said that having died, he found himself on an unknown road which he traversed for some time. Presently the road divided, and he hesitated which branch to take. While he hesitated a native came up to him, took him by the arm, and led him along one branch. As he went, our friend became increasingly struck with his guide’s villainous countenance, and finally demanded whither they went. “Never you mind,” sinisterly replied the guide; “come on.” At that the “dead” man became terrified, and cried for help and on his crying, a third person came running across the lands. He was observed to have a cross marked on his brow and at the sight of him the guide fled. The newcomer was much out of breath, explained that the road was the road to hell, and besought our friend to turn back and send for a teacher. He did so, reached the place in which he had first found himself, returned to life, and sent for the catechist. [The catechist did not think the man was sick. He marked a cross on his brow designating him a catechumen — a person prepared to become a Christian.] The man promptly lay down contentedly enough, and that night “died” again. His friends went so far as to make his coffin and dig his grave, and they sent for the catechist to bury him. [The man then returned to life and stated that his cross had vanished — that it was only a temporary designation — that his Christian guide stated he needed baptism.] He ... returned to life, and now reproachful at what he considered a trick that had been played upon him, demanded baptism. [After baptism, he again died and stayed dead.] (Keable, 1921, p. 527)

This account paralleled the NDEs found all over the world that specify a particular action required to enter the heavenly realm. (In the previous story, a church offering was required.) Culturally specific elements were also found in medieval Asian and European NDE accounts; NDErs returned to inform their listeners that specific actions were either required or forbidden. For example, Asians learned during NDEs that chanting sutras, creating images of the Buddha, doing good deeds, or copying scripture granted special merit and alleviated the suffering of deceased relatives; whereas sinful behavior such as hunting and killing animals or collecting debts by force resulted in afterlife punishment (McClenon, 1991, 1994).

A second story involved a “prophet” who died, came back to life, and attracted large crowds. The prophet was not a member of any specific Christian sect but sent his “converts” to Christian missionaries for further instruction:
He lived in a village far removed from Europeans, and in a little-civilized district. He fell ill, and he "died." It was winter, and therefore probably he was "dead" for some three days, for he recovered only when the grave was dug, the coffin made, the food prepared, and the mourners gathered. He sat up suddenly while the old women were discoursing upon him. ... He told the old folk ... where he had been and what he had seen, and they were his first converts.

It seemed to him that he had been dead many years, and the full recital of those years would take much time. He had, for example, come to a river and observed that it was both too full and too deep to cross. On the bank were gathered many souls, and now and again unearthly spirits crossed the river easily, selected one and another, and as easily led them over. Then the prophet (to anticipate) mingled with the crowd, and asked why it was that one and another were selected. Could he not cross? The people one and all glanced at his knees, and told him that not until they were hard from kneeling did he stand any chance of crossing. And thus does the prophet to-day inculcate the duty of prayer.

Once across, after long learning of prayers, he came to make up for lost time by preaching repentance. Like another Isaiah, he confessed that he could not speak; not so much however, because he lips were unclean, but because he was unlearned; and therefore God ordered him to be taught to read. This, therefore, constituted one miraculous sign of his office, for having never learned he now could read. In the hut, on awakening, he immediately demanded a book; and there was none in the village. In a day or two one was procured from the Mission, and at once he opened it and began to read. Such is the universal testimony. Further, he now knows many prayers. Also he had a gift of interpretations. And I was assured by his chaplain that he had performed miracles of healing. (Keable, 1921, pp. 529–530)

Keable (1921) took it upon himself to investigate this case "a year or more" after the NDE:

I tackled the reading "miracle," and the interesting thing was that undoubtedly he could not read much even then. So far as I could discover he could "read" anywhere in the Gospels, the commoner Epistles, and some of the psalms with ease and fluency. Given a place, he would glance at it and then begin. If you stopped him, however, he knew at what point in the print he had been arrested. In the Old Testament, with the exception of such passages as Genesis I or Isaiah LI, he went much more slowly. He stumbled hopelessly among the genealogies of Chronicles like a child beginning to read.

This is then, as likely as not, an amazing case of the subliminal memory. As a boy or as a young man, in village after village, he may have been within earshot of the reading of the Scriptures; for converts, who can do so, will sit on the ground and read aloud for hours, and the services of the French Protestant catechists consist
largely of such readings. It must be supposed, then that the whole of these had been stored by him subconsciously, and were now, by a strange circumstance, placed at his normal disposal. (Keable, 1921, pp. 529–531)

Although Keable (1921) “explained” the miraculous element within the prophet’s performance, this account provided another example of a shamanic initiation. The prophet’s story, faith, and reading skills attracted audiences, some of whom were healed. Like a shaman, the prophet’s abilities exceeded those of normal people, inspiring faith in those meeting him. Such performances, inducing hypnotic and placebo effects, benefit those more open to suggestion. Hypnotic suggestions, which do not require listeners to be in trance, have been proven to affect physiological processes including blood flow and brain chemistry. Ritual suggestions are particularly beneficial for alleviating burns, infertility, childbirth complications, and mental disorders (McClenon, 2002a).

According to this “ritual healing theory,” shamanism has had evolutionary impacts (McClenon, 2002a). Over many millennia, people with genes allowing hypnotic and placebo processes benefited from spiritual healing rituals. As a result, these rituals led to increased frequency of “religiosity” genotypes. These genes facilitated hypnotic, dissociative, and anomalous experiences, including NDEs, out-of-body experiences, apparitions, waking extrasensory perceptions, paranormal dreams, and psychokinesis. Although animals seem to perceive apparitions, precognitions, and extrasensory perceptions, *Homo sapiens* has used ritual trance for healing and, with increasing ability for symbolization, interpreted these episodes linguistically. These interpretations shaped future perceptions. Eventually, humans devised culturally-specific beliefs regarding spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities. This is not to say that anomalous experiences such as NDEs are invalid, but that people with dissociative and hypnotic capacities are more likely to perceive such episodes.

The ritual healing theory is open to empirical evaluation. The processes that selected and shaped religiosity genotypes can be studied within the realms of medical research, anthropology, sociology, psychology, folklore studies, and genetic research. The theory argues that spiritual healing practices continue to provide greater benefits to those more open to suggestion. Such people are hypothesized to be more likely to perceive NDEs and other anomalous perceptions. Such episodes continue to generate folk beliefs in spirits,
souls, life after death, and magical abilities – elements that inspire spiritual healing. The Kongo and Basuto cases suggest that folk traditions of all societies contain NDEs shaped by cultural expectations but having similar core features derived from their physiological basis.

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