

An Hawaiian Near-Death Experience

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a case report of an Hawaiian near-death experience (NDE) from the early 1900s, which was uncovered in a turn-of-the-century monograph of Hawaiian folk tales (Thrum, 1907). The account differs from others in the same volume because it appears to be a real-life account rather than a folk tale. I describe similarities and differences from other Pacific area accounts, with particular attention to the only other Polynesian NDE account in the literature, a Maori NDE reported by Michael King in 1985.

KEY WORDS: culture; history; case-study; Polynesia.

There have been several single case reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) in different cultures, from Israel (Abramovitch, 1988) to the Mapuche people in South America (Gómez-Jeria, 1993). Although these previous accounts have been the result of single interviews, other cases have been collected from century-old literary or oral sources from anthropologists (Berndt and Berndt, 1989), travel writers (Schorer, 1985–86), or frontier settlers (King, 1985). The reporting of ancient accounts of NDEs, especially from nonWestern areas, constitutes an important cultural resource for modern near-death studies because most of these accounts predate current research and popular ideas. They also provide crosscultural variations to our understanding of NDEs. In this context, single nonWestern accounts, their methodological problems notwithstanding, provide valuable challenges to our understanding of NDE phenomenology in terms of psychodynamic content and cultural typology. The present paper reports the case of an Hawaiian NDE that appears in a 1907 edition of Thomas Thrum's *Hawaiian Folk Tales*.

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The Case

Thrum's account began with the title, "A visit to the spirit land; or, the strange experience of a woman in Kona, Hawaii." Kalima was ill for many weeks and eventually "died." Her "death" was so convincing that her family and friends prepared her grave and laid her beside this for the funeral rites and acts. During the course of these ministrations Kalima was seen to sigh and then eventually to open her eyes. Naturally everyone present was quite surprised but glad to have her back. Still weak from her ordeal, Kalima took several days to recover her strength to tell a most strange story to her family. Her account is reproduced in part below:

I died, as you know. I seemed to leave my body and stand beside it, looking down on what *was* me. The me that was standing there looked like the form I was looking at, only, I was alive and the other was dead. I gazed at my body for a few minutes, then turned and walked away. I left the house and village and walked on and on to the next village, and there I found crowds of people,—Oh, so many people! The place which I knew as a small village of a few houses was a very large place, with hundreds of houses and thousands of men, women and children. Some of them I knew and they spoke to me,—although that seemed strange, for I knew they were dead,—but nearly all were strangers. They were all so happy! They seemed not to have a care; nothing to trouble them. Joy was in every face, and happy laughter and bright, loving words were on every tongue.

I left that village and walked on to the next. I was not tired, for it seemed no trouble to walk. It was the same there; thousands of people, and everyone so joyous and happy. Some of these I knew. I spoke to a few people, then went on again. I seemed to be on my way to Pele's Pit,—and I could not stop, much as I wanted to do so. (Thrum, 1907, pp. 59–60)

The account went on to describe her continuing journey much as before, meeting old friends or loving strangers in more and more villages. She described how impressed she was with the joy and happiness of all the people that she encountered. Finally she reached the volcano that she seemed uncontrollably drawn toward and there she was stopped by a small group of people.

... they said, "You must go back to your body. You are not to die yet."

I did not want to go back. I begged and prayed to be allowed to stay with them, but they said, "No, you must go back; and if you do not go willingly, we will make you go."

I cried and tried to stay, but they drove me back, even beating me when I stopped and would not go on. So I was driven over the road I had come, back through all those happy people. They were still joyous and happy, but when they saw that I was not allowed to stay, they turned on me and helped drive me, too.

Over the sixty miles I went, weeping, followed by those cruel people, til I reached my home and stood by my body again. (p. 61)

Eventually Kalima was forced back into her body and then made her recovery with some regret.

Discussion

There are four salient anthropological observations to make about this case. First, the NDE derived from an illness account, like so many others in the literature. Although these accounts are not the only sources of NDE phenomenology (see Kellehear, 1996), their regular sourcing from such accounts unduly identifies the popular understanding of their origins with illness and death. This Polynesian case falls neatly within this tradition.

Secondly, there is no report of a tunnel sensation. Indeed, there appears to be no mention of experiences of light and darkness at all. This is consistent with NDE reports from Guam (Green, 1984) and conditionally consistent with the only other Polynesian, albeit Maori, account reported (King, 1985).

Thirdly, there is no report of a life review, and this is also consistent with the absence of this feature in other Pacific areas (Green, 1984; King, 1985) and aboriginal accounts (Berndt and Berndt, 1989; Schorer, 1985–86). Dorothy Counts (1984) did report some life review in NDEs from Melanesia, but those reports were clearly influenced by missionary influences in that area (see Kellehear, 1996).

The fourth observation relates to this problem of the life review. In the Maori account reported by Michael King (1985), no life review was present, but the NDEr did “fly” to Te Rerenga Wairua, “the leaping off place of spirits” (King, 1985, pp. 93–94). She perched, ready to make her descent into this mythical place, when she was drawn back to her body. This Polynesian account is very similar to the Hawaiian account in this respect, and we can only speculate about the consequences for the NDErs in both accounts if they had continued on their journey beyond their “leaping off” places. Would the descent into the pit, suggested in these accounts, provide journeys into darkness? At the end of the

journey into darkness, would a life review take place? In the Hawaiian and Maori accounts, the only two Polynesian accounts available to date, the cessation of these accounts before the descent into the pit leaves these questions tantalizingly unanswered.

Clearly, methodological considerations caution us not to depend too heavily on these accounts. They are reported by foreigners to the culture from which the reports come. The reports themselves are old and may have changed in the retelling over many years. Factors such as the ease and accuracy of translation must always raise considerations of reliability. Nevertheless, they are the only reports we have and they appear consistent not only with each other, but also with those from other areas of the Pacific.

This additional report from Hawaii lends continuing support to my earlier view that NDEs appear to follow social and psychological phenomenology shaped by the religious cosmology of the period and place (Kellehear, 1996). I do not argue that NDE contents are merely a function of such cultural influences; they may not be. The Israeli NDE described by Henry Abramovitch (1988) and the study of expected paretological imagery I reported with Harvey Irwin (Kellehear and Irwin, 1990) show that NDEs are not a simple function of expectations. My argument is only that cultural influences may be crucial in supplying ways of understanding the content of NDEs. To put it another way, culture supplies broad values and attitudes to individuals and these provide individual orientation during an experience. In this way, cultural influences provide a basis for interpreting NDE content, and furthermore are crucial to shaping the retelling of the experience to others from one's own culture. The Hawaiian case continues to illustrate, if only modestly by the addition of one more case, this work-in-progress hypothesis.

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