

Afterlife Beliefs and Dream Encounters with the Dead among Adherents of Alternative Spiritualities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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This article examines the connection between the ideas adherents of alternative spiritualities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have about the afterlife and their understanding of dreams involving the dead. It explores how these ideas and interpretations are connected to the perceived agency of the dead, as experienced by my interlocutors in their dreams. Focusing on ideas about the afterlife within alternative spirituality, the article discusses why these beliefs have regained significance and how they have been reinterpreted in relation to modern/secular and religious explanations. By analysing the beliefs of individuals engaged in alternative spiritualities regarding the afterlife, it explores how these ideas shape their understanding of dreams featuring personally known deceased individuals. As beliefs about the afterlife influence how individuals perceive the state of the dead, it examines how these beliefs enable the dead to have agency upon the interlocutors in their dreams. The findings are based on ethnographic research conducted with spiritual individuals in Sarajevo and Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

KEYWORDS: alternative spirituality, dreams, dead, afterlife, near-death experience, Bosnia and Herzegovina, agency

Članek preučuje povezavo med predstavami o posmrtnem življenju in razumevanjem sanj o bližnjih mrtvih med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti v Bosni in Hercegovini. Raziskuje, kako so te predstave in interpretacije povezane z vplivom, ki ga imajo nanje mrtvi. S poudarkom na predstavah o posmrtnem življenju v alternativni duhovnosti članek obravnava, zakaj so ta verovanja znova pridobila na pomenu in kako so bila reinterpreterirana v razmerju do modernih/sekularnih ter religioznih razlag. Z analizo predstav o posmrtnem življenju pokaže, kako ta prepričanja oblikujejo njihovo razumevanje sanj, v katerih se pojavljajo mrtvi. Ker prepričanja o posmrtnem življenju vplivajo na to, kako posamezniki dojemajo stanje mrtvih v onstranstvu, članek preučuje, kako ta verovanja omogočajo, da imajo mrtvi v sanjah določen vpliv na sogovornike. Ugotovitve temeljijo na etnografski raziskavi, opravljeni med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti v Sarajevu in Banjaluki v Bosni in Hercegovini.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: alternativna duhovnost, sanje, mrtvi, posmrtno življenje, izkušnja bližine smrti, Bosna in Hercegovina

INTRODUCTION

Dreams are cross-culturally understood as enabling communication between the divine and human worlds (Järvinen, 1998; Bourguignon, 2003: 136; Mageo, 2003: 16; Đorđević Belić, 2024). The anthropologist Raymond L. M. Lee notes that the remains of dream chambers found at archaeological sites in many parts of the world reveal the notion that dreams connect the worldly and otherworldly realms (Lee, 2013: 117). As such, dreams can also be understood as a medium for contact between the living and the dead. This is how dreams of the dead are perceived in many different cultural contexts and they are believed to enable the living to obtain information about the needs of their deceased, their condition in the afterlife, and general information about the afterlife (see Stark et al., 1996; Järvinen, 1998; Kiliánová, 2010; Hesz, 2012). How these dreams are narrated, understood and interpreted is significantly influenced by people's ideas and notions about the afterlife. Furthermore, people's ideas of the afterlife, together with their understanding of dreams, influence how they perceive the agency of the dead in dreams and what impact they may have on the living.

Concepts of the afterlife vary across societies, religious groups, as well as among individuals. Lee (2013: 110–111) notes that in modern, post-Christian, Western societies, religious teachings on the afterlife have become marginal and beliefs in the afterlife have fragmented. Similarly, sociologist Tony Walter (1993: 129) observes that in postmodern Western societies, believers often come up with their own answers to metaphysical questions, including what happens after death. The Church is no longer the primary source of information for these sorts of questions.

However fragmented afterlife beliefs have become in postmodernity, Lee (2015: 84) writes that this period has brought renewed interest in the possibility of post-physical existence. He sees the growing amount of literature related to death and dying in recent years as a sign that our relationship towards death has changed (Lee, 2003: 134; see Moody, 1984; Newton, 2003; Newton, 2005; Schwartz, 2016). Among the new answers emerging on this topic, alternative spirituality is especially influential as it has reconfigured ideas about death.

This article will discuss how ideas about the afterlife have been reinterpreted within alternative spirituality, contrasting them with previous modern/secular and religious explanations, and examining why these ideas have re-emerged as a significant topic among spiritual communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It will analyse people's ideas about the afterlife and how these ideas influence, connect to, and intertwine with their interpretations of dreams involving personally known deceased – primarily significant others. As beliefs about the afterlife influence how individuals perceive the dead, I will examine how these beliefs enable the dead to exert agency over my interlocutors in dreams.

In this article I demonstrate that questions about the afterlife are important to my interlocutors, many of whom have quite elaborate ideas on the subject. The interlocutors I write about in this article, as well as most of the individuals involved in alternative spirituality I interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, believe in reincarnation. Their views of the afterlife have mainly been shaped by books and workshops on the topic. Many of them

mentioned accounts of near-death experiences and literature that is globally influential in alternative spiritual circles. Alternative spirituality has been considerably more important than the religion of their upbringing in shaping their views of the afterlife. I noticed that ideas about the afterlife influenced how my interlocutors understood the dreams of the deceased – they mainly interpreted them as real encounters with the souls of the deceased. The experiences of the agency of the dead in dreams were described as having a positive effect on them. I interpret this as resulting from their positive view of the afterlife.

In describing the influence exerted by the dead on the living, I use the concept of agency. Alfred Gell famously defines an agent as one who “causes events to happen in their vicinity” (Gell, 1998: 16). He theorized that things can possess agency – what he calls secondary agency – as human agency is exercised through them (Gell, 1998: 19–21). Bruno Latour expands this definition, viewing agency as “the capacity to have effect and/or to influence the actions and interactions of individuals and events” (Latour, 1993 in Heng, 2022: 402), thereby eliminating the distinction between primary and secondary agency.

Many authors have argued that the dead possess agency (Maddrell, 2013; Heng, 2020; Heng, 2022; for research in Bosnia and Herzegovina see Henig, 2017; Mencej, 2021; Mencej, 2024). Some scholars understand the agency of the dead as residual agency, meaning that it is ascribed to them by the living (see Hockey et al., 2010; Maddrell, 2013). I understand agency in a similar way to Terence Heng, who describes the dead as “agentic and capable of influencing the actions of others” (Heng, 2020: 39; see also Heng, 2022: 402). He focuses on materiality and objects – material proxies of consociation – through which the dead exercise agency over the living (Heng, 2020: 39). However, in my research the dead exercise agency over the living in dreams, so no objects are used as proxies. Moreover, my findings suggest that the agency of the dead in dreams is primarily manifested in the emotional responses of the living rather than in their concrete actions. The responses include feelings of closeness to the deceased, a sense that the relationship is continuing or relief that the dead continue to exist in the afterlife. My understanding of agency is somewhat broader than that of the scholars mentioned above. It is in line with how my interlocutors described it – not necessarily as leading to an individual’s action, but as an emotional transformation or impact resulting from contact with the dead in dreams.

Dreams have long been a subject of research in anthropology and folkloristics (see Lincoln, 1935; Eggan, 1949; Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993; Stark et al., 1996; Stewart, 1997; Hollan, 2004; Kracke, 2006; Kirtsoglou, 2010; Laughlin, Rock, 2014; Mittermaier, 2015). However, there has been limited research on dreams involving the deceased. This issue has mostly been dealt with from the point of view of bereavement in psychology (Barrett, 1992; Garfield, 1996; Hinton et al., 2013; Black et al., 2016), and anthropological analyses have been conducted in various cultural settings (for Karelians in Russia see Stark et al., 1996; Järvinen, 1998; for a village in Slovakia see Kiliánová, 2010; for Hungarians in Romania see Hesz, 2012; for Serbians see Đorđević Belić, 2024). However, little is known about how dreams involving the dead are understood in relation to spiritual individuals’ views of the afterlife (cf. Lee, 2003), despite the increasing influence of such views, especially in the West.

I will analyse the ideas and experiences of three individuals I interviewed during my fieldwork in two cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo and Banja Luka. In the following chapter, I briefly describe the phenomenon of alternative spirituality and its importance in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by a presentation of my interlocutors.

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY AND MY INTERLOCUTORS

In describing the spiritual movement of my interlocutors, I use the term “alternative spirituality” and refer to its adherents as “spiritual people”. I differentiate “spirituality” from “religion” by understanding spirituality as emphasizing subjective, personal experiences and the search for one’s authentic self, while religion is more focused on institutions and organized systems of belief¹ (see Heelas, 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 8; Fuller, 2001: 4; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021: 122; Bužeková, 2024: 1–3). Spirituality can therefore be antagonistic to religion, but not necessarily. An example from Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Sufi tradition (see Kostadinova, 2023), which, while being a spiritual tradition, is also part of the Islamic religion. Although these concepts may be blurred in the field, this article does not include individuals who identify solely with traditional religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (such as Muslim or Christian spirituality).

Thus, my research focuses on alternative spirituality, where “alternative” denotes a distinction from established religions. Many of my interlocutors identified as “spiritual but not religious”, rejecting the established religious institutions (for a discussion of the term “spiritual but not religious”, see Fuller, 2001; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021). However, I recognise the problematic nature of this term, as it is broad and encompasses diverse, heterogeneous alternative spirituality groups and movements, including a wide range of worldviews and ideas (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 10–11). To address this issue, I provide a detailed explanation of each interlocutor’s ideas. Another issue with the term “alternative” lies in its discursive assumptions, as it implies viewing these groups from the perspective of official religions. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman criticize this perspective, arguing that various forms of spirituality should be regarded as equal parts of the contemporary religious landscape.

I acknowledge that spirituality and the individual’s search for meaning are not new phenomena but have existed throughout history in various forms, shaped by different socio-historical contexts (see Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 4–8; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 8).² However, as stated by Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, the relative power of spiritualities in contemporary times lies in their ability to be repackaged to suit industrial

¹ I am also aware that the distinction between spirituality and religion is characteristic of modern Western societies and may not be applicable to all societies (see Wixwat, Saucier, 2021: 122).

² This is why I consider alternative spirituality to be a more appropriate term than synonymic terms such as “new spirituality”, “contemporary spirituality”, “new religious movements” and “new religiosity”. However, I use the term New Age when citing other authors who employ it. I regard it as a narrower term, more closely associated with the post-World War II context.

and post-industrial societies, which are seeing the decline of official forms of religions (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 8). Alternative spirituality, though not new, transitioned from niche practices to a mass movement during the 1960s, particularly in the West, before expanding globally (Heelas, Woodhead, 2005: 48; Heelas, 2008: 40). Folklorist Kaarina Koski (2016: 18) describes the period after the 1970s as marked by a growing interest in the paranormal and the occult, alongside the decline of traditional religions and an increasing fascination with alternative spiritual beliefs.

The growing popularity of alternative spirituality, its increasing number of adherents and its rapid spread around the world have led some scholars to characterize it as a “spiritual revolution” (see e.g. Tacey, 2003). While Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005: 2; 149) have questioned the term and speak instead of “mini revolutions”, it is evident that alternative spirituality is gaining global influence, especially in the West. Less is known about the influence of alternative spiritualities elsewhere. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, traditional religions became more publicly visible as the importance of ethno-religious identities increased after the war (1992–1995) (see Kolind, 2007: 124; Maček, 2009: 162). Alternative spiritualities remain of limited importance, and reliable statistics on the people involved are difficult to obtain.

However, in my field research I came across many spiritual groups that had been founded in the last few years and encountered many people who had recently become involved in alternative spiritualities. Based on my fieldwork experience, we could speculate that in urban contexts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, their relevance is slowly growing, gaining more public visibility and attracting new adherents (for the rise of alternative spiritualities in other post-socialist countries see Črnič, 2001; Potrata, 2004; Radulović, 2014; Kis-Halas, 2019; Panchenko, 2021; Bužeková, 2023: 13; Bužeková, 2024). Furthermore, alternative spiritualities played a significant role in interpreting extraordinary and metaphysical experiences among my interlocutors (cf. Koski, 2016), as well as addressing abstract questions about life after death. They significantly influenced how interlocutors imagined the state of the dead in the afterlife and the possibility of encountering them.

During my six-month fieldwork in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, I conducted 105 semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in alternative spiritualities, employing qualitative content analysis. My criteria for choosing interlocutors were broad; I mainly interviewed people who defined themselves as “spiritual but not religious”, with some exceptions. These included interlocutors who participated in alternative spiritual activities or groups but were also practicing Orthodox Christians or Muslims (cf. Bužeková, 2023). In the interviews, I asked them general questions about their spiritual paths, attitudes towards the afterlife and their experience with the agency of the dead. My interlocutors were often happy to share their experiences of encounters with the dead and commented that this was an important and overlooked question. As noted by Kaarina Koski (2016: 16), such experiences are appreciated in New Age circles. Among the instances where people had experienced the agency of the dead, dreams were the most common medium.

The three interlocutors I focus on in this article are all involved in alternative spiritualities, which have significantly shaped their ideas of the afterlife, their understanding of contact with the dead in dreams, and the effect these experiences have had on them.

I will first provide a brief description of each interlocutor and their spiritual path, followed by an analysis of their understanding of the afterlife. Then I will present their dreams of the dead, their interpretations of these dreams, and how they perceive the agency of the dead in relation to their beliefs about the afterlife.

My interlocutors, whom I will call Mirza, Ajša and Lejla,³ are all spiritual people, practicing different types of spirituality. All three of them are highly educated, holding university degrees. They all told me that religion did not play an important part in their upbringing, instead describing their families as being socialist/communist. They were all born in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was a secular state. Although it was more liberal towards religious communities than the Warsaw Pact countries (Buchenau, 2005), religion was discouraged and removed from public life, schools and institutions.

Mirza, a 43-year-old from Sarajevo, did not have a religious upbringing, as his parents were not religious, though they both grew up in Muslim families. As a child, he was curious about the meaning of life and started reading texts from different religions, but they did not provide the answers he was looking for. When the internet became widely available, a new world opened up for him, allowing access to spiritual literature and videos on life, psychology, well-being and spirituality. Nowadays, he mainly engages in spiritual practices alone, while also attending various workshops and lectures on the topic.

Lejla is 41 years old and was brought up in a non-religious family. She states that death was a taboo topic in her family, despite growing up during the war. In her twenties and thirties, she was an atheist, but later turned to yoga, which improved her physical and psychological well-being. This sparked her interest in the spiritual aspects of yoga. She now actively practices yoga, attends spiritual workshops and maintains her own personal spiritual practice.

Ajša is a 38-year-old spiritual individual from Sarajevo. She comes from a religiously mixed family, like many of my interlocutors in Sarajevo. Her father was a communist, while her mother was more interested in spiritual questions. She grew up during the war and was never interested in traditional religions, which she describes as too dogmatic. She started exploring spiritual questions independently and was especially interested in books about soul travel and reincarnation. Later, she began attending yoga classes and various workshops, a practice she continues to this day.

I chose to analyse the cases of these three individuals because they all experienced the agency of the dead in dreams and possessed well-developed ideas about the afterlife. While I do not believe their experiences and ideas are representative of all my interlocutors, I found some similarities in both their afterlife concepts and their experiences of the agency of the dead in dreams among people involved in alternative spirituality. As I will show, my interlocutors' ideas about the afterlife are significantly influenced by literature on alternative spirituality and are similar to the ideas held by individuals involved in alternative spiritualities worldwide. In the next chapter, I will explore how alternative spirituality has shaped its adherents' views on the afterlife, both on a wider scale and among my interlocutors.

³ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of my interlocutors. For the same reason, some of their personal information has also been changed.

SHIFTING VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE

Psychologist Jesse Michael Bering and cognitive scientist Mitch K. Hodge write that belief in an afterlife is predisposed by human cognitive abilities and is not culturally acquired (Bering, 2002: 269–271; Hodge, 2011). Hodge states that anthropological and psychological evidence suggests that while people understand that the body of the deceased will not function any longer, they do not fully comprehend this as the annihilation of every aspect of that person. This is why we often perceive death as an absence rather than an obliteration, reflected in the language we use – we say the dead have gone to another place and refer to them as “departed” or “gone” (Hodge, 2011).

However, people’s ideas about the afterlife are strongly influenced by their cultural and religious settings and the messages they receive in them. Tony Walter (1993: 127–141) sees the New Age movement as a response to the secularization and medicalization of death, which portrays death as an abnormal event and a failure. In contrast, the New Age rehabilitates death as a natural event.⁴ More importantly for my argument, the afterlife regained importance in alternative spirituality movements, where the widespread belief in reincarnation placed the future of the soul at the centre of attention (Walter, 1993: 141). Although my interlocutors were born into more or less religious Muslim, mixed or atheist families, they all expressed a belief in reincarnation. They frequently described these explanations as logical and intuitively true. Ajša shared her views on the matter:

To me personally you know, it [reincarnation] made sense from the beginning. /.../ Of course, I didn’t fully understand it when I was young, but the idea always made sense to me. Because in a universe where everything changes, it didn’t make sense to me how something could just stop. /.../ And so for me, reincarnation was perfectly logical. (Ajša, 1986)

Tony Walter (1993: 132–141; see also Lee, 2015: 86) notes that belief in reincarnation is one of the unifying aspects of the otherwise heterogeneous New Age groups and movements. Another common feature of reincarnation beliefs is the notion of an inner essence – a soul – which is eternal and continues to exist after the death of the body.⁵ A new factor identified by different authors in reincarnation beliefs is the idea that an individual’s soul continues to grow not only in the afterlife but also throughout future lives (Walter, 1993: 131; Lee, 2013: 114–121; Kinsella, 2017: 187). This is characteristic of alternative spiritualities, which promote the quest for personal growth and the search for

⁴ However, Tony Walter (2020: 26) later writes that in the West, death was not considered to be natural until the scientific revolution. Instead, it was attributed to God, witchcraft, or supernatural powers, much like in many traditional societies. Walter (2020: 256) thus points out that the idea of death being natural is not traditional, but rather one that emerged in modern Western societies.

⁵ The idea of the soul separating from the body contrasts with later Hebrew beliefs and the New Testament view, where a person is seen as a unified being of body and soul, resurrected as a whole. It is closer to the neo-Platonic version of Christian theology, in which the soul is immortal and continues to exist after death, though it differs in its understanding of the connection between the soul and body during life (Walter, 1993: 135).

authenticity and well-being (Heelas, 1996). In alternative spiritualities, death is not viewed as something frightening but as a spiritual transition – a gateway to knowing ourselves, as a person is freed from the material plane, i.e. the body (Lee, 2013: 114–121). Lejla told me about the explanation of death and dying she received at a spiritual workshop she attended:

That was the first time we dealt with the question of death, concluding that death is a transition from one state to another /.../. In fact, dying offers the greatest spiritual potential. /.../ If we are properly aware while dying, we can make great spiritual progress. And then we learned how it is possible to achieve this. Actually, the most important thing is awareness, to be conscious as we die. And not to feel fear! /.../ Then the whole story about what awaits us afterwards unfolds. (Lejla, 1983)

Tony Walter (1993: 141) observes that in New Age spirituality, the afterlife is not a source of anxiety but rather the opposite – it is viewed with naive optimism. Many of my interlocutors echoed this sentiment, frequently repeating the phrase, “I am not afraid of dying,” and expressing hopeful views about the soul’s journey after death. Mirza, for example, told me he envisions the afterlife as a place full of love:

When we die, I believe there is only pure love, and that we return – I mean, we lean more towards these vibrations I would say, where everything is love, all is one. (Mirza, 1981)

Love, light and unity were recurring topics in the afterlife descriptions shared by my interlocutors. The “pure love” that Mirza mentions in his understanding of the afterlife is similar to the accounts of people who have had near-death experiences and describe the universal love and understanding they felt in the process (see Moody, 1984; cf. Lee, 2003: 137). Tony Walter argues that New Age beliefs about the soul and its continuing existence after death are drawn from various religious traditions, as well as from descriptions of near-death experiences. He says the latter are particularly important, as they present proof that the soul lives on after death (Walter, 1993: 135; see also Lee, 2013: 110; Kinsella, 2017: 171). Indeed, Mirza told me his view of the afterlife was formed by these accounts:

Ultimately, I figured out that, essentially, everything is just love when we die. And I was watching just recently, there are loads of near-death experiences on YouTube – and look, I mean, people from all over the world, from different religions – atheists too, everyone who’s had one says the same thing, it’s unbelievable, really. /.../ And I think that’s what’s fascinating, you know. (Mirza, 1981)

Like Mirza, many of my interlocutors stated that literature and videos about near-death experiences had a significant impact on their understanding of the afterlife. Ajša explained

the effect that accounts of near-death experiences had on her belief in the afterlife and also highlighted their credibility due to the similarities between these narratives:

And then there were also a lot of people who had /.../ near-death experiences. And all those experiences are really interesting to me – now you can even find a lot of them online – but all of them, in their own way, say very similar things, essentially similar. (Ajša, 1986)

Near-death experiences were popularized by Raymond Moody (1984) in his bestseller *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon – Survival of Bodily Death*. The book contains fifty accounts of near-death experiences and identifies common themes. Michael Shannon Kinsella (2017: 173) notes that his writings on the matter were very influential not only for the definition of near-death experiences, but also for their impact on mainstream ideas about what happens after death. Even though Moody conducted his research in the USA, I found that his book and ideas also exerted a powerful influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶

While Moody is certainly influential, other authors also shaped my interlocutors' ideas about the afterlife.⁷ Lejla told me she found her answers in a book by Robert Schwartz (2016) entitled *Your Soul's Plan*. She discovered the book after the death of a friend, while searching for answers about the location of his soul. The central idea of the book is that the soul, guided by its spiritual guides and other souls, chooses the experiences (and challenges) it will face during its lifetime. These are selected before incarnation to provide the lessons necessary for the soul's spiritual growth (Schwartz, 2016: 26). Lejla told me about her perspective on the matter:

And then I read that book [Your Soul's Plan] and /.../ I realized how each of us – it was, you know, an epiphany moment because I realized how often we judge other people and the ways they live. And how all these people, no matter what their circumstances – whether they are serious alcoholics, gay, people who have become paralyzed, or lost their sight, or lost their whole family in the most brutal way – how all of us come here with some kind of lesson. /.../ A lesson that we need to learn, and that the circumstances we find ourselves in are the best for us to learn the lesson we came for. Along the way – I know a lot of people, and then you start meeting a lot of people who think similarly to you and you come to the conclusion that our whole life is all about remembering. That when we were born we actually forgot everything and now we're trying to remember. Thanks to this realisation I actually have no fear of death. (Lejla, 1983)

⁶ His book has also been translated into Croatian and Serbian – languages my interlocutors can read.

⁷ My interlocutors also mentioned that their views of the afterlife had been shaped by movies such as *Astral City: A Spiritual Journey* (directed by Wagner de Assis, 2010), *After Life* (directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1998), *Enter the Void* (directed by Gaspar Noé, 2009) and the Netflix series *Surviving Death* (directed by Ricki Stern, 2021).

Another book that was frequently mentioned by my interlocutors was Michael Newton's (2005) *Journey of Souls: Case Studies of Life Between Lives*. This book explores themes and ideas similar to those found in the works of Schwartz and Moody. Central to all these texts is the portrayal of the afterlife as a spiritual place and true home of the soul, characterized by optimism and described as a place full of empathy, morality, kindness, tolerance, patience and unconditional love (Moody, 1984; Newton, 2001: 26; Schwartz, 2016). Both Newton and Schwartz describe a pre-incarnation agreement concerning the experiences that the soul will undergo in life that is supposedly made in collaboration with the soul. Its goal is the soul's spiritual advancement. They also both claim individuals undergo amnesia before birth, forgetting all about these agreements and the spiritual afterlife (Newton, 2001: 27–29; Schwartz, 2016: 20–26). These ideas are also described by Lejla in the quotation above.

While all the previously mentioned books were written in the last half-century, another significant book frequently mentioned by my interlocutors is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* [*Bardo Thödol*].⁸ It is part of the *bardo*⁹ teachings that have their source in Tibetan Buddhism, and which have had a profound influence in the West and elsewhere.¹⁰ The book provides the reader with teachings about the soul's journeys and continued existence after death, the process of dying and the possibilities for achieving liberation – freeing the soul from the cycle of reincarnation (Lee, 2003: 141–142).

While my interlocutors rarely mentioned the book as a direct influence due to its complexity, two of them attended a workshop or lecture in which the book and the ideas behind it were explained. Ajša's understanding of the afterlife was shaped by one such lecture:

And there was this man, it was a few years ago, not that long ago – he gave a wonderful lecture, a weekend seminar on the Bardo Thödol [Tibetan Book of the Dead], maybe you've heard of it. /.../ And he somehow explained the Bardo Thödol. There were also meditations, and he gave, in my opinion, one of the most complete explanations of life after death. (Ajša, 1986)

The lecturer helped them interpret the book and explained what happens after death while also telling them about meditation and other techniques that can help guide the soul at the time of death. He also taught them various methods to help them reach the soul while in *bardo* (an intermediate phase) and explained the structure of this realm. One of the methods described is lucid dreaming, which I will address in the next chapter, along with other experiences of encountering the dead in dreams and their agency as described by my interlocutors.

⁸ Raymond Moody interestingly cites this book, noting that it contains accounts of the soul leaving the body similar to those he found among his 20th century American interviewees (Moody, 1984: 89–90).

⁹ *Bardos* are intermediate/transitional states between birth, death and rebirth in Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism. The period between death and rebirth consists of three *bardos* (Stefon, 2015; see Lee, 2003: 141–142).

¹⁰ This book has also been translated into many languages, including Croatian and Serbian, both of which my interlocutors can read.

THE AFTERLIFE AND DREAMS OF THE DEAD

Anthropologist Amira Mittermaier (2011: 10) points out that in the West, the states of dreaming and wakefulness have long been ontologically, epistemologically and ethically separated. However, there are many cultures in which dreams are not seen merely as internal psychological processes but as gateways to other realities that are distinct from the reality of our everyday existence. Charles D. Laughlin and Adam J. Rock note that in most cultures dreams are taken seriously as they serve various purposes: confirming an individual's role in society, facilitating spiritual journeys, enabling contact with spirits, providing information and helping solve problems (Laughlin, Rock, 2014: 233–241; see also Kempf, Elfriede, 2003; Mittermaier, 2011: 6; Mittermaier, 2012: 248; Green, 2015: 153; Mittermaier, 2015). Dreams are often regarded as a means of accessing the realm of the dead, as in many cultures, sleep and death are seen as ontologically connected (Mabrouk, 1987: 11; Astuti, 2007: 321; Rivière, 2009: 109). Authors who investigated dreams of the dead found that the appearance of the deceased in dreams can have different meanings across cultures and historical periods (see Bitel, 1991: 39–42; Stark et al., 1996; Hollan, 2004: 174; Astuti, 2007; Rivière, 2009: 109; Kiliánová, 2010: 7; Arukask, Raudalainen, 2012: 124; Green, 2015: 160; Mittermaier, 2015: 134). Many of them discovered that dreams of the dead are culturally important and taken seriously.

When discussing dreams of the dead, my interlocutors often distinguished between “spiritual dreams”, which meant actual contact with the souls of the deceased in another realm, and dreams perceived as products of their subconscious mind (cf. Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993: 223–224). They mostly described relying on intuition to discern whether something was just a dream or genuine contact with the soul of the deceased, often mentioning a sense of the presence and closeness of the departed. In the following section, I will examine dreams my interlocutors perceived as genuine encounters with the dead. Each subchapter will present and analyse the dreams of one interlocutor. I will also discuss how their beliefs about the afterlife influenced the possibility of such encounters and the perceived agency of the dead within these dreams.

MIRZA'S ASTRAL TRAVEL IN DREAMS AND POSITIVE PERCEPTION OF THE AFTERLIFE

Like most of my interlocutors, Mirza dreamt of his loved ones shortly after they passed away. This always happened to him two days after they died, and he perceived the dreams as real contact with the deceased, describing the dreams as vivid and beautiful:

They came and you know, gave me a big, big hug. You know, they were laughing and it was just so, so nice, you know. (Mirza, 1981)

The encounter in his dreams was initiated by the dead, in this case by his uncle and aunt who came to say goodbye. His experience of the dead as happy, fulfilled and full of

love for him is consistent with his view of the afterlife. He said that in his imagination the afterlife is *pure love*, he imagines it is *full of light* and that *all is one*. Mirza's description of his encounter with the dead assumes the soul's existence after the death of the body, a belief that Tony Walter and Raymond L. M. Lee identify as characteristic of New Age spirituality (Walter, 1993: 132–141; Lee, 2015: 86). Furthermore, he described the dead as always being connected with the living, although he emphasized that we should *let them go*:

Well, my perspective was /.../ that we should let them go, that they're in a good place and moving on, and that we need to continue with our lives – like, that's what comes to me /.../ you know, like, intuitively, as some kind of answer. And that we're always connected, that we love each other, you know, like that. (Mirza, 1981)

Mirza's view was influenced by spiritual literature, particularly the works of Raymond Moody and Michael Newton, who describe the afterlife in similarly positive terms. Moody's accounts of near-death experiences emphasize the universal love and understanding felt by people who have this experience (Moody, 1984), while Newton describes the afterlife as characterized by optimism, empathy, morality, kindness, tolerance, patience and unconditional love (Newton, 2001: 26). As Tony Walter (1993: 141) observes, in New Age spirituality the afterlife is not a source of anxiety but rather the opposite – a concept viewed with naive optimism. This is also the sentiment that resonates in Mirza's account.

According to Mirza, the dead came to him specifically because they felt he had superior perception due to the work he had done on his spiritual abilities. However, he also said he travelled into the realm of the dead, providing more detailed explanations of dreams he called astral journeys.¹¹ During these experiences, he felt he had left his body and travelled to another dimension, where he could connect with the dead. He described a particular astral journey in which he met his ancestors who sat in a circle and prayed for him:

I had one particular experience when I was leaving my body, like my astral body was coming out of the physical one – I was spinning in circles and ascending.¹² It felt amazing you know, it was beautiful for me, you know. And then I saw quite a few, quite a few people sitting and just praying for me. /.../ I couldn't see their faces but I could feel they were there and they were just praying – repeating some... prayers, mantras, I don't even know what they were. And then somehow I felt like they were my ancestors. (Mirza, 1981)

¹¹ In occultism the astral plane is defined as “the realm of concrete consciousness, the level of reality that corresponds to the human experiences of dream, vision, out-of-the-body experience, and ordinary consciousness” (Greer, 2003). Astral projection, which is supposedly achieved through various techniques (lucid dreaming among others), is the process of separating the astral from the physical and etheric body (Greer, 2003; see Leadbitter, 1895). Crow writes that during astral travel “the individual imaginatively leaves her or his physical body and travels to places in this world or another dimension” (Crow, 2012: 159).

¹² For a similarly description by people recounting the experience of being carried away by witches, and its comparison with altered states of consciousness, see Mencej, 2018.

Astral travel in dreams was also described by my interlocutor Ajša who referred to her lucid dreams¹³ as astral journeys – an experience I will describe below. In Mirza’s account, another aspect of contact with the dead emerges, connected to his idea of the afterlife – the belief that the deceased take care of the living – praying, supporting and being there for them. I asked him if these experiences had any effect on him and he replied:

Yes, yes they did, like really – I was just like, overjoyed somehow. (Mirza, 1981)

I perceive the change in Mirza’s emotional state after encountering the deceased in dreams as agency of the dead. Especially in his first account, where the deceased came to him, he perceived the encounter as initiated by them. The positive effect of those dreams aligns with his view – shared by many in alternative spirituality – that the afterlife is a *good place*, and that souls move on and continue to grow spiritually in the afterlife. When I asked him how he made sense of such encounters, he said:

By then, I had read a lot of books about life after death and studied spirituality, spiritual science, and metaphysics and all sorts of things, so it all felt completely normal to me. (Mirza, 1981)

Another effect of Mirza’s view of the afterlife was that it helped him normalize his experiences. The encounters were all positive for him, as was his view of the afterlife. While he perceived the realms of the living and the dead as separate, he believed they could be bridged in dreams – either by the dead, who came to say goodbye, or by himself, through astral travel to their realm.

LEJLA’S DREAMS: INSIGHTS INTO THE AFTERLIFE AND THE STATE OF THE DEAD

Lejla told me about a couple of dreams in which the dead revealed their state in the afterlife. Both dreams left a positive impact on her, as the dead consistently conveyed that they were doing well in the afterlife. In the first instance, the soul of a friend who had died by suicide appeared in order to share his state. Although Lejla perceived her friend’s condition in the afterlife as unpleasant, she interpreted the overall message of these dreams as reassurance that she could be optimistic about the future of his soul. She describes her dreams and the agency of the dead in them:

And I dreamt of him in a dark space in Belgrade, some horribly gloomy park, dark, the three of us [including her boyfriend] – the weight is enormous,

¹³ The American Psychological Association defines lucid dreaming as “a dream in which the sleeper is aware that they are dreaming and may be able to influence the progress of the dream narrative” (American Psychological Association, 2023).

the humidity, the darkness. There's a sense of loneliness. But I woke up from the dream and even said it out loud to remind myself, you know, to tell myself that he's okay now, that he's helping other souls. /.../ I was glad that he came to me in the dream. I was happy when I realized /.../ that he would be okay and that he would help other souls [in the afterlife]. (Lejla, 1983)

Many authors researching dreams of the dead have noted that one reason the deceased appear in dreams is to reveal aspects of the afterlife (see Järvinen, 1998; Kiliánová, 2010: 15; Đorđević Belić, 2024: 9–17). Folklorist Smiljana Đorđević Belić (2024: 17) argues that such dreams not only reflect a community's perceptions of the afterlife but also reinforce and shape its image. Interpretations of dreams about the dead are therefore connected to pre-existing beliefs about the afterlife, yet these dreams can also shape and influence those very beliefs¹⁴ (see also Barrett, 1992: 104; Stark et al., 1996: 260; Jung, 2011: 301–311; Black et al., 2016: 111). Although Lejla was worried about her friend's well-being in the afterlife, he *came to her* in dreams and showed her his state, which she interpreted as a sign that *he will be okay*. I see his coming into her dreams and the way it changed her emotional state as agency of the dead, which is also how she saw it.

Similarly, Lejla had a dream about her brother-in-law's father, who also conveyed to her how he was doing in the afterlife.

There was another death – my brother-in-law's father passed away. /.../ On the day of his funeral. And he had cancer, a severe case. I dreamt of him in some endless, beautiful natural space with mountains and a river. And incredibly clean air, even though he used to smoke, you know. It [the cancer] even spread to his lungs, and I dreamt of him in such purity. And how he just looked at me and waved, as if to say: "I'm okay! I'm fine." (Lejla, 1983)

Lejla explained that this experience reassured her, helping her understand that the dead are in a good place and that everything will be fine, both for them and for the living:

I don't really know – all these dreams I've had, I dreamt as if afterwards I see that they're okay and that they will be okay. (Lejla, 1983)

Like Mirza, Lejla saw the afterlife and the state of the souls within it in an optimistic light – a perspective reinforced by her dreams of the dead. Notably, her accounts emphasise her concern for the state of the dead in the afterlife, focusing on them rather than on the bereaved. Tony Walter describes how New Age followers have shifted their focus when it comes to death. In the modern secular view, the emphasis is mainly on the bereaved rather than on the deceased. However, New Age beliefs have reversed this, placing more attention on the experiences and journey of the dead. He attributes this shift

¹⁴ Interlocutors' beliefs about the afterlife were sometimes influenced by their dreams of the dead. However, a discussion of this topic falls beyond the scope of this article.

to the influence of reincarnation beliefs and the idea that an individual's soul continues to evolve in the afterlife (Walter, 1993: 131–142; cf. Kwilecki, 2009: 124). For Lejla, the reassurance she received in her dreams about the fate of the souls not only eased her concerns for them but also brought her comfort regarding her own afterlife.

THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD AND AJŠA'S LUCID DREAMING

My third interlocutor, Ajša, explained how she envisions communication with the dead in dreams, linking it to her understanding of the afterlife as influenced by the Tibetan Book of the Dead. She explained that such contact is possible before the soul of the deceased is reincarnated:

And then there's this space where the soul resides before it is reborn /.../. And while they're in that space you can contact them. That's /.../ the space where the soul processes the experiences of this life, and then after working through them in its own way, it decides on a new life and is reborn. (Ajša, 1986)

She explained that she frequently connected with her grandfather while he was in that space. Initially, he reached out to her in dreams but after attending a workshop on interpreting the Tibetan Book of the Dead, she learnt various techniques that enabled her to initiate contact herself – including lucid dreaming.

Raymond L. M. Lee (2013: 111–120) writes that lucid dreaming and near-death experiences are thought to enable access to postmortem experiences. The idea is that through lucid dreaming we can both explore our inner self while also travelling to the afterlife and gaining information about it. In *bardo* teachings, sleep is viewed as a gateway to understanding the process of death, which is seen as a transformation from embodied to disembodied consciousness, with consciousness itself continuing. He explains that as *bardo* teachings and Tibetan meditation practices have spread, this understanding has become more widely accessible and popularised (Lee, 2003: 142–144).

In a similar manner, Ajša explains how the places of dreams and the afterlife are connected:

And then – and then she also explained that these souls often appear in dreams because that's a space where you can communicate. It could be the influence of the subconscious, but it could also be an entry into that space, as they call it. Are you familiar with the term Akashic field?¹⁵ /.../

¹⁵ The Akashic field (*Ākāśha*) is a concept first defined by theosophists. According to Charles Webster Leadbitter (Leadbitter, 1895: 19), it is a higher medium located on the astral plane, which contains permanently impressed records of all past, present and future events. The Akashic records are defined as “in occultism, a compendium of pictorial records, or ‘memories’, of all events, actions, thoughts, and feelings that have occurred since the beginning of time” (*Britannica*, 1998).

It's a field where you can connect beyond time and space with all the information that exists from the past and even the future. /.../ Now, I'm not sure exactly – the field where souls reside, I don't know – but they are connected. (Ajša, 1986)

Ajša explained that she had learned that the *bardo* consists of different spheres, to which the dead are assigned based on how they lived their lives. She noted that some of the spheres are more accessible to the living than others. Ajša was able to reach her grandfather's soul because he had lived a good life, placing him in a space that was easier to access.

First, when you understand that space, then the soul's journey – you can see where the person is. Because they have, like – there's this... it's like a circle /.../ and I think there are six realms where the soul goes depending on the life it lived. /.../. And then, if they are – now, it's not literal like the hellish worlds from religions, but there are these so-called hellish worlds. /.../ But, for example, my grandfather – as I told you – he was so refined, and then it was easier to get in touch with him – at least that's how I understand it. (Ajša, 1986)

Ajša experienced contact with her grandfather in dreams for several years, but this eventually stopped, as he was reincarnated. She described the impact that her grandfather had on her through these encounters:

You know, it's not something – my experiences aren't literal, like you receive some advice – not in that sense. But... the change it brings you, how to say, that beautiful moment with the person – with the soul of someone you love – surely has an impact on your life. Just like when you meet a friend who's still alive, you know. And let's say you have a beautiful encounter and that day is changed. I think it changes in that way. And especially, I think those beautiful experiences are significant in life, no matter on which level they happen. (Ajša, 1986)

She described the subjective experience of contact with the dead in dreams, which was shaped by the belief she had in the afterlife, as influenced by the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Ajša viewed the interactions with her deceased grandfather as meaningful and transformative because she experienced them as real while his soul lingered in the intermediate space of the *bardo*, where contact is possible. For her, the impact of contact and spending time with a dear person is significant *no matter on what level they happen*.

Ajša's understanding was shaped by different factors, including a workshop on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. In this context, the realms of the living and the dead are less distinct, and dreaming and death are seen as interconnected. As a result, she experienced contact with the dead through lucid dreaming. Her beliefs about the afterlife also enabled her grandfather's agency, as she regarded her dreams as genuine moments spent with him.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored how my interlocutors' ideas of the afterlife shape their interpretation and understanding of dreams of the dead and the agency of the deceased in dreams. I focused on three interlocutors who experienced such agency. They all regarded these dreams as ontologically real contact with the souls of the deceased. This perspective was rooted in the belief that the soul continues to exist and journey after the death of the body. According to them, contact with the soul is possible in certain instances, such as in dreams.

I demonstrate that questions about the afterlife are important to my interlocutors, many of whom had well-developed ideas on the subject. In line with the idea of the afterlife in alternative spiritualities, my interlocutors believed in reincarnation (cf. Walter, 1993: 132–141; Lee, 2015: 86). Alternative spirituality generally played a much more significant role in shaping their views than the secular ideas or religious traditions of their upbringing and surroundings. Initially, some of my interlocutors sought answers within these religions but were unable to find what they were looking for. This led them to explore alternative spirituality, where they were able to find more convincing explanations.

Their view of the afterlife was, therefore, rather optimistic. This positive view of the afterlife is generally promoted by influential alternative spiritual literature, accounts of near-death experiences and teachings from the spiritual workshops my interlocutors attended. Their understanding was shaped by both contemporary writings and translations or adaptations of ancient Buddhist texts, particularly the Tibetan Book of the Dead. As Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2010: 7) observe, in alternative spiritualities the process of personal growth does not end with death but continues into the afterlife. In this way, my interlocutors did not see death as the end, but rather as a new level of self-exploration.

Raymond L. M. Lee (2015: 92) describes a shift in New Age spirituality where the afterlife is seen as a continuous journey rather than a final placement in a specific realm such as heaven or hell. In this view, death is not an endpoint but a transitional stage in an ongoing process of spiritual development. Similarly, religious scholar Susan Kwirecki (2009: 124) analyses after-death experiences in the United States and concludes that for those who have such experiences, death does not signify the end of spiritual growth but rather a new opportunity for it. She notes that this perception reflects contemporary American culture, similarly to how ghost encounters in medieval times reflected Roman Catholic beliefs (see Finucane, 1996).

Ideas about the afterlife shaped how my interlocutors understood dreams of the dead, which they primarily perceived as ontologically real encounters with the souls of the deceased. These souls were generally thought to exist elsewhere but remained accessible to the living provided one possessed the appropriate methods and knowledge to make contact with them. Alternatively, they experienced the dead reaching out to the living, though they emphasized that such encounters required a certain level of spiritual development, attentiveness or openness. All three of my interlocutors experienced contact with the souls of loved ones or individuals who were at least known to them.

Since these dream encounters were perceived as genuine interactions with the souls of the dead, my interlocutors experienced the agency of the deceased. This agency was described as having a positive influence, which was consistent with their optimistic view of the afterlife. Rather than prompting specific actions, the agency of the dead primarily manifested as emotional transformation. My interlocutors described their encounters as pleasant, reinforcing their belief that the souls of the deceased continue to exist elsewhere, do well in the afterlife, and maintain a supportive relationship with the living. This perspective aligns with their understanding of the afterlife as a positive place, full of meaning and love.

In the experiences of my interlocutors, who were either visited by the dead or travelled to meet them in dreams, the dissolution of boundaries between life and death is striking. Raymond L. M. Lee (2015: 92) attributes this shift to postmodernism, where previously defined distinctions are increasingly questioned and redefined. In this context, death – largely neglected in modernity¹⁶ – is attracting renewed interest and becoming a subject of exploration (Lee, 2003: 144). The ongoing processes of reenchancement (Lee, 2003: 144) and the relocation of the sacred into the subjective world of the individual (Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 25) raise questions about the changing ideas of the afterlife, the possibilities of contacting the deceased, and the practices used for connecting with the dead. How these developments will shape broader perspectives on the afterlife, death and dying will remain an interesting question for future research worldwide.

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¹⁶ Tony Walter opposes the idea of “death denial” in modernity, arguing instead that the growing division of labour across all aspects of our lives has led to reduced contact with dying. He thus sees the institutionalisation of dying as a consequence of modernity, rather than “death denial” (Walter, 2020: 30–31).

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PREDSTAVE O POSMRTNEM ŽIVLJENJU IN STIKI Z MRTVIMI V
SANJAH MED PRIPADNIKI ALTERNATIVNIH DUHOVNOSTI V BOSNI
IN HERCEGOVINI

Članek obravnava ideje o posmrtnem življenju in interpretacije sanj o mrtvih med duhovnimi posamezniki v Bosni in Hercegovini. Temelji na šestmesečnem terenskem delu v Sarajevu in Banjaluki. Ugotavlja, da alternativna duhovnost nudi razlagalne okvirje za različna metafizična vprašanja, med njimi tudi za vprašanje življenja po smrti. Ker je ideja o reinkarnaciji in duhovni rasti po smrti vse bolj razširjena, zlasti na Zahodu zanimanje za življenje po smrti že dlje časa narašča. Alternativna duhovnost postaja vse bolj prisotna tudi v Bosni in Hercegovini, kjer je po vojni sicer prevladoval vpliv tradicionalnih religij. Članek se osredinja na tri duhovne posameznike iz Bosne in Hercegovine, predstavi njihovo duhovno pot in podrobneje analizira njihove predstave o posmrtnem življenju ter literaturo in druge vplive, ki so te predstave sooblikovali. Ugotavlja, da sogovorniki verjamejo v reinkarnacijo, si posmrtno življenje predstavljajo optimistično, prav tako pa menijo, da je stik z dušami, ki obstajajo tudi po telesni smrti, mogoč. Nadalje članek obravnava takšne stike, ki so jih sogovorniki izkusili prek sanj. Sanj si torej ne razlagajo kot odraz podzvesti, temveč kot ontološko resnične izkušnje stika z mrtvimi. Članek podrobneje analizira sogovorničino izkušnjo astralnega potovanja v sanjah, sanje, v katerih mrtvi prenašajo informacije o svojem stanju v posmrtnem življenju, in lucidno sanjanje, ki sogovornici omogoča stik s preminulim bližnjim. Ugotavlja, da predstave o posmrtnem življenju ustvarjajo možnost, da mrtvi na različne načine vplivajo na žive, kar so izkusili obravnavani sogovorniki. Članek potrjuje tezo o sicer širše prisotni tendenci brisanja meja, ki je značilna za postmoderno družbo. Pokaže namreč, da so v alternativni duhovnosti svetovi mrtvih in živih vse manj dojemani kot ločeni, zaradi česar so mrtvi in posmrtno vedno pogostejše predmet zanimanja in raziskovanja.

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