

“Growth” vs. “Stuckness”: Morality, the Afterlife and the Influence of the Deceased on the Living

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This article explores conceptions of the afterlife and experiences of the dead among adherents of alternative spirituality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on ethnographic research in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the study demonstrates how moral frameworks shape the topography of the afterlife. On the one hand, a predominant belief in reincarnation stimulates positive, comforting encounters with deceased individuals who lived and died in accordance with moral values. On the other hand, the study examines how souls considered “stuck” – due to immoral lives or “bad deaths” – can exert an unpleasant influence on the living. Reciprocity, a central concept in understanding relations between the living and the dead, is thus reconfigured in comparison with traditional expressions. In this alternative spiritual milieu, only the deceased who are perceived as “stuck” require assistance from the living, while the deceased more broadly are understood as those who care for and support the living.

KEYWORDS: alternative spirituality, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the deceased, afterlife, reincarnation, stuck souls, morality

Članek obravnava predstave o posmrtnem življenju in izkušnje z mrtvimi med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti v Bosni in Hercegovini. Temelji na etnografski raziskavi v Sarajevu in Banji Luki ter analizira, kako moralni okviri oblikujejo topografijo posmrtnega življenja. Po eni strani prevladujoče verovanje v duhovni napredek in rast v posmrtnem življenju vpliva na pozitivna srečanja s pokojniki, ki so živeli v skladu z moralnimi načeli. Po drugi strani pa članek prikaže, kako duše, ki zaradi nemoralnega življenja ali »slabe smrti« veljajo za »zataknjene«, največkrat negativno vplivajo na žive. Recipročnost, osrednji koncept pri razumevanju odnosov med živimi in mrtvimi, je v primerjavi s prevladujočimi tradicionalnimi razumevanji preoblikovana. Med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti pomoč živih potrebujejo le tisti pokojniki, ki so zaznani kot »zataknjeni«, medtem ko so mrtvi širše razumljeni kot skrbniki in podporniki živih.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: alternativne duhovnosti, Bosna in Hercegovina, mrtvi, posmrtno življenje, reinkarnacija, zataknjene duše, moralnost

INTRODUCTION

Alternative spirituality is a phenomenon that has been gaining prominence worldwide for several decades (Heelas, 1996; Hanegraaff, 1996; Hammer, 2003; Heelas, Woodhead, 2005; Heelas, 2009; Palmisano, Pannofino, 2021; Mossière, 2023; Dyndová, 2024). While many researchers have discussed the emergence and characteristics of alternative

spirituality in the West (see Fuller, 2001; Tacey, 2004; Bowman, 2014) and in some post-socialist countries (see Črnič, 2001; Potrata, 2004; Kis-Halas, 2019; Putnik, 2019; Radulović, 2019; Panchenko, 2021; Bužeková, 2025: 131), little attention has been paid to these phenomena within Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Hammer, Swartz, 2020). This country's religious landscape has been shaped by both its socialist past within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (see Radić, 2002) and by the subsequent reassertion of religious identities linked to the three main ethnicities following the 1992–1995 war¹ (see Kolind, 2007; Maček, 2009). Even though alternative spirituality is still of limited importance there and no demographic data on the matter exists, the growing number of yoga studios, meditation courses and spiritual workshops indicates that alternative spirituality is also on the rise in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The above-mentioned transformation is bringing about changes in individuals' ideas and practices, including the conceptions and customs related to dying, the dead and the afterlife. Notably, it is reconfiguring the notion of reciprocity between the living and the dead, which many scholars regard as a key concept for interpreting their relationship (see Walter, 2019; Hesz, 2025; Mencej, 2025; Pócs, 2025). Traditionally it has been assumed that, after death, the living bear the responsibility of caring for the deceased (see Klass, 2014; Djurić, 2024). In the context examined in this article, however, this obligation applies only to the deceased who are considered "stuck". More commonly, it is the deceased who take care of the living.

Instead of adopting atheist or religious explanations regarding dying, the deceased and life after death, spiritual people are embracing alternative spiritual interpretations. These are often eclectic (see Partridge, 2005: 55; Radulović, 2019; Bužeková, 2024) and vernacular (Primiano, 1995) as individuals are adopting interpretations from diverse traditions to create their own understandings. However varied these explanations may be, this article focuses on identifying similarities in ideas and experiences among my interlocutors. The section dedicated to ideas addresses the first research question: (1.) What are the notions of the afterlife among alternative spiritual adherents in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Furthermore, drawing on the theory of continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), which normalised the social relationships individuals maintain with their significant deceased, I examine the agency attributed to the deceased on the living and how this agency is connected to my interlocutors' understandings of the afterlife. This leads to the second research question: (2.) How are individuals' experiences of the agency of the deceased related to their conceptions of the afterlife?

I will answer these questions on the basis of ethnographic data gathered during six months of research in the two largest cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo and Banja Luka. In this time, I conducted 105 semi-structured interviews² with individuals

¹ After the war, in the course of the ethnicisation of religious differences, Serbs came to be broadly identified as Orthodox Christians, Bosniaks as Muslims, and Croats as Catholics.

² The majority of my interlocutors were women (seventy-four), although I made an effort to include men as well (twenty-four). Other researchers also noted that women tend to be more actively engaged in alternative spiritual milieus (see Heelas, Woodhead, 2005: 97–106; Bužeková, 2014). The ages of my interlocutors ranged from twenty-six to seventy-eight, with most falling between thirty and fifty years of age.

engaged in various forms of alternative spirituality and undertook participant observation in spiritual workshops. My interlocutors followed diverse spiritual paths. Some were affiliated with relatively informal groups, while others were connected with more organised movements, such as a neo-shamanic circle, the Brahma Kumaris, the Spiritual Science Research Foundation, the Bruno Gröning Circle, or communities linked to spiritual teachers such as Sai Baba³ and Mohanji.⁴ Others practiced various spiritual techniques such as reiki or theta healing, and I met some at workshops on family constellations. That said, most of my interlocutors engaged in spirituality independently: they attended different workshops and events organised by diverse groups and movements, read spiritual literature, and consumed online content on spiritual topics. Although some people declined the invitation to be interviewed, many participants were eager to speak about their experiences with the deceased, a topic they felt was underexplored yet highly important for them. As Kaarina Koski (2016: 16) notes, such experiences are often welcomed in New Age circles. Even though various authors argue that, in the contemporary West, the deceased are not generally perceived as part of society (see Klass, 2014: 104), my research – supported by other scholars working on similar topics (see Lee, 2013; Koski, 2016; Bužeková, 2025) – demonstrates that within alternative spiritual circles the deceased are understood as remaining part of society, integrated into everyday life, and playing an active role in individuals' lives.

In this article I focus on people who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (for discussion of the term, see Fuller, 2001; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021). I refer to my interlocutors as “spiritual people” and use the term “alternative spirituality” to describe their milieu. As most of my interlocutors reject established religious institutions, I use the term “alternative” referring to its distinction from established religions. In understanding spirituality, I follow scholars (see Heelas, 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 8; Fuller, 2001: 4; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021: 122; Bužeková, 2024: 1–3) who distinguish spirituality from religion, as it is centred on individual, subjective experiences and the quest for personal authenticity, whereas religion is typically associated with institutional structures and codified systems of belief.⁵ I acknowledge that the term “alternative spirituality” is problematic due to its breadth, as it encompasses a wide array of diverse and heterogeneous groups with very different perspectives and beliefs (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 10–11). To avoid this ambiguity, I provide a detailed presentation of each interlocutor, including the groups and ideas that have significantly shaped their views.

³ Sai Baba was an Indian guru who passed away in 2011 but continues to have numerous devotees worldwide.

⁴ Mohanji is an Indian spiritual teacher who leads a transnational spiritual movement through his Mohanji Foundation.

⁵ While spirituality may sometimes oppose religion, this is not always the case. For instance, the Sufi tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a spiritual practice that is part of Islam (cf. Kostadinova, 2023).

THE SPIRITUAL MILIEU AND THE AFTERLIFE

Alternative spirituality crucially influenced the ideas my interlocutors had about metaphysical topics. In particular, it informed their responses to abstract questions concerning life after death. All research participants who described themselves as spiritual stated that they believed in reincarnation, a belief widespread in alternative spiritual circles, although understood differently from Hindu and Buddhist formulations (Walter, 1993: 132–141; Lee, 2015: 86). As Tony Walter (1993: 141) observes, it was precisely through the popularisation of reincarnation that notions of the afterlife gained renewed relevance within alternative spiritual movements. This holds true for my interlocutors, many of whom articulated relatively elaborate views on the afterlife.

The people I spoke with often described the stark contrast between their elaborate adult afterlife beliefs and the relative nonimportance of such questions during their childhood. For the majority, their upbringing – in the socialist republic of Yugoslavia – was non-religious, and the question of life after death was rarely discussed. Asja,⁶ an interlocutor who practices different spiritualities – meditation, reiki, yoga and neo-shamanism being the most important for her – told me about the transformation of her afterlife beliefs. In response to my question about what her views had been while growing up, she said:

Socialist-communist, you know – that's it! You live, you die, and there's nothing! That's the idea I had, right? /.../ And now I know we repeat existences, that we come back, but basically, right, we return only insofar as we've left those deposits [negative patterns one still needs to solve⁷], and so on. (Asja, F, 1968)

Lacking an explanation about life after death, she gradually found convincing answers through years of involvement in various alternative spiritual practices. Other interlocutors similarly told me that alternative spirituality filled the “vacuum” left by their atheist upbringing. Many of them actively searched for explanations to metaphysical issues through different approaches – including traditional religions – but told me alternative spirituality was the most convincing for them. Given that alternative spirituality encompasses a heterogeneous array of ideas, practices, groups and movements (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000), individuals combined elements from these diverse sources to construct their own narratives about life after death. My next interlocutor, who otherwise identifies as a follower of Mohanji, told me how her spiritual path and the various ideas she encountered shaped her current beliefs about the afterlife:

Gradually, you know, I started working on myself. First, it was homeopathy, then kinesiology appeared. And through kinesiology, I realised

⁶ To protect the identities of my interlocutors, I gave them pseudonyms and, where necessary, modified their personal details.

⁷ The text in the square brackets was written by the author.

the existence of the concept of karma and transference. I mean, I always believed in karma, but I didn't fully grasp what it truly represented or how much ancestral burden we carry, you know? /.../ And then, of course, people who were into spirituality started appearing in my life. And then, in those circles, I learned about various techniques and such. Then Reiki came along, transcendental meditation, and I even went to Peru and tried ayahuasca. (Lamija, F, 1976)

Interlocutors often told me that they intuitively felt reincarnation was the most convincing or most logical explanation for the afterlife, and they sometimes supported this view with “scientific” arguments. Amina, a follower of Mohanji, who regularly participates in family constellations and practices different types of energy healing, told me why she was convinced in reincarnation:

I am /.../, an engineer at heart and by profession, and I always find myself pondering the origin of information. It's not about taking things at face value, but when you arrive at the same information from many different sources, that says something. Many things have already been proven today. /.../. It [reincarnation] has actually been demonstrated through regression therapy. Many studies have been done on this topic – life after death, the soul's transition – many regression therapists have written about it. It's hard to believe none of it is true. /.../ Why do some children fear certain things from birth? Why do they love some things and dislike others? /.../ Every life is a continuation of the previous one. (Amina, F, 1978)

Amina maintains that reincarnation should not be understood merely as a belief, but as a truth-based concept substantiated by the evidence she cites. This kind of argumentation is common among alternative spiritual people, who frequently use scientific language and quasi-scientific explanations to legitimise alternative spiritual ideas (see Hanegraaff, 1996: 62–66; Hammer, Swartz, 2020: 101–107; Bužeková, 2023: 25, 31). Olav Hammer emphasises precisely this rhetoric of science in relation to afterlife beliefs within alternative spirituality. He argues that spiritual practitioners who claim that reincarnation forms part of a rational worldview draw upon Enlightenment rationality. According to Hammer (2003: 489–494), this represents a distinct product of the modern age, made possible by the progress of secularisation: what used to be a religious question has now been incorporated into a rationalistic worldview. He further claims that it is precisely in past-life experiences that the rationality of reincarnation beliefs is grounded. If such experiences are available, as my interlocutor Amina also stated, one does not need blind faith to believe in them.

Although scholars have noted the fragmentation of afterlife beliefs in contemporary times (Singleton, 2012; Lee, 2013: 110–111), certain unifying beliefs can still be found, even within eclectic forms of alternative spirituality. The first of these that I examine concerns an alternative spiritual understanding of reincarnation. According to this

understanding, life after death is conceived as a continuous journey, whose ultimate goal is the spiritual progress of the soul (see also Hanegraaff, 1996: 264–268; Hammer, 2003: 464). The afterlife is thus imagined as a positive, spiritual place that enables the continuous growth of individuals. This was mirrored in the experiences my interlocutors had with the deceased. These experiences were predominantly positive, with the deceased appearing to comfort them, to let them know they would be fine in the afterlife, and that they are still here with them. Although the afterlife was largely perceived in positive terms, certain souls – who, for moral reasons, could not attain the proper place – were regarded as remaining “stuck”. These souls were often portrayed as troubling the living, thereby exercising a more disruptive agency over them. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on this distinction.

WHEN THE AFTERLIFE CONSTITUTES GROWTH AND TRAVEL

Raymond L. M. Lee (2015: 92) observes a transformation within New Age spirituality, where the afterlife is no longer conceptualised as a final destination – such as heaven or hell – but rather as part of an ongoing spiritual journey. In this perspective, death is seen as a transitional phase in an ongoing spiritual development, and not as an endpoint (see also Walter, 1993: 131; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 7; Lee, 2013: 114–121; Kinsella, 2017: 187). Among my interlocutors, the idea of continuous growth – both in the afterlife and in subsequent lives – appeared repeatedly. Many people told me about their previous lives, how these are influencing their current life and the negative patterns they need to solve in this life to progress spiritually.

Connected to the notion of spiritual progression across lifetimes, ideas about pre-incarnation agreements⁸ were fairly widespread. My interlocutor, a follower of Mohanji, adopts an eclectic approach, combining ideas of pre-incarnation agreements she read about in literature containing Mohanji’s teachings. She describes reincarnation as a continuous process oriented towards personal growth, stimulated by the challenges one encounters in life and chosen by the individual themselves:

You come back, yes, you create a new body. This means you return according to an agreement or contract, which you yourself create. You decide. You come back by your own desire, in the sense that what remains – when you say “karma” – are essentially unfulfilled desires. You want to learn compassion. Maybe in your past life you were a total jerk, and now, when you’re back in a state of universal consciousness, you say: “I want to return. I want to

⁸ Pre-incarnation agreements are described as arrangements made between lifetimes by souls, often in consultation with spiritual guides. Through these agreements, souls actively choose the circumstances, challenges and lessons they will face in their next incarnation. These are meant to help souls learn new lessons and thus to continue developing spiritually. My interlocutors specifically referred to two books that influenced their ideas on preincarnation agreements: Robert Schwartz’s (2016) *Your Soul’s Plan*, and Michael Newton’s (2005) *Journey of Souls: Case Studies of Life Between Lives*.

learn how to love. I want to learn empathy.” And then you negotiate within the soul group – what’s it called? There’s a book, Your Soul’s Plan /.../, it explains in great detail how this agreement is made. So, all of us – our closest family, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts – we’re all in the same soul group. We constantly reincarnate together and make agreements: “Okay, Tina wants to learn empathy. She wants to experience this, this, and this. So, let’s decide who goes with her – who’ll be the daughter, who’ll be the son, who’ll be the partner she’ll hate, the one who’ll do, I don’t know, this and that.” (Ena, F, 1978)

Many of my interlocutors told me that their involvement in alternative spirituality changed the way they perceive death and dying. Like Ena, many others understood death as a transition – a process with spiritual potential or an opportunity for growth. Olav Hammer (2003: 469) writes that the idea of the soul’s reincarnation as a means of spiritual progression is derived from the Theosophical theory of reincarnation developed in the 19th century. Although ideas of reincarnation have been present in Europe since then, they remained a relatively marginal belief, limited to esotericism, until they gradually began to enter mainstream culture in the second half of the 20th century (Hammer, 2003: 480). However, understandings of reincarnation in Europe have remained largely based on the Theosophical interpretations.

In the process of becoming a mainstream afterlife belief in the West, ideas about reincarnation were also shaped by other influences. Jan Bremmer notes the impact of narratives of near-death experiences (NDEs) on contemporary understandings and the growing fascination with the afterlife. He points out that these narratives were popularised by Raymond Moody’s bestselling book *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon – Survival of Bodily Death* (1984). In this work, Moody describes NDE accounts involving feelings of universal love and reunion with loved ones during their journey to the afterlife. Bremmer (2002: 101–102) analyses modern NDE narratives and suggests that the contemporary afterlife is imagined as a realm filled with love and protection – which makes it an antithesis to the modern world. He states that the afterlife has thus become a means for psychological improvement rather than a final destination, reflecting the modern worldview in which individual progress constitutes the central goal of life.

Accounts of NDEs were repeatedly mentioned by my interlocutors as important for their understanding of the afterlife. Their visions of the afterlife often corresponded to notions of the afterlife described by Jan Bremmer – feelings of universal love, protection, the possibility of growth, and reunion with deceased loved ones. The afterlife was predominantly understood as the soul’s true home – a spiritual realm filled with positive moral qualities such as compassion, tolerance, kindness, patience and unconditional love. Rather than being a place of judgment or punishment, it was seen as a nurturing space that supports the soul’s continued evolution and gives meaning to life.

As a result of these specific understandings of the afterlife, many interlocutors expressed not fearing death. This outlook aligns with observations made by other scholars. Raymond L. M. Lee (2013: 114–121) points out that in alternative spiritualities, death is

not perceived as frightening but as a spiritual transition – a gateway to self-knowledge, as the individual is freed from the material plane, that is, the body. My interlocutor, the Mohanji follower cited above, tells me about her optimistic vision of the afterlife:

I truly believe in reincarnation – this whole concept makes complete sense to me. /.../ And it was the first time I heard that death isn't the end of everything [in the spiritual workshop she attended]. In fact, I experienced it, somehow it is my emotion – that death is a great liberation. That life on Earth is actually suffering because you're shackled to this physical body with its limited capabilities, while we're really from some third, fifth, twelfth dimension. And here we are, compressed into this body with its organs, perceptions, and actions – it can only do so much. It can't astrally project into other dimensions, even though all of that is actually our true reality. This whole narrative totally makes sense to me; I get it. So I've stopped fearing death. /.../ This idea that it's not the end really resonates with me. (Ena, F, 1978)

Similar perceptions of the afterlife were reflected in the agency of the dead as experienced by my interlocutors. Many interlocutors told me their deceased appeared to them in difficult moments, sometimes connected with the bereavement, but not necessarily. Encounters with the deceased and feelings of their impact were often described as positive experiences, providing peace of mind, serving as proof that life after death exists, and confirming the positive view of the afterlife held by my interlocutors.

Amna experienced contact with her deceased mother in the form of wind, which provided comfort during her bereavement, and continued to sustain connection with her mother later in life. She was brought up in a non-religious family, although her grandparents were practising Muslims. Consequently, she was not socialised within a religious framework, but still had some contact with it. She describes her mother as relatively spiritual: she read available spiritual literature and believed in metaphysical phenomena. Amna said she began to develop her own spirituality under her mother's influence, embracing beliefs in the universe, energy and reincarnation. After her mother's death, she first perceived her presence in the form of wind at her funeral, and such experiences continue to occur in everyday situations. These encounters were always positive experiences for Amna, providing guidance and a sense of connection:

When I have some dilemma, a decision to make, you know, whether to decide in favour of something or not, whether it's the right decision or not, then that wind appears. /.../ It's positive for me, you understand? /.../ I don't approach it [the contact with the dead] with fear, like a warning or anything, it's just that these signs tell me whether I'm on the right path, whether it's like – as if she [her mother] approves. (Amna, F, 1978)

I asked her for a concrete example of the influence her deceased mother had on her:

For example, after more than twenty years /.../ I changed my career, right. /.../ With that, I closed a certain chapter, and these are major life decisions, right. Where essentially, you have to make them on your own – you can talk to people, to friends and so on, but in the end, these are decisions you make by yourself, and you’re not sure if it’s really the right one, you know. And then something like – I sit down and think – “Oh, if only you were here now [her mother],” you know, “I’d ask you what you think about it,” and so on. And then all of a sudden, this little breeze appears out of nowhere. And I think to myself: “That’s it! Aha, okay, maybe you’re giving your approval,” you know? And that somehow gives me a sense of calm, and based on that I make my decision. (Amna, F, 1978)

She goes on to describe the close relationship she had with her mother: they talked frequently, understood each other well, and her mother was always there for all the family. Amna adds that during her mother’s illness, she did everything she could for her, which eased her conscience. Moreover, her mother was aware that she was dying and was prepared for death. Because she died in this way, had lived a morally upright life, and received her daughter’s full support, she was imagined as having successfully passed to the otherworld, to be in a favourable state in the afterlife, and could therefore have a positive impact on the living.

Very often, the deceased did not interfere in the lives of the living but appeared only to reassure them that they were well in the afterlife. My next interlocutor, Iva (F, 1986), became spiritual and developed her own connection with a god after beginning to practise Kundalini yoga in her twenties. Discussions about the afterlife had never taken place in her family, which motivated her to seek her own understanding. She encountered ideas about reincarnation and karmic connections in a Kundalini yoga course and felt they made sense. She explains that she perceives messages from her significant deceased during transcendental states or when her intuition is heightened. She sometimes experiences her grandmother’s presence – or even sees her – during meditation, which she describes as a positive experience. She interprets these visits as expressions of the deceased’s wish to spend time with her.

She goes on to describe the moral way of life of her grandparents, especially their openness in accepting one another and maintaining close bonds, despite belonging to different religions – Muslim and Orthodox Christian. She stresses that respectful and moral relationships were the norm in her family. Regarding her deceased grandmother, who appears to her in meditations, she specifically highlights that she was highly organised, efficient, self-reliant and clear-minded. She taught herself to read and write, worked consistently, and was deeply devoted to her family. Although my interlocutor did not know her well, as she passed away at a relatively young age, it is evident from her account that she regards her grandmother as a highly moral individual.

Amna’s and Iva’s cases both show that the positive experiences with the deceased described by my interlocutors were closely linked to the moral lives these souls had lived, and to their “good deaths”, which enabled them to reach the right place and a

peaceful state in the afterlife. Among the moral qualities most frequently mentioned in my material were harmonious relationships and an individual's dedication to their family. It was less common for interlocutors to emphasise their own role in the soul's transition to the afterlife, although Amna, for instance, pointed out that she had done everything she could during her mother's illness. However, in all these cases, good relationships in life continued as good relationships after death.

Similar experiences and understandings of contact with the deceased recurred throughout my fieldwork, but they are not common in other contexts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹ I argue that the predominantly positive experiences with the deceased are related to the specific alternative spiritual understanding of the afterlife held by my interlocutors. As noted by Kaarina Koski (2016), alternative spiritualities can play a significant role in interpreting extraordinary and metaphysical experiences. Apart from the specific understandings found in alternative spiritual circles, there has also been a wider change in relationships with the deceased in contemporary society. Dennis Klass (2014: 106) notes that the hostile dead have almost completely disappeared, while the deceased increasingly take on supportive or encouraging roles. Together with Robert Goss (2005), he interprets these changes within the context of wider social transformations. Transnational consumer capitalism has freed individuals from the interpersonal obligations and role-based obligations tied to social membership. As a result, personal bonds – both among the living and the dead – have become more fluid. They can be chosen, reshaped or discontinued when they no longer provide satisfaction. This flexibility is reflected in relationships with the deceased, allowing the living to determine which aspects of the bond continue after death, thereby relieving tensions in the bond. However, I do not view these two interpretations as separated. Alternative spirituality itself is a product of the contemporary industrial and post-industrial context (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 8) in which individualism represents one of the most significant social shifts. For my interlocutors, alternative spirituality constituted a central conceptual framework within which the deceased occupy an important place – as is evident from the research material presented above.

As my interlocutors interpreted experiences of contact with the deceased and understood life after death in a spiritual way, the deceased who had lived moral lives and died a “good death” tended to convey positive messages or offer guidance along the interlocutors' life paths. This represents a novelty shaped by contemporary societal changes. What aligns more closely with traditional understandings of relationships with the dead in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in broader European contexts, is the notion of the “stuck” dead. These are the deceased who either did not live a moral life or died a “bad death” and are therefore perceived as being “stuck” – either in the world of the living, in an intermediate realm, or in the “wrong” world. I will discuss their condition and the ways in which they exert agency over the living in the following chapter.

⁹ For contact with the deceased understood as frightening and related to breaking the moral norms in rural BiH, see Mencej, 2024; 2025; for the deceased considered as unpleasant, unnatural, dangerous visitors in BiH, see Softić, 2016: 276–28; for a general prohibition against disturbing the deceased in vernacular beliefs, see Softić, 2016: 8.

WHAT ABOUT THE SOULS THAT ARE STUCK?

In anthropology, stuckness has primarily been examined in the context of people immobilised during migration (Cangià, 2020; Dantzer, 2023; Chemlali, 2024), caught in spatiotemporal entrapment within political systems (Jansen, 2015: 157–185), or in situations of crisis (Hage, 2009: 97). Ghassan Hage (2009: 97) conceptualised stuckness as the opposite of the feeling that one is “going somewhere”. In contrast, in my analysis, stuckness refers to the obstruction of personal growth and the possibility of spiritual development in the afterlife – an aspect that, as demonstrated in the previous section, is often regarded as the central purpose of the afterlife among alternative spiritual communities.

Tatiana Bužeková, in her research on neo-shamanism, concludes that the topography of the otherworld is structured according to a “moral assessment of the behaviour of the dead” (Bužeková, 2025: 121). Souls can therefore reach the “right” place only through moral behaviour during their lifetime, whereas those who fail to do so become stuck in the wrong place – such as the world of the living. Among her neo-shamanic interlocutors, moral behaviour and spatiality also extend to the influence that the deceased exert on the living. The deceased who reside in the “right” place have a positive impact on the living, while those who remain stuck in the “wrong” place exert a negative impact. Bužeková (2025: 133–134) thus concludes that spatiality is closely intertwined with the concept of right and wrong behaviour – of both the living and the dead.

Within the broader spiritual communities I studied, similar ideas were present. The concept of stuckness appeared frequently among individuals and groups, particularly followers of Mohanji, neo-shamans, and participants in family constellation rituals. Several interlocutors explained that souls could become stuck either in the world of the living, between worlds (that is, between the world of the living and that of the dead) or in the “wrong” place – such as the “lower world” in neo-shamanic cosmology. Beyond the idea of being located in an improper realm, many also emphasised another dimension of stuckness – the soul’s inability to grow. Souls can become stuck for a variety of reasons, most of which were linked to morality – such as “bad death” (especially suicide, abortion, or sudden death), insufficient spiritual energy resulting from a non-spiritual life, immoral conduct, lack of fulfilment, or continued attachment to people or things in the world of the living due to an unwillingness to accept their death.

Stuck souls were generally perceived as lacking agency over their own fate and as dependent on the assistance of the living – particularly ritual specialists such as neo-shamans, energy healers, and others – in order to transition to the other world. While remaining between worlds for a short period after death was not necessarily viewed negatively, stuckness – that is, a prolonged inability to move on and to grow – was, without exception, regarded as undesirable by my interlocutors. Such souls were predominantly understood as unconscious, unpeaceful, or even suffering. They were largely seen as passive, although at times they were described as actively meddling in the lives of the living.

Luka, a member of the Spiritual Science Research Foundation, told me about his experience of the negative impact of stuck ancestors.¹⁰ For him, the influence of stuck ancestors becomes evident when the same problem recurs within a family, which, he explained, had also happened in his case:

One of the signs of ancestral influence is when similar or identical things keep happening across generations in a family. If you observe that in a certain family – well, in my father's lineage for instance, there was much alcoholism. Many were addicted to alcohol. Not officially diagnosed as alcoholics, but they all drank heavily. Many broken marriages – my parents divorced, his [father's] brother divorced, my uncles divorced. /.../ On the other side, premature deaths or childhood deaths. In my family specifically, several died of cancer in their 40s and so on. My father's siblings died as children. My brother's wife too – she died from a brain haemorrhage. You see, when there's this kind of disharmony in a family, when things keep happening repeatedly – that's one of the signs that ancestral influence exists. (Luka, M, 1971)

In his view, the primary reason why the deceased – ancestors – become stuck is a lack of spiritual energy. Spiritual energy, he explained, is primarily cultivated through regular meditation, but also through moral living. Insufficient spiritual energy means certain deceased remain close to the Earth, whereas spiritually fulfilled individuals are lighter and therefore able to ascend – “like in physics” – to higher realms. The proximity of certain ancestors to the Earth thus enables them to exert an influence on the living:

Not all people are good. Some do bad things in life – they lie, steal, cause problems for others – and when they leave their physical body, they will still carry those characteristics. They just won't have a physical body anymore, so they'll continue to exert a negative influence on people. And those who have such predispositions will be more easily influenced by them. (Luka, M, 1971)

Like Luka, other interlocutors told me that stuck or restless souls found themselves in such states as a consequence of their immoral behaviour during life or as a result of dying a “bad death”. Often, individuals perceived as immoral or not spiritually developed were considered more vulnerable to their influence. I did not record a clear distinction in the state in the afterlife between people belonging to these two categories, but they were understood as being interconnected – immoral individuals were more likely to die a “bad death”. A recurring theme was suicide, which was seen both as a “bad death” and as an immoral act.

¹⁰ He explains that as many as seven generations of ancestors can influence individuals, with the most recent three generations exerting an even stronger influence.

To illustrate the distinction between those who die a “good death” and those who die a “bad death”, I once again turn to Iva (F, 1986), the interlocutor cited above. She described her experience of contact with her deceased grandmother, whom she sensed during meditation. Iva emphasised that her grandmother had lived a moral life, followed her own path, achieved many things and ultimately died a “good death”. For this reason, Iva explained, she does not “feel her own ancestors as a burden” (Iva, F, 1986). The situation, she added, is different for those who died in the war (1992–1995) and are either insufficiently remembered – because the circumstances of their death are unknown – or are remembered too intensely. In such cases, these souls may become stuck, and she senses their presence in various places across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Because what is felt here, what I can say is that, in some way, the souls are often stuck. That is, somehow stuck either because, for example, it was not sufficiently made known what happened – meaning, you know, that it was completely neglected, not spoken about, or pushed aside – or, on the other hand, because of the sorrow and grief of those who remained, who somehow did not let them cross over. /.../ I know that in certain parts of Bosnia this can be felt. And one senses that physical heaviness in the space. (Iva, F, 1986)

She specifically mentioned Omarska, Prijedor, Bosanska Krupa and Ahmići, emphasising that the deaths of many Bosniaks there were neglected. The remains of numerous victims have still not been recovered, preventing the proper rites of passage from being performed. As their deaths were not acknowledged, she argues, forgiveness was impossible, and the souls of the deceased could not find closure (for the postwar neglect of deceased Bosniaks in Prijedor, see Hamer, 2025; 2026). Iva notes that such unsettled souls can bring a sense of heaviness to the living, which she feels in such places.

In some cases, the deceased were believed to become entities,¹¹ and in others, to be possessed by them. As entities, the deceased could attach themselves to the living and cause harm or stimulate unwanted behaviour. My next interlocutor is a follower of Mohanji who carries out spiritual practices aimed at clearing entities from her clients. She tells me that the signs that someone has an entity attached include: “*if ugly thoughts come to your mind, if you’re too negative, if you’re feeling blocked or stuck*” (Amina, F, 1978). In the following passage, she describes how such entities can attach themselves to people:

So, if a soul – how should I put it – if a soul doesn’t fully let go of the body, depending on the manner of death... If it’s a case of suicide especially, but also other kinds of death like murder and suicide and so on, then these individuals, these souls actually, if for instance someone was meant

¹¹ My interlocutors understood *entities* as encompassing a wide range of metaphysical beings, including the deceased. In most cases, it was the deceased who were perceived as *stuck* and as exerting a negative influence – or agency – over the living.

to live to age 70 but committed suicide at 40 – how are they supposed to fulfil that karma? They still have that karma to live out, but no body. Then they can become entities looking for a body – the body of someone who has a tendency or potential to live out what they themselves still need to experience. If someone enjoys alcohol, and that spirit also loved alcohol, it will go to that person. And because of that, all low-frequency emotions in people – like anger, judgment, jealousy, envy, sorrow – these are all low frequencies, and they thin out our aura. Then we become vulnerable, accessible to such beings, to such entities. (Amina, F, 1978)

Alongside Mohanji's followers, neo-shamanists were also among the spiritual groups working with the stuck dead. In neo-shamanic cosmology, my interlocutor Nika explains, there are many worlds, each corresponding to different states of being. She describes how enlightened souls may pass into the collective realm, how most souls are reincarnated to continue their journey, and how some souls can become stuck between worlds:

There are those who become stuck in grief, who refuse their own death, who die unwillingly or do not believe they are dead at all. These are the souls that cling desperately to this world. In shamanism, we call them the ones trapped between worlds – belonging nowhere, suspended. (Nika, F, 1975)

Some neo-shamanists also made a distinction between the “upper”¹² and “lower” worlds within their afterlife cosmology. In determining which world a soul enters after death, the distinction between conscious and unconscious living – and dying – is crucial. Souls who lived consciously and fulfilled their life purpose automatically go to the “upper world”. In contrast, those who lived unconsciously and without fulfilment may become trapped in the “lower world”. Stuck souls, either stuck in the “lower” world or in between worlds, are believed to exert a negative influence on the living. Another practitioner of neo-shamanism explained to me the distinction between the different states in which ancestors may find themselves and how their afterlife situation affects the living:

So shamanism speaks both of the reality of ancestors who took advantage of life, and of the reality of ancestors who carry certain debts, who carry certain energies, who haven't released the stories of their emotions. There are very serious states in which ancestral energy and souls can become stuck, suffer greatly, and struggle intensely. /.../ The more healed they are, the freer a life we can live. (Emir, M, 1970)

¹² My interlocutor clarifies that the “Upper” and “Lower” worlds do not represent a binary opposition, but rather different dimensions of existence: “*The Lower World is not inherently negative. It is far more than just the realm of the dead. Here dwell our power animals, our ancestors – a place beyond simple spatial dimensions. Think of it rather as a temporal continuum: if you view time linearly, this becomes the past. Past, present and future exist here as one. It is less about ‘below’ or ‘above’, and more about the eternal flow of existence itself.*” (Nika, F, 1975)

In neo-shamanism, as well as in other spiritual groups, the negative influence of the deceased could be countered by the living through helping stuck souls. Emir explained that shamanic rituals can help the deceased and, in so doing, free the living from their negative influence. Amina, a previous interlocutor and a follower of Mohanji, also spoke of her spiritual cleansing practices, which are intended to help stuck souls pass to the “right” place and thereby remove their harmful effects. According to an interlocutor from the Spiritual Science Research Foundation, the solution to the negative impact of ancestors lies in spiritual energy – gained through regular meditation and specific mantras – which the living are meant to send to the dead. Similarly, within family constellation workshops, rituals were occasionally performed to help stuck souls move on to the “right” place.

My interlocutors consistently associated the notion of “stuckness”, or the inability to cross into the other world, with questions of morality. Most often, it was attributed to the failure of the deceased to observe moral norms – debts, unresolved emotions, lying, stealing – while at other times, it was associated with a “bad death” – such as dying in war,¹³ suicide, a death that was not accepted, or the absence of a proper burial ritual for other reasons. Ideas about a lack of morality or a “bad death” preventing souls from passing into the otherworld are not specific to spiritual cosmology, but are also present in vernacular notions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond.

Mirjam Mencej notes that in vernacular understandings – not only in Bosnia, but also elsewhere in Europe – those who die a “bad death” are believed to be unable to pass into the otherworld. As a result, they may become stuck and appear as ghosts or cause trouble among the living (Mencej, 2025: 352; see also Risteski, 1999; Cowdell, 2011: 59–62; Softić, 2016: 266–267; Čepulienė, Pučinskaitė, 2023: 13). Lyudmila N. Vinogradova (1999: 44–49) writes that in Slavic folklore, the concept of a “good death” was associated with a natural death, a death within “one’s own life term”, and the proper observance of rituals. The category of the “unclean” dead, who could become actively harmful and affect the living, included those who died a “bad death”: by suicide, murder, or violence; those who died “before their time”, at an inappropriate age, or away from home and relatives. A deceased person could also become “unclean” if funerary customs were not properly observed, if they had been in contact with evil spirits during life, or if they failed to sever ties with the living before death.

Dragana Djurić (2024: 4–5) notes that in Slavic folklore, the souls of the deceased fall into two categories: the “good” or “pure” deceased and the “impure” deceased, who have no proper place in the otherworld. She notes that this categorisation depends both on how a person lived – their morality – and on how they died. Although the “pure” deceased can help the living, such assistance depends on the attitudes and care the living show them. By contrast, the “impure” deceased, who are usually positioned between the two worlds, “disturb the living by bringing them misfortune, sickness and death” (Djurić, 2024: 5). Similarly, Claude Lecouteux (2009: 26–27, 134–135) observes that in Germanic folklore from the 10th to the 13th centuries, the “dreadful dead” were those

¹³ Surprisingly, I did not come across many other narratives that would link “stuckness” with those who died in war, apart from the narrative described above.

who had no proper rite of passage, sought revenge, were killed or drowned, died of illness, or were socially marginalised. Although in my material the “stuck” souls were not always regarded as dreadful, their state of stuckness was nonetheless attributed to the moral condition of the deceased.

The category of the “stuck” dead among my interlocutors aligned closely with the more traditional ideas described above. However, their notions of a “good” and a “bad” death differed slightly from traditional understandings. Those who experienced a “bad death” were generally described as people who had committed suicide, died in violent circumstances, or had not accepted their death for some reason. Similar to traditional notions, the proper performance of rituals remained important: if the prescribed rituals were not carried out correctly, the deceased could remain in a liminal state. Some interlocutors also emphasised that excessive grief could prevent the soul from moving on. What was stressed more strongly, however, was the importance of fulfilling one’s spiritual role in this world – a theme largely absent from more traditional narratives. Another category, rarely mentioned in older traditions, concerned those who died a conscious death – a notion understood as an additional requirement for achieving a “good death”. A focus on personal growth thus became essential for achieving a good death (and a good afterlife), reflecting contemporary norms and expectations that place self-development at the centre of a meaningful life.

CONCLUSION

The theory of continuing bonds suggests that after death, people maintain social relationships with the deceased (Klass et al., 1996). This proved to be an accurate assumption in the context of experiences with the deceased among alternative spiritual practitioners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for whom the deceased remain part of society (cf. Klass, 2014: 104). Nonetheless, my interlocutors expressed these continuing bonds in specific ways. Many authors argue that reciprocity is a key concept for understanding relationships between the living and the deceased (see Walter, 2019; Hesz, 2025; Mencej, 2025; Pócs, 2025). In many (especially Abrahamic) religions, it is typically assumed that after death it is the living who have the duty to care for the deceased (for Islam see Mabrouk, 1987; Venhorst, 2013; for Catholicism see Hesz, 2025: 87). Numerous studies have shown that the living are expected to care for the deceased, pray for them, and help them attain a higher spiritual status. The living are often thought to owe this to the deceased, who gave them life, identity, or inheritance (see Klass, 2014; Djurić, 2024; Tolstaya, 2024; Hesz, 2025; Mencej, 2025; Pócs, 2025).

In contrast, the same ideas of debt were not present among my interlocutors, and their understanding of reciprocity with the deceased was modified. Among spiritual practitioners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reciprocity was manifested in the expectation that the deceased take care of the living, providing help and guidance, while the living, in return, assist souls that are stuck. This represents a shift in the principle of reciprocity between the living and the deceased. Whereas traditionally the actions of the deceased

during their lifetime created a moral debt that the living were expected to repay through ritual care, here it is the deceased who predominantly care for the living, thus appearing as benevolent figures. I interpret this shift within the conceptual framework of alternative spirituality, in which the deceased are seen as benevolent and the afterlife as a space where it is possible to grow continuously.

Moreover, I agree with Dennis Klass and Robert Goss (2005), who argue that the hostile dead have disappeared from contemporary society due to broader social transformations – such as individualism, the decline of rigid role expectations, and the increasing fluidity with which people can choose, reshape and end relationships, a dynamic that extends into relationships after death. I understand ideas and concepts within alternative spirituality as profoundly shaped by post-modern times. In this sense, alternative spirituality does not stand apart from these wider transformations but is deeply interwoven with the very societal shifts that Klass and Goss describe.

However, in my material, “stuck” souls were still perceived as requiring help from the living, a view that resonates with ideas traditionally present in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in wider European contexts (see Risteski, 1999; Cowdell, 2011: 59–62; Softić, 2016: 266–267; Čepulienė, Pučinskaitė, 2023: 13; Djurić, 2024; Mencej, 2025: 352). Thus, in my interlocutors’ explanations, different interpretive frameworks and conceptual repertoires are mobilised simultaneously. Alongside more traditional understandings of the deceased and their needs, they also draw on contemporary frameworks, particularly those of alternative spirituality which are themselves shaped by contemporary conceptions of the self, morality and relationality.

Yet, the moral principle regulating relationships between the living and the dead remained significant. Traditionally, the deceased in Bosnia and Herzegovina were believed to appear to the living when social norms were violated, thereby reinforcing moral and communal order – also including the principles governing relationships between the living and the dead (see Mencej, 2024; 2025). In contrast to these traditional Bosnian contexts, spiritual practitioners no longer consider the deceased to act as moral enforcers or punitive agents, but rather as compassionate figures offering comfort and guidance. The deceased do not interfere in the non-moral actions of the living. Instead, it is the (spiritual) living who are responsible for helping those deceased who are being punished for their immorality or who died a “bad death”, and who consequently remain stuck in this world, between worlds, or in the wrong world. In this sense, the deceased continue to function as moral figures, yet they are no longer seen as beings who intentionally warn the living about their moral failings. Rather, they exert unconscious negative influences regardless of the behaviour of the living, or they shape people’s moral imagination through the example of their own fate.

This shift, however, does not negate the link between cosmology and morality, as noted by Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart (2007 in Mencej, 2025: 345–356). Instead, it reconfigures it. The moral imperative is no longer centred solely on respecting communal norms but also encompasses the individual’s spiritual progress. The central opposition thus becomes between “growth” and “stuckness” – in life as well as in the afterlife – echoing Ghassan Hage’s (2009) observation that positive feelings are associated with

“moving”, here understood as internal, existential progress. This reflects a broader moral cosmology in which morality is not institutionally enforced but operates on a spiritual level (Strathern, Stewart, 2007 in Mencej, 2025: 345–356), where cosmological and moral order remain intertwined. As Jan Bremmer (2002: 101–102) noted, in the modern worldview the individual’s progress has become a central goal in life, a logic reflected in conceptions of the afterlife – not only in the idea of the continuous growth of moral and spiritual souls, but also in the punishment of immoral souls who failed to fulfil their spiritual role in this world and are therefore denied progress through stuckness.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The author states that the article is based on research data, which is stored in ADP – Social Science Data Archives, Ljubljana, Slovenia – and are available to others on the basis of a justified request.

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»RAST« IN »ZATAKNJENOST«: MORALNOST, POSMRTHNO ŽIVLJENJE IN VPLIV MRTVIH NA ŽIVE

Članek obravnava predstave o posmrtnem življenju in izkušnje z mrtvimi med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnih gibanj v Bosni in Hercegovini (BiH). Temelji na šestmesečnem terenskem delu v Sarajevu in Banji Luki, ki je obsegalo 105 pol-strukturiranih intervjujev in opazovanje z udeležbo. Glavni raziskovalni vprašanji sta bili: (1) kakšne so specifične predstave o posmrtnem življenju med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti v BiH in (2) kako so s temi predstavami povezane njihove izkušnje z mrtvimi?

Ugotovitve kažejo, da med udeleženci prevladuje verovanje v reinkarnacijo. To vsebuje specifične ideje kontinuirane rasti duše, ki v veliki meri izvirajo iz teozofskega razumevanja reinkarnacije. Sogovorniki navajajo, da bistvo sosledja reinkarnacij vidijo v duhovni rasti posameznika/duše, zato kot cilj življenja, pa tudi smrti in posmrtnega, postavljajo prav duhovni razvoj. V tem smislu pogosto poudarjajo idejo predinkarnacijskih sporazumov in možnosti dostopa do prejšnjih življenj preko regresoterapije. Sogovorniki pri tem pogosto uporabljajo znanstveni diskurz, s katerim legitimirajo svoje ideje. Navajajo, da so njihovo zanimanje in podrobne predstave o posmrtnem življenju v nasprotju z njihovo vzgojo, ki je bila v veliki meri ateistična, posmrtno življenje pa tako ni bilo pomembno vprašanje.

Predstave o posmrtnem življenju kot prostoru rasti in duhovnega doma duše se odražajo tudi v izkušnjah z mrtvimi. Večinsko so bile te izkušnje pozitivne, mrtvi so se v življenjih živih pojavljali kot podporniki ob težkih trenutkih, kot duhovno vodstvo, včasih pa tudi le zato, da bi z živimi ohranjali družbene vezi. Članek nadalje prikaže, da so bile take izkušnje večinske pri mrtvih, ki so živeli moralna življenja in imeli lepe odnose z bližnjimi, ki so se po smrti torej nadaljevali. Drugačne, pogosto obremenjujoče izkušnje se povezujejo z mrtvimi, ki niso živeli moralnih življenj ali so umrli zaradi »slabe smrti« – zaradi samomora, nasilne smrti, smrt v vojni, nepripravljeni na smrt – ali pa zanje ni bil izveden ustrezen ritual prehoda. Duše takih mrtvih so bile razumljene kot »zatakne« – bodisi med svetom živih in mrtvih, na svetu živih, bodisi pa v napačnem posmrtnem prostoru. Zaradi svoje

umeščnosti so imeli ti mrtvi pogosto negativen vpliv na žive. To se je med živimi lahko odražalo v neharmoničnih odnosih znotraj družine, zasvojenostih, občutkih zataknjenosti, depresiji, občutku teže na določenih prostorih ali pa na drugačne načine oviralo razvoj posameznika.

Recipročnost med živimi in mrtvimi se tako kaže na način, da mrtvi, ki so v posmrtnem prostoru na pravem mestu, pomagajo, svetujejo in tolažijo žive. Medtem pa živi – predvsem duhovni specialisti – s svojimi dejanji pomagajo mrtvim, ki so ostali zataknjeni, da bi se lahko premaknili na pravo posmrtno mesto. Na ta način lahko tudi zmanjšajo njihov negativen vpliv na žive. Ključna ugotovitev raziskave je, da moralni okviri oblikujejo »duhovno topografijo« posmrtnega sveta. Ta topografija pa ne oblikuje le položaja in stanja duš po smrti, temveč tudi njihov vpliv na žive.

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