

Gregory Shushan: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thanks for coming to this talk and thanks to IANDS for inviting me here today. It's a real honor and a privilege to be able to share my research with you. I think of any audience in the world... Is this thing... There we go. You guys all know what a near-death experience is, so I'm not going to really spend too much on definitions. These are the main features of NDEs as far as my research is concerned.

Gregory Shushan: Out of body experience, seeing the body entering darkness, encountering deceased relatives, being of light, some of kind of judgment and evaluation, encountering an obstacle or barrier, other realms and feelings of transcendence or union, all probably very familiar ideas to everyone here. Now, documentary reports of NDEs are known from throughout the world and throughout history. I know examples from all of these, but NDEs do vary across cultures. For example, returning to the body element. This is just a kind of illustration of return to the body, William Blake, just to give you something to look at. The return to the body obviously is universal in NDEs, otherwise we wouldn't have anything to talk about.

Gregory Shushan: But in the West, the reason for the return is often that you're told it's not your time to die. You have some kind of unfinished business back on earth to return to attend to. But in the East, it's more often a case of mistaken identity where they say we got the wrong Gregory Shushan, so go back and we're going to bring the right one next time. Some elements of NDEs across cultures also seem to correspond to social scale. Only in small scale societies. We have examples of people walking along a road or a path to the other world or through a forest. Also, they have aftermath realms and volcanoes or on islands or mountains, other kinds of sacred earthly locales, which is I think much rarer in Western NDEs.

Gregory Shushan: But like any experience, an NDE is rooted in the culture of the person having it. This means they're processed and interpreted depending on a person's religion, language, society and environment. In other words, to put it simply, how the experience is experienced varies by individual. It's a symbiotic relationship where culture specific beliefs influence universal experiences and the other way around. But critically, the NDE is pretty much always interpreted as this is what happens when we die. For this particular talk, I want to take you through about 4,500 years of NDEs in 54 minutes or less.

Gregory Shushan: I want to show you how I've established that despite whatever cross-cultural differences in NDE accounts and afterlife beliefs, afterlife beliefs in societies around the world have actually been based on NDEs fairly commonly. My interest in this subject started when I was reading some ancient Egyptian afterlife text, and I started wondering why these descriptions of the afterlife seem so familiar. I realized that it was because there are similarities with NDEs. Then, I started wondering if that were the case in Egypt, if that would be the same in other cultures.

Gregory Shushan: What intrigued me the most about this was the implication that if there are consistent similarities across cultures, then that would mean afterlife beliefs have to be based on something other than simply a cultural element. There has to be something universal going on and the idea there was that it could be an NDE. The beliefs would have to have some kind of common or perhaps even universal foundation beyond culture in other words. To explore this question, I decided to look at different civilizations around the world.

Gregory Shushan: I compared the text from five different regions, Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, Mesopotamia from the Sumerian and Old Babylonian periods, Vedic India, Pre-Buddhist China, and Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, meaning Aztec and Mayan, and those are the approximate dates there. These civilizations all emerged largely in the state of cultural dependence. They didn't have much contact with each other at the times that I'm looking at. They had different kinds of social organizations. Egypt was a large state society. Vedic India was possibly not a state society at all.

Gregory Shushan: This means that similarities of beliefs between these cultures can't be explained by oh, they all have the kind of social structure or level of civilization or other kind of sociological question like that. Then as well as being written... Oops. As well as being written at different cultures and in different parts of the world, they're also written in seven different languages. We've got all these kind of checks on the possibility that they wouldn't be influencing each other. They're cross-cultural. They're cross-temporal, meaning across time, across geographical around the world and cross-contextual.

Gregory Shushan: The text in each of these civilizations that I looked at were written for varying purposes and had varying context basically. Some were afterlife descriptions written as guidebooks to the other world. Some were mythological or literary texts. Some were funerary ritual texts and some were hymns or poems. Let's look briefly at some examples from each area just to give you some idea of the flavor of the kinds of text I was looking at in each region, but keep in mind the literature really is vast, so it's really just smattering.

Gregory Shushan: I should also say that a lot of the images I'll be showing here are actually dated to much later than the text I'm looking at because images from those earlier eras that are relevant are quite rare, but I wanted to give you something to at least give you some idea of how these civilizations thought about the afterlife. Ancient Egypt comes first beginning with the Pyramid Text originating around 2350 BCE where afterlife guidebooks provided souls of the dead with knowledge to overcome dangers in the other world and to join gods in a divine realm. The soul leaves the body shown here in bird form and joins the sun god Ra in the solar boat.

Gregory Shushan: The sun god is obviously a being of light. You can see where I'm going with this. The deceased sails with the sun god through the celestial waters of the upper realm, the heavenly realm. Encounters deceased relatives. The person's soul is

actually identified with various gods and transformed into one of the blessed dead. As the sun god sets, the deceased sails with him through the darkness of the other world, having to pass various barriers and obstacles along the way. This top image is a map from the Coffin Text, which actually shows different paths in the underworld and the images below are potential underworlds threats that a soul might be meeting.

Gregory Shushan: Hidden in the depths of the underworld is the corpse of Osiris shown on the top. He is the god of fertility and also lord of the dead. What's interesting here is the deceased becomes identified with Osiris, but still undergoes judgment in which the deeds and piety of the individual are reviewed as in this bottom scene from the Book of the Dead. The spirit then resumes the journey back up through the sky and ascends to the heavenly realm in a divinized spiritualized sort of state. Now we're onto Mesopotamia. Dating back as far as 2100 BCE, we have legends of gods and culture heroes who traveled to the other world and returned.

Gregory Shushan: The story of the Sumerian king Gilgamesh, who's this one here with the lions, he features what might be the world's first documentary NDE. We don't really know if Gilgamesh was a real king or not, a real individual or if it's entirely mythological. In his narrative, he's lying on his deathbed. He travels to the netherworld and undergoes a life review assisted by a panel of deities such as these on the right. He has a transformative experience and his heart is undone, as the text says, by a being of light who in this case is the sun god Utu down on the bottom left. He becomes semi-divine and god-like.

Gregory Shushan: He's also reunited with deceased relatives and then returns to this body and awakens. His servant Enkidu, also down there on the right, also has an NDE. The goddess Inanna, up here on the left, she travels to the underworld in order to conquer it. There she is. Well, possibly maybe a depiction of her standing at the gates to the underworld. Her myth actually contains two additional NDEs, one of a pair of fertility gods and goddesses and one of another fertility god Damu. He goes to the other world specifically as a disembodied spirit. They explain him in those terms.

Gregory Shushan: Beer is made out of his blood in order to facilitate his rebirth, which is actually an important but weird little detail which I'll get to back to later. Radiant deities, deceased relatives, positive and negative states, barriers and judgments, these are all familiar themes in these texts. Then finally for Mesopotamia, the Sumerian king Etana ascends to the heavenly realm riding on an eagle. You can see there. This bit here and also down here. Moving onto India, in the earliest Indian text beginning with the Rigveda, which dates at least to 1500 BC, possibly much, much earlier, souls descend on the cremation smoke of their own funerary pyres and then they undertake a perilous journey to the underworld.

Gregory Shushan: They go to various divine realms including the realm of Indra of here or Vishnu or to Yamaloka, which is the realm of the god Yama who's the lord of the death. This is a realm of light and abundance. Often in these texts, underworlds are not

just gloomy, negative, creepy places. There are realms of light and fertility as well. Those who've done good deeds, who've conducted proper rituals or have attained a high level of spiritual enlightenment will go and join their ancestors and become one with the divine. Others go to a dark abyss and then they have to endure various kinds of punishments or some are just annihilated all together.

Gregory Shushan: There are actually numerous afterlife possibilities in the Vedic texts, various kinds of realms and experiences. On the left, this is a depiction of the god Vishnu's legs and each level of his legs is a division of a different afterlife realm. On the right is just a contemporary image of a woman having an NDE and encountering the god Shiva. Of particular interest for us though is a series of NDE-like narratives spanning all of Vedic literature. In the earliest example, a young boy travels to the realm of Yamaloka, the god of the dead, to find his deceased father.

Gregory Shushan: In other versions, the young boy is actually killed by his father in order to go to the underworld and bring back some kind of knowledge or wisdom and then he comes back. That's Yama on the top riding the bull and below is Yama with one of these boys called Nasakitas who's getting a lecture from Yama about the knowledge and state of being in the underworld. On the right are scenes of various kinds of punishments and torments that one can undergo if you're not careful. Then finally for India, there's a text called the Atharvaveda. That features a spell to recover a dying man and it describes his soul ascending from the underworld and returning to his body, which I think is a fairly clear indication of an NDE.

Gregory Shushan: Then in China, the earliest references to afterlife we have are from oracle bones like these dating as early as the 18th century BCE. They mentioned the souls of kings ascending to heaven and joining the gods, but the most relevant text began around 800 BCE. They give details about deities such as Shangdi, the lord of heaven, who rewards the good in the afterlife, and Yo Pei, who punish the bad. Here's a judgment scene on the left and on the right is a much later Buddhist image of a dead person arriving in the other world. There's an underworld called the Yellow Springs in China, which was originally a realm of joy and peace. Again, it's an underground realm.

Gregory Shushan: But over time, it grew to have more negative connotations. This is just an image of a hand funerary banner there on the left, which actually shows the ascent and progression a soul through the different levels of the other world. On the right at the top is a funerary bowl, which is inscribed with descriptions of a bureaucratic afterlife. There's another soul arriving in the realm of the dead on the bottom. Ancient Chinese poetry seems to have references to NDEs. They talk about the retrieval of souls from dangerous afterlife realms and then returning them to the body.

Gregory Shushan: In one of these, a spirit reluctantly returns to the body when his path is blocked on his progression to the underworld, so he reaches a barrier and has to come back. The world's first unambiguously documentary NDE also comes from China. It's a 7th century BCE example where a man recovers from an illness and reports that he went to see the emperor of heaven. That it was a joyful journey. He came back with precognitive information, which was later verified. There's a concern with proving these experiences with some kind of veridical content. There's another report from around 600 years later of a woman who revived from death.

Gregory Shushan: She reported that she had seen her deceased father-in-law and he told her that it wasn't her time to die and so she had to return to the body. All together from ancient China, there's at least 127 return from death accounts dating from about the 5th century BC to the 10th century CE, so about a 1,400 year period. Then from ancient Mesoamerica, in the Mayan mythological text called the Popol Vuh, which is dated about 300 BCE, this pair of hero twins at the top, they're playing ball above the netherworld. They annoy the gods of the underworld, and so they have to descend and go through a series of torments and tests. That's some of the underworld beings they encounter just below.

Gregory Shushan: They appear before a council of gods in that picture on the top and ultimately they're killed within the underworld even though they're already dead and they're resurrected down below shown there with their father. The hero twins on the sides and their father is in the middle. They went there originally to meet their father. They gained divine and transformative powers as they meet deceased relatives and they finally ascend into a celestial realm. Then in an Aztec myth called the Legends of the Sons, the feathered serpent deity Quetzalcoatl journeys to the underworld called Mictlán. This is a realm of creation, as well as being the land of the dead.

Gregory Shushan: After a perilous journey, souls would arrive there. It's described as a place of light and they would join their relatives. Quetzalcoatl also traveled through a paradise called Tamoanchan, which is there depicted on the right. He was reborn with new kinds of transformative powers. Also from ancient Mesoamerica, there's actually a documentary NDE reported by a Spanish explorer dated around the 16th century. It involves a princess named Quetzalpetlatl. She left her body and had feelings of joy, journeyed to the other realm assisted by a guide.

Gregory Shushan: She met various spirits, deceased relatives, encountered the fertility god and had a positive transformation when she returned to life including coming back with healing abilities. There are quite a few other descriptions of Aztec noblewomen who died and returned with prophetic powers. There's obviously a lot of very culture specific stuff here despite the kind of general thematic similarities. The differences between all these various texts are really too numerous to mention, but it's clear that ancient Indians, Chinese and Aztecs at

least were familiar with NDEs because there are actually references to them in the texts.

Gregory Shushan: For Mesopotamia, it seems they were familiar because of the Gilgamesh story where he has something very much like an NDE, but we're not sure if that's a myth or not. For Egypt, it's really a matter of extrapolating NDE features from afterlife journey texts where there's never like an individual mentioned. But nevertheless on a sort of wide thematic scale, we can identify symbolic expressions of NDEs in each one of these civilizations. I'm just going to have to kind of breeze through these pretty quickly just to point out where these features occur. Out of body experiences, I mentioned references to the deceased ascending in spirit form.

Gregory Shushan: In addition to that, there's souls ascending on cremation smoke. In China especially on dragons, ladders, various kinds of ascent as birds. This obviously recalls out of body experiences where people generally describe ascending from their body rather than sinking. Then a corpse encounter when an individual leaves the body and sees their corpse behind. This is really significant because seeing the corpse in these texts is often associated with the spirit's realization that he or she is still dead yet paradoxically still alive. This realization of one's own physical death is also the realization of the conscious survival of that death.

Gregory Shushan: If you see your body, you're outside your body and you think, "Wow. There is that corpse. I must really be dead." In Egypt, this is when the deceased discovers the corpse of Osiris in the underworld. I mentioned that the deceased becomes Osiris, so this encounter is actually an encounter with one's own corpse. In the text, this is described as the revelation of a secret. The secret causes the true understanding of death and immortality and actually enables the soul to proceed to the next level of the afterlife. I mentioned this Mesopotamian god Damu who sees his own blood being made into beer while he's in the other world. That's described in the text as causing the realization that he's dead.

Gregory Shushan: It's a kind of a corpse encounter that causes him to realize this. There's a similar principal in the Indian text. There's this idea of decay in the underworld, which brings forth life. In China, there are references to corpses of divine or divinized humans and to an afterlife god who's holding a drug of immortality in his hand, but he's also a corpse. The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, he realizes he's dead when he looks in the mirror and sees his own decaying flesh basically.

Gregory Shushan: The descriptions of corpses in these texts are often pretty revolting, which I think reflects the idea that many NDErs have when they are faced with a prospect of returning to their body and they're actually disgusted by it and repulsed and they don't want to return at all. Entering darkness, much more straightforward. There are caves and underworld paths and tunnels of various descriptions. Meeting deceased relatives is also pretty straightforward. Parents, brothers, sisters, all kinds of relatives are mentioned in the text, but most often

just the ancestors it says. Then a presence or being of light. Deities are often described as radiating light, but so are spirits of the dead.

Gregory Shushan: In a lot of these texts, some of these are described as being stars. We saw that a couple of the afterlife deities were actually the sun or the sun god. Obviously beings of light. Then some kind of judgment or evaluation of a person's earthly life. There are even a few life reviews where individuals experienced their entire lives at once. Obviously very similar to NDEs. There's an Egyptian text called Teachings of King Merikare and the gods are reviewing this king's entire life history. They say it unfolds before him in an hour. Placed before him like a treasure, which I think is a really nice way of putting it.

Gregory Shushan: In Mesopotamia, there's a funerary text where a man goes to the gods in the underworld and confesses his sins basically. In the Upanishads, there's a life review described exactly as there is in NDEs. In reaching obstacles or barriers, again, pretty straightforward. There's an overlap here also with souls of the dead being interrogated. If they are not able to answer the questions that the underworld entities ask of them, then they're sent back to their bodies, obviously recalling the return element of an NDE. This is one of the reasons that people are forced to return in these texts. Journeys to other realms.

Gregory Shushan: A lot of these realms are often considered the realm of creation, which recalls a lot of NDErs saying that they feel like they've returned home, like this is the true state of being. I think it gives people a new sense of spiritual renewal and revitalization of their spiritual beliefs is I think reflected in the idea of afterlife realms also being realms of creation and rebirth. Finally, feelings of transcendence or the association of the self with the divine or the absolute. Souls often become one with a particular deity, though they often also just become a deity themselves or some other kind of god-like being with all kinds of transformative and creative powers.

Gregory Shushan: Now remember that all these similarities are despite all the differences that I mentioned with virtually no possibility of these beliefs traveling from one area of the world to another, different language groups, the fundamental differences between these ancient texts and modern NDE reports. What we can gather from all this is that the authors of the ancient texts were familiar with NDEs, suggesting that the origins of afterlife conceptions in all these ancient civilizations were at least partly rooted in NDEs.

Gregory Shushan: I think to argue the reverse that conceptions came before the experience does not explain how the set of consistent general beliefs could be independently invented around the world or how that set of ideas could influence spontaneous universal NDEs. It doesn't really make sense. In other words, cross-cultural experience is explicable without preexisting common beliefs, meaning you don't need to have a belief in an afterlife in order to have an NDE. But cross-cultural beliefs of the kind we've seen here are not really explicable without a common

experience such as the NDE. Here's a baby chick having an out of egg experience and he's coming to the realization that the egg came first.

Gregory Shushan: That's the first 4,000 years out of the way, which brings me to the project that I did last at University of Oxford. I'm sorry. If you want to read about the stuff we just reviewed, it's available on this book here. Last project is NDE, Shamanism and Afterlife Conceptions in Indigenous Religions. Compared to the early civilizations of my previous study, these societies had very different forms of social organizations. They had no industrialization, no urbanization, no complex economies or complex political systems. They're mostly low population groups, hunter-gatherer or low scale agriculture or herding.

Gregory Shushan: If they show similarities with these larger civilizations that I looked at before, that would really strengthen the idea that afterlife beliefs are based on something other than just culture. As with my work on ancient civilizations, I really wanted to minimize the possibility of diffusion across cultures and across regions, so I focused on these three geographically distant areas of the world, Africa, the Pacific and North America. For the most part, I concentrated on material that was before conversion to any non-indigenous religion. In this case, it's Christianity or Islam for Africa.

Gregory Shushan: But because all of these societies were non-literate, the only sources for their religious beliefs are the records of missionaries, explorers and other writers beginning in the 16th century. Here's just a few examples of some of the people I got my material from. This means there's obviously a wide variation in the quality of these texts. Remember the explorer reports of this kind were written at a time when there was a colonialist agenda of exploiting or stealing people's land and resources, subjugating local populations. As far as missionaries go, they were there trying to save souls, trying to civilize people, which invariably meant destroying their local religions.

Gregory Shushan: We need to read the texts that these people wrote with a very careful critical eye. On the bright side, the text exists. We have material to look at. The other thing that's really important about these texts is they actually have documentary NDEs for each region of the world, which is something we saw as a bit sketchier for the early civilizations and for the more ancient texts. Because of that, I was able to really zero in on some of the most important questions of the relationship between NDEs and culture. The role of NDEs in the formation of religious beliefs, how culture affects the beliefs itself, and how social and cultural factors determine the reception of NDEs, so how experience interacts with beliefs.

Gregory Shushan: Then adding further complexity to the mix, shamanic experiences often have similarities to NDEs, which is interesting because shamanism varies across cultures. In some cultures, it's more focused on possession or sorcery or leaving the body and rescuing souls in the other world. That's the kind I'm most interested in today. But the idea that shamanic states are achieved by various

different means including long dancing, drumming, repetitive singing, drug use, the idea that all those different kinds of techniques might lead to similar kinds of experiences which are then similar to NDEs is a question that I don't think has been really addressed that closely.

Gregory Shushan: We'll get back to that in a couple of minutes, but first, I want to just breeze through a few examples of NDEs in some of these cultures and the way they actually say how they affected their afterlife beliefs. In his voyage to Virginia in 1585, the English explorer Thomas Harriot reported the first known Native American NDEs. When he asked the Algonquin people that he met about their afterlife beliefs, they told them of a man who died and returned and they recounted their experiences in the spirit world. The first man was a wicket man and he went to a hellish place. It's interesting that the first one is a negative NDE.

Gregory Shushan: He was saved by a god who made him return to his body so he could teach people how to avoid going to such a negative realm. The second man went to a positive realm, which he described as a place of abundance and essentially a mirror image of earth. He met his deceased father who sent him back to his body so that he could tell people about the positive aspects and the happiness of the other world. Interestingly, 60 years later, a Jesuit missionary from France Paul Ragueneau, he was given similar accounts and he was also told that the local people didn't believe in his Christian teachings because they gave credence to their own NDEs than they did to biblical teachings.

Gregory Shushan: More than 300 hundred years later across the continent and across the Pacific Ocean, we have a report from 1890 from an anthropologist named Edward Triger. He wrote that Maori afterlife beliefs derived from the dreams of people in trance through illness and when the soul journeys away and is sometimes on the brink of crossing to Hades but returns is how he described it. He gave one example in which a man returned to life after being dead for five days. The man claimed he'd been in a happy realm of abundance where he met deceased relatives and they warned him not to touch the food or else he wouldn't be able to return to his body. He reached a river and was sent back by an afterlife deity that he met there.

Gregory Shushan: This idea that Maori afterlife beliefs were based on NDEs was confirmed by subsequent anthropologist later. One named Elsdon Best about 15 years after Triger gave two more examples of NDEs of spirits going through a tunnel in the beach, a hole in the beach, and coming out into a realm of light. They came to a fence which they had to climb over, then met deceased relatives who sent them back. The earliest of those Maori reports goes back to 1854. Then across the Indian Ocean in Southern Africa, the Nyakyusa people of Tanzania and Malawi, their knowledge about the afterlife was said to have come from persons who died and returned.

Gregory Shushan: They believed that those who committed suicide must explain to the spirits why they committed suicide, but that didn't actually determine what their afterlife fate would be because everyone is welcomed to come and rest in the other world. The land of spirits was said to be located underground and it was reached through a grave. Once again, traveling through darkness. It was an idealized mirror image of earth once again with lots of abundance of cattle, good hunting and fishing, and spirits of the dead acquired great power there and joined their ancestors in living with the deity.

Gregory Shushan: These cases all exemplify the idea that NDEs commonly form the basis of afterlife beliefs around the world. In the Native American literature alone, I found about 60 historical NDEs from tribes across the continent, not counting many more which seem to be mythologized NDEs about figures traveling to the underworld to rescue their wife or parent. In around a third of those 60 accounts were statements that their afterlife beliefs actually derived from NDEs and that includes all the ones shown here.

Gregory Shushan: You're unlikely to find NDEs discussed in histories of these religions or of any religions for that matter or in any religious studies courses, but I was interested to find that these earlier generations of anthropologists came to similar conclusions specifically about Native Americans including EB Tylor up on the left who actually made the connection cross-culturally. He wrote that the cross-cultural occurrence of men whose spirits traveling in the hallucinations of extreme illness to the land of the dead have returned to reanimate their bodies and tell what they have seen. He argued that these kinds of experiences were responsible for afterlife beliefs around the world.

Gregory Shushan: But let's not be too hasty and over generalize to the point that we ignore some of the differences. Because despite whatever similarities, these differences need to be recognized particularly in how NDEs are received in different cultures. In some ways, this is actually where it gets really interesting because despite the Nyakyusa example I gave earlier, in Africa there's a very different picture created than in Native America. Basically it's a collection of highly diverse cultures across the continent, very different beliefs, but there are some regional tendencies, some distinctively African characteristics that are just not found in Native North America.

Gregory Shushan: Generally speaking, African cultures were simply far less concerned about the afterlife in general. Myths of journeys to spirit realms were very rare, narratives of shamanic other world journeys were very rare, and NDEs were particularly rare. Instead, African religions tended to be more focused on the continued presence of ancestor spirits on earth, as well as with avoiding potentially harmful influences from these spirits. Rather than concerning other world journeys and visionary quest to other worlds, shamanism was really more concerned with spirit possession and witchcraft and attitudes towards the dead were characterized by high degrees of fear and avoidance.

Gregory Shushan: Interestingly of the comparatively few African NDEs I did find, which was only 10 or 12 as opposed to the 60 in North America, nearly all of them were from Bantu-speaking cultures marked in beige there on the map. This corresponds to the fact that Bantu cultures also have more afterlife beliefs, more discussion about the afterlife in general. There's a direct correlation there between interest and occurrence of NDEs. In contrast to the 20 or so Native American NDEs where they actually said this is where we got our afterlife beliefs, in Africa there are only two.

Gregory Shushan: These two are clearly the exceptions that prove the rule and a clue to explaining this difference is the fact that most African NDEs were related in context of fear and aberration rather than valorization and this is a wonderful event that's happened in North America. For example in 1874, there was an account of an Ashanti woman who was killed during a ritual sacrifice, but she revived and found herself surrounded by a lot of other sacrificial victims, all these naked corpses. She went to the council of elders and she claimed that she had been to the underworld and met some gods and they didn't accept her because she was naked.

Gregory Shushan: She asked them if she could go get dressed and then they could kill her again so she could go back, and they did. Then in 1880, the Tanala of Madagascar believed that if a person revived, he or she should be immediately stoned to death. In 1875, a Zulu near-death experiencer was almost killed again on suspicion that he'd been revived by witches. In 1931, the Lambda of West Africa believed that people who returned to death were actually possessed by spirits, meaning not their own spirit, but somebody else's. The Igbo of Nigeria were said to have a deep seeded terror of disembodiment according to report from 1906. Then certain funerary practices also impacted the occurrence of NDEs in Africa.

Gregory Shushan: According to fieldwork from 1904, the Lozian Southern Africa conducted burial immediately after death while the body was still warm. That's clearly not conducive to returning from death. Some cultures would also bind the corpses in a sort of crouching position which would make it impossible to move, let alone free yourself if you found yourself returning to life. In many African societies, the elderly would be abandoned out of earshot of the village essentially to die of starvation or to be eaten by wild animals. Fear of corpses was common. Fear of a reanimated corpse would be even greater as evidenced by legends of zombies.

Gregory Shushan: Even where we do have a return from death context for an African religious belief or movement, the experience itself is actually secondary. We have this account from 1704 of a prophet Beatriz Kimpa Vita from the Congo. She died and returned to life, but actually reported nothing like an NDE. Instead, she claimed that she was possessed by the spirit of St. Anthony. Possession was a much more culturally acceptable phenomenon than an NDE. It was much more compelling than somebody who claimed to have been to another world and

encountered gods and came back. Being possessed by St. Anthony was much more important.

Gregory Shushan: When we look at the social and religious context surrounding beliefs in life after death, it's really not so surprising that NDEs would be rare in African societies. There were cultural restrictions placed on them. It was actually potentially dangerous to even relate that you'd one if you were possibly to be going to be killed afterwards and steps were even taken to prevent them in funerary practices. There was rarely a receptive environment for them to become part of local tradition and that contrast sharply with Native America where long traditions of shamanic practices and visionary experiences meant greater cultural receptivity to NDEs.

Gregory Shushan: The Pacific in the meanwhile fall somewhere in between Africa and North America. There's an almost casual acceptance of roughly 20 or 25 NDEs I found in the Pacific. A handful of statements that afterlife beliefs were based on NDEs. Quite a few afterlife journeys. Shamans did practice retrieving souls from the other world, but there are not that many descriptions of what they found there. They lacked the kind of Native American visionary traditions. There was less interest in the subject of an afterlife than in North America, but more than in Africa. There were some concern with sorcery, though not as much as in Africa. It really does place the Pacific kind of midway along the continuum there.

Gregory Shushan: But this combination of the idea of NDEs cross-culturally and culture specific phenomena or elements still isn't really enough to explain all the similarities and differences across cultures. I think a really compelling theory, really comprehensive understanding of afterlife beliefs and NDEs in relation to culture needs to combine a number of factors. NDEs aren't the end of the story in other words. There's psychological factors. For example, ideas about happy hunting grounds. This idea that the afterlife is an idealized mirror image of earth is kind of Freudian wish fulfillment thing. A compensation for an often difficult and unjust life on earth.

Gregory Shushan: A reward for having lived through this life and getting a better life in the end. Also, social and political factors. Ideas of judgment and punishment are manipulated by the ruling elite. As time goes on, there's actually... You can trace these manipulations in the texts. There's increasingly more detailed descriptions of heavens and hells. Also, environmental factors. The other world, again, being an idealization of earth. If you're in Egypt, it's a celestial Nile or whatever. If you're in the great plains of America, then it's happy ending grounds with buffalo. There's also social hierarchies are preserved in the other world. Occupations are also often preserved.

Gregory Shushan: There are also ritual factors we saw in India. The idea of the soul ascending on its own cremation smoke. Sometimes burial reflects ideas of the afterlife being in an underworld, and then there are factors involving cognition and human conceptual logic. Just being human beings, we think about things in similar ways

across cultures because we have the same kinds of brains. For example, we see life and death in terms of rebirth and the cycles of nature or the cycles of the sun and the moon. Personal perspective I think also plays a part.

Gregory Shushan: The authors of these ancient texts and people who have these experiences are individuals and we're not just automaton products of our cultures who just parrot what we hear back in our culture. If we choose to accept that NDEs are genuine glimpses into the afterlife, genuine adventures of the soul in realms beyond death, there are also metaphysical factors such as encountering spirit beings and feelings of transcendence. As well as specifically afterlife beliefs, NDEs can also lead to innovations and religious practices. For example, among the Mi'kmaq of the gulf of St. Lawrence in Nova Scotia, a man had an NDE and then subsequently introduced shamanic techniques into his tribe.

Gregory Shushan: So, anybody could have an NDE essentially, anybody could replicate the journey that he had. NDEs were instrumental to the formation of some religious movement such as the Ghost Dance in the 19th century and also the Indian Shaker Church. This really grounded these religions and the authority of NDEs and once again enabled the populations to replicate the NDE through shamanic practices. In a way, it's like the democratization of NDEs. Anybody can access this divine reality. This is a cross-cultural phenomenon. It happens in the Pacific. Here's an example of the Koreri movement in West Papua where again these religious movements were often founded on NDEs.

Gregory Shushan: The NDE is also relevant to other types of religious beliefs. I don't think it's such a stretch to suggest that out of body experiences gave rise to beliefs in dualism. Judgment and life review are obviously relevant to righteous behavior. In small scale societies, there are cases of NDEs where gods will give instructions about changing some of kind of habit or negative behavior that the tribe is doing such as wife beating or wasteful funerary practices. In fact, it's possible that beliefs in gods and spirits to begin with actually came from NDEs originally evolved from encounters that people had during NDEs.

Gregory Shushan: To summarize, while NDEs are universal and people commonly base certain religious beliefs on them, they do so only when their cultural environment allows unless, of course, they're totally innovating a way from what their culture beliefs at the time. Then notwithstanding certain funerary rituals which would be reviving impossible, of the kind I talked about in Africa, existing beliefs don't make NDEs more or less likely to happen, but they make them more or less likely to be expressed. As for shamanism, in some cultures shamanic practices are intended to replicate NDEs.

Gregory Shushan: The NDE is a model and proves that such experiences are possible and provides a sort of roadmap for the shaman to take on a culturally particular shamanic journey. The fact that African shamanism is focused more on possession and sorcery, which is very crucial to African beliefs, just shows how culturally distinct shamanism is. We can't really generalize about it too much. Now almost

everyone who's had an NDE genuinely believes that they temporarily left their bodies, encountered spirit beings, went to another realm, and so on. It's understandably that they would interpret the experience as exactly what it appears to be.

Gregory Shushan: Henceforth, believed that consciousness left the body and will survive bodily death. There are many examples of NDEs which run contrary to local or personal beliefs and that demonstrates that NDEs are not predicated on cultural expectations and the African cases are perfect examples. Other good examples are NDEs of atheists. There's a prominent psychologist and mathematical physicist John Wren-Lewis, as well as the very famous atheist philosopher AJ Ayer. Both completely changed their views about the afterlife following their NDEs. I think these kind of cases of these atheists are effectively individual microcosms of the historical examples that I looked at today.

Gregory Shushan: In some ways, support groups which revolve around NDEs can also be seen as a type of a religiosity, helping members to cope with negotiating their new beliefs in light of their experiences. There we go. It's my best slide. NDEs have been fully integrated into popular culture. Even a child in any atheist household who's never heard of NDEs would have no trouble understanding what's going on in these images. Research in cognitive psychology shows us that human beings are hardwired to intuitively believe in an afterlife. As such, we're likely to be receptive to experiences that seem to prove those intuitions correct.

Gregory Shushan: We always want to be proven right, don't we? Of course, the elephant in the room in this research is whether or not it supports the survival hypothesis that NDEs are evidence for life after death. Well, one of the nice things about my study of NDEs and culture is that it can be independent of the survival debate. You might call it a built in cop-out clause. My research makes no commitment to metaphysical or reductionist theorists and in fact could actually be used to support either one. But whether NDEs are genuine spiritual experiences or merely epiphenomena of a dying brain, they've been influencing religion since the beginning of recorded history as I think I've shown here. Thank you.

Speaker 1: We've got about five minutes for questions, so let's have at it.

Audience: I would assume with most of this that you're talking about spontaneous NDEs. A lot of these shamanic cultures and in fact even in Vedas in India, they talk about taking hallucinogenic drugs. Do you think that some of these may have been affected by lot of hallucinogenic drugs or do you think most of them were spontaneous?

Gregory Shushan: I think that in the Native American material at least, they actually make a distinction. It's pretty clear which ones are shamanic, which are NDEs. Sometimes it's a little blurry about which kind of descent myths of shamans, which ones of those are real experiences and which ones are myths. But yeah, you're right. In the Vedas, there's a lot of shamanic sort of activity and also in

the Chinese material. It's really hard to say, but the fact is that when they do have these kinds of journeys, they do say normally that it's to an afterlife realm. In a way, it doesn't matter too much if it's a shamanic experience or a spontaneous one in those senses.

Gregory Shushan: But yeah, I do try to make the distinction where it exist. With the ancient texts, as I said, it's a lot of extrapolating from religious text material without any kind of documentary evidence.

Audience: Hi. Enjoyed your talk. My name is JP. Just in looking at this a layman, I've come to the conclusion too that a lot of religious beliefs and practices and teachings must have come from some NDE experiences. But one thing that in going on the web before coming here and running to stories of, for example, Hindu NDEs where they said, "Well, oh, you know, it's different culturally," and that they would say something like that, "Oh no. I don't want to set it on the blacksmith. I want to set it on the cook."

Audience: The thing that I was a little dismayed about, but maybe it's because the translation isn't full is that in one NDEs that I've looked at or watched or read about, there's always this very important central core that there's this love or acceptance just overwhelming sort of piece. I didn't read about that or hear that in what you presented today. I was wondering that well, is that still there? That seems to me to be a very central component. Is it still there but maybe it hasn't been translated or come across in the translations?

Gregory Shushan: Yeah. Yeah. It could be that or it could also be that it's something that just wouldn't be discussed in the culture. A lot of NDEs also don't specifically describe I left my body, but they talk about their body being in another realm. It's like do you count out of body experience or not. But yeah, that is true. There are some references to it. There was the Chinese one that the guy described feelings of joy, but yeah, a lot of them don't. That's I think one of the continuing problems with NDEs and even with all the stuff I've done on culture. I haven't really been able to determine one particular culture or kind of culture having these specific elements and other cultures having these.

Gregory Shushan: It's pretty difficult. I mean a lot of the small scale societies, beings of light are pretty rare, but again, is that because a deity is already assumed to be a being of light or is it because they didn't see any light. It's like still the eternal question of NDEs. Allen Kelly here did an interesting article on tunnels and NDEs you might find interesting.

Audience: Earlier you were talking about the idea of dualism. Kind of the idea of an ultimate good and an ultimate evil at odds with each other. Certain cultures even within NDE while positive ones are by far the most common, you do have hellish elements to some and some straight out hellish ones. Culturally I was wondering... Different religious have different ideas on the ideas of good or evil,

whether or not there really is an eternal hell that you go to, whether it's a temporal place.

Audience: Did you notice studying it from different cultures whether there was specific elements that tended to lead one culture towards having I guess a more optimistic view like in the Native American cases where hell isn't the eternal place you go to if you do not follow a specific set of practices or such, as opposed to others like Africa or in certain other places where... Gilgamesh, for instance, has a very dark dim view of the afterlife and very negative light. You're almost assuredly going to go to this hellish realm so to speak.

Gregory Shushan: That's an interesting case actually because that that has really been overstated in Mesopotamia especially the Sumerian afterlife. There's a kind of idea which I think goes back to like Old Testament studies comparing the Mesopotamia afterlife to [inaudible 00:55:52] because there are these historical connections between them. But in the text there's a lot of references to a bright place of joy and wonder and happiness and feasting and all this kind of thing. One of the Sumerian texts, the afterlife is based on... Your reward or punishment is based on how many children you have. A man with one child eats just dry bread and sits on bricks in the corner.

Gregory Shushan: It goes up to however kids and the person who had the most kids dwells in opulence with the gods or whatever. No, that's another thing. It's really kind of difficult to generalize about. Not only do the fates and types of fates differ between cultures, but the reasons for reward and punishment differ a lot. That's one example. Another one is whether you've conducted the proper rituals in the right way. It's not always necessarily your moral worth or your good deeds. It's whether you followed certain types of behavior or whether you're a certain class of society, if you're a warrior or a woman who dies in childbirth is another one.

Gregory Shushan: Yeah, again, the nine or so elements that I singled out that were similar cross-culturally are really the main ones that I found. The ones that are left out were left out because they weren't really there that much.

Speaker 1: Let us all give Gregory a nice hand for a wonderful presentation.