

A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE NARRATED BY A VEPSIAN WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

This article* focuses on the immediate near-death experience of an elderly woman living in traditional Vepsian culture. We analyse which universal, and which more culturally motivated features are present in her story narrated to us in 2018. We conclude that, despite the strong association with animistic beliefs in the informant's everyday life, the experience is dominated by elements specific to vernacular Orthodox Christianity. The article presents a translation from Vepsian of a fragmentary personal experience narrative.

KEYWORDS: animistic beliefs • near-death experience • Vepsians • vernacular Orthodox Christianity

INTRODUCTION: THE VEPSIANS IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND TODAY

We have been conducting regular fieldwork in the Central Vepsian settlements in the Leningrad and Vologda oblasts in north-western Russia for more than a decade. This has now been interrupted first by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by the war in Ukraine. We have been primarily interested in the vernacular beliefs presented in native

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conversation, i.e. in memorates, legends and narratives of both personal and mediated experience of the supernatural. During our field trips we have recorded both linguistic and folkloric material. Vepsian is an endangered language with a decreasing number of speakers year by year (Grünthal 2022: 291). According to the last census, there were still 2,173 speakers (Population and Census Data of Russian Federation 2020: Table 4). The number of people who considered themselves Vepsians was slightly higher at 4,534 (ibid.: Table 1). The area of Vepsian settlement has been gradually decreasing since their scientific documentation started in the second quarter of the 19th century (Grünthal 2015: 12). Thus, by the 21st century Vepsian is spoken only in the less accessible parts of north-western Russia. The spread of better roads, mobile phone communication and the internet means rapid assimilation.

The self-awareness of Vepsians has been negatively affected by the disparaging attitude towards the non-Russian population that spread rapidly in the 20th century. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, this accelerated the voluntary assimilation of new generations firstly in the loss of language and secondly moving away from traditional settlement areas. A short period of support for and development of native language and culture in the 1930s on the wave of the *korenizatsiya* policy (Strogal'shnikova 2016: 91–101; for a more detailed overview of the whole phenomenon, Liber 1991) was followed by an unequivocal decline. At the end of the 1980s, the perestroika period brought a new rise (Strogal'shnikova 2016: 120–131), which has now subsided. The national interests of Vepsians have been nullified by state bureaucracy and Russian chauvinism. Vepsians do not have a de facto education system in their own language today. The optional learning of the mother tongue is reduced to a minimum in local schools, and Vepsian is already learned as a foreign language. Therefore, more or less fluent Vepsian is spoken only by middle-aged and retired people. Because of this language death our fieldwork has also a dimension of preservation.

Living relatively far from large cities, rather sparsely between large forest and swamp massifs, has preserved the close connection of the Vepsian vernacular worldview with animistic beliefs. In Vepsian animistic ontology, nature and its inhabitants have not lost their animistic character even now. Spirits inhabiting different areas and objects are an elemental part of experience stories, especially for older people. For them the traditional worldview is still a lived reality. In daily life, spirits, healers and specialists in verbal magic (Vps. *tedai*) are treated with respect.

Although during the 20th century the Soviet Union successfully destroyed Russian Orthodox shrines and clergy, the anti-religious policy did not reach penetrate the grass-roots level and the science-based worldview, spread through schooling, has not been able to eradicate old beliefs. For example, through the 20th century herding in collective farms preserved the magical contracts with the forest spirits made by shepherds belonging to old professional dynasties (see also Arukask 2018) and livestock were cured and birth was assisted using charms; lost animals were found using magical negotiations with the forest spirit; and folk medicine, searching for missing persons, love magic, fortune telling, etc., still belong to the field of activity of *tedai* even today.

The thousand-year-old Orthodox tradition has undoubtedly left its mark on the Russian cultural space. Popular Orthodoxy is organically intertwined with animistic beliefs and practices. It is not wrong to say that especially for communities further away from urban churches and monasteries, Christianity has had to accommodate an animis-

tic belief system. Saints had to be assimilated in the realm of animistic spirits (or vice versa), religious beliefs assimilate into magical understandings and practices, etc. We have not observed any conflict in people's perceptions of this topic. Due to the language barrier, illiteracy, the restricted influence of canonical Christianity, and the period of atheism during the Soviet era, official Orthodoxy has not been able to penetrate too deeply into the consciousness of local Vepsians. Yet it is familiar through Orthodox iconography, the calendar system, and other influences.

Since the 1990s, the Orthodox faith in Russia has begun to reclaim its positions more forcefully. However, in remote rural areas, the restoration of churches in local centres has not been achieved to any great extent. In the intervening hundred years, churches have at best been preserved as buildings, although transformed into warehouses, cultural centres, etc. A large number of them have also simply been destroyed with only a few now regaining their former function. On the other hand, small chapels have been vigorously restored (or rather rebuilt) in the villages. Along with this, the tradition of local chapel feasts, which had begun to fragment in the meantime, has also been restored in places where the community is still viable.

We cannot analyse here the syncretistic nature of the chapel holidays and the rituals performed there, i.e. the interweaving of canonical Orthodoxy and animistic-magical beliefs (see more on this in Heikkinen 2006; Vinokurova 2007; 2010; 2012). In any case, chapel feasts have had an important place in the identity of the community throughout history. They have brought people closer to Orthodoxy over the centuries and transmitted Christian understandings and ideas of popular culture. In recent decades, these feasts have also been supported by the media. In the case of our target group, first of all, information and propaganda spreads through television. Orthodoxy, its ideology and aesthetics are regularly present in Russian TV programs. The influence of television on the Russian population is significant and consistent even in the case of passive viewing. For the popular consciousness, the TV screen itself is like an icon in the corner of the room – always present, influencing and controlling.

THE WOMAN AND HER CULTURAL BACKGROUND

This article is based on the experience story of one of our informants, which we recorded in the summer 2018, while working in a village of rather isolated Pätzhar' (officially Pyazhozero) settlement in the western part of Vologda Oblast, Russia. From the nearest settlement point, it is about 15 km on a poor gravel road, and beyond the settlement of Pätzhar', human habitation ends. What makes this story special for us (and of course for the speaker herself), is the theme – the near-death experience (NDE). We have not been able to record anything like this in such detail before, although the supernatural and related experiences have always been of interest to us. In this article, we will focus primarily on the presentation of the story itself, and the description of the speaker's personality and background. Although the study of NDEs has a long enough history, methodologically in-depth studies have been dominated by Western cases. As a Western religious discourse, the specific interconnection of NDE with Christian, mystic, spiritualist-occult, theosophical and esoteric discourses has been extensively analysed by Jens Schlieter (2018). However, there is also evidence of other approaches to traditions

less touched by the Western cultural context (cf. Carr 1993; Perera et al. 2005; Belanti et al. 2008; Kellehear 2008, etc.).

Our informant, a woman G (we will leave her name unknown), born in 1937, was familiar to us from our previous field sessions. She had spent most of her life as a collective farm worker in her home village. She had seven years of education, which might be considered normal for a person of her generation who had not moved away from her home place. Our conversations were predominantly in Vepsian. We mention this because today all Vepsians are bilingual, and especially when communicating with people outside their community (and not only with them, unfortunately) they tend to use Russian automatically. Thus, we have had to adjust the linguistic code-switching (from Vepsian to Russian) from time to time when communicating with our informants, due to our research interests.

As an informant, G is characterised by an above-average interest in and openness to supernatural topics. As mentioned above, talking about animistic spirits, extraordinary experiences, verbal magic, etc., is not a completely alien topic for the older generation of Vepsians. At the same time, this does not imply an absolute openness in this field. On the contrary, even when communicating with confidential acquaintances, such as ourselves, many informants are reserved. Caution in not opening up fully only confirms a person's belief in animistic reality. The spirits and what goes on around them are part of reality, not an entertainment belonging to a fictional fairy-tale world. It is not uncommon for people to either conceal or deny their own knowledge and experience in this area.

Nevertheless, we got to talking with G about 'uncommon things' more than usual. This may also have been due to her inherent trust in us. It also seemed that, in addition to a relatively more open manner of communication, these topics could have been of more than average interest to her, or that this interest and desire to discuss these things exceeded the usual cautionary boundaries typical for Vepsian people. Already at our first meeting in 2014, G spoke to us in detail about, for example, the ways in which she communicates with her house spirit (the presence of a house spirit in the household is elementary for Vepsians). Although Greyson (2014) proposes a greater openness to the mystical among those who report NDE, we are not sure whether and to what extent the animistic worldview of the Vepsians can be equated with the Western understanding of mysticism.

Thus, like other Vepsians of her generation, G was completely at home with animist beliefs. It was part of her vernacular religious worldview, a more or less experienced reality. G's home is situated on the shore of a lake a few hundred metres from the forest boundary that encircles the entire settlement of Pätzhar'. The different parts of the settlement were in turn divided by wooded intermediate areas and a swamp, in addition to meadows. Thus, apart from the immediate home space, wild nature and the 'animistic biodiversity' associated with it were everywhere around.

In addition to the diverse natural environment, G's immediate surroundings included some nearby neighbouring households. The whole settlement was characterised rather by depopulation, with younger people moving away in search of work and a more social environment. G had also been living alone for many years since her husband's death. However, during the summer there were always more people around, fishermen from afar constantly coming to the lake, as well as periodic visits from G's children and grandchildren living in the towns. Near G's house, in a meadow by the

lake, there was a village party place. It was a small area where once a summer, or less, the local *Elon pu* ('Tree of Life') folk festival was held, a Vepsian cultural event with songs, dances and other entertainment organised by the local cultural worker. However, this kind of celebration rarely revived the place, and we did not happen to come across it.

It is important to note that the former church of Pärzhar' and the cemetery next to it are located in the immediate vicinity of G's household. The wooden church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord could have been a nice building until the coming of the Soviet Union. Fortunately, the towers of the church were never removed and the cemetery around it was never destroyed, a fate that befell many churches and cemeteries with the advent of Soviet power. During World War II, a hospital was located in the church building. Next to the community cemetery, a separate, smaller section for the Soviet soldiers who died in the hospital has been preserved. Although the church was not visibly damaged from the outside, it had been neglected for a long time. During the years of our field trips (2014–2019), the roof of the church leaked dangerously, the towers were in a sad state and without crosses and the exterior looked grey. Not so long ago, the replacement of the windows began, but even this work had stalled.

Inside the church, one could see a dilapidated oven, shabby floors and a partially changed interior plan. The altar part and the entire interior were missing (probably for a century). However, there was an improvisational altar designed in the right wall with some printed holy pictures and other relevant items. The crumbling church thus fulfilled its original function and had a sacred meaning, at least for someone. Despite the fact that less than 50 inhabitants lived in Pärzhar' during the winter, the small cemetery was relatively tidy and the graves well maintained. Locals who have passed away were still buried in the cemetery, and during the last few years some of our good informants also found their place there.

As expected, G also had an icon corner in her home, as is characteristic of popular Orthodoxy. Throughout the 20th century, the Soviet government fought for the abandonment of holy corners, with varying degrees of success. If they became somewhat less popular in the intervening decades, then since the 1990s icon corners have returned almost everywhere. Thus, Orthodox Christianity at the grassroots level certainly also had a place in G's life, although as a person of the Soviet era, her knowledge of Christian prayers was minimal. Although we never specifically researched it, G may have known, at least in general terms, the legend related to the feast of her home church (the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the eighth Sunday after Pentecost, in the summer), when the three disciples Peter, James and John saw the divine glory and the play of light that had fallen from heaven to Jesus on Mount Tabor. Next to Jesus, disciples also saw the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:28–36; Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8). We can only speculate whether some similar knowledge could have had an effect on the NDE we were told about.

THE PROBLEM AND NATURE OF THE NDE

The study of NDEs has developed into an interdisciplinary research field since Raymond A. Moody's pioneering book *Life After Life* (1975). The different approaches of

physicians, psychiatrists, palliative care workers, and researchers of different religions are intertwined here. There are both similar elements and differences in the stories of people who have experienced a NDE. An interesting question is whether and to what extent these visions arise from a psychophysiological cause, can be explained medically, or depend on religious or other cultural influences. The range of explanations is, as expected, wide (see Greyson 2015: 777–783). It is logical to ask which perception and/or memory processes are activated in an NDE situation and what is the role of previous personal experience here.

According to the pioneering discovery of Endel Tulving (1972: 384–387; 2002), humans have a subjective autonoetic consciousness, thanks to which it is possible to relive a past individual experience and project it into the future: “Episodic memory is oriented to the past in a way in which no other kind of memory, or memory system, is. It is the only memory system that allows people to consciously re-experience past experiences.” (Tulving 2002: 8) Based on this, the passing of life events in front of the eyes, which is characteristic of the near-death state and often occurs in NDEs, should somehow be related to the episodic memory unique to the person. The activation of memory processes at the moment of death has also been recorded. Different cognitive activities in the brain generate electrical signals of different frequencies, which are denoted by letters of the Greek alphabet. If the activity of alpha or beta frequencies decreases before death, activity in the gamma-band related to remembering and recalling, as well as meditation, increases (Vicente et al. 2022).

At the same time, images of the other side, which do not reflect individual experience but contain recognisable cultural (especially religious) details, should be based on semantic memory, i.e. existing knowledge (cf. Tulving 1972: 382–395). However, the question is to what extent there is a reason to reduce the whole phenomenon of NDE to memory processes and human brain activity. At this point, the results of Pim van Lommel (2013) and his working group in establishing and investigating the existence of *non-local consciousness* are important. Often, people who have gone through an NDE have been in brain death for a longer time, for example due to cardiac arrest. When the heart stops, the supply of oxygen to the brain ends very quickly, the brain stops working, and according to common understanding, human consciousness should also stop with it. If a person has a heart attack and cannot be revived within 5–10 minutes, death will occur. Nevertheless, there are enough cases where a person has regained consciousness even after brain death (for example nine minutes, cf. *ibid.*: 9–10) and reported what he or she saw and experienced while ‘passing away’. According to our informant G, she was in “another world” for three days, but we have no further knowledge of the medical details (it is very likely that she was in a coma).

So, in the case of an NDE, when brain activity has temporarily stopped, some other way of consciousness should function, the human consciousness should be located ‘somewhere else’, outside the physical organism handled by conventional medicine. Understandably, this is a challenge to the classical understanding of human consciousness and its location (see also Greyson 2010). As could be understood, G’s illness was caused by some kind of blood poisoning, the source of which we could not find. Medical help did not reach her this time and she was in a near-death state; both before and after this she was at home under the supervision of her daughter T who was present. It would have seemed quite impossible for an ambulance or other medical personnel to

reach this remote village. G could have received the necessary aid and hospitalisation only with the help of a helicopter.

The event in question took place in the summer of 2017. Some time after G had the NDE, we came to Pāzhar' for fieldwork. Wanting to meet G, we heard about her serious condition and that she is not able to communicate with anyone for long at the moment. However, we were allowed to visit her, her house and the room where she was lying. A few days had passed since her 'death' at that moment. Still weak and in an unstable state, G recognised us. During the few minutes we were there, we could not do any recording. It was, above all, a meeting with a good friend. At that moment, it seemed possible that we would never meet again. We remember that G was under the strong influence of what she had experienced. The experience had affected her both physically and emotionally. Despite her exhaustion, she said "I do not know if I was in hell or in paradise". We could only wish her strength and recovery, and leave.

A year later, when back in Pāzhar', we were delighted to learn that G had recovered and was able to take care of herself. We visited her on a day that suited her. G's general condition was not quite the same, it was clear that in addition to her age, she had also been crushed by the crisis a year ago. However, we were able to have a nice tea together, and among other things, she talked about her NDE. Once again, it was clear that what she had experienced had a great impact on her. What was seen in the NDE seemed to have crystallised partly as fragmentary images or dreamlike episodes of action. Talking about it did not require much absorption or effort from her but seemed to be in her 'active consciousness'. However, what we heard was not a polished narrative. It was understandable that there were parts of the experience that were confusing or only guessed at by G. We let her speak without interrupting and recorded what we heard with her consent. The NDE was narrated in Vepsian.

G'S EXPERIENCE STORY AND THE POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF ITS EPISODES

The text of the interview, which in total was about eight minutes long, originally transcribed in Vepsian using ELAN¹ software, is presented in the following, translated from Vepsian. Since G's speech was very broken, the original Vepsian transcription and translation presented here are also fragmentary, grammatically often incoherent, containing omissions and confusing passages. (Square brackets are used to mark our additions; /---/ marks unclear words.)

Q: But you said you were like in paradise.

G: I was, I was in paradise. For example, [I was] shown: in a circle they sit, a pit [grave] and in a circle all the horns/horned ones sit like this. And discussed all whom to save and... And the pit of sulphur. Another room – the caldron is boiling. And in the caldron these swim like on the end of a fishing line, these, well, they are leeches, and so on, they are tiny, they are so long [illustrates using her hands] and they boil like that. In this third [room are] puppies. Such a huge wide one, even, made of birch wood like that. /---/ it closes from above. Puppies go from there, [and] back again. Fourth room – kittens. And then [they] opened the gate,

children's toys, well all kinds of toys, all kinds of toys. And everyone is moving – horses and dolls and it seemed to me that everyone was moving. But then, three arched gates, from there someone comes out and dances. But a man came, the men of war were, in a cape-like garment and without sleeves. Those capes and raincoats were like that, I remember. Such a man came, rushed us all to these arched gates, or run into the rooms, he alone led. [He] spins, waves, [(?) in the cage] there are those shoes, shiny shoes with gold chains. But these dolls are like that, they are all children's, colourful. But to this. This man spins with a hooded cloak or what it is. Well, in these /---/ like brown, dark brown, very dark such a /---/, it also seemed so colourful. But from the other side, from above, a girl descends, like a [circus] artist. In this, on this side, she flew again. With this hand holds for support. And [also] shoes for herself, light like this, they are not light, fur coat, here and this is light also like this. Fur coat, long coat. And she says something and I feel stupid, can't hear, can't hear at all. Said, said, something is waving and to get up there again, with this hand, with this side I flew up [in the air] to get up. And then the room arrived [i.e. then I arrived in the room]. But someone from somewhere says: "G, you need to make a cross on three icons." And thus [I say]: "I do not see, I do not see." I say something like this: "I can't see. Who are [they]?" said to the three, whoever they were. And as for me, it is necessary to put Nicholas the Wonderworker under this pillow. Well, then for such a ... for the priest and for Nicholas the Wonderworker and Mary the Mother of God, they needed to [make a cross] like that and that's it. And here this mown field where the feast is coming, in this field the earth is brown, as if it had been mowed and dried. But the table, I am lying on the table. And I look, and one rises from the ground and makes a ring around it with the censer, did it three times, and three priests rose from there. And three more lines, in this six, in this nine, but there I don't know, I counted them as six men, in this nine. There were three priests, these /---/ were placed on the head and on these sides by three people. Well, I see, there were again some kind of drinking glasses, I don't know, they put the glass in the same way. With these they started to give tea to the priests, they chatted about something there, they said something, but far away and I can't hear, they say, I can't [hear]. But one [of them] ... doesn't have girls or women like that, everyone is on the men's side like that, I wonder [what else]. But one of these women /---/, those fine handkerchiefs with which you go to church like this, like a wind brought spots on the face of this priest, and so here. But then the priest says: "Nadezhda, Nadezhda, Nadezhda." The third time I woke up. I woke up: "Oh! T, T, I'm burning, I'm burning!" in this room's large side and: "Mum, how are you burning?" "I'm burning, very hot and sweaty and..." "Mum you're not on fire, no." "Give me a drop of cold water!" "No, I won't give cold water," she says, "I won't, mum, you're all sweaty." But T /---/ to the chapel I will take you. Brought three pieces of cloth, two pillow-cases and this flannel towel. And covered me with a towel and on my head /---/, that T, the steam began to rise like that until these pieces of cloth dried. T also did something with [my] body, the body temperature must be thirty-six, [she said]. and I slept, I slept, I know I fell asleep. I woke up again:

"T, I don't have half a head."

"Mum, how don't you have a head?"

"No, this [side of my] head doesn't exist."

There was such a noise, terrible such a noise, a noise. [Considers how to explain.]

Well, noise. And [T] controls: "Mother, mother, you don't have a mouth like that."

"Mother, mother, here is a mouth and here half a head and." Next to me again and:

"Holding [your] head." And couldn't sleep on that ear for a month. When I put it on the pillow, a huge noise. Space/air was needed. Blood vessels, see, T she [says] that the blood vessels are big. And glory to God, God even helped. And more, twice they were from the city of Cherepovets, there was a priest with a woman, and they took [me] to the church. Well, this priest says like this first, that in order to get relief to repent of sin, I don't know why I am a sinner, but I just say: "Sinner, sinner."

In a nutshell, we can summarise G's experience as follows. G is shown a sulphur pit and horned creatures sitting in a circle possibly around it, debating who, apparently those in the pit, should or should not be saved. The vision moves as if through different rooms. In another room, a kettle is boiling. In the cauldron, floating as if on the end of a fishing line, are some creatures that G thinks of as leeches. In the third room, she sees a wide vessel opening and closing from above. Puppies come in and out of it. In the fourth room are kittens. A doorway is opened, from which come lots of children's toys – horses, dolls; they move around like living things. There are three archways in total, which will be opened, and dancing creatures come out.

But then a man in a hooded cloak without sleeves comes in, seemingly along with other soldiers, and shoos everyone through the gates back to their rooms. The man is waving, twirling his garment apparently scattering everyone. Shiny shoes with gold chains can be seen in the cage (it remains unclear if it is the room where the puppies were), as well as dolls, children's toys (it seems that the man pushed them in it). Something dark brown, dark can be seen inside something, something looks colourful.

Somewhere from the other side, a girl descends from above, flying like a trapeze artist, holding herself with one hand so as not to fall. She has light-coloured or not light-coloured – G is uncertain here – shoes and a light-coloured overdress. She says something, but G cannot hear anything that is said. In any case, she invites G along, G takes off sideways into the air and ends up somewhere in the room.

Someone somewhere says: "G, you have to worship three icons." G replies that she cannot in any way see who the three saints are but is told to worship whoever they are. It is necessary to put the icon of St Nicholas the Wonderworker under her pillow. The priest (*batyushka*), St Nicholas the Wonderworker and the Mother of God are to be worshipped, and that is it.

There is a mown meadow, which G compares to a nearby lakeside area where festivities are held. It is mown, brown and parched. She is lying on a table and sees someone, probably an Orthodox priest, coming up from the ground and making three circles with an incense burner, possibly around her. From there three priests rise.

Three lines, six and/or nine men at a time move around, which seemingly could be compared to an Orthodox church service. The three priests are wearing some kind of special headgear. There are drinking glasses, and the priests are being served tea; they are saying something, but again G cannot hear what is being said. There are only men, no women.

The wind carries or throws a thin headscarf, the kind women use in church. It turns to be spots on the priest's face – G recalls this episode humorously. Then the priest says "Nadezhda, Nadezhda, Nadezhda", and on the third time the informant wakes up already in "this world".

She feels as though she is burning in fire and asks her daughter for water. She covers her with wet clothes, steam rises, the clothes dry, her body temperature drops. G falls asleep, wakes up again, feels that half her head is missing, hears a terrible noise. The daughter turns it into a joke and convinces the mother that everything is fine. But putting one side of her head on the pillow G hears the terrible noise for a long time afterwards and cannot stay in bed like that. Her blood vessels are swollen, which is probably caused by high blood pressure.

In the conversation that follows, the topics of thanking God and repenting sin follow, and the whole conversation inclines from lived experience to something else.

In the following we analyse the elements of G's NDE by category.

Christian Elements

Listening to, and later rereading the transcription of, this description of an undoubtedly impressive experience, it cannot be unnoticed that elements related to Christian beliefs and images predominate. Their origins could be traced either to Orthodox iconography or, more generally, to the roles or beings in Christian visual art. The vision begins with an image of a sulphur pit. This, together with the mention of some horned creatures, leads directly to the icons depicting the Last Judgement or other apocalyptic episodes. There is no doubt that the horned satyric devil is one of the most attractive figures in Christian art. The boiling cauldron with the creatures around and in it is also apocalyptic in origin, as a symbol of hellish sufferings. G is aware that all this "was shown" to her.

The described rooms and the three arched doorways can be taken as Christian architectures (in a heavenly sense now?). A gateway could mark a way forward or a connection to somewhere. The gateway as such is a familiar element in every person's daily life. In an Orthodox context, one can mention an important type of religious gateway, the so-called royal doors (*Tsarskiye vrata*) in the iconostasis of every Orthodox church. In an Orthodox church these arched double gates symbolise the entrance to paradise, with behind them a mystery and sanctity inaccessible to common people. From there, the altar is inaccessible and can only be entered by ordained clergy. We can only refer here to the dominant meaning of the gates. We do not know the details of the gates in G's vision except that they are arched. In G's home church, the entire iconostasis had long since been destroyed, but this need not imply her ignorance of its existence. Obviously, arched doorways are predominant elsewhere in Orthodox architecture.

In addition to the horned creatures, the icons mentioned at the end of the vision, which G must worship, are of clear Christian origin. Specifically mentioned are the icons of Nicholas the Wonderworker and the Mother of God. Both are prominent and important icons/saints in the Orthodox context. Three priests – Orthodox clergymen – are also mentioned. There seems to be a connotation here of a kind of Orthodox worship with priests with incense burners and a certain number of people (men) who could be likened, if one wished, to church servants or people attending worship.

The person in the hooded robe at the beginning of the vision could be identified with a monk, and in the Orthodox context specifically a schema monk. However, the lack of collars on the garment and the strange behaviour of the figure argue against this. Could the girl in white descending from above be an angel? The narrator does not confirm this in her story. Angels are more likely to be male (as per Orthodox icons) or genderless.

Specific (Universal) Elements of the NDE

In addition to culturally specific elements, universal overlaps often have been observed in NDEs. Such recurring elements attracted the attention of Moody from the very beginning, and he categorised them in his pioneering monograph *Life After Life*. In his book Moody (1975) arranges the following stages or experiences as separate stages:

- ineffability;
- hearing oneself pronounced dead;
- feelings of peace and quiet;
- hearing a noise;
- seeing/going through a dark tunnel;
- being out of one's body;
- meeting other beings (including previously departed acquaintances or relatives);
- meeting the being of light – experiencing an extraordinary personalised light (for example at the end of a tunnel). The being of light may have asked the experiencer important questions about the quality of the life he or she has lived;
- panoramic life review;
- coming to the border of death;
- returning (to the body) by invitation or otherwise, often against the will of the experiencer.

Moody also specifically mentions the fact that experiencers do not hesitate to describe their experiences to others, which proves the realism (rather than dreaminess) of what they have experienced. He also points out that the experience usually has a significant impact on the person's life thenceforward and on their perception of life and death in general.

There is no doubt that G was struck by what she experienced. The significance of this had in no way diminished, even a year later, when our interview took place. Nor did G have any hesitation in sharing this strange incident with us.

In G's story we recognise or sense the following 'universals': the light being, in the form of a girl in a light dress descending from above, whom G compares to a circus artist; taking off as if at someone's invitation (similar to going through a tunnel?); an out-of-body experience, in the form of G seeing herself lying on a table; hearing a noise on the way back. The scenes in the final part of the vision – worshipping icons, being in a parched or scorched field – could be identified with reaching the 'final frontier', the apogee of an NDE, although this remains more speculative on our part.

In the final part of the vision, the situation where the priest(s) with the incense burner emerges from the ground and the ritual around G's body takes place would seem to transcend into some kind of Orthodox church service or (why not) the some-

times customary drinking of tea that follows it (tea glasses, chatting). The priest's triple "Nadezhda" acts as a kind of return signal, which also seems to wake G up. The word in Russian is both a woman's name (although it was not the first name of the protagonist here) and can be translated as 'hope'.

We can observe that what G experiences does not coincide with Moody's list of episodes. Indeed, it has been argued that the occurrence of episodes varies from person to person, as well as being culturally determined (Greyson 2015: 776–777).

Other Elements

Characteristic of oral performance, G's account of her NDE is not a stylistically polished narrative. We can be sure that it is anchored around essential elements, yet G does not seem to have attempted to compose it in any way that would make it more understandable or clear. It is probably more characteristic of people from a tradition with greater literary influence (i.e. the Western world). The written culture, and people living in it, inherently strive for greater analytical and systematic approaches and try to generalise and "understand" things from a distance (cf. Ong 2002 [1982]: 36–57). As we can see, there is still enough in G's story to be puzzling and obscure for herself, not to mention us.

The animals and other creatures seen in the rooms form an important part of the story: cats and dogs both in and outside cages, various moving toys (horses, dolls, etc.). A hooded man (or men, soldiers) behaving actively (or aggressively) adds a kind of drama to the experience. G remembers a number of distinct details that do not, however, explain much to us. In the final part of the experience, images of G's already half-awake, apparently also feverish and exhausted state, the complications of re-entering the "old" body, and communication with the nursing daughter are intertwined. The priest of the town of Cherepovets, who appears at the end of the story, already seems clearly to come from "this world".

IN CONCLUSION: CHRISTIAN AND FINNIC BELIEF LAYERS

Summarising this NDE, we can conclude that for G, in addition to universal elements of a more general nature, specific images or episodes of Christian origin were activated or actualised. The whole experience seemed to her first and foremost a visit to "paradise (and hell)". Of course, such sojourns in Christian topos have a venerable history in both Western and Eastern Christian traditions and corresponding literature. In the Orthodox tradition, apocryphal texts should be mentioned, the knowledge of which spread among the people of Russia over the centuries, for example with the "Descent of the Virgin into Hell" (Rus. *Hozhdeniye Bogoroditsy po mukam*) with its description of hell and its victims (Rozhdestvenskaya 2002: 159–170, 231–232). The strong binarism of images of the otherworld in Russian (and Slavic) folk Orthodox experiences of the otherworld (*obmiraniya*) has been emphasised, where visions distinguish between lower and upper areas of hell, as well as left and right, and folk interpretations are closely linked to Christian morality (Wigzell 2005). We do not directly encounter anything like this in the G's story. Her mode of expression is rather hesitant, expressing her own

surprise. Perhaps this exclusive dominance of Christian elements is the most surprising fact about G's experience story. As mentioned above, we do not have to consider even a superficial knowledge of the Christian elements, visual language, rituals, etc., specific to folk culture, to be impossible for G. On the contrary, there were enough sources for the active realisation of Christianity in her life. However, a completely different experiential orientation could also have come into question, the reasons for which will be briefly discussed below.

The pervious view of the afterlife in the old worldview of the Finnic peoples (including Vepsians) is somewhat different from that of the Christians (Siikala 2002: Chapter 4). Some of its elements have probably not disappeared even now, being preserved in funeral customs, lamentation (ritual crying), and the animistic world view in general, especially among the older generation of Vepsians in villages far from urban centres. During previous fieldwork, we once noted the story of a completely different NDE. In 2007, a Vepsian healer and *tedai*, whose health had deteriorated significantly in old age, spoke of her NDE, which had also occurred in a medically critical, possibly clinical death situation.

The worldview of the narrator of this experience contained a rather archaic idea of life after death, which she, as a person belonging to the dynasty of illiterate *tedai*, knew traditionally (see also Arukask 2019). She had already spoken a few times before in an interview situation, saying that after death, a person reaches the underground world, where he or she meets the departed ancestors and where a communal life similar to the one on earth continues. For the narrator, knowing that she would be able to meet her departed loved ones again was very important emotionally. Talking to her after her NDE, she happily confirmed what she had previously known. Indeed, in an NDE she had gone to the other side, in the archaic worldview known to her, met her lost relatives and seen their way of life (in "blue houses").

In this experience story, which was not so detailed, but all the more important emotionally, the usual elements typical of NDEs (a tunnel, light, images of a previous life, etc.) were not mentioned, except for meeting people who had previously passed away. Christian elements were also completely absent, although the details of Christian church service, the architectural style and visual language of Orthodox churches were by no means unknown to the narrator. The images of this experience could be explained by the fact that for the narrator, as a prominent *tedai*, and not only the bearer of a very archaic worldview but also a practitioner of it, Christian beliefs were not that important and didn't contribute so much to the creation of reality. Pre-Christian beliefs, including the old mythology of the Finnic peoples, had much greater weight here.

For the Vepsians of the older generation, such mythology was reflected in the topographical elements of the afterlife presented in the laments and in the importance of the communal afterlife described above. Indeed, in Vepsian lament texts there are themes where the mourner invites members of the community of the dead to meet the departed one, to receive him or her. The world of the dead is depicted as being located on the other side of a water body or swamp, access to which requires the use of a bridge or boat (e.g. Zaytseva and Zhukova 2012: 153–154; also Siikala 2002: 139–145). Such laments probably could not be unfamiliar to G, who lived quite near to the cemetery. There are commemoration customs which include the "mobility" of the deceased, i.e. calling him or her home from and sending them back to the cemetery after a commemoration ritual

at the table at home, something that is done through a physical walk and verbal speech acts (Vinokurova 2011: 123–128).

Despite the fact that similar archaic pre-Christian beliefs and practices must have been known to G, and must have been kept alive or even encouraged by her traditional way of life, animistic beliefs and the relative ‘paganism’ of popular Orthodoxy do not appear in her NDE as analysed in this article.

NOTES

¹ ELAN computer software Version 6.7 (2023). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, the Language Archive. Retrieved from <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>.

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