

Survival of Bodily Death  
An Esalen Invitational Conference  
December 6 - 11, 1998

Cross-Cultural Dimensions  
Sukie Miller

Sukie Miller led this discussion and began with a vivid and rather amazing personal story from some of her field research in Brazil. She set out to study beliefs around the afterdeath (her term of choice) in various cultures. Brendan O'Reagen, the former director of research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, recommended Brazil and Bahia in particular. Bahia has a rich tradition deriving from African slaves who hid their Yoruba religion within Catholicism, resulting in something called Candomble. Through an anthropologist named Juanita, who had married an important figure in the Candomble, Sukie and Brazilian Edmundo Barbosa were invited to a significant ritual on a local island. The 48-hour ritual focused on the returning ancestors, the returning dead, called the Egun. Juanita and her husband could not go for health reasons, so Sukie was forced to attend on her own. The first odd event was that the head of ceremonies said they had been expecting her, though there were no lines of communication available that she knew of.

Sukie and Barbosa were then allowed into the temple for the nighttime ritual. This Candomble ritual revolves around the Egun, the long-departed ancestors, who entered the temple through a locked door and were draped in fantastic fabrics with bells and mirrors. The Egun do weddings, baptisms, initiations, healings, and rituals and they are beloved by the community. The children were fixated on the Egun and sang songs back and forth. Initiates enforced distance between the Egun and the "living," for it was said that if a coat of the Egun touches one, it will burn. The event went on the whole night, with goat sacrifices, ancestors coming in through windows, and a variety of seemingly magical things. Normal reality-testing was suspended; Sukie felt the whole night went beyond anything she had seen or heard. High initiates into the religion are allowed to don the costumes and take on the roles, in a similar manner to the kachinas in the American Southwest. There seem to be elements of possession or altered states, similar to those employed by ancient oracles, all which added to the mystery of the ceremony.

The line became increasingly blurred between reality and the paranormal a few years later when Sukie's mother in New York was in the process of dying. As Sukie laid down to go to sleep, she heard powerful drumming coming from her living room. When she entered the room, it was filled with drumming and dancing Egun. There were odors of food in the kitchen and the toilet was flushing. She immediately assumed these sights were side-products of her fevered state, simple hallucinations, but she allowed herself to enjoy them. The "visitors" came again the next night, just as convincingly, and then her mother died. The question of the "reality" of the visitation only becomes relevant within a skeptical Western context. The Brazilian Candomble accepts the reality of the Egun and people who do not are anomalies. This allows for a suspension of disbelief and perhaps the admittance of something truly paranormal. Readiness is key: there are stories of people who go to see the Egun and fall asleep for the entire ceremony, a difficult feat to accomplish.

Sukie developed a grid of 180 questions to administer cross-culturally to thirty different groups in India, Brazil, Nigeria, and Indonesia, chosen for the richness of their afterdeath system (e.g. the Mahapatra in India, an untouchable caste that burns bodies and stays with the dead until the spirits are ready to move on). Her intent was to study beliefs around the afterdeath, especially details and nuances beyond the simple fact of whether or not there is something like an afterdeath, and she targeted those shamans, healers, and elders who reportedly knew something of these matters. The research was very difficult, even with a senior researcher in each country: her formulations of questions often presupposed Western ideas, translation was challenging, and many shamans just took the answers for granted. Questions included rating statements like "the afterdeath will be personally transformational," and reflecting on questions such as "what will you 'be' in the afterdeath (pure consciousness, subtle body, regular body)?" Gender in the afterdeath? Sense of humor? Ability to see? She tried to flesh out the details of cultural beliefs and use the questionnaire as a way to initiate a deeper dialogue. A secondary intent was educational; not only did the questionnaire evoke one's own beliefs but stimulated thinking about what is possible to believe. She explored the results in her first book (Miller, 1997).

In general, her work shows that what we experience is often colored or even predetermined by what we believe. Many cultures in Africa, Brazil, and India view the presence of spirits as so unremarkable that it is occasionally difficult to discern whether they are referring to living or deceased individuals. The same cultural shaping extends into visions of the afterdeath; most of what people report in various cultures is shaped and colored by their cultural belief system.

Sukie found four quasi-universal "stages" of the afterdeath in nearly all cultures which articulate such a system. The first stage is waiting -- which can be as short as a few minutes to as long as centuries -- in which the traveler becomes accustomed in various ways to the shock of dying and the transition to a spirit world. The Jewish tradition of sitting shiva has roots in this belief. The second stage is judgment, which varies from karmic equations to divine judgment to self-judgment and might involve the most recent life or all past lives. The third stage Sukie calls "possibilities" (e.g. heaven or hell), during which time spirits go somewhere in accordance with their past behavior or current desires. The fourth stage is return: individual reincarnation, group reincarnation, resurrection by a Messiah, etc. This last can vary extensively; the Candomble believe that the men return if they are of a high enough order and the women return into nature. In Africa, return often happens within nine months, gauged by the birth of someone whose birthmarks mirror markings made on the deceased.

Ed Kelly brought up the question, which parallels his feelings about cross-cultural universals in mysticism, of whether we can actually infer anything about an afterlife from quasi-universal beliefs. Does the existence of universals constitute real evidence? Stace (1987) attempted to do this with mysticism but Ed was not convinced by the logic. The standards of evidence for these types of phenomena -- which demand the insertion of a new ontological order -- might be stricter than for something that fits more neatly into our current scientific understanding. Michael Murphy countered, though, that mystics provide a methodology, a series of practices to produce the experiences and insights they report; in that sense they represent a form of inner empiricism. However, one must be adequate to the domain by undertaking the practices, just as a biologist must use a microscope to make her observation. Sukie pointed out that her primary concern has been practical and therapeutic rather than evidential in terms of survival. Perhaps the truth value may be less important than the use value.

Charles Tart added that a somewhat credulous "field" may create a situation that allows survival-type phenomena to occur; strong doubt, rather than playing a neutral role, might actually be suppressive. He is willing to suspend disbelief when looking at these internal experiences in the service of exploring further. On a practical level, even if he has never been to Munich, if enough people describe it to him, he is willing to believe they may well be describing a real place. He brings that same perspective into this research.

## References

- Miller, Sukie. 1997. After Death: How People Around the World Map the Journey After Life. New York: Simon and Schuster. ([buy at amazon.com](#))  
Stace, W.T. 1987. Mysticism and Philosophy. Los Angeles: Tarcher.

[Conferences Menu](#) | [Summary Home](#)

[State of the Survival Field](#) | [Episodic and Periodic Nature of Psi Phenomena](#) | [Reincarnation](#) | [Near-Death Experiences](#) | [Out-of-Body Experiences](#) | [Multiple Personality Disorder](#) | [Channeling and mediumship](#) | [Cross-Cultural Dimensions](#) | [Philosophy and Meta-Issues](#) | [Future Directions for Research](#) | [Bibliography](#) | [Recommended Reading](#) | [Participants](#) |

[About Esalen CTR](#)  
[General Calendar](#)  
[Web Links](#)  
[Home](#)

[Leading Scholars](#)  
[Articles & Book Reviews](#)  
[Meditation Archives](#)  
[Extraordinary Functioning Archives](#)

[Evolutionary Theory](#)  
[Survival Research](#)  
[Integral Capitalism](#)  
[Past CTR Conferences](#)

For inquiries about Esalen's public workshops and classes, please visit [www.esalen.org](http://www.esalen.org).

### Help

Questions or comments about our website?

Send email to [WebMedia@esalenctr.org](mailto:WebMedia@esalenctr.org).

All text, graphics and content of the Esalen CTR website are Copyright 1999-2001 by Esalen Center for Theory & Research. All rights reserved.