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Exploring the Gate of Death: An Analysis of NDE from the Religious Culture Perspective

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Abstract

This study aimed to find the roots of differences in near-death experiences between different religious cultures. The research question posed is: why are there differences in experiences gained through near-death? Data on near-death experiences were obtained from the near-death case, Azlina from the Malay ethnic group who developed Islamic culture, and Martin Ebetan from the Minahasa ethnic group formed by the Protestant culture. The analysis was carried out using the hermeneutic approach developed by Heidegger on presuppositions. The presuppositions consist of fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to form a vision in the world

of near-death or what Sigmund Freud called latent dream content. The study results show that the vision experienced during near-death represents the initial experience obtained from religious culture. Azlina's vision of torture against sinners is closely related to her understanding of Islamic law, which has a vital position in Malay culture. On the other hand, Martin Ebetan met a robed figure who carried a basin due to his understanding of Jesus according to Protestant teachings and became a central figure in Minahasa culture.

Keywords: Near-Death Experience, Religious Culture, Malay, Minahasa, Islam, Protestant

1. Introduction

Death is an event that must be experienced by all living things, both plants, animals, and humans. The cycle of life from birth, development, and then death shows that death is a stage that must be experienced. Even during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people die every day. As of 11 July, the government reported that the number of deaths from the COVID-19 virus had crossed the 1000 mark, which is 1007 people (Rahman, 2021)^[24]. A new record that makes many people understand that the distance between life and death is getting thinner.

Death becomes a critical cultural phenomenon when people begin to believe that it is a soul or spirit, so the conception that humans consist of body and soul (Mushlih, 2008)^[21]. When death occurs, the body will decay and become soil. On the contrary, the soul is understood to be eternal. The immortality of the soul gave birth to many rites and views on life after death. Various relics were found from archaeological excavations, representing that death rites have developed since pre-literate times, such as sarcophagus and stepped pyramid (Steimer-Herbet, 2018; Widhianningrum *et al.*, 2019)^[28, 35]. After that, the death rites grew more complex, such as rites of 3, 7, 40, 100 days, 1 year, 2 years and 1000 days (Aufa, 2017; Grave, 2018)^[2-9].

No less stunning is the view of life after death that develops as a result of the belief in the existence of a soul. Life after death is understood as the migration of the eternal soul to live without a body. The depiction of the soul's life without a body can be broadly grouped into three: terrible, pleasant, and ordinary. Here, the description of here afterlife is structured in religion, which Geertz (1973)^[8] understands is a system.

No matter how detailed descriptions of life after death in religion, never have evidence and witnesses because the world of the dead can never be seen with the eyes of a living human. Anyone who has died for decades writes down his experiences for the living. In contrast to the realm of death, which is still mysterious, many narratives are composed of people who experience near-death or what in society is known as dead but alive again and in English vocabulary, referred to as apparent death or near-death. Their experiences are published in various forms, such as writings, videos, and some are even featured on television shows. Therefore, the traces of near-death experiences can be well-documented until now. One of them is Francesco Petrarca (read: Petrarch), a famous Italian writer in the XIV century, who is seen as one of the milestones marking the birth of the European Renaissance. He was in near-death and nearly buried. Moments before the funeral ceremony began, Petrarca returned to life and left great works for the European community. In one of his notes, he wrote that the power of maturity had

made him more mature and gave him common sense. He learned through experience that youth and fun are nothing but vanities (Fanthorpe & Fanthorpe, 2000, p. 84) ^[6].

From the narratives of people who experience near-death, it can be seen that there are differences, including the journey after the soul leaves the body. Europe and the United States generally found stories about the soul's journey through a tunnel (Charland-Verville *et al.*, 2020; Kellehear *et al.*, 1994) ^[4, 16]. On the other hand, Asians, including Indonesians, who experience near-death do not talk about the tunnel. The journey of the Asian people's soul, in general, is through a bridge over a deep river or a very high stair soaring into the sky (Ito & Miura, 2016) ^[14]. The difference is not only in the journey to the near-death world but also in the various phenomena experienced.

From the differences in narrative content between Europeans and Asians, whether the differences also occur among Indonesians? The question was asked related to the reality that Indonesia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. In other words, the question posed in this study is whether religious culture gives birth to a unique near-death experience narrative and distinguishes it from a different religion?

2. Literature Review

Near-death is a psychic event where the individuals experienced gain mystical phenomena, such as meeting with deceased people or saints. From this point of view, near-death is different from death in a clinical sense, namely the cessation of all vital functions of human organs, namely the heart, respiration, and brain that cannot be repaired/changed (Dewi, 2017) ^[5]. In general, people who are near death will experience more than one of the following symptoms:

1. The spirit is outside the body. The exit of the soul from the body can occur comfortably, painful, or suddenly already outside. In general, the soul sees his lifeless body and even clearly hears the various conversations that are going on around the body.
2. Traveling. Once outside the body, the spirit then travels to a place. The journey can be done alone or carried by mystical creatures.
3. Arriving at a physically-like scene in the world and a spiritual realm.
4. Meet people who are already known. The people they meet are usually parents, siblings, relatives, and close friends who have died.
5. Gaining unique experiences and creating deep impressions, both those that give birth to deep peace, feelings of being very loved/protected, as well as events that cause fear and horror.
6. Meet the light. The color of the light can be white or golden, which causes feelings of pleasure, or red, which causes fear.
7. Get a sign of returning to worldly life because the time has not yet come for individuals who experienced near-death. This sign can lead to feelings of reluctance and disappointment and high spirits to carry out a mission in the world that needs to be completed.
8. The spirit returns to the body (IANDS, 2017; Taylor & van Lommel, 2006; Thonnard *et al.*, 2013) ^[12, 31, 32].

There have been many discussions about near-death experiences, both from religion, medicine and psychology. From a religious perspective, various events experienced during the near-death show that their religious beliefs and

religious teachings are true, that life after death exists (Fanthorpe & Fanthorpe, 2000) ^[6]. Therefore, the effect of near-death on religious and social life is generally positive, such as showing more compassion, kindness, and love for others. Even Jahromi's research (2021) ^[15] found that among people who experience near-death, there is a significant change in behavior, namely from closed people to new people who are open and involved in various social activities. Psychological changes of people who experience near-death, because whatever is seen, heard, and encountered is understood as real experienced.

The various visions in the near-death experience of normal people are also experienced by those who are blind from birth. Martha, who was blind from birth, drowned in the lake when she was five years old and got NDE. She explained:

I saw detail that I would not have seen in "real" life. I could go anywhere, even to the tops of trees, simply by my intending to go there. I was legally blind. For the first time, I was able to see leaves on trees, bird's feathers, bird's eyes, details on telephone poles, and what was in people's back yards (Long, 2014) ^[18].

The problem is that is it true that they can see without using their eyes, hear without using their ears and meet others without a body? From a religious perspective, this phenomenon is possible because of a soul with various abilities, such as living beings with complete senses. Soul has not time and space limitations, so, as Martha explained, it can go anywhere simply by intending it. However, those answers raised a new problem regarding the existence of the soul. Does the soul exist in humans? Is the soul the same as the mind that leads to the human brain?

The study of biogenics and psychedelic drugs of the psyche led to much research into the pineal gland and Dimethyltryptamine or DMT. The pineal gland is found in the brain and is actively involved in mechanisms that control humans' sleep cycles and mood disturbances (Srinivasan, 1989) ^[27]. DMT is a chemical derived from tryptamine and is produced by all plants, animals, and humans. The stunning effect of DMT makes various plants containing many DMT used to release the soul in various cultures (Mckenna *et al.*, 1984) ^[19]. Experiments by injecting a specific dose of DMT in people produce the same symptoms as people who experience near death, so DMT is called a soul molecule (Strassman, 2001) ^[29].

Scientific studies show that near-death is a survival mechanism or thanatosis. When facing the threat of wild animals and the opportunity to fight back or escape is no longer possible, playing dead or near death becomes the only alternative to save oneself (Peinkhofer *et al.*, 2021) ^[23]. The problem that arises then is that it is rare for humans to be threatened by wild animals in this millennial era, but why do near-death still occur frequently? Wild animals threats rarely happen, especially in urban areas. However, the danger of death is increasing physically, such as robbery with violence and terror, the threat of disease, and traffic accidents. Greyson's research (2003) ^[10] explained that 10% of heart attack victims experience near death.

From the various studies that have been carried out, the question that will focus on this study is why experiences in the near-death world are different? If the afterlife, heaven, and hell exist, all those who experience near-death should see them as the same objects. This principle applies to all things that are objectively called existent. From this perspective, the existence of the mystical places in here

afterlife is not absolutely objective.

3. Methodology

This study will examine the near-death experience experienced by two people from different ethnicities and religions/beliefs. The first is Aslina from the Malay ethnicity, is Muslim, and lives in Bengkalis Riau, Indonesia. The second person is Martin Egetan from the Minahasa ethnic group, a Christian, and lives in Manado, Indonesia. The story of the two individuals who experienced near-death was obtained through YouTube as primary resources and other electronic media as secondary resources.

The experience gained is analyzed using a hermeneutic approach which places it as a text containing messages from people experiencing near death. The message is in the form of a moral evaluation of the entire life experience of the subject experiencing near-death, and this step is generally carried out as an effort to save themselves from the threat of death (Schlieter, 2018) ^[26]. Borrowing Freud's term, experiences in near-death Pare latent dream content from the unconscious (Balconi *et al.*, 2017; Freud, 2010) ^[3, 7]. By placing near-death experiences resulting from moral evaluation, life experiences and knowledge, both pleasant and frightening, are understood as the basis.

Heidegger (1996) ^[11] explains that the initial experience and knowledge are called presuppositions and essential in defining interpretation. From this viewpoint, interpretation is not absolute objectivity but contextual and perspectival (Lafont, 2015) ^[17]. In the NDE contexts, visions that occurred along near-death are appropriation toward the unconscious mind to be understood and acceptable by individuals' religious culture. Furthermore, Heidegger (1996, p. 214) ^[11] breaks down the presuppositions into the initial experience (fore-having), initial perception (fore-sight), and initial conception (fore-conception).

Two NDE Experiences

Azlina experienced near-death at the age of 24 in 2006. Her experience was narrated through the Kick Andy Show, broadcast on Metro TV on 13 August 2010. On the show, Azlina explained that she suffered from hyperthyroidism since she was 20 years old. When her condition worsened, she was accompanied by her uncle, Rustam Efendi, for treatment at Mahkota Medical Center, Malacca, Malaysia. Conditions worsened, and Azlina fell into a comatose. Even the electrocardiograph or heart rate measuring device showed no movement, or Azlina was dead. The incident was witnessed by his uncle and several paramedics and lasted for more than an hour.

For more than an hour that Azlina experienced near death. It is said that initially, Azlina's soul was pulled out through the tip of her foot. The pain was unbearable, like being stabbed by a sword and skinned alive. He saw his body stretched out and surrounded by uncles and nurses. By two angels, Azlina's soul was taken to a place to be reunited with her dead father. The father asked Azlina to go home with the excuse of taking care of her mother and younger siblings.

Not only meeting her father, but the two angels also asked Azlina about who her God is, who is her Leader, where her Qibla is, and her parents' names, which she answered smoothly according to Islamic teachings. Azlina was then seated in a chair accompanied by a woman on her right. When asked, the woman claimed to be Azlina's charity during her life and would always accompany her until the

end. Azlina was also visited by many pious women dressed as Muslim women who kissed the right and left cheeks as an introduction.

Azlina and her deeds were then taken to another place to be shown to torture people who during their lifetime committed major sins, such as crooks, murderers, adulterers, and people who did not want to be Muslim. In the terrible scene, Azlina then made a loud dhikr. The chant of dhikr brought Azlina's spirit back to her body which was medically marked by the heart's movement on the electrocardiograph. However, Azlina was still comatose, so her treatment room was moved to the ICU. Two days later, Azlina just woke up from the comatose.

Unlike Azlina, Martin Egetan started his story as an electrical employee at a State Electricity Company's partner company. When the damage occurred, Martin and a friend were asked to repair the electrical panel. After finished, just about to leave the panel room, suddenly there was a spark above Martin's head. His friend made it out, but not Martin Egetan. Black smoke filled the panel room, and fire chased Martin wherever he tried to escape. The armor was burnt, and the flames quickly reached his skin. In desperation, unable to escape the disaster, Martin instead embraces high-voltage wires in hopes of a quick death and an end to the pain. However, the action turned out to be a failure. He did not die and just bounced and fell on the floor. In desperation, suddenly, he heard a woman's voice saying, "Wake up, you will be saved." Without knowing how the process was, Martin's body was already outside the panel room when he opened his eyes. Martin was then taken to the hospital.

Arriving at the Emergency Room, Martin felt his soul leaving the body. He saw and heard as the doctor examined and said that Martin had died. Martin shouted that he was alive, but no one listened. Likewise, his wife and friends said that Martin was still alive, but the doctor was adamant, so there was an argument. Finally, the doctor put Martin in the morgue with the message that it must be picked up tomorrow morning because burns all over the body make the body smell bad quickly.

As long as his body was in the morgue, Martin's soul was in a beautiful endless green garden. While he was walking around enjoying the park, from a distance came a man in a robe with his right hand carrying a basin. As he got close, Martin's legs trembled, and he could not stand up. He knelt, and the man poured water over Martin's head. Martin felt a peace he had never found in his life, so he asked to live in the park. Using body language, the man refused and asked Martin to come back.

When Martin's soul returned to his body, he could sit up in bed, even though his body was full of burns and still bleeding. When he realized that he was alive again, Martin was sad. His mind was filled by the unwillingness of his wife and son to accept his disabled caused the burns. Martin had to undergo treatment in hospital for a year to be declared cured of his burns.

4. Discussion

The two near-death cases described show that the experiences gained, especially their description of the world after death, have apparent differences. Culturally, the differences are caused by the ethnic and cultural origins that become the background of each individual experiencing near-death. The cultural truth is a social identity that is the most legitimate truth (Park, 2011; Renan, 1882) ^[22, 25].

Azlina came from a Malay ethnic background, one of the ethnicities known as a society that has a strong Islamic culture. Since the end of the Padri War (1803-1837) in West Sumatra, Malays ethnic have developed a culture known as the *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* (Tradition based on Sharia, Sharia based on Islamic Scripture/Quran). The Sharia in this context can be understood as Islamic laws.

On the other hand, Kitabullah means the Qur'an, which is believed to be the Holy Book of Allah. Qur'an, as the book of Allah in Malay society, is understood as God's revelation and is used as a human guide in living life (Syahrial & Dja'far, 2019) [30]. Azlina's Malay culture grew stronger when she became a student at the Bengkalis Institute of Islamic Religion (STAI: *Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam*).

By looking at the cultural identity that shaped Azlina's experiences, views, and initial conceptions, it can be understood that the visions she experienced during her near-death were her subjective reflection on Malay culture, primarily Islamic religious culture. From this point of view, there will be differences in vision with people from different cultural backgrounds. FD, who became a respondent to the Islamiyah's research (2018) [13], is also Muslim. She described her near-death experience by saying that she was in a vast field with no borders, both in length and wide. FD stood up straight while confused, and then she prayed in local language, "*Gusti wangsulke kulo teng Alam kulo Maleh Gusti* (Lord, return me to the life in the world again, oh Lord)."

Although FD is also Muslim, she did not receive any questions asked by angels or visions of torture that happened to Azlina. This difference occurs because FD came from Boyolali, Central Java, Indonesia, which is culturally Javanese. In Javanese culture, death is not a process leading to the final judgment by God and then sent to hell or heaven, as taught by Abrahamic religions. Death in Javanese society is seen as a transfer from the physical life to the spirit world. The relationship between the deceased and his family remains intact. A death does not break the blood relationship between the deceased and his family. People who die, especially the head of the family, are believed to have a spirit that will always keep their family alive in peace and avoid various disasters. On the other hand, his family expresses respect and affection for the deceased by conducting family and social death rites and visiting the grave every month for strewing flowers (Grave, 2018) [9].

Azlina's near-death experience has many similarities with the experience of KR, who was born and raised in Jakarta and came from militant Muslim family background. The similarities are mainly to the pain when their soul leaves the body and the questions of the realm of death raised by angels (Molina, 2015) [20].

The critical role of early experience is also clearly seen in the near-death case of Martin Egetan. He comes from Minahasa, where the ethnicity develops a culture that is thickly colored by the Protestant religion. Even Minahasa is identified with Protestants and is no longer called Minahasa people to those not Protestant (Weichart, 2004) [34]. The dominance of the Christian element in the community's cultural identity had resulted in various customs and cultures that are contrary to Christian teachings being marginalized, even though they existed long before the religion came. One of them is the Kampetan ceremony which is an ancestral glorification ritual. The ritual is held by bringing in ancestral

spirits who will give instructions to the Minahasa community in living life through the medium of traditional leaders. Because in Christianity, the dead souls have united with God and cannot interact with humans, the Kampetan ritual has been marginalized. The ceremony can be carried out again when had been found the figure of Opo Wananatas, which is equated with God in Protestantism as the center of Kampetan ritual worship (Tumbelaka *et al*, 2020) [33].

By understanding the culture that formed Martin Egetan, it can be understood that various experiences during near-death are a representation of Minahasa's cultural identity, especially Protestant culture. The characteristics of Protestant religion had surfaced in mystical narratives before experiencing near-death, namely when Martin was thrown to the floor after he hugged a high-voltage cable. In that situation, Martin heard a woman's voice saying, "Wake up, you will be saved." The word "saved" in the context of avoiding death indicates the strong Protestant religious culture that shaped Martin's early experiences.

The strength of the Protestant culture is also seen in the figures found in the world of near-death. Martin met a man in a robe who poured water from above his head, so he felt very peaceful. Although it is not explicitly stated, the robes and the very peaceful feeling it creates directs the understanding of the figure implicitly as Jesus. He is believed by Protestants as God. With a different language, the figure bears a resemblance to the person Ira Winanti met when experiencing near death. It is said that when Ira Winanti had a frightening experience in a world of near-death, suddenly a soft voice said, "Do not cry, do not be afraid, my daughter." When Ira Winanti looked, she saw a man wearing a sparkling clean white shirt; there was like a white scarf on his shoulders, his oval face shone with gold like the sun. The similarities are mainly in the psychological effects it causes, namely peace (Winanti, 2015) [36].

The events experienced by Martin in the near-death world are very different from those of Setiadi Ismail, who were not shaped by a militant Protestant culture. It is said that when his soul was out of the body, Setiadi was visited by two angels to be invited to meet Jesus. Setiadi refused, so he was left alone in a very dark place. Then Jesus came with the two angels and asked, "why do you not come to me?" Setiadi then asked for forgiveness which Jesus replied by ordering him to testify. "Tell everyone that I am the one who holds the key to the kingdom of heaven," said Jesus, and then Setiadi's spirit returned to his body (Admin, 2021) [1]. From Setiadi's near-death experience, there is no depiction of the figure of Jesus as the savior who brings peace of mind, as described by Martin Egetan. There is also no tenderness, as defined by Ira Winanti.

5. Conclusion

Near-death is a condition close to death but still alive. Therefore, various memories about life are still well stored in the brain. The memories, especially the unconscious mind, appear as a vision in the near-death experience. Azlina's belief in Islamic law appears in the form of a vision of torture against humans who committed various violations of the prohibitions contained in the Qur'an. The same thing happened to Martin Ebetan, who is a Protestant. The belief in Jesus as the savior gave rise to a vision of a robed figure who brought waters of peace.

The correlation between near-death experience and religious beliefs is also shown by FD in Islamiyah's research.

Although she is a Muslim, the Javanese religion influenced her thought stronger than Islamic teaching. It caused FD's near-death experience to differ from that of Azlina. The near-death experience in line with Azlina's NDE is KR in Molina's research, who strongly believes in Islamic teaching. These findings are exciting but still far from being able to be generalized. Many studies of near-death experiences are needed that cover most ethnic groups in Indonesia to make this finding a stronger position. Therefore, this study is a preliminary and starting point for further researches on NDE in Indonesia.

Near-Death Experience quoted:

Azlina at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtXoTbPiUTA&t=1164s>

Martin Egetan at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShZvnSV2mRo>

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