

Comforting Dreamscapes: Exploring the Agency of the Dead through Dreams among Spiritual People in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

TINA IVNIK

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
tina.ivnik@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract: The article examines how spiritual people in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina experience the agency of dead significant others through dreams. Many anthropologists have shown that dreams of the dead are understood as communication between the divine and human worlds, or between the dead and the living, and are thus perceived as particularly important. This study examines how ideas about the afterlife among spiritual people in Sarajevo shape the understanding of those dreams and how, in turn, dreams can also influence the individual's understanding of the afterlife. It shows that while spiritual interpretative frameworks dominate in the understanding of these dreams, Islamic and psychoanalytic perspectives are also occasionally applied. Accounts from interlocutors reveal that the appearance and emotional state of the people in these dreams, as well as the messages they convey, can play a significant role in their influence on the living. Furthermore, the paper shows that due to the generally positive view of the afterlife characteristic of alternative spirituality, the dead appearing in dreams of spiritual people in Sarajevo

predominantly have a comforting agency, providing reassurance, a sense of support, gratitude and a feeling of continuing bonds with their deceased loved ones.

Keywords: afterlife, dreams, the dead, alternative spirituality, continuing bonds, Sarajevo Bosnia and Herzegovina

INTRODUCTION

Dreams have inspired diverse and conflicting ideas and understandings throughout the history of humankind. While in ancient Egypt, Rome and Greece they were understood as prophecies and supernatural visitations, Aristotle and his followers saw dreams as expressions of personal thoughts, desires, experiences and anxieties. According to the anthropologist Charles Stewart, these two conceptualizations continued to fluctuate in Western ideas about dreams for the next 1500 years. The distinction between reality and fantasy was not clearly delineated until the Enlightenment, after which dreams lost much of their cultural relevance, with the exception of some fields that emerged later, such as psychoanalysis (Stewart 1996: 165; see also Gregor 1996: 361; Laughlin & Rock 2014: 235–236). However, dreams have diverse roles, meanings and importance in different societies, and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (1993: 211) distinguishes between cultures where dreams are considered less, equally or more important in comparison to the occurrences experienced in waking states.

A particular form of dreams, which I will examine in this article, is dreams about the dead.¹ I will analyze the experiences and understandings of those among spiritual people in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. My research questions are: How do my interlocutors understand their dreams of the dead significant others? Which interpretative frameworks do they use to make sense of these dreams – religious or atheist worldviews they were raised in, or spiritual perspectives they have adopted? What enables the dead in dreams to have an agency over the living? How do my interlocutors experience this encounter?

Anthropologists have observed that in many cultures, dreams are regarded as a form of communication between the divine and human worlds, while dreams of the dead are often interpreted as communication with the dead (see Bourguignon 2003: 136; Kempf & Hermann 2003; Kiliánová 2010: 17; Mageo 2003: 16; Mittermaier 2011: 6; Mittermaier 2012; Hesz 2012; Đorđević Belić 2024).² Similarly to other research, my interlocutors often understood the appearance of the dead in dreams as ontologically real and thus as an actual contact between their soul and the soul of the deceased. That was the case when dreams of the dead were pleasant and marked by a sense of closeness with the deceased. In contrast, bad dreams of the dead or those lacking a felt sense of

connection were more often explained by my interlocutors through psychoanalytic concepts. Thus, they understood these dreams as manifestations of their subconscious, rather than actual contact with the souls of the dead. Apart from spiritual and psychoanalytical frameworks, an Islamic understanding was also occasionally applied.

The spiritual interpretative framework – that was predominantly used – was composed of various spiritual ideas that my interlocutors found and accepted on their spiritual path. In line with alternative spirituality, which emphasizes personal experience and searching for answers inside the self rather than following external authority (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 29, 78; Heelas 2008: 5–40; Bužeková 2024), they relied on their intuition and the emotions experienced in the dream rather than consulting dream interpretation manuals or authoritative figures. However, as is common in alternative spirituality, where people seek and combine ideas from various traditions in what has been termed a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon 2000), my interlocutors’ ideas about the afterlife, and consequently about the dreams of the dead, were rarely based on a particular doctrine, but were rather constructed through an eclectic mix of perspectives.

In the article, I will first present my interlocutors and my research methodology. I will then discuss how ideas about the afterlife and dream interpretations of spiritual people are intertwined as the afterlife turned out to be an important factor that shaped the dream interpretation by spiritual people, and vice versa – dreams influenced interlocutors’ ideas about the afterlife. Subsequently, I will show that my interlocutors relied on their own feelings and intuition in understanding the dreams, rather than following a particular authority or relying on dream interpretation manuals. I will also specify how my interlocutors distinguish between dreams that are ontologically real and those that are thought to be caused by psychological states and processes of the individual. Finally, I will discuss my interlocutors’ experiences of the dead in dreams and argue that the appearance and emotional state of the dead in these dreams, as well as the messages they convey, can play an essential role in the impact they have on the living. Those, I claim, correspond to my interlocutors’ ideas of the afterlife.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted fieldwork in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from February to May 2024. I carried out forty-nine semi-structured recorded interviews with a total of fifty interlocutors.³ In most cases, I conducted only a single interview with each participant, except for one instance where I conducted a follow-up interview. A few interviews included two participants. The majority of my interlocutors were women (thirty-seven),⁴ though I made an effort to include men as well (thirteen). The age range of the participants was thirty to seventy-

two, with most falling between thirty and fifty years old. Most of my interlocutors were highly educated – at least thirty-three of them had university degrees. I estimate the majority of my interlocutors' socioeconomic status as above average for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Additionally, I carried out participant observations at various gatherings and workshops of different spiritual groups. I attended several shamanic⁵ workshops, yoga and meditation courses, spiritual group meetings, family constellation⁶ workshops, and one reflexotherapy workshop. Before each event I explained the purpose of my research to the group leader and asked if I could attend. At the beginning of each gathering, I introduced my research to the participants and asked if everyone was comfortable with me participating in the event. I also took the opportunity to ask if anyone was interested in participating in an interview. As a result, some of my interlocutors were part of the same groups or attended the same events. Some knew each other for many years while others had just met, as there were different levels of fluctuation in different groups. This was particularly evident in family constellations workshops, which are open to new participants and have only a few people who regularly attend, less so in shamanic groups, which are also open groups, but more people regularly come to seances. In contrast, in some groups (such as Sai Baba⁷ and Mohanji⁸) there is little fluctuation, and members were generally closer to each other and knew each other for longer periods of time. However, due to the limited number of people involved in alternative spiritualities in Sarajevo, many knew each other, particularly those who had been interested in this topic for a longer period and had thus been meeting in various spiritual activities.

My criteria for selecting interlocutors were rather broad, as I focused on people who adhered to alternative spirituality, with 'alternative' referring to its distinction from established religions. Many of my interlocutors identified as 'spiritual but not religious' (for a discussion of the term see Fuller 2001; Wixwat & Saucier 2021), thereby rejecting the established religious institutions. However, there were two exceptions: interlocutors who were both spiritual and practicing Muslims. The rest of the participants were practicing different types of spiritualities. Some were members of informal spiritual groups (such as a shamanic circle, Brahma Kumaris⁹, and groups following gurus such as Sai Baba and Mohanji). However, most practiced spirituality independently. They attended different alternative spiritual workshops, read spiritual literature and watched videos about spirituality and were thus creating their own explanations, among others also about the appearance of the dead in dreams. In describing the spiritual movement of my interlocutors, I use the term 'alternative spirituality' and refer to its adherents – my interlocutors – as 'spiritual people.'¹⁰ However, I am aware of the problematic nature of the term 'alternative spirituality,' as it is rather broad, and can include diverse, heterogeneous groups with a wide range of different worldviews and ideas (Sutcliffe & Bowman

2000: 10–11). To address this issue, I provide a description of each interlocutor and the groups and ideas that importantly influenced him/her.

Many of my interlocutors were critical of the term ‘alternative spiritualities’ for a different reason, claiming that they are not alternative, as they have existed for a long time in many contexts (such as Buddhism or Hinduism, but sometimes referring to the various ‘autochthonous’ beliefs and practices as well). I nevertheless use the term, especially to emphasize the alternative geographical origins of the spiritualities and to emphasize that I do not include spiritual people that belong solely to ‘traditional’ religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (such as Muslim or Christian spirituality). However, some of my interlocutors also practice ‘traditional’ religion and combine that with alternative spiritual beliefs and practices (see Bužeková 2023: 13).

The majority of my interlocutors come from Muslim families, some from religiously mixed families (see Lendák–Kabók 2024), two from Catholic families, and two from Orthodox families. Many declined to adopt the ethno-religious identities commonly used in Bosnia and Herzegovina, instead identifying themselves as “Bosnians and Herzegovinians”. I assume that was so because this kind of resistance towards identification is rather widespread in Sarajevo (see Bartulović 2013). This is especially so with more politically liberal people and people who do not identify as part of any of the three main religions present in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Catholicism, Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Also, some of my interlocutors came from religiously mixed families and were critical of the distinctions between different religious groups that are widespread in the country’s political system and in everyday life.

Mostly, my interlocutors said that religion did not play a significant role in their upbringing; many of them stated that their family was socialist/communist. Except for the younger generation, they mostly grew up in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was a secular state. Following the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia after World War II, the new government, in line with Marxist ideology, tried to restrict the influence of the religions that were seen as hostile to it (Radić 2002a: 340–341). Religion became a private affair, and the government tried to prevent it from affecting social, economic and political contexts. Radmila Radić (2002b: 639–641) notes that while the state’s initial policies toward religion were similar to those of other Eastern European countries after World War II, Yugoslavia’s expulsion from Cominform in 1948¹¹ and subsequent collaboration with the West led to a more liberal approach toward religious communities. However, the ideological pressures towards religions were still exercised.

In the interviews, I asked participants general questions about their spiritual path, their attitudes towards the afterlife and their experiences with the dead.¹² In the analysis, I employed inductive qualitative content analysis based on my ethnographic data. In it, I focused on encounters with the dead in interlocutors’ dreams. To protect the identities of my interlocutors, I pseudonymized them

and, when necessary, modified personal information about them. Before each interview, I explained the purpose of my research, clarified that the material collected would be used for academic publications, and asked for their consent to record the interview. Due to the topic being potentially delicate, I was clear that participants did not need to answer any questions they may have found uncomfortable, and I was careful not to distress them during the interview.

Throughout my field research, when analyzing the data and in writing this article, I have taken my interlocutors' experiences of encounters with the dead seriously and have not questioned them (for a critical treatment of 'anthropological atheism' see Ewing 1994). I follow Amira Mittermaier, who discursively approached her interlocutors in a way so as not to set herself as an arbiter of their 'reality'. Instead, she explored dream experiences that were meaningful in the lives of her interlocutors, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging invisible actors and their impact on human experience (Mittermaier 2011: 28; see also Mittermaier 2012: 256). Nonetheless, this article has certain research limitations. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were perhaps more open to discussing spiritual matters and their experiences with the dead. It is possible that those who declined to participate had different, potentially more ambivalent or negative, experiences with the dead. Despite this, I hope that I have effectively conveyed and interpreted my interlocutors' accounts about their dreams of the dead.

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY

The growing popularity of alternative spirituality, rising numbers of practitioners and the speed of its spread around the world have led some scholars to characterize it as a 'spiritual revolution' (see e.g. Tacey 2003). While Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005: 2; 149) have questioned the term and speak instead of some 'mini revolutions,' it is clear that alternative spirituality is becoming influential globally. Heelas and Woodhead explain the growing popularity of alternative spirituality in the West as a consequence of the "subjective turn" as defined by Charles Taylor (1991). He theorized that it is a shift from a life lived in accordance with external, objective roles, obligations and responsibilities to a life lived in accordance with the individual's subjective experiences (Taylor in Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2). Because spiritual groups emphasize individualized paths to personal growth and prioritize enhancing quality of life through subjective experiences, alternative spiritualities are more amenable to the Western societies after the subjective turn than mainstream religions (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 5–29; 78; see also Heelas 2008: 5–40).

Nevertheless, reliable statistics on people involved in alternative spiritualities are often difficult to obtain (see Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 7), which was also the case in my research in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The discussion on the quantitative presence of alternative spiritualities is beyond the scope of

this paper, but in my field research I came across many spiritual groups that had been founded only in the last few years and encountered people who had recently become involved in alternative spiritualities (for the discussion on the rise of traditional religions and alternative spiritualities in other post-socialist countries see Črnič 2001; Potrata 2004; Radulović 2014; Kis-Halas 2019; Panchenko 2021; Tiukhtiaev 2021; Bužeková 2023). Some of my interlocutors in Sarajevo see alternative spirituality as a purer, non-corrupted expression of faith compared to mainstream religions, which they see as too closely connected with (corrupt) politics. Namely, after the war (1992–1995), Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced the rise of traditional religions, which became more publicly visible as the importance of ethnoreligious identities grew (see Kolind 2007: 124; Maček 2009: 162).

Although alternative spiritualities are of limited significance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on my fieldwork research I assume their relevance is slowly growing in urban contexts, gaining more public visibility and practitioners. As my interlocutors are spiritual but nevertheless grew up with different explanations of the possibility of contact with the dead, of the afterlife and the meaning of the dreams involving the dead, I will be interested in which interpretations they used in explaining their dreams of the dead. As ideas of the afterlife proved to be crucial for their understanding, I will first examine those.

IDEAS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

Even though most of the interlocutors I discuss in this article were born into Muslim families and some into mixed or atheist families, they all stated they believe in reincarnation, and not in Islamic eschatology (for Islamic eschatology see Mabrouk 1987; El-Gazali 2000; Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002; Segal 2004: 642–693; Venhorst 2013). Islamic eschatology, as opposed to ideas about reincarnation, asserts that a person/soul only has one life that will determine his future in the afterlife (see Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002: 32–41). According to this religion, after death one's soul leaves the temporal world and waits in *barzakh* (intermediate phase) until resurrection.¹³ The difficulty of that period and the final judgement at the time of resurrection is determined by the person's conduct during their life on earth (Venhorst 2013: 260–262). Reincarnation is therefore a foreign concept in Islamic eschatology, yet it is frequently mentioned by my interlocutors as their understanding of the afterlife. Often, they told me they found those explanations “logical” and “close to them”.

I met Ajša through the recommendation of a common acquaintance of ours. She was born in 1986 and comes from a religiously mixed family, all her grandparents being of different religions. However, her father was not practicing any religion, as he was communist, while her mother was more into spirituality, but not religious as well. She said that both were liberal towards different ideas.

Her seeking for metaphysical answers started in the adolescent period when she was researching different spiritual paths and traditional healing practices. In her early spiritual development, she mentioned reading the journal *Arka*, i.e., a local journal covering spiritual and paranormal topics, as well as other literature on related topics, and listening to Hare Krishna¹⁴ lectures. There she was first acquainted with the idea of reincarnation. She stated that these ideas continue to resonate with her:

To me personally, you know, it made sense from the beginning. For me – when I – of course, I didn't fully understand it when I was young, but that idea always made sense to me. Because in a universe where everything changes, it didn't make sense to me how something could just stop. [...] And so, for me, reincarnation was perfectly logical.

Later she started practicing meditation, yoga and other spiritual techniques. Because she was interested in the topic of the afterlife, she attended a workshop where she got a clearer idea of it, as well as the idea of the possibility of communication with the dead. The workshop was related to the explanation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. She told me that the soul goes to a certain space after death, where it processes the experience of this life before it plans for the new life and decides to be born again. In this space the living can access the soul with certain techniques. In a workshop she attended, a lecturer explained that contact with the dead is possible through dreams:

She [the leader of the workshop] said that these souls [of the dead] often appear in dreams because that's the space where you can communicate. It could be an influence from the subconscious, or it could be an entry into that space, as they call it. Um, I don't know if you're familiar with the term the Akashic Field.¹⁵ It's a field where – where you can connect, beyond time and space, with all the information that exists from the past, even the future. And that's this kind of field. Now, I'm not sure exactly, that field where the souls reside – I don't know – because they are connected [with the Akashic Field].

Even though Ajša is mentioning the workshop on Tibetan Book of the Dead as her source of reference for the afterlife, it is evident that her interpretations involve other ideas as well. Alex Nash notes that the term “Akashic records” (or “Akashic field”) probably derived from the Sanskrit word *Ākāśa*, but that the concept as we understand it today is largely a product of the Theosophical society in the late 19th century. Its original understanding, which could be roughly translated as space, atmosphere or sky, was rather different as it did not involve its ‘archival function’, which is now regarded as its primary

characteristic (Nash 2020: 110–112). In theosopher Charles Webster Leadbeater's book we read that Akashic records are a higher medium located on the astral plane, which stores permanently impressed records of all past, present and future events (Leadbeater 1895: 19). Ajša, speaking of a place "where you can connect, beyond time and space, with all the information that exists from the past, even the future" is showing her understanding of Akashic fields as an 'archive' that Nash identified as a theosophic idea.

Another characteristic of her account that reflects the influence of New Age ideas on her belief in the afterlife is her view that souls process the experiences of a previous life before they plan for the new life and decide to be born again. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2009: 267–268) explains that it is not reincarnation in itself, but a particular understanding of reincarnation that is typical of New Age beliefs. According to New Age reincarnationism, individuals reflect on the experiences between incarnations and decide on the challenges they still need to go through in order to continue evolving spiritually. Another specific feature of the New Age understanding of reincarnation, which is not evident from Ajša's accounts but is relevant to those of other interlocutors I will analyze below, is the idea of progressive spiritual evolution, which is understood as a process. Hanegraaff argues that the core of reincarnation beliefs in New Age is that reincarnations are seen as educational journey across the realities that enable continuous spiritual evolution (Hanegraaff 2009: 263–264; see also Bremmer 2002: 86).

It is mainly spiritual interpretations that can be identified as having an impact on Ajša's understanding of dreams of the dead, though she mentions psychoanalytical interpretations as well – the dreams can be "an influence from the subconscious." Although in her dream interpretation she refers to an authoritative figure – the leader of the workshop –, the ideas presented at the workshop were in line with her already held beliefs. As I already wrote, she had acquired those searching for her own explanations of the afterlife and other spiritual questions beforehand – in Hare Krishna lectures, literature she previously read, yoga and meditation courses she attended.

On the other hand, what is equally important is that her belief is based on her own experience of communication with her grandfather in dreams. Ajša claimed that she had a close connection with her grandfather through dreams and that she developed ways to intentionally connect with him. At first it was him getting in contact with her in dreams, while later she learned how to do lucid dreaming¹⁶ with some techniques she learned at an abovementioned workshop on interpretations of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. She had contact with her grandfather for a few years, until it eventually ceased. She explains the cessation as the result of his reincarnation.

My belief was that I met my grandfather while he was in that in-between space, because after some time – and it was really easy

for me, it was so easy to connect with him – but after a while, he disappeared. I never met him again, not once!

While her view of the afterlife influenced how she experienced communication with the dead in dreams, her dreams of her grandfather confirmed her already held afterlife beliefs and further shaped them.¹⁷ As she met him in an in-between space before incarnations, she interpreted that he showed her the space he was dwelling in and thus mapped it for her. She told me she imagines the afterlife as composed of various spheres where the souls go, depending on how they have lived. As he was a very thoughtful and caring person, she assumed he now resided in a higher realm, which he presented to her:

I: And maybe, in a way, when I started exploring the Bardo¹⁸, it felt like he was showing me, mapping out that space a bit for me. That's how it seemed to me.

T: Who was mapping it for you?

I: My grandfather.

T: Ah, like he was showing you what's there?

I: Yes. Because that's this nonverbal space [...]. And in those realms, that type of communication remains. It's much more direct, more immediate [...].

T: And then he showed you those different spheres you mentioned, or just the sphere where he was?

I: I think just the one where he was.

Various alternative spiritual theorists emphasize the importance of personal experience in alternative spirituality, as it is based on the personal experiences of its practitioners rather than on accepting dogmas (see Heelas 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000: 8; Fuller 2001: 4; Houtman & Aupers 2010: 6; Wixwat & Saucier 2021: 122; Bužeková 2024: 1–3). In the case of Ajša, it was through her dreams she experienced the afterlife and got a confirmation and a concrete, clearer picture of her previously-held ideas of what happens after death. Personal experiences might be important in non-spiritual environments as well. Smiljana Đorđević Belić (2024: 9–17) argues that dreams of the dead of her Serbian interlocutors reflect the dispositions of the broader community while simultaneously reproducing the image of the afterlife. Thus, interpretations of dreams about the dead are shaped by pre-existing beliefs about the afterlife (see also Kiliánová 2010: 15) and, conversely, dreams of the dead can actively influence these beliefs¹⁹ (see also Barrett 1992: 104; Stark et al. 1996: 260; Jung 2011: 301–311; Black et al. 2016: 111).

DREAMS AS ONTOLOGICALLY REAL

Amira Mittermaier points out that states of dreaming and wakefulness have long been ontologically, epistemologically and ethically divided in the West (Mittermaier 2011: 10; cf. Bitel 1991). However, different authors note that dreams continue to be considered a form of contact with the supernatural and a reliable source of information in many vernacular religious traditions in the West as well (see, for instance Kiliánová 2010 for a village in Slovakia; Hesz 2012: 141–157 for Hungarians in Romania; Bitel 1991: 39–42 for Early Middle Ages Europe). The same holds true in other parts of the world. In her research on dreams among Egyptian Sufi Muslims, Mittermaier found that dreams have a high epistemological value for them: referring to dreams can have the same validity as referring to experiences from waking life (Mittermaier 2015: 135). Like the Sufi Muslims in Egypt, there are many cultures in which dreams are not understood as internal, psychological processes, but as providing access to other realities distinct from our reality of our everyday existence. Charles D. Laughlin and Adam J. Rock note that most cultures take dreams seriously – to confirm the individual’s role in society, travel in spiritual dimensions, enable contact with spirits, to get information and to solve problems (Laughlin & Rock 2014: 233–241; see also Kempf & Hermann 2003; Green 2015: 153).

Among my interlocutors, the experience of contact with the dead in dreams was often explained as ontologically real. Such an understanding is reflected in terminology. My interlocutors often used expressions such as that someone “came into a dream” [*dolazio u snove*] or that the souls of the dead are “getting in touch with us” [*stupaju u kontakt sa nama*]. Esma, a woman in her forties, grew up in a Muslim family, in which they followed many of the Islamic ways of taking care of the dead. Today it is ideas of reincarnation that she finds convincing and defines herself as spiritual rather than religious, though she still appreciates some Islamic teachings she finds pleasant and convincing. She tells me her thoughts of a soul travelling after death with which we can still have contact through dreams:

Every time I wake up [from dreaming of the dead], I’m glad because I feel like I’ve met them in some other reality. Because, I mean, I truly believe that their souls – I mean, the body might decompose, but the soul goes on, I mean, the soul cannot be destroyed. Now we don’t know the journey of the soul, where it goes, but there must be some place where it goes. And so, I consider that to be some contact with those souls, when there are, let’s say, normal, pleasant dreams.

Esma tells me she understands dreams with the dead that are “normal” and “pleasant” as dreams in which contact with the dead was real. She differentiates these types of dreams from those in which she feels no connection to the

deceased, interpreting the latter as dreams driven by the subconscious. Similar distinctions were commonly made by my interlocutors. Mostly, they described that they intuitively felt whether a dream was “just a dream,” arising from the psychological processes of the individual, as those dreams were either bad or did not provoke a feeling of closeness to the dead person. In contrast, when there was a feeling of presence and connection with the dead person, they interpreted those as genuine contact with the soul of the deceased.

My interlocutor Aldina, born in 1982, lost her boyfriend when she was in her thirties. She considers herself a spiritual person, who has been studying and practicing many different spiritual approaches in her spiritual path, from Buddhism to tantra yoga. After her boyfriend died of a ‘bad’ death,²⁰ she prayed for him in her daily rituals. It was only after several years that he began appearing to her in dreams, which she interpreted as a sign that he had been unable to reach out earlier due to a lack of energy resulting from his ‘bad’ death. He came to thank her in dreams, and although he looked tired, she understood that he most likely got reincarnated again and that her prayers helped him. As she had quite an elaborate perspective on the afterlife, she explained that contact with him as an astral encounter.

I never even doubted it. I never doubt these things, I am absolutely certain that there is a connection, and that we meet, and that we hear each other – especially souls that are connected, or souls that travel together. But it was a very clear image – it was a very clear astral encounter [in a dream with her boyfriend] – it’s not like – I’m dreaming now, so was it him or wasn’t it. No, no, no, it was a clear astral encounter and, well, it’s very clear to me that we live very intense astral lives, I have no doubt.

Like Aldina, Ajša used similar explanations for her encounters with the dead in dreams. Moreover, while Aldina told me she needs to be open to dream the dead but cannot initiate the encounters, Ajša developed techniques to contact the dead through lucid dreaming. In the following comment, she elaborates on her identification of “astral projection” with lucid dreams:

It’s possible in dreams [to contact the dead], yes, because the whole dream space – what’s it called? [...] Astral projection. And that entry – what is the astral, really – thoughts and emotions. What are your personal thoughts and emotions, how does it work – so there are certain kinds of antennas within us, and we connect with specific thoughts and emotions, and the astral contains everything, right, in that way. And when you dream, in line with your tendencies, you enter a particular astral world. Essentially, it’s what you choose, right.

[...] And so, whether it's entering – entering a dream is essentially entering the astral space. And the difference between a lucid dream – astral projection – and an ordinary dream is the level of consciousness, how aware you are, because if you're just, in quotation marks, 'just dreaming', you're going along with whatever your tendencies are.

For Ajša, all dreams happen on the astral level, but one can only control astral travel in lucid dreaming and thus avoid following the tendencies that otherwise guide one's dreams. When she had mastered lucid dreaming, she could intentionally visit the dead. Raymond L. M. Lee (2013: 113) argues that the New Age emphasis on self-potentiality allows individuals to develop different inner worlds. He notes that lucid dreaming is presented as an example of “worlds of the mind” that can serve as a bridge to the afterlife.

Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996: 259–260) notes that a central aspect of New Age belief is the existence of other realities that are freely accessible to individuals – often through altered states of consciousness. He highlights how New Age adherents perceive a connection between the world of the mind, and the realms where the soul resides after physical death. This reality is loosely described in theosophical terms as an ‘astral plane’. In occultism it is defined as “the realm of concrete consciousness, the level of reality that corresponds to the human experiences of dream, vision, out-of-the-body experience, and ordinary consciousness” (Greer 2003). Astral travel, which can be achieved through various techniques (lucid dreaming among others), is the process in which the individual imaginatively separates the astral from the physical and etheric body (Greer 2003; Crow 2012: 159; see Leadbeater 1854).

In the examples of Aldina and Ajša, they both use the terminology of the “astral space”, “astral travel” and “astral encounter”. They understand their experience of contact with their deceased loved ones in these terms, and do not interpret it as an internal psychological process, but as a meaningful encounter, which was enabled through their access to the other realities. Both thus relied on spiritual interpretations, heavily influenced by theosophical understandings, and perceived their dreams of the dead as ontologically real.

THE DEAD AS COMFORTING FIGURES

Most of my interlocutors described the presence of the dead in dreams as comforting.²¹ Dreams where the dead appeared to guide and teach them or were preparing them for specific issues in life were especially common among people who were followers of particular gurus. Usually, they dreamt of the guru they were following – such as Sai Baba or Hare Krishna. However, in this article I will only discuss dreams of the personally significant dead.

I met Hana, born in 1983, as she contacted me herself, knowing what the interest of my research was and wanting to share her story with me. She too considers herself a spiritual person, practicing various spiritual disciplines for more than a decade, but she identifies as Muslim as well. She was brought up in a family where religion was not particularly emphasized, although her parents both came from Muslim families. In her teenage years she became interested in Islam, especially Sufism, and she considers Islam to be a spiritual religion and often intertwines it in her explanations about metaphysical topics. At the time we met, during Ramadan, she was fasting. However, she has also been attending family constellation workshops, energy healing, past life regressions and astrological counseling.

Hana told me about her grandmother visiting her in dreams. She told me she was thinking about the reason why her grandmother reached out specifically to her and attributed that to her being 'into spirituality'. She also explained that because of her spiritual understanding of the other world, she did not react to those dreams with fear, but with gratitude and honor:

So, I – since I am into spirituality, I always receive that very – I receive it with gratitude, not with fear. I received it with gratitude and with great, honestly, with honor that she [her deceased grandmother] reached out to me specifically! Out of all of my relatives. Maybe she felt that I hear and see her, even in her afterlife, because I think that souls also choose those who have an open heart for the afterlife in their material body.

Hana had dreams in which her grandmother appeared with a request to play some traditional Islamic songs – *ilahije* and *kaside*²² – for her. She later went to her grandmother's grave and played some songs that her grandmother wanted to hear. For my interlocutor that was a very emotional moment, but she felt peaceful because of her feeling that this ritual brought peace to her grandmother's soul. She interprets this dream as a consequence of her work on herself through family constellations:

Through family constellations, I have opened the field²³ many times – for my mother, my grandfather, and my mother's parents. But recently, I also opened it for my father's parents. They have both been in the other life for a long time as well. But I believe that this stirs up energy. [...] And through that healing process, I brought her [grandmother] some kind of comfort, if you understand me. And a sense of peace. So I think that's a big part of why she started appearing to me [in dreams].

While my interlocutor interprets the appearance of her deceased grandmother in dreams as a result of stirred-up energy caused by her work with family constellations – a spiritual interpretation –, she is intertwining her explanations with Islamic interpretations of the dreams as well. In the next quote, she emphasizes the relationship with the dead within the Islamic calendar:

But look this [dream] is all happening right before the holy month of Ramadan, which is interesting. Maybe in some way... In Islam, we also have the tradition of visiting the souls before Ramadan, cleaning their graves, tending to their eternal resting places, watering them [the graves], and washing them. It's almost like bathing their spiritual bodies – bathing their mezar, their grave. So I somehow took this as a kind of invitation before the holy month to come to her and reach out, you know what I mean? Since in this month, the heavenly gates are open, the angels (meleci) are present – everything is sacred in this month. And somehow, I felt it was also like: "Bathe me with song!" That's how I experienced it.

Hana is using a spiritual, as well as an Islamic interpretation for her dream of the dead. She discursively places herself within the Islamic community, as she says that "in Islam we have a tradition of visiting the souls before Ramadan". She understands that period as a time "when the heavenly gates are open, and the angels are present" and reflects on the possibility that it was this openness that stimulated the contact with her grandmother.

In Islam, dreams are considered a means through which ordinary individuals can connect with sacred realms (Green 2015: 145–148; see also Mittermaier 2011: 7).²⁴ Besides that, dreams are the only way in which the dead can have a contact with the living (see also Segal 2004: 651; Sariyannis 2013: 211–213). Seen as real by Muslims, dream visions allow living people to visit the deceased, who can convey messages, request something, or offer reminders. These interactions can involve prophets, *evlijas*²⁵, or familiar deceased individuals, such as ancestors and family members (El-Gazali 2000; El-Aswad 2002: 89–90, 43–44; Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002: 50–51; Campo 2004: 176; Mittermaier 2015: 134). An Imam²⁶ from Sarajevo told me that the dreams in Islam are mainly focused on the deceased:

Now, if something happens – this kind of contact [with the dead] that comes through dreams – it is mostly interpreted as a way to show the status of the deceased in the afterlife. This is the most common interpretation. Although there are cases where some messages might be sent, they are generally not related to anything other than the deceased person. So, if someone dreams of a deceased person in

a beautiful state, it is interpreted that they are in a good place in the afterlife. If they appear in a distressing state, it is understood that their afterlife is not favorable. Based on this, actions may be taken, for example, to do something for the soul of the deceased, and so on.

Hana interpreted her dreams as her grandmother communicating the wish she had in the afterlife. In contrast to my other interlocutors, who primarily relied on spiritual interpretations, Hana understood her dreams as an instance in which the dead came to her with a request. This was the only case during my fieldwork where a dream involved the dead requesting something from the living. That may reflect Hana being influenced by Islamic interpretations – along with spiritual perspectives – of dreams involving the deceased.

However, the difference in perception and ways of interpreting the dreams of the dead between spiritual and non-spiritual people is evident in the following comment. In it, Hana compared her interpretation of her deceased grandmother appearing in dreams with the interpretation of her mother, a non-practicing Muslim:

So, my mom also dreamt [of her mother, interlocutor's grandmother] several times, and... to be honest, she was scared. Because she didn't understand what the soul wanted, why it was appearing in her life, what she could do... somehow, I've noticed that people who aren't into spirituality and into this concept of unity have much more fear than we do, we who understand that the soul hasn't come to harm or threaten [them] but has come out of pure love, out of a pure need for love. [...] She was somehow paralyzed by that fear that maybe the soul wanted something she couldn't give it. Or... I don't know, the whole contact between the dead and the living is deeply intertwined with emotions of fear and uncertainty. But for me personally, it's not so much that it feels close, as much as it just feels normal.

While Hana dreamed of her grandmother asking her for a favor, she still emphasized *pure love* because of which her grandmother came into her dreams. She interpreted that her grandmother came specifically to her with her being into spirituality and into the “concept of unity”. Therefore, she saw the soul coming to her as “normal”. By contrast, for other people, the contacts with the dead are “intertwined with fear and uncertainty”. Kaarina Koski (2016: 16) emphasizes that spiritual people can appreciate the contact with the dead, which is evident from the normalization of the contact as described by Hana.

Apart from different understandings of dreams of the deceased grandmother they had, Hana and her mother also interpreted dreams using different interpretative frameworks. Her mother consulted an Islamic handbook for dream interpretation. There she found an explanation that such dreams could

mean that the dead came to take the living with them – thus foretelling the dreamer's death. By contrast, Hana follows her own intuition and feelings in dream interpretations:

I, for example, don't interpret it that way. I interpret it based on my own feeling about the dream. [...] I don't think that I'm going to die because of it. I just think that she is close to me. So, in my opinion, interpreting those dreams isn't really relevant, because there can be a lot of fear involved if a deceased person appears to you in a dream. But to me, it's purely love.

Among my interlocutors, it was common to interpret dreams by relying on intuition and feelings regarding dreams. This was also true for my interlocutor Mia, who practiced meditation to get the messages conveyed through her dreams. Mia, born in 1964, was born into a religious Muslim family. She sees Islam practiced by her family as spiritual and emphasizes her family's openness towards different views. In her adult years, she started to practice yoga and meditation herself, while also attending regular guided practices. She told me about her way of interpreting dreams through narration of concrete dreams of her dead brother:

I dream of him [her dead brother] [...] He was much younger than he was when he left his body. [...] And so, I was thinking about what the message of that dream was. I never really figured it out, although I often received messages while meditating on dreams. I learned that in yoga – our instructor taught us how to meditate, how to receive a message, but also how to be at peace if we don't receive one. During some difficult periods in my life, I meditated and received messages through dreams, and they truly helped me a lot.

Mia, like most of my interlocutors, did not use manuals or books to interpret dreams, nor consulted about them with some spiritual leader. Many interlocutors told me they rely on their intuition and feelings that dreams trigger in them, aligning them with ideas in alternative spirituality that emphasize personal paths to growth, self-improvement and the importance of subjective experiences (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 29, 78; Heelas 2008: 5–40; Bužeková 2024). In alternative spirituality, the goals of finding one's authentic self and transcending one's socialized self are achievable through spiritual discipline, and throughout this process experience is given the highest authority (Heelas 1996: 18–22). While religion is more oriented toward institutions and organized systems of belief, spirituality emphasizes subjective, personal experiences (see Heelas 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000: 8; Fuller 2001: 4; Houtman & Aupers 2010: 6; Wixwat & Saucier 2021: 122; Bužeková 2024: 1–3).

Corresponding to that, Paul Heelas defines an emphasis on the experience of the individual which provides “uncontaminated access to the spiritual realm” as a fundamental characteristic that unifies otherwise heterogeneous alternative spiritualities (Heelas 1996: 21). That can be seen in Hana’s ways of dream interpretation through the feelings she had in dreams and through Mia’s using meditation as a technique to get the meaning of the dream within herself.

As is also notable from Hana’s and Mia’s dreams, the dreams of the dead among spiritual people were prevalently described as positive, emphasizing the dead in them as comforting figures. Mirza, born in 1981, is a spiritual person from a Muslim family. He told me he has been “astral traveling” since he was a child. In his astral travels during dreams, he has met many deceased people who were close to him while they were alive. He described waking up happy after such dreams and explained how he understood those meetings:

Well, my perspective [on dreams about the dead was] [...], like, a kind of farewell – to let them go, that they’re in a good place and moving on, and that we need to continue our lives. That came to me [...] intuitively, like some kind of answer. And that we’re always connected, that we love each other, you know, like that.

A good place that Mirza mentioned as his idea on where his personally significant dead were, was in line with his idea of the afterlife. As with Mirza, my interlocutors considered the afterlife – or the place where souls are placed before being reincarnated again – as positive, describing it as a place full of love, connection, unity and purpose. In relation to their positive view of the afterlife, Hana and Mia described the younger appearance and peaceful, blessed energy of their dead significant others in dreams:²⁷

She [her deceased grandmother] wasn’t the same – maybe a little younger. Yes, she was younger, well-preserved, definitely not in old age. But she seemed... calm. Blessed, peaceful.

He [her deceased brother] was always younger in my dreams. [...] Because, like, when we leave this body, there we’re all in some kind of younger version of ourselves, in some kind of body of our own.

Mia stated that she remembers dreams of her dead brother during difficult periods in her life. Because they had a good relationship while he was still alive, he continued to be a positive figure for her in the afterlife. She told me a dream in which he still had his former role of her brother:

Then I remember, in one dream, he said to me like this, 'Don't worry about anything, about anything.' He said it several times, gesturing with his hand, looking at me, and I know that expression on his face, [...] And he looked at me so lovingly, with a sparkle in his eyes, 'But nothing.' Like he wanted me to promise him, 'But nothing, but nothing,' something like that. And I often think of it when things get really hard for me, you know, really.

Emma was born in 1976 into a religiously mixed family. Her father's side was religiously diverse but not actively practicing any religion, while her mother's side were practicing Muslims. She emphasized that neither side imposed any beliefs on her. Before the war, she started practicing yoga and transcendental meditation, but during the war her engagement with spirituality deepened. Surrounded by death and dying, she also became more interested in questions about the afterlife. After the war, she emigrated and lived abroad for a decade, where she continued to explore different spiritual traditions.

Emma lost her boyfriend a few years ago. They were very close, and she described him as a very peaceful, fun and active person. He often appears in her dreams when she is having a challenging time. She particularly emphasized one dream, which she had not long after he died, while she was still in mourning:

Once, I had a dream, and in my dream, he was sitting on a chair in the bedroom, like, on the side. And he says, 'Oh,' he says, 'my love,' he says to me, 'I know you're wondering where I am, but I'm here! I'm always here.' [...] So, it was a beautiful dream, like – like reassurance: 'Don't worry, I'm here, I'm here, I'm with you here.' [...] It was a very nice feeling, yes – of closeness and connection, I remember, it was a beautiful dream.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996: 264) argues that Western ideas of reincarnation are “this-worldly” as they assume that the dead continue to engage in the same activities and maintain the same relationships they had in life. This is different from Eastern reincarnation ideas, which presuppose that this-worldly activities will lose their meaning after death (see also Lee 2013: 120). In my research, dead people appearing to the living in dreams still had their former roles – of family members, friends or partners. Emma's boyfriend explicitly told her he is “still with her”, but manifestation of that message was implicit in most of the dreams I discussed in the article. Following Hanegraaff (1996: 264), that reflects a distinct Western reincarnation concept in which this-worldly – relationships, appearance, personality and wishes – will still be relevant for people after they die.

CONCLUSION

In the article, I have demonstrated that many of my interlocutors – spiritual people in Sarajevo – experienced encounters with the dead through dreams as comforting. They mainly stated that they feel an ongoing connection with the deceased through such dreams; they feel that the dead still take care of them through subtle reminders, calm presence or reassuring messages. This is in a sharp contrast with traditional conceptions of the dead among Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁸ Traditionally it was widely believed that the dead were dangerous and better avoided and that bothering the dead – be they known or unknown people, who died either recently or long ago – would result in punishment (Softić 2016: 271–277). And while the appearance of the dead in dreams is not necessarily interpreted as negative in Islam, the focus tends to be on the deceased individual and their state in the afterlife. In contrast, among my interlocutors, it is a particular type of dream that prevails – those in which the dead appear to comfort and reassure the living.

Thus, when comparing the majority of my interlocutors' dreams of the dead with the Islamic understanding of such dreams, we see a reversal of the "historical pattern of obligation" (Kwilecki 2009: 123). Indeed, Susan Kwilecki (2009: 101–118) writes about contemporary experiences of after-death communication in the USA and points out that the dead have changed from traditional ghosts who want something from the living, are dangerous and vindictive, into spirits that have become therapeutic figures, available to the living. The message usually conveyed from the dead in after-death communication is that the dead are fine now, they are here for the living, they love them, and that they have come to apologize to or forgive the living. Those messages are rather similar to the messages my interlocutors received from their dead. Therefore, for spiritual people in Sarajevo, the dead are no longer dangerous, better to be avoided (Softić 2016: 271–277) or focused on themselves, but rather comforting, supportive and available to the living.

As a result, most of my interlocutors described feeling better in their waking lives after dreaming of the dead. They stated that the dreams actively helped them, especially during the bereavement period (see also Barrett 1992). In their dreams, the dead were mostly good-looking, and emotionally healthy – young, fresh, bathed in light and happy. They usually brought positive messages of love, connection, care and comfort. Dreams about the deceased were mostly a sign of continuing bonds for my interlocutors, a sign that the dead still taking care of them and supporting them (see also Black et al. 2016: 111; Niyazioglu 2016).

I argue that spiritual people's positive views of the afterlife shaped the way they experienced dreams of the dead. As is common in alternative spiritual understandings of the afterlife, my interlocutors emphasized continuous

growth after death rather than placement in a fixed realm, such as heaven or hell. Olav Hammer (2003: 469–469) notes that Western reincarnation beliefs are largely based on Theosophical interpretations. Among other historically influenced changes they integrated with the idea of reincarnation, the most important for the discussed topic is integration of the idea of evolutionism. Within this framework, reincarnation is portrayed as an optimistic process of the soul's continuous progress. Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996: 258) observes that in New Age religions, death is understood as an initiation, a necessary stage in development, transition to a new level of existence and part of the growth process, rather than the end (see also Lee 2013: 121; Lee 2015: 90–92), which reflects modern cultural values that prioritize personal development (Bremmer 2002: 102). Tony Walter (1993: 141) therefore highlights a prevailing optimism within New Age beliefs regarding both the afterlife and future incarnations.

Because of the positive view of the afterlife and ideas of growth in the afterlife, the personally significant dead my interlocutors dreamed about retained recognizable personal identities, kept their former roles, and appeared as comforting, emotionally available figures to the living. Conversely, disturbing or negative dreams about the dead were typically interpreted through psychoanalytic frameworks rather than as ontologically real encounters. It seems that such negative experiences conflicted with their broader understanding of the afterlife and were therefore not regarded as genuine contact with the souls of the dead.

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NOTES

- 1 In academia, dreams about the dead were mainly researched in the field of bereavement studies in psychology, where authors investigated the topics appearing in such dreams (Barrett 1992; Garfield 1996; Hinton et al. 2013; Black et al. 2016).
- 2 The ontological connection between sleep and death is present in many cultures (Mabrouk 1987: 11; Astuti 2007: 321; Rivière 2009: 109). Elisabeth Kirtsoglou (2010: 332) notes that *hypnos* (sleep) and *thanatos* (death) are twin sisters in Greek mythology. Similarly, sleep is considered a 'lesser death' in Islam (Mabrouk 1987: 11; see also Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002: 49).

- 3 Being a researcher from Slovenia played a role in shaping my access to interlocutors. Coming from a country that is geographically and culturally close to Bosnia and Herzegovina, I was perceived as somewhat familiar with local customs, habits and historical contexts, particularly due to the shared history of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in Yugoslavia. However, I was still considered an outsider which may have made some participants more comfortable in sharing their experiences with me. Moreover, I was often treated as a guest and various people tried to help me with my research. I made it clear that I am not part of any spiritual movements myself, but I am interested in different ideas. Perhaps being a woman made it easier for me to access other women, which is reflected in the higher number of female participants.
- 4 As was the case in Sarajevo, other researchers noted that women are generally more engaged in alternative spiritual milieus (see Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 97–106; Bužeková 2014).
- 5 For etymological analysis and definition of the terms shaman/shamanism and neoshamanism see Bužeková 2014; Laughlin & Rock 2014: 234–235; Bužeková 2023: 14.
- 6 Family constellation therapy is a transgenerational, phenomenological, therapeutic intervention (Cohen 2006). It usually takes form in a group therapy. The method is often described as pseudo-scientific. I agree with Júlia Gyimesi who analyses it within the framework of Western esotericism (2023).
- 7 Sai Baba was an Indian guru. He passed away in 2011 but continues to have numerous devotees worldwide.
- 8 Mohanji is an Indian spiritual teacher who leads a transnational spiritual movement through his Mohanji Foundation.
- 9 Brahma Kumaris is a spiritual movement originating from India (see Brahma Kumaris n. d.).
- 10 My understanding of the term alternative spirituality aligns with Wouter J. Hanegraaff's (1996) definition of New Age religion.
- 11 The Cominform, or Communist Information Bureau, functioned as an agency of international communism. Rising tensions between the member states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia culminated in the expulsion of Tito's party in 1948 (Britannica 1998b).
- 12 As I was asking interlocutors about their encounters with the dead they experienced in different settings, I assumed that encountering the dead in dreams would be the most frequent answer. That proved true, although there were many other ways the dead were experienced by my interlocutors – in rituals, through technology, natural events and feelings.
- 13 In the Bosnian language, the verb *preseliti* [to move, to relocate] is often used as a euphemism for 'to die'. Death is seen as a relocation from one world (i.e. the temporal world) to another, while the dead person is seen as a traveler (Softić 2016: 145).
- 14 The Hare Krishna movement is a popular name for The International Society for Krishna Consciousness. It directly derives from Vaishnavism, one of the three main religious streams of classical India. It centers on worshiping Krishna, who is a form of the god Vishnu worshiped in Vaishnavism (Črnič 2005: 675).
- 15 The Akashic records are defined as "in occultism, a compendium of pictorial records, or 'memories,' of all events, actions, thoughts, and feelings that have occurred since the beginning of time" (Britannica 1998a).
- 16 The American Psychological Association defines lucid dreaming as "a dream in which the sleeper is aware that they are dreaming and may be able to influence the progress of the dream narrative" (American Psychological Association 2023).
- 17 Interestingly, Carl Jung's idea was that dreams of the dead represented genuine communication with the deceased, while his personal experiences and the dreams of others played a significant role in shaping his ideas about the afterlife (2011: 301–315).
- 18 *Bardos* are intermediate/transitional states between birth, death and rebirth in Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism. The period between death and rebirth consists of three *bardos* (Stefon 2009).

- 19 In his autobiography, Carl Gustav Jung (2011: 301–315) describes his dreams involving the dead and states that he believes these dreams represent communication with the deceased. For him, both his own and others' dreams about the dead shaped his ideas of the afterlife.
- 20 'Bad' death in Slavic folk belief is defined by Lyudmila N. Vinogradova (1999) as "the category of harmful 'un-clean' deceased, [that] consists of: 1) those who died of 'not his own' death; 2) those who didn't break finally before his death relationship with the living [...]; 3) those who had been in contact with the evil spirits during their lives [...]."
- 21 Among dreams of the dead, I also encountered several cases of oneiromantic dreams and one interlocutor who told me that such dreams had negative impact on her, as she was still in bereavement and was sad those were just dreams.
- 22 *Ilahija* is a religious song, that can be performed either solo, by a choir, with or without instrumental music. While in the contemporary practice it is categorized under *ilahija*, *kasida* is a longer song dedicated to the Prophet Mohammed (Softić 2011: 164). During the 1992–1995 war, both forms acquired patriotic character (Hamer 2018: 117).
- 23 She is referring to the concept of 'the knowing field' as it is understood within family constellations. The concept is defined by Julia Gyimesi (2023) as encompassing "a sensory experience of the representatives that provides somatic and emotional access to the feelings, sensations, and repressed experiences of the person whom they are representing."
- 24 However, not all dreams are considered relevant in Islam. The scriptural tradition distinguishes between three types of dreams: those inspired by God, those inspired by the Devil, and those that are a reflection of the worries and wishes of the individual (for differentiations of dreams in Christianity see Bitel 1991). This differentiation corresponds to the opinion about dreams shared by the majority of Muslims today (Edgar & Henig 2010: 251–253; cf. Mittermaier 2011: 6).
- 25 *Evlija* is very loosely defined as a Muslim "saint" (cf. Bejtić 1982; Mencej 2021: 11).
- 26 Imam is "in a general sense, one who leads Muslim worshippers in prayer. In a global sense, imam is used to refer to the head of the Muslim community (*ummah*)" (Britannica 2025).
- 27 I only heard a few instances of people who looked tired or old – in one example because of a 'bad death' and in the other because – according to the interlocutor – the soul was temporarily frightened and lost after death, and her situation and appearance got better with time.
- 28 For Bosniak ghost narratives in the Srebrenica region, which have the effect of preserving the memory of the massacre, reclaiming space and punishing the Serbs for the crimes they committed during the war see Mencej 2021. For the agency of the dead who punish mistakes and frighten the living among the Bosniak population in central rural Bosnia and Herzegovina see Mencej 2025.

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Tina Ivnik is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Her research interests range from historical transformations of cultural landscapes, changes in rural communities to alternative spiritualities, interpretations of dreams, and encounters with the dead. Geographically, she focuses on the Slovenian–Italian border region, as well as urban areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

tina.ivnik@ff.uni-lj.si