

THE BELIEF AND CASES RELATED TO REINCARNATION AMONG THE HAIDA

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*The Belief and Cases Related to Reincarnation among the Haida**

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Like other tribes of northwestern North America, the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands (British Columbia) and southeastern Alaska have conserved their traditional belief in reincarnation. Thirty-four informants showed that the belief still persists, even among some young adults. Cases of the reincarnation type occur frequently among the Haida. The main features of 24 cases investigated between 1965 and 1975 are: predictions of rebirth in a particular family; announcing dreams, which indicate who is to be reborn; birthmarks said to correspond with wounds on the deceased person with whom a child is identified; imaged memories of a previous life; and correspondences in behavior between a child and a deceased person. Although the characteristics of the Haida cases resemble those of other northwestern tribes of North America, they differ in some respects from cases of other cultures, such as those of Southeast Asia.

DURING MANY YEARS of investigating cases of the reincarnation type, I have examined cases in several different cultures, comparing similarities and differences (Stevenson 1960, 1974b, 1975). In previous articles, I have compared the characteristics of cases among the Tlingits of Alaska (1966), the Alevis of Turkey (1970), and the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka (1973). The present report summarizes data from 24 Haida cases and also provides information about the belief in reincarnation among the Haida. Here, also, I shall compare the characteristics of the Haida cases and their belief in reincarnation with the patterns found among other tribes of northwestern North America and in other parts of the world.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Haida have inhabited the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia for centuries. Before their first contacts with white men, some of the Haida had migrated (probably in the 18th century) to Prince of Wales Island in what is now Alaska, and pushing the southern Tlingits back, they occupied considerable territory there. In the closing decades of the 18th century, the Haida came into contact with European explorers and traders—principally Spanish, British, and Russian. The political boundaries established by the Russians and British, and later by the Americans, led to some separation between the Haida living in what became British Columbia and those living in Alaska.

The Haida language is spoken by a small but diminishing number of persons on both sides of the international boundary. Linguistic separations, long antedating contact with the white man, account for the fact that the dialect spoken in Masset (on the northern coast of the

*It is a duty and a pleasure to thank the many Haida informants who generously shared information with me about cases and their beliefs in reincarnation.

Queen Charlotte Islands) is closer to that spoken in Hydaburg, Alaska (about 72 miles to the north, across Dixon Entrance), than it is to that of Skidegate. Skidegate—70 miles south of Masset but on the same island (Graham)—is the other large population center of the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Plausible estimates of the population of the Haida indicate that they may have numbered 10,000 before the coming of the white man. The ravages of smallpox and other diseases in the 19th century greatly reduced their numbers, however, and it is unlikely that all the Haida in both Alaska and British Columbia total more than 3,000 persons at this time.

Haida society, which is matrilineal, is divided into two exogamous moieties—Raven and Eagle. Although the Haida's language differs markedly from that of the surrounding tribes (the Tlingit and Tsimshian,¹ for example), their culture generally resembles that of other tribes of the northwestern coastal areas in British Columbia and southeastern Alaska. Within the broad cultural group of the northwestern tribes, the Haida showed distinctive features both in their practical achievements—they were master mariners—and in their art. Most such differences, however, lie outside the scope of the present paper.

At least two missionaries (Collison 1915; Harrison 1925) and three scientists (Dawson 1880; Krause 1885; Swanton 1905) who observed the Haida in the 19th and early 20th centuries, became familiar with their belief in reincarnation. None of them, however, made a particular study of this belief or related cases. To my knowledge, there have been no recent investigations of this facet of Haida culture.

SOURCES OF DATA

The data reported here were obtained during five field trips to the territory of the Haida between 1965 and 1975. In Alaska, most of my informants lived in Hydaburg and Craig on Prince of Wales Island; I interviewed one informant in Ketchikan. On the Queen Charlotte Islands, my informants lived in (old) Masset (site of the Indian village), New Masset, Skidegate, and Queen Charlotte City. I also interviewed some Haida informants in Prince Rupert and Port Edward on the British Columbia mainland. Mrs. Betty Hulbert obtained some additional information for me from informants in Craig, Alaska.

Altogether, I interviewed 34 Haida informants, who furnished sufficient data about 24 cases to provide a fairly complete picture of

1 The Tsimshian inhabit the mainland of western British Columbia, east of the Queen Charlotte Islands. Their territory, however, extends somewhat north of the most northern latitude of the Queen Charlotte Islands. The Tsimshian are thus neighbors of the Haida and, to the north, of the Tlingit.

each case (although there are gaps in the information, indicating the need for further study). In addition, they gave fragmentary or preliminary information about another 23 cases, some of which may provide material for further investigation. For most of the 24 primary cases, I had only one or two informants, although for a small number of them, I could interview three or four (but never more) informants. Some told of more than one case. I have described elsewhere the methods I have developed for conducting my interviews (Stevenson 1974b, 1975).

The cases were not detected by any systematic sampling. As it turned out, informants for one case frequently mentioned another case, or referred me to another person who could provide further information. Before going to a village for the first time, I usually obtained the name of a senior resident who, I was told, would help me, and this was invariably true.

As time and the willingness of the informants permitted, I asked them to relate various aspects of the Haida belief in reincarnation. Although I have developed a questionnaire (unpublished)² for inquiring systematically about features of the belief in reincarnation, I only went through this questionnaire fully with two informants. From others, I obtained information in a more informal manner, sometimes as they spoke spontaneously about the Haida belief in reincarnation, and sometimes in response to questions that I asked. Since most of the informants were interviewed separately, they spoke about their belief in reincarnation without hearing what other informants had said. It can be assumed, therefore, that most of what I learned was not influenced by a need on the part of my informants to conform to what other persons had already said, or by a fear of deviating from accepted doctrine.

Although nearly all the Haida are today at least nominal Christians, many of them continue to believe in reincarnation according to the oral traditions of the tribe. Unlike the great religions of Asia, the traditional religions of the northwestern American tribes never received any scriptural recording, much less a codification instructing persons in a uniform system of belief. Under the circumstances, then, it is perhaps surprising that my informants showed as much agreement about the belief as they did—and not surprising that they sometimes differed in their opinions. When describing the Haida's belief in reincarnation, I am relating opinions that are widespread, but I do not mean to imply by this that each item of the belief was uniformly held by all my informants. Moreover, even the belief in reincarnation itself was spoken about with varying strength of conviction by different informants.

2 My questionnaire is adapted from one used by Thomas (1968) among people of West Africa.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HAIDA CASES

USUAL FEATURES

The Haida believe that a person can, before he dies, choose his parents for his next incarnation, as well as influence, by his premortem wishes, the features of his next physical body. They attach importance to announcing dreams as indicators of the previous personality of a baby to be born.³ Such dreams usually occur during pregnancy. After birth, the baby may be examined for birthmarks, deformities, and other physical features that, according to their correspondence with wounds or with wishes of the presumptive previous personality, may give further indications of the baby's suspected previous personality. As the child begins to speak and to manifest post-infantile behavior, he may make statements indicative of imaged memories of a previous life. He may also show behavior corresponding to that of the deceased person he claims to have been or with whom he has been identified by his elders. For example, a child who "remembers" the life of a man who drowned may show a phobia for water, although other members of his family do not. Or, a boy who "remembers" the previous life of a married man may show particular affection for that man's widow and express jealousy if other men pay attention to her.

A fully developed Haida case may thus have five features: (1) premortem expression of wishes concerning reincarnation; (2) dreams announcing the reincarnation of a deceased person in the body of a baby to be born; (3) birthmarks, deformities, or other physical characteristics that are interpreted in relation to reincarnation; (4) imaged memories on the part of the subject; and (5) unusual behavior that corresponds with known characteristics of the identified previous personality. In my collection of Haida cases, however, few contain more than two or three of these features, and only one case exhibited all five features. The subjects of Haida cases, moreover, make many fewer statements about previous lives than do most subjects of reincarnation cases in Asia. (Haida cases are, however, relatively rich in what appear

3 The term "previous personality" refers to the deceased person who the subject of a case claims to have been in his previous life or with whom the subject may be identified by other persons on the basis of dreams and birthmarks, even when the subject himself does not claim to remember a previous life. The term "announcing dream" refers to dreams that are believed to indicate the identity of a deceased person who is being reborn; they usually (but not invariably) occur during the pregnancy involving the child who becomes the subject of a case. Cases are said to be of the "sex change" type when the subject claims to remember the previous life of a person of the opposite sex, or is said to have been a person of the opposite sex in his previous life. "Imaged memories" are cognitive information about people, objects, and events of the previous life, whereas "behavioral memories" are the emotions, interests, aptitudes, skills, and other non-verbal behavior of a subject that may correspond to similar behavior reported for the related previous personality of his case. All these terms may be used without commitment to a particular interpretation of the case.

to be behavioral memories.) A case may be accepted by Haida elders solely on the basis of an announcing dream and some noted similarities of behavior between a child and the person of whom he is supposed to be the reincarnation. Sometimes two or more candidates are put forward for the role of subject in a case (a topic I shall discuss later). The expectations of the parents and other elders aroused by announcing dreams, as well as the physical characteristics of a newborn baby, alert the parents to pay attention to what that child may later say or do. Such parents may thus notice remarks and behavior suggestive of memories of a previous life that the European or non-native North American parent might ignore. On the other hand, the expectations aroused by dreams and birthmarks may also bias the parents' observations, even leading them to guide the child in the direction of behavior that he might not otherwise show. This is not necessarily an unconscious process on the part of the elders, although it may be. At or soon after birth, a baby may be given the Haida (Indian) name of the putative deceased personality whose reincarnation he is thought to be. Thereafter, the child is assumed to be the reincarnation of that person, and it may be difficult for him to reject this role.

From the above considerations, it also follows that Haida cases do not usually indicate anything paranormal—that is, the subject rarely says or does anything related to the previous personality which he could not have acquired by normal transmission from his elders. In this paper, however, I am concerned not with the evidential strength of the Haida cases, but only with describing their characteristics and those of the Haida belief in reincarnation.

PARTICULARS OF THE HAIDA CASES

Of the 24 cases, 10 lived in Alaska, and the other 14 lived in British Columbia. As far as I can tell, there are no significant differences in the characteristics of the cases between the two international subdivisions, and I shall therefore consider all 24 together. Seventeen of the subjects were males, and seven were females. Because there were no cases in which the subject was identified as having been a person of the opposite sex in his previous life, the related previous personalities also included 17 males and 7 females.

In 18 cases, the subject and identified previous personality were members of the same immediate or extended family. In one case, they were more distantly related, and in five cases, they were not related in any way. In all cases, however, the previous personality was someone known to members of the subject's family, sometimes as a good friend. Among the 18 cases in which the subject and identified previous personality belonged to the same family, the connection occurred on the

side of the subject's mother in eight cases. In the other cases, the relationship was either on the side of the subject's father, the subject was a younger sibling of the identified previous personality, or the relationship was through marriage only.

Announcing dreams were reported for 14 cases. (In one case, two persons had announcing dreams, so there were actually 15 dreamers.) Although announcing dreams were said to have occurred in several other cases, the informants could not remember precisely who had had the dream. Among the 15 known dreamers, 4 were men and 11 were women. Of the women dreamers, only four were the mothers of the concerned subjects, the other female dreamers being grandmothers, other relatives, or friends of one or the other family. Rather often, the dream was had by someone closer in relationship to the deceased personality—his widow, for example—than to the subject.

The mode of death was impossible to determine in seven cases. In the other 17 cases, however, the cause of the previous personality's death was ascertained either from death certificates or from informants whose testimony on the matter seemed adequately reliable. In these 17 cases, the previous personality had died violently in 6 cases and of natural causes in 11 cases. The incidence of violent death in the related previous personalities is thus 28% of those cases for which the cause of death is known.

Regarding the physical characteristics of the subjects, a birthmark or deformity was noted on the body of the subject at or soon after birth in four cases. In another case, the infant was born with a severe dermatitis that cleared up after two weeks, although he continued to suffer from "some trouble with his skin." The identified previous personality of this case had suffered, at the time of his death, from severe exfoliative dermatitis, and the immediate cause of his death appears to have been a complication of this disease. (I obtained a copy of the death certificate, which confirmed the occurrence of severe exfoliative dermatitis.)

Data to permit a calculation of the interval between the death and presumed rebirth were not obtained in seven cases. The relevant dates for the remaining 17 cases were either known precisely (sometimes from birth and death certificates) or judged sufficiently reliable as given by informants. The interval in these 17 cases ranged from two weeks to seven years; the median interval was four months. In 11 of the 17 cases, the interval was eight months or less, indicating that in these cases, assuming the accuracy of the data, the subject had been conceived prior to the death of the previous personality.

In three cases, the related previous personality was reported to have selected premortem his parents for his next incarnation. In seven cases,

the subjects, according to my informants, had expressed a premortem wish for some alteration of physical appearance in the next incarnation. For example, the previous personality had said that he wished to be taller, better-looking, or fairer in his next incarnation. But sometimes a person hoped for more distinctive changes, such as that of being reborn with red hair. The most extraordinary case of this sort is that of a fisherman who, tired of working hard all his life, repeatedly expressed a wish to be reborn with only one hand so that he would not have to work at manual labor in his next incarnation. After the fisherman's death, the next child born in the family (his grandson) had a normal left arm, but his right arm stopped about three inches below the elbow joint, and there was no trace of a hand. No other instance of a congenital deformity has occurred in this family. The pregnancy of the mother with the deformed child was entirely normal; she took no drugs and had no illness during it.⁴

COMPARISON OF HAIDA CASES WITH THOSE OF OTHER CULTURES

The small number of Haida cases under analysis here makes it prudent to regard all comparisons with cases in other cultures as provisional only, pending opportunities to investigate the presently known cases further and to study new cases.

The preponderance of male subjects noted in the Haida cases also occurs among the Tlingits (Stevenson 1966, 1970) and the Alevis of Turkey (Stevenson 1970). The higher incidence of violent deaths among the related previous personalities of Haida male subjects (five cases) as compared with female subjects (one case) may contribute to the preponderance of male subjects. However, some other factor must also be in play, since a higher incidence of male subjects also occurs in cases in which the related previous personality died naturally; in this subgroup of 11 Haida cases, there were 8 males subjects and 3 female ones. In addition, males preponderated in Turkish cases in which the previous personality had died naturally, but not in Tlingit cases (*ibid.*).

In the complete absence of cases of the sex change type, the Haida cases resemble those among the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska. Among 85 Tlingit cases, I have found no instance of a person being identified with a deceased member of the opposite sex. Nor have I found any instances of this among 13 Tsimshian cases (Stevenson, unpublished data). De Laguna (1972), however, has reported sex-change cases among the Yakutat Tlingit, who live north of the Tlingits among whom I have conducted research. Such cases occur among the Eskimos (Stevenson 1966) and Athabaskans (Stevenson, unpublished data) as well. Slobodin

4 I shall later publish a detailed report of this and other Haida cases.

(1970) reported a high incidence (50%) of sex-change cases among the Kutchin of the Canadian Northwest Territories.

The incidence of announcing dreams among the Haida (definitely reported for 14 of the 24 cases, and vaguely reported for some other cases) is slightly higher than that which I found among Tlingit cases. Announcing dreams were reported to me for 20 of 43 Tlingit cases (Stevenson 1966). In the Tlingit cases, the pregnant mother was the dreamer in 8 of the 20 cases, whereas in only 4 of the 14 Haida cases, the pregnant mother had the announcing dream.

Birthmarks and deformities, reported for only 5 of 24 Haida cases (21%), occurred less frequently than they did among Tlingit and Turkish cases, in which the incidence of birthmarks and deformities was 54% and 51%, respectively (Stevenson 1970).

Although the Haida, like the Tlingit, have a matrilineal society, their cases do not show as high an incidence of relationship on the mother's side between the subject and concerned previous personality as do those of the Tlingit. Such a relationship occurred in only 8 (33%) of the 24 Haida cases, as compared with 70% of 43 Tlingit cases (Stevenson 1966).

The median interval between death and presumed rebirth is much shorter for the Haida cases (4 months) than it is for Turkish cases (9 months), Sri Lanka cases (21 months), and Tlingit cases (48 months) (Stevenson 1970). The incidence of violent death among the related previous personalities (28%) is lower than that of any other culture for which corresponding data have been analyzed (Stevenson 1974). It contrasts especially with the high incidence of violent death (56%) in the related previous personalities of Tlingit cases.

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON THE BELIEF IN REINCARNATION AMONG THE HAIDA

Most of the Haida who believe in reincarnation more or less endorse the relevance of the various features of the cases outlined above, such as the tendency to incarnate in the same family, and the importance of announcing dreams as indicators of who is to be reborn. However, as mentioned earlier, different informants sometimes expressed variant opinions about parts of the belief in reincarnation. In addition, some informants mentioned certain aspects of their beliefs that are not illustrated by the cases mentioned or by any case. In this section, therefore, I shall present additional observations about the belief in reincarnation among the Haida.

Concerning the possibility of changing sex from one life to another, I heard different opinions. Some informants said this does not occur, but others admitted the possibility, although only one informant had

actually heard of a case of this type. This informant lived in Alaska and said the case had occurred in the Queen Charlotte Islands. When I went to the islands, however, I was unable to trace the case from the information I had. Overall, I was impressed by the greater tolerance to the idea of sex change among the Haida as compared with my Tlingit informants. All of the Tlingits declared that sex change from one life to another is "impossible"—an opinion echoed by the Alevis of Turkey and the Druses of Lebanon, but refuted (at least as a generalization for the whole world) by many sex change cases that have reportedly occurred in Southeast Asia, as well as by those among the Eskimos, Athabaskans (including Kutchin), and Yakutat Tlingits already mentioned.

The Haida do not believe in the rebirth of subhuman animals as humans, or vice versa. (One informant recounted to me an old legend of a Haida who had claimed to have been a halibut in his previous life; all other informants who spoke to this topic denied that subhuman animals could be reborn as humans, or, conversely, humans as subhuman animals.) In this aspect of their belief, the Haida agree with the Tlingit, who also do not accept the rebirth of subhuman animals as humans, or vice versa. (These beliefs about reincarnation should not be confused with beliefs and related legends concerning the *transformation* of animals into humans, and the reverse.)

After death, according to traditional Haida belief, the soul sojourns for a variable time in some intermediate plane of existence. The duration of discarnate existence is not fixed as it is among the Jains (Stevenson 1975) and Druses (Stevenson 1974b). It is quite acceptable among the Haida for a subject to be conceived before the death of the previous personality with whom he will later be identified. As already mentioned, this had, in fact, supposedly occurred in 11 of the 17 cases for which there were relevant data. One informant told me that when this happens, the mother of the baby "becomes very large" before her delivery. Her remark perhaps implied that the pregnancy goes beyond maturity in order to allow the reincarnating personality time to adjust himself before returning, although she did not say so. This informant believed herself to be the mother of a subject conceived before the death of the related previous personality. My notes are not explicit on the matter, but it appears that this subject may have been born post-maturely. Another subject, also thought to have been conceived before the death of the related previous personality, was born postmaturely. I have no other data bearing on this topic, and merely record it as an aspect of the belief in reincarnation among the Haida that deserves further study.

I have already mentioned that more than one candidate may be nominated for the role of subject in a case. This can occur when two or

more persons have announcing dreams apparently related to the forthcoming reincarnation of a deceased personality, but the different dreams indicate the babies of different pregnant women. Logically, this rivalry could be resolved by carefully observing the two or several nominated children. For example, two mothers each told me that they believed one of their boys was a well-known and much respected member of their family reincarnated. One of the mothers described to me, with regard to her son, an announcing dream had by the old man's widow, imaged memories (of a rather specific kind) that her son had had, and also behavioral memories appropriate for the deceased man in question. In contrast, the other mother reported only one vague and unspecific statement her son had made, and an equally unspecific single item of behavior that she thought appropriate for the deceased man in question. It seems to me that much stronger evidence was offered for the claim that the first of these two boys was this particular man reborn than was offered for the second child. Many of the Haida avoid the dilemmas presented by such conflicting evidence, however, by saying that the soul can divide into several portions, each of which can then animate a new body. This certainly reduces controversy when claims are made for two or more children to be a particular person reborn. The belief in "soul-splitting" during the process of reincarnation occurs among the Eskimos and the Burmese. I have never heard of such a belief among the Tlingit.

My Haida informants never spontaneously mentioned any system of rewards and punishments that they think link one life with another on the basis of moral conduct. Two elderly informants whom I directly questioned on this topic both denied that any such system formed part of the Haida belief in reincarnation. Two other informants, however, considered reincarnation a continuous process leading to the perfectibility of man.

I have already mentioned that the Haida cases have fewer birthmarks and deformities than the Tlingit cases. I also found that some Haida informants were unaware even of the existence of birthmarks as possible indicators of the identity of a reincarnating person. The two elderly informants mentioned above both denied that birthmarks contributed to the identification of a reincarnating person; instead, they claimed, dreams served this purpose.

This neglect of birthmarks would surprise the Tlingits, who attach great importance to them. The comparative neglect of birthmarks in the Haida ideas about reincarnation accords with the paucity of Haida cases having birthmarks and deformities. Here, apparently, is an illustration of the circular relationship that seems to occur between the characteristics of the cases in a particular culture and the beliefs held

about reincarnation in that culture, a topic which I have discussed more fully elsewhere (Stevenson 1974a). The belief that sex change does not occur and the absence of cases of the sex change type appear to provide another illustration of the same process.

In connection with announcing dreams, an interesting cultural evolution appears to have occurred among the Haida. In the 19th century (and perhaps later), the village shaman (called the *Sā-ag-gā*), using information from his dreams or trances, announced the previous identity of each newborn baby. Harrison (1925:112-113) described this function of the shaman. One of my informants (who was born in 1887) said that at his birth, a shaman had told his family of whom he was the reincarnation. This informant further reported that the decline and disappearance of the shamans had led to the use of dreams by what we might call laymen in determining the previous identity of a baby. If we assume that such dreams include at least sometimes a paranormal process—Tlingit announcing dreamers correctly predicted the sex of a baby to be born in 26 of 29 instances (Stevenson 1966)—then it would appear that paranormal powers, which were at one time possessed only by specialists, became more widely spread among the general population in a kind of “do it yourself” movement.

I became accustomed to hearing elderly informants both for Tlingit and Haida cases lament how the young people no longer paid any attention to reincarnation. There appeared to be some justification for such remarks with regard to younger Tlingits, although I found several interested and well-informed young Tlingit mothers who were prepared to tell me about cases and to enter into serious discussions. Among the Haida, I found, in proportion to all the informants, even more young mothers similarly interested and open in their willingness to talk about reincarnation cases and their beliefs related to them. Among my best Haida informants were four young mothers all 30 years of age or younger. This is not to say that other, older informants were unwilling to talk about the subject. On the contrary, all the Haida informants I approached, with one exception, were most cooperative, and most were also eager to discuss the cases and belief related to reincarnation. I mention the young mothers only as a corrective to the mistaken idea that the belief in reincarnation is dying out among the Haida. I would even go so far as to predict that in the revival of Haida culture which is now under way, we may expect the Haida people to give increasing attention to this important part of their ancient religion.

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