

The Belief in Reincarnation and Cases of the Reincarnation Type Among the Haida ¹

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INTRODUCTION

During the investigation of cases of the reincarnation type in which I have engaged for many years, I have examined the cases of several different cultures for characteristics in which they resemble each other or differ from one culture to another. In previous articles (Stevenson, 1966, 1970, 1973) I have compared the characteristics of cases among the Tlingit of Alaska, the Alevis of Turkey, and the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. The present report summarizes data from 24 Haida cases and also provides some related information about the belief in reincarnation among the Haida. I shall also compare characteristics of the cases and the belief related to reincarnation among the Haida with the patterns of the cases and beliefs found among other tribes of northwestern North America and in other parts of the world.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE HAIDA

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 eighteenth century) to Prince of Wales Island in what is now Alaska and, pushing the southern Tlingit back, they occupied considerable territory there.

The Haida came into contact with European explorers and then traders—principally Spanish, British, and Russian—in the last third

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² It is a pleasure to thank the many Haida informants who generously shared information with me about cases and about the belief in reincarnation among the Haida people. My thanks also to Mrs. Betty Hulbert, who obtained some additional information on my behalf from informants in Craig, Alaska.

of the eighteenth century. 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 Queen Charlotte Islands) is closer to that spoken in Hydaburg, Alaska (about 72 miles to the north, across Dixon Entrance), than to that of Skidegate. The latter town is 70 miles south of Masset, but on the same island, Graham Island. It 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 in the eighteenth century before the coming of the white man to their territory. The ravages of smallpox and other diseases greatly reduced their numbers in the nineteenth century and it is unlikely that all the Haida of both Alaska and British Columbia number more than 3,000 persons at this time.

The Haida have a matrilineal society and are divided into two exogamous clans or moieties, the Raven and the Eagle. Although their language differs markedly from that of the surrounding tribes such as the Tlingit and Tsimshian,³ their culture (during its heyday) generally resembled 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 certainly showed distinctive features both in their economy—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 late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became familiar with their belief in reincarnation. None of them, however, made a particular study of this belief or of related cases. Nor have I learned of any more recent investigations of these important features of the 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

³ 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.

informants lived in Hydaburg and Craig on Prince of Wales Island, but 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.

I interviewed altogether 34 Haida informants. They furnished information concerning 24 cases of the reincarnation type that was sufficient to provide a picture of the main features of these cases. In addition, they gave more fragmentary or preliminary information about another 23 cases, some of which it may be possible to investigate further. Many of the main 24 cases also have data missing and require and deserve further study. Some of the informants gave information about more than one case. For most of the 24 cases I had only one or two informants, although for a small number of them I was able to interview three or four (but never more) informants. I have described elsewhere (Stevenson, 1974a, 1975) the methods I have developed for the conduct of interviews during the investigation of cases of this type.

The cases were not detected by any systematic sampling. Informants for one case frequently mentioned another one, or referred me to another person who could provide further information. Before going to a village for the first time I had nearly always 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 tell me about various aspects of the Haida belief in reincarnation. Although I have developed a questionnaire (unpublished)⁴ for inquiring systematically about features of the belief in reincarnation, I went through this questionnaire fully with only 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 about various aspects of it that I put to them. Most of the informants were interviewed separately and thus gave their information about the belief in reincarnation without hearing what other informants had said. I think 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 told me or by fear of deviating from accepted doctrine.

⁴ This questionnaire is adapted from one used by Thomas (1968) among people of West Africa.

Nearly all the Haida are today at least nominal Christians. Many of them, however, 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, it is perhaps surprising that informants showed as much agreement about the belief as they did, and not surprising that they sometimes differed in their opinions. When I describe the belief in reincarnation among the Haida I am writing about opinions that are widespread, but I do not mean to imply 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.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HAIDA CASES OF THE REINCARNATION TYPE

Usual Features of the Cases

The Haida believe that a person can, before he dies, choose his parents for his next incarnation and also that he can, by his premortem wishes, influence the features of his next physical body. They attach importance to dreams as indicators of the previous personality of a baby to be born. Such "announcing dreams" usually occur during the pregnancy of the baby's mother. After the baby's birth it may be examined for birthmarks, deformities, and other physical features that, according to their correspondence with wounds or with wishes expressed by the presumptive previous personality when living, may give further indications of the baby's previous identity. 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: (a) premortem expression of wishes concerning reincarnation by a person who later dies; (b) dreams announcing the reincarnation of a deceased person in the body of a baby to be born; (c) birthmarks, deformities, or other physical characteristics that are interpreted in relation to reincarnation; (d) imaged memories on the part of the subject; and (e) 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 I know of only one case in which all five occurred. The subjects of Haida cases, moreover, make many fewer statements about the previous lives than do most subjects of reincarnation cases in Asia. (Haida cases are, however, relatively rich in what appear to be behavioral memories.) A case may be accepted by Haida elders solely on the basis of an announcing dream and some observed 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 to which I shall return later. The expectations of the parents and other elders aroused by announcing dreams and 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 usual European or (non-native) North American parent would ignore. On the other hand, the expectations aroused by dreams and physical characteristics may also bias the parents' observations and even lead 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. A Haida baby at or soon after birth may be given the Haida (Indian) name of the putative deceased personality whose reincarnation he is supposed to be. It will thereafter be assumed that he is the reincarnation of that person and it may be difficult for him to reject this role.

From the above considerations it follows also that Haida cases are not usually strong with regard to anything paranormal. In other words, the subject rarely says or does anything related to the previous personality concerning which we can say he could not have acquired the necessary information by normal transmission from his elders. In this paper I am concerned, however, not with the evidential strength of the Haida cases, but only with describing their characteristics and those of the Haida belief in reincarnation.

Geographical Distribution of the Cases

The subjects of 10 of the cases lived in Alaska and the other 14 subjects in British Columbia. So far as I can tell, there are no significant differences in the characteristics of the cases from the two international subdivisions and I shall therefore consider all 24 cases together.

Sex of Subjects and Related Previous Personalities

Of the 24 subjects, 17 were males and seven females. There were

no cases in which the subject was identified as having been a person of the opposite sex in the previous life and so the related previous personalities also included 17 males and seven females.

Relationships between Subjects and Previous Personalities

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 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

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

Mode of Death of Previous Personalities

In seven cases the mode of death has not been ascertained. In the other 17 cases 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 died violently in five cases and of natural causes in 12 cases. The incidence of violent death in the related previous personalities is thus 29 per cent of those cases for which the cause of death is known.

Physical Characteristics of Subjects

In four cases a birthmark or deformity was noted on the body of the subject at or soon after birth. 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 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.)

Interval between Previous Personality's Death and Subject's Birth

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.

Wishes Expressed Premortem by the Related Previous Personalities

In three cases the related previous personality was reported to have selected premortem his parents for his next incarnation. In seven cases he was reported to have expressed premortem a wish for some alteration of his physical appearance in his next incarnation. For example, the previous personality had said that he wished to be taller, better-looking, or have a fairer complexion 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 his death the next child born in his family (the fisherman's grandson) was born with a normal left arm, but his right arm, which I carefully examined and photographed, stops about three inches below the elbow joint and has no trace of a hand in the stump. There is no other instance of a congenital deformity in this family. The pregnancy of the mother of the deformed child was entirely normal; she took no drugs and had no illness during it. The subject of this case was born in 1949 and was therefore a young man when I met him in 1973 and again in 1975. Both his parents told me that they had heard his grandfather, the presumed previous personality, repeatedly say that he would be reborn with one arm (or one hand) only. Another informant, who was a contemporary of the previous personality, told me independently that he had heard the subject's grandfather make a similar

statement. Two other (secondhand) informants said that they also had heard that the presumed previous personality had made such a prediction about having only one hand in his next incarnation. (The informants varied in saying whether the prediction was of having only one *arm* or one *hand*.) The case has no other features additional to those mentioned. The subject claimed no memories of a previous life, and his mother did not claim to have had an announcing dream.⁵

COMPARISON OF HAIDA CASES WITH THOSE OF OTHER CULTURES

The smaller number (24) of Haida cases under analysis here makes it prudent to regard all comparisons with the cases of other cultures as provisional pending opportunities to investigate the presently known cases further and to study new ones.

The preponderance of male subjects noted in the Haida cases occurs also in cases among the Tlingit and the Alevis of Turkey (Stevenson, 1966, 1970). The higher incidence of violent deaths among the related previous personalities of male subjects (five cases) as compared to female subjects (one case) may contribute to the preponderance of male subjects. But 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 cases there were eight male and three female subjects. Males preponderated also in Turkish cases in which the previous personality died naturally, but not in Tlingit cases (Stevenson 1970).

In the complete absence of cases of the "sex change" type, the Haida cases resemble those among the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska. I have found no instance of a person being identified with a deceased member of the opposite sex among the many Tlingit cases that I have studied. Nor have I found any instances of this among 13 Tsimshyan cases (Stevenson, unpublished data). De Laguna (1972, pp. 776-781), however, has reported cases of the "sex change" type among the Yakutat Tlingit who live north of the Tlingit among whom I have conducted research. Cases of the "sex change" type also occur among the Eskimos (Stevenson, 1966) and Athabaskan (Stevenson, unpublished data). Slobodin (1970) reported a high incidence (50 per cent) of cases of the "sex change" type 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. In the Tlingit cases, the pregnant mother was the dreamer in eight of

⁵ I intend to publish later a detailed report of this and other Haida cases.

the 20 cases where an announcing dream had occurred. The pregnant mother had the announcing dream in only four of the 14 Haida cases.

Birthmarks and deformities, reported for only five⁶ of 24 Haida cases (21 per cent), occurred less frequently than they did among Tlingit and Turkish cases in which the incidence of birthmarks and deformities was respectively 54 per cent and 51 per cent (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 supposed previous personality as do those of the Tlingit. Such a relationship occurred in only eight (33 per cent) of the 24 Haida cases compared with 30 (70 per cent) of 43 Tlingit cases.

The median interval between death and presumed rebirth is much shorter for the Haida cases (four months) than it is for Turkish cases (nine months), Sri Lanka cases (21 months), and Tlingit cases (48 months) (Stevenson, 1970).

The incidence of violent death among the related previous personalities (29 per cent) is lower than that of any other culture for which corresponding data have been analyzed (Stevenson 1974b, p. 409). It contrasts especially with the high incidence of violent death (56 per cent) 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 endorse more or less the relevance of the various features of the cases that I have outlined above such as the tendency to reincarnate in the same family and the importance of announcing dreams as indicators of who is to be reborn. However, as I mentioned earlier, different informants sometimes expressed variant opinions about aspects of the belief in reincarnation. In addition, some informants mentioned some 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

⁶ This figure includes the four subjects with birthmarks and deformities and the baby born with dermatitis mentioned earlier.

I went there I was unable to trace the case from the information I had. I was impressed by the greater tolerance of the idea of "sex change" among the Haida, as compared with my Tlingit informants. All of the latter who spoke about this topic had 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 cases of the "sex change" type that have occurred in Southeast Asia as well as by those among the Eskimos, Athabaskan (including Kutchin), and Yakutat Tlingit 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 about this topic denied that subhuman animals could be reborn as humans or humans as subhuman animals.) In this aspect of their belief the Haida agree with the Tlingit, who also do not believe in 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.)

The Haida believe that after death 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 and the Druses (Stevenson, 1974a, 1975).

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 apparently 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. The informant did not say so, but the remark perhaps implies that in Haida belief the pregnancy goes beyond maturity in order to allow the reincarnating personality time to adjust itself before returning. This informant was herself 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 postmaturely. Another subject, also 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 a possible aspect of the belief in reincarnation among the Haida, and perhaps of the Haida cases, 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 relating to the forthcoming reincarnation of a deceased personality, but the different

dreams indicate the babies of different pregnant women. It would seem to me that this rivalry could be resolved by careful observation of the two or several nominated children. For example, two mothers each told me that they believed one of their sons 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 deceased man's widow, rather specific imaged memories that her son had had, and also behavioral memories appropriate for the deceased man. In contrast, the other mother reported only one quite vague and nonspecific statement her son had made and an equally nonspecific single item of behavior that she thought appropriate for the deceased man in question. I think the first of these two mothers offered considerably stronger evidence for the claim of her son to be the deceased man reborn than did the second mother. Many of the Haida, however, avoid the dilemmas presented by conflicting evidence of the kind just mentioned by saying that the soul can divide into several entities each of which may 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 I have also heard of it among 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 are thought by them to link one life with another on the basis of moral conduct. Two elderly informants to whom I put a direct question on this topic both denied that any such concept formed part of the Haida belief in reincarnation. Two other informants 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 have the Tlingit cases. I found also that some Haida informants were quite 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. They attributed importance to announcing dreams for this purpose.

The comparative neglect of birthmarks among the Haida would surprise a Tlingit interested in reincarnation since the Tlingit attach great importance to them. This neglect of birthmarks in Haida ideas about reincarnation accords with the relative paucity of Haida cases involving birthmarks and deformities. We may have here an illustration of the circular relationship that seems to exist between the characteristics of the cases in a particular culture and the beliefs held about reincarnation in that culture, a topic I have discussed more fully elsewhere (Stevenson, 1974b). The belief that "sex change"

does not occur and the absence of cases of that type among the Haida appears to provide another illustration of the same process.

In connection with announcing dreams an interesting cultural evolution seems to have occurred among the Haida. In the nineteenth century (and perhaps later) the village shaman (called the *S̄-ag-ḡ* by the Haida), using information from his dreams or trances, announced the previous identity of each newborn baby. Harrison (1925, pp. 112-113) described this function of the shaman. One of my informants, who was born in 1887, said that at his birth a shaman told his family of whom he was the reincarnation. This informant further said that the decline and disappearance of the shamans had led to the use of dreams by those we might call "laymen" in determining the supposed previous identity of a baby. If we assume that such dreams at least sometimes include a paranormal element—Tlingit announcing dreams correctly predicted the sex of an unborn baby in 26 out 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 for both 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 Tlingit, although I found several interested and well-informed young Tlingit mothers who were quite prepared to tell me about cases and to enter into serious discussions of the subject. Among the Haida I found, in proportion to all informants, even more young mothers similarly open in their willingness to talk with me about reincarnation cases and their beliefs related to them. Among my best Haida informants were four mothers all 30 years of age or younger. This is not to say that older informants were unwilling to talk about the subject. In fact, with one exception, all the Haida informants I approached were cooperative in answering my inquiries, and most were also eager to discuss the cases and their beliefs 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 the Haida culture which is now under way we may expect the Haida people to give increasing attention to this important aspect of their ancient religion.

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