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Review of *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief  
Among North American Indians and Inuit* edited by  
Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin

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**Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit.** Edited by Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. xxiv+411 pp. Tables, references, and index. \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0-8020-7703-X).

*Amerindian Rebirth* is both a major collection of essays and probably the best current reference work on Native North American beliefs about reincarnation. Of its sixteen articles, four are previously published; two of them (Slobodin's and Ian Stevenson's), however, include authors' afterthoughts updating their ideas on their research. A substantive foreword by Gananath Obeyesekere, moreover, provides perspectives on reincarnation from the study of Indic religions. The book includes an appendix offering a trait index to North American Indian and Inuit reincarnation sources, compiled in a twenty-one page chart. Since the essays themselves focus mainly on the arctic, western subarctic, and Pacific Northwest, the appendix is a valuable tool for amplifying comparative perspectives.

Several main themes run through the book. Obesekere and others point out contrasts between Asian and North American concepts of rebirth. Obesekere emphasizes the "ethicization" undergone by Indic religions as they elaborated the cosmic doctrine of karma, "a system of ethical intentions that decide the nature of rebirth." In contrast, although Antonia Mills rightly notes the ethical components in Amerindian thinking as well, Amerindian

rebirth usually involves returning as a relative with a familiar name and set of statuses and a place in the fabric of a small community.

Several essayists usefully elaborate on contrasts between Amerindian and Christian world views bearing on rebirth. Slobodin (chapter 9) notes that since the early Christian fathers' rejection of the teachings of Origen, no Christian sect has sanctioned belief in reincarnation. In particular, metempsychosis, allowing for the migration of souls between human and animal forms (a possibility often freely accepted in Amerindian thinking), offended orthodox belief in human beings as uniquely and separately created. As for categories of thought, Alexander von Gernet, in one of the book's most valuable articles, finds that the Jesuits' conceptualization of "the soul" as unitary and indivisible blinded them to their prospective Huron converts' ideas of "soul pluralism" which allowed for "the possibility of separate destinies for different souls or qualities belonging to the same self." Inuit and Amerindian thinking, as Bernard Saladin d'Anglure observes, also often allows for crossing of gender boundaries when persons reincarnate.

Other original contributions come from Edith Turner on the Inupiaq, Lee Guemple on the Inuit cycle of spirits, Mark Nuttall on Greenland Inuit ideas of the person, Jean-Guy A. Goulet on reincarnation as a fact of life among Dene Tha, Marie Mauze on the Kwakiutl, and Michael Harkin on Northwest Coast ideas of rebirth in comparative perspective. Finally, in a pair of ambitious essays, Ian Stevenson explores Tlingit cases "suggestive of reincarnation," drawing on psychiatric and field research and insights into paranormal phenomena to examine in what senses such things could really happen, while James Matlock seeks to place Amerindian ideas about the recycling of souls into evolutionary perspective, offering hypotheses about social structure and world views going back to early Paleo-Indian populations.

All the authors are worth reading; but the mature, thoughtful, well-informed, and open-minded perspectives of Richard Slobodin deserve special note. Both his chapter on Kutchin concepts of reincarnation and his concluding comments demonstrate a historical as well as an ethnographic sensibility: "It is worth bearing in mind that all of the situations presented synchronically here do have histories." Antonia Mills implies optimistically in her Introduction that the historical record has been completely read (saying, for example, that Amerindian reincarnation concepts are not mentioned in documentary sources from 1632 to 1746). But the topic still presents challenges; historians may usefully assist its study in the future as they peruse sources so voluminous that no single scholar or group of

scholars can ever read every one. We can all help with the project, adding not just to the trait lists but to improved ethnohistorical understandings of this deep and absorbing subject. In doing so, we may arrive, as well, at better understandings of Amerindian concepts of the person and the self, a topic to which the editors and contributors are sensitive since it is so central to the complex phenomena they seek to understand. **Jennifer S. H. Brown**, *Department of History, University of Winnipeg*.