

REINCARNATION BELIEFS of North American Indians

Reincarnation Beliefs of North American Indians provides an in-depth look at spiritual experiences about which very little has been written. The stories and commentary presented here about Indian reincarnation beliefs are drawn from the anthropological record and other primary sources of information. They present a fascinating look into the rich and varied psychic life of the American Indian.

Learn about a Winnebago shaman's initiation, the Cherokee's Orpheus myth, the story of "A Journey to the Skeleton House" from the Hopi, the Inuit man who lived the lives of all animals, the Ghost Dance, and other extraordinary accounts. For the most part the stories are from the past, but there is also a contemporary account of rebirth, for the experience of reincarnation is still real today for many Indian people.

"This book contains a unique collection of fascinating stories about reincarnation, soul travel, metamorphosis, and near-death experience. It offers a rare look into the rich spiritual life of the Indian people, and I would recommend this book to anyone interested in comparative religion and the cultures of the North American Indian."

Antonia Mills, PhD

Professor of First Nations Studies, University of Northern British Columbia,
coeditor of *Amerindian Rebirth*

"Warren Jefferson has meticulously documented North American Indian reincarnation beliefs, legends, and stories in this engaging and authoritative account of a worldview that somehow survived the European invasion and continues to impact many contemporary tribal groups. This book is a fascinating description of how a spiritual paradigm played (and still plays) a vital role in the daily life of its believers, revitalizing and energizing the individual, the family, and the community."

Stanley Krippner, PhD

Professor of Psychology, Saybrook Graduate School,
coeditor of *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*

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WARREN JEFFERSON

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Soul Journeys, Metamorphoses
and Near-Death Experiences

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Foreword

This book represents a rich collection of writings about the reincarnation beliefs of North American Indians and the relationship of soul journeys, metamorphoses, and near-death experiences to reincarnation concepts. The collection draws from a wide array of writings on the topic both by American Indians, such as activists Charles Eastman of the nineteenth century and Thomas Sewid of today, and by ethnographers and researchers, including Franz Boas, Paul Radin, Knud Rasmussen, and others. The author presents a variety of writings on the traditional spiritual beliefs of many different American Indian peoples and the spiritual movements, such as the Ghost Dance and Shaker religion, that occurred in the wake of the takeover of the continent by European colonizers.

Most people are unaware of North American Indian reincarnation beliefs, and I welcome this book as a valuable contribution to making people more aware of how North American Indian spiritual beliefs include the view that all life forms reincarnate. When I began my studies of the spiritual beliefs of North American Indians, I had little knowledge of the depth and breadth of reincarnation concepts within their cultures. Even after taking courses in Indian spirituality at Harvard University, I was not aware of how widespread this belief was. It was not until 1964, when I went to the Beaver Indians of northeastern British Columbia, Canada, as a graduate student, that I learned how integral and vibrant the experience of reincarnation is among these Northern Athabaskan people. The experience of finding elders returned as babies among them was, and still is, very real for these people.

Finding the depth of the Beaver Indian experience, I began a search to learn how prevalent such concepts were among other North American Indian peoples. In fact, I found that the concepts are alive and well among many Native groups, despite the influence of Christianity. Reincarnation belief has continued, even if some Indian people have kept their views private or hidden because of the imposition of the Western worldview.

In this book the reader is offered a rich tapestry of accounts from a number of North American Indian peoples about death, dying, and

returning to this life. Included are stories from the Inuit of the polar region; the Northwest Coast people, such as the Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw), the Gitksan, the Tlingit, and the Suquamish; the Pueblo people of the Southwest, such as the Hopi and Cochiti; the Winnebago of the Great Lakes region; the Cherokee of the Southeast; and the Sioux people of the Plains areas.

While there are some differences between the concepts and experiences of the varied North American Indian peoples, many aspects of the experiences described for a particular Indian tribe in this tome can be found among other tribes as well. For instance, the depiction of crossing the divide from this world to the spirit world described for the Coastal Salish by Curtis is similar to accounts from other Indian groups; the attempt to bring back a deceased wife from the nether world is recounted among a wide variety of Native peoples; the role of the shamans in healing and bringing people back to life from near death, as in the case of Black Elk presented here, is a theme many North American Indian people would recognize; the pierced-ear marks found on the reincarnated person as described here for the Coastal Salish relate to similar experiences among the Blackfoot and the Gitksan, among others; and the wailing for deceased relatives and the care taken to not mourn too long, lest the loved one be prevented from getting to the land of the dead, beautifully recounted in the examples presented in this book, have similar expressions among many North American and Inuit peoples.

There have been five hundred years of interpenetration of Western and indigenous concepts since first European contact. While most of the accounts presented here relate to the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, what is impressive is that Indian concepts and experiences about soul journeys, metamorphoses, near-death experiences, and reincarnation have survived through this long and difficult history and are aspects of Indian life that continue to be experienced today.

The author suggests the southwestern Cochiti concept of punishment of a soul for an evil life is indigenous. I wonder if this represents an internalization of the judgmental bias Christianity adopted when the concept of reincarnation was made anathema at the second Council of Nicea in the fourth century AD. Perhaps the Cochiti account is an

internalization of the Christian concepts of soul punishment combined with the Indian concept of soul journey to the spirit world.

The ethnological record indicates reincarnation beliefs are found among the indigenous peoples on all continents of this earth. And as this book demonstrates, they are also found in most of the world's major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, esoteric Judaism, the classical Greek tradition, early Christianity, and some sects of Islam. The author's introductions to the writings that he has selected show that reincarnation concepts are a part of foundational human religious experience and are closely interrelated to shamanism.

I am grateful to Warren Jefferson for his great, pure effort in putting this information together in one volume. A book like this is long overdue and makes a valuable contribution to the study of comparative religion. My hope is that it will bring an increased awareness to the general public about the profound spiritual traditions of the North American Indians—traditions from which I think we could all learn a great deal.

—Antonia Mills, PhD

Professor, First Nations Studies,
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understand the limitations of experience and what is referred to as the “myth of the given,” we see that what is being described are universal human experiences shared by people of all cultures since the beginning of time, even into the present.

Topics Explored in this Book

Chapter one delves into the foundations of the modern world’s view of reality and challenges our accepted ideas about how the world works. The theories and laws of classical physics do not hold up in the microworld or macroworld. New physics posits that matter, the rock-solid part of our everyday world, is in reality a bundle of energy and fundamentally behaves very much like light. “As I saw it, a scientific truth was a hypothesis that might be adequate for the moment but was not to be preserved as an article of faith for all time.” (Carl Jung in Campbell 1976)

Then, in order to get right to the Indian experience, the story of human-to-human reincarnation is presented as told by Thunder Cloud, a Winnebago shaman. He dies in battle but does not know it until he sees a heap of bodies on the ground and his own among them. He is taken to the “spirit land” and is reborn two more times.

The modern-day case of Rhonda Mead of the Gitxsan tribe in British Columbia, Canada, who it is thought to be the reincarnation of her own great-grandmother, is explored next. Her family believes the young girl is the matriarch of the family reborn, because she will not let anyone sit in a chair that the great-grandmother always sat in. That, along with the fact that she knows things only the deceased great-grandmother could know about, convinces everyone she is the relative reborn.

Chapter two presents an overview of the religious beliefs of the North American Indian in order to put reincarnation in context. We learn that Indian religion is comprehensive and multifaceted, and that it held a central position in the life of the average person. The Indian’s life was infused with the supernatural, and there was constant interaction between the spirit world and humans. Also discussed are the guardian spirit and shaman complex within these societies, the Indian emphasis on vision quests for the attainment of personal connection with beings in the spirit world, and animal helpers.

Chapter three compares Indian reincarnation beliefs with world religions. The ethnological record shows that American Indian reincarnation beliefs have a very long history and that Indic and ancient Greek belief systems do not predate them. Their metaphysical concepts are as elaborate and complete as those found in these other ancient cultures.

This chapter also presents soul concepts found throughout the world and shows that the Indian concept of rebirth is quite different from the Christian concept. In many groups there was a belief that the human soul could be reborn to live again in a newborn person. There was also a dual-soul concept, wherein it was believed that a person has within him two souls, a life-soul and a breath-soul. Some also believed that a soul could reincarnate in more than one person at the same time. Most North American Indians believed that all living creatures possess a soul and that even inanimate objects have a soul.

Chapter four is on shamans and medicine men, who developed the myths of the spirit world and traveled to the land of the dead. Shamans were sometimes called upon to help someone defeat an enemy or cause a death, and this chapter presents an example of magic by analogy, or sympathetic magic, in the Cherokee formula to destroy life. You'll also read numerous accounts of shaman initiations, reincarnations, and

journeys to the land of the dead, including a number of Inuit stories.

Chapter five is about death and near-death experiences and introduces, among other entries, James Mooney's account of the Ghost Dance, which swept across the plains in the 1860s. It was initially a peaceful revival movement that prophesied that the Indian world would be restored, the whites would be gone, and the dead would live



Mother and Child—Inuit

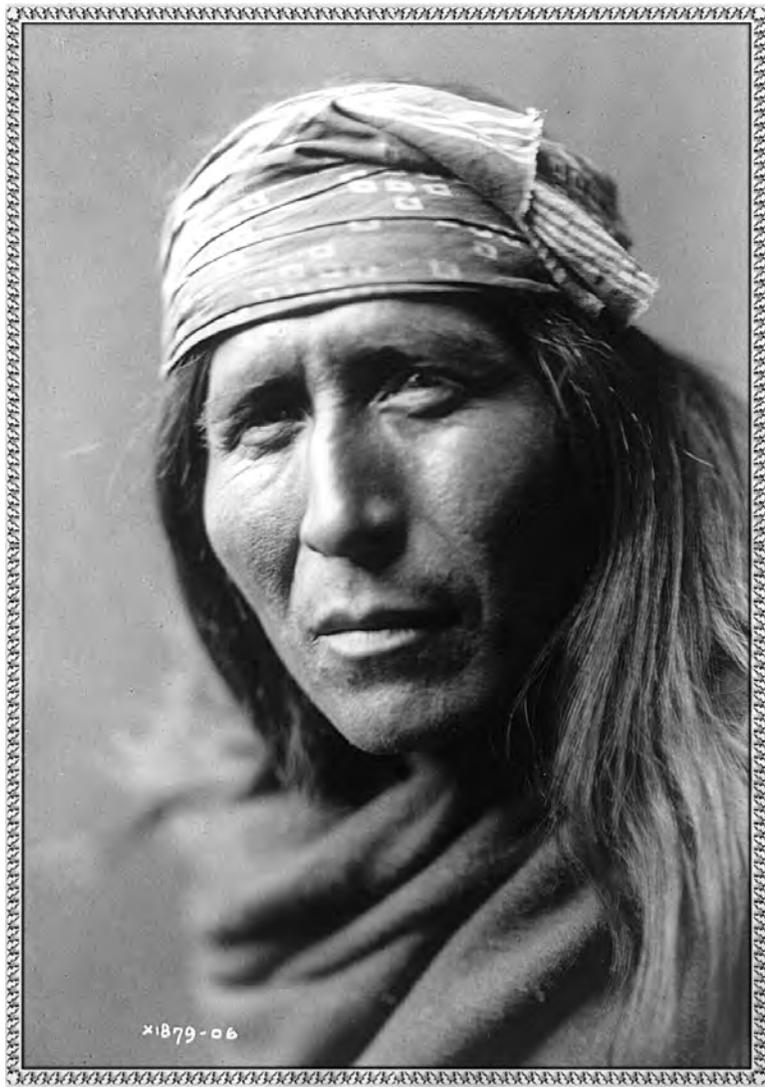
again. But the dancing was perceived as a threat by the white authorities, and an armed attack was ordered on a group of dancers on the Sioux reservation. As a result, we are left with the tragic massacre at Wounded Knee Creek as part of American and Indian history.

In this chapter you will also find numerous accounts of Indian experiences dealing with death and dying and journeys to the underworld, including the Cherokee Orpheus myth, a legend found among numerous Indian groups. Next, you will read about the Winnebago view of death, which considers death just a different kind of consciousness. Although the dead are no longer seen, interaction with them has not ceased, for they return in dreams or visions to communicate with the living. The dead may also come back again as newborn babies.

Chapter six presents more stories on death, the afterworld, and soul journeys from various tribes, including the Pueblo, Tlingit, Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw), Omaha, Coastal Salish, and Sioux. In chapter seven you will learn about the world's great religions and their concepts of reincarnation, both historically and how they are perceived today. This chapter also covers the Western concept of the soul and reincarnation.

Chapter eight is on ancient cultures, focusing on Egyptian, Greek, and Roman beliefs, with particular emphasis on Plato and his writings on reincarnation. You'll learn about the Greek Orpheus myth, which describes how a newly married husband unsuccessfully attempts to bring back his young bride from the underworld. This myth, with slight variations, is widespread among various Indian groups.

The stories that follow are for the most part from traditional North American Indian people of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Told in their own words, they recount experiences of death and rebirth, near-death experience, journeys of the soul and soul retrieval, travel to the land of the dead, and people becoming animals in this life and the next. May these stories take you on fantastic journeys, stir your imagination, and illuminate a part of the complex psychic life of American Indians so that you can share in their rich spiritual traditions.



Tsahizn Tseh-Apache Tribe