

## Culture



# Antonia MILLS and Richard SLOBODIN (eds), *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. 411 pages, \$50.00 (cloth) \$18.95 (paper)

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Antonia MILLS and Richard SLOBODIN (eds), *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. 411 pages, \$50.00 (cloth)\$18.95 (paper).

By Wayne A. Holst

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*Amerindian Rebirth* represents "the first collection of papers centering on the subject of reincarnation in indigenous North American belief and social actio. Its publication enhances awareness of the subject at a time of noticeable increase in scrutiny brought to bear in accounting for the existence of such beliefs. These are qualities not previously encountered in the literature "except in work by Indologists and in some ethnographies of south Asian tribal peoples". (p. 254).

The general development of this study occurs on two levels. First, a reconstruction is attempted of prior constellations of pre-Christian contact rebirth theories among North American Indian and Inuit peoples which argues a widespread dispersal of such beliefs among American Indians in general. The Foreword suggests that if similar studies were carried out among African, Australian and Melanesian groups (not to mention, for example, Pythagoras and Orphic mysteries of the ancient Europeans) "we will come to possess a vastly enhanced knowledge of religious beliefs that will alter our present world picture of comparative religion" (p. xii).

Secondly, this study seeks to relate recovery of such "early American" rebirth themes to more fully developed, modern Indic/Asian doctrines of rebirth and salvation (such as karma, nirvana, moksha, etc.) as currently understood by advocates of Hindu, Buddhist and Jainas religions (p. xix):

Several focal and interwoven themes make up the study: There is significant documentation of suggestedly interrelated Amerindian and Inuit "rebirth" traditions ranging over a vast expanse of aboriginal culture and a broad North American terrain taking up the major part of the book (or fourteen chapters). The various authors of these chapters present considerable background to their respective subjects.

There is an attempt to reconstruct a cyclical (as compared to a linear) theory of life continuity through the recovery of basic forms of rebirth eschatology from the native peoples of this continent; a question-

ing of the purported uniqueness of Asian "transmigration of soul" beliefs; an attempt to see these as part of a broader distribution of similar life forms; and a suggestion of how development, refinement and systematisation of reincarnational beliefs occurred in Indic cultures as evidence of how the rebirth beliefs of small scale societies such as Indian and Inuit must invariably be transformed to satisfy the spiritual requirements of larger scale societies.

Finally, there is a presentation of how this focus on primary spiritual themes can help shape a new paradigm in the comparative study of religion.

The undertaking is illuminating, expansive and challenging in several ways. Modern scholars of early cultures and religions are confronted with significant evidence of foundational spiritual beliefs of aboriginal Americans which — because of their seeming obtuseness since first encounters — were misunderstood, denigrated and largely ignored. At the same time these students are encouraged to recognize evidence in early rebirth traditions which provide embryonic underpinning for more highly developed, contemporary religious eschatologies. To accomplish something equally significant on both fronts is a daunting assignment. The real accomplishment of this timely study is that, like all true ground breaking work, the reader is left with the sense that helpful new vistas have been prescribed even as large parts of the terrain remain currently ill-defined and unmapped.

Previously unidentified associations have burst dramatically into focus. One gets the impression that this study is not only a collection of generally well-chosen, representative essays but also a reflection of the editors' growth in individual awareness and joint collaboration in a endeavour that has been expanding for many years. The full implication of what they have been personally and now jointly discerning has only dawned on them gradually. Thus, while the first major theme of their study has involved perhaps a quarter century — the other themes suffer from a more limited period of attention. It is almost as though they have long concentrated on a particular subject and now, in a burst of serendipitous insight, they see exponential possibilities in a direction their research might lead them.

The resulting work, therefore, strikes this reviewer as understandably but unnervingly uneven — not so much in terms of the general quality of the book but with respect to the text's ability to deliver a balanced message in relation to its self-declared purposes.

What we seem to have, therefore, is an excellent study of traditional and modern reincarnation belief among North American Indians and Inuit —the book's essential purpose; and a tempting enticement to explore how ancient, marginal spiritual traditions can impact upon larger contemporary religious and cultural studies.

Pierrette THIBAUT and Diane VINCENT, *Un corpus de français parlé. Montréal 84: historique, méthodes et perspectives de recherche, Recherches Sociolinguistiques 1*, Québec: Département de Langues et Linguistique, Université Laval, 1990. 145pp + vi.

By Becky Brown

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In 1984, a group of Canadian researchers made yet another significant contribution to an already impressive body of research which over the past 30 years has kept Canada at the forefront of the field of sociolinguistics. Thibault and Vincent (1990) is an account of this important scholarly endeavor, a project referred to as *Montréal 84*.

The *Montréal 84* research team of Thibault, Vincent, D. Sankoff and Kemp proposed to add a real time dimension to the already well-known Sankoff-Cedergren 1971 corpus of the spoken French of Montreal. The researchers of *Montréal 84* reinterviewed half of the original informants of the *Sankoff-Cedergren* project which added a time depth of 13 years to the speech data. Although not normally considered a full generation lapse, it still presents an adequate passage of time for interesting sociolinguistic phenomena possibly to occur.

A good deal of Thibault and Vincent (1990) compares various aspects of the *Montréal 84* project to its predecessor, the *Sankoff-Cedergren* corpus. *Montréal 84* involved the reinterviewing of 60 of the original 120 informants of the *Sankoff-Cedergren* corpus. To this, they added 12 new informants between the ages of 15 and 25 years. This book discusses all aspects of the collection and transcription of the 72 interviews of the *Montréal 84* corpus. The goals of the two projects differ slightly, partly because of the changing social climate. The *Sankoff-Cedergren* linguists had a social statement to make about studying supposed "non-standard" dialects. It was a commonly held belief at that time that Québécois was full

of errors and aberrations. In response to this myth, many sociolinguists assumed the task of demonstrating the systematic grammars of "dialects". They showed that dialects had grammatical rules and patterns just like any standard languages. *Montréal 84* had no such social agenda. As far as the linguistic goals were concerned, the *Sankoff-Cedergren* corpus focussed on phonetics, morphophonology and morphosyntax, while placed more emphasis on syntax, lexicon and discourse.

From the "Introduction" one gleanes that Thibault and Vincent (1990) could be viewed as a "manual" for sociolinguists or anthropological linguists. In this sense it is a highly useful tool in that it serves as a guide for researchers who intend to computerize or constitute a corpus themselves. Thibault and Vincent's work is especially important in this regard, since they spare the novice researcher the seemingly insurmountable obstacles involved in the groundwork of corpus creation (i.e. refinements in methodology, the "why's" behind transcription conventions). Their experience is valuable and can save future researchers from making irreparable mistakes that they otherwise could not anticipate. Furthermore, as is customary in sociolinguistic research, corpora are often made open to other linguists for consultation. Thibault and Vincent (1990) serves as a manual for visiting researchers. It is a detailed description of the methodology and essential background information for outside scholars.

Chapters Two and Three are a chronological presentation of the collection and transcription of the interviews. They compare aspects of the method used in the *Sankoff-Cedergren* corpus as opposed to improvements used in *Montréal 84*, especially in terms of numbers of researchers and time spent on each step. There is also an in-depth description of the social characteristics of the informants.

Chapter Two begins with a brief discussion of the ethical considerations involved in the task of reinterviewing the 1971 informants who were originally assured anonymity. The *Montréal 84* research team maintained the same high ethical standards and scientific rigour to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees as in the *Sankoff-Cedergren* corpus. Furthermore, there seemed to be little or no problem with a new group of researchers tracking down the original informants in the name of science. Once the *Montréal 84* informants were located, it was necessary to conduct additional fieldwork to fill the void left by the aging of the original informants. There was no