

9 Kutchin Concepts of Reincarnation¹

ABSTRACT. The eastern Kutchin or Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories and Yukon, Canada, are Dene people who traditionally live by hunting and trapping. Through observations made at various times between 1938 and 1968, a pervasive belief in reincarnation was noted. Not only did all Kutchin take reincarnation as a fact of existence, but a number of non-Kutchin living in the area perceived some Kutchin to be reincarnates. The belief was universal although all modern Kutchin were raised as Christians and were made aware that reincarnation belief had no place in Christian doctrine. Not all Kutchin were perceived as reincarnated; in 1938-9 about one-tenth of the population were so regarded. The reborn included close kin, but also notable persons of former years, including non-Kutchin. A rebirth was preceded by announcing dreams. A process of secularization was noted for reincarnation belief; however, the belief did not appear to be dying out. Rather, it functioned in preserving community identity and cohesiveness.

In 1938, when I lived for the first time among the Peel River Kutchin, the chief's mother, Lucy Martin, then over eighty, became very ill. She appeared to be dying, but, a tough and almost indestructible old lady, she recovered to live another ten years. When she was strong enough to speak, she told of her experiences while dying.

I left my body lying in the tent and I rose up into the air. I remembered having done this many years before, when my children were small. That time, I was worried and frightened, but this time it felt fine. It was a bright sunny day and I could see the whole camp. Smoke was rising, dog teams were going here and

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there, and I could see my great-grandson, Andrew, coming to my lodge with a load of good meat for me ...

Something was bothering me after all. I had to find a new mother, some woman who was going to have a baby. I thought of Rowena, Andrew's wife. She was a good girl and would be a good mother. But she was not going to have a baby ...

Nobody in camp was. I could not be born again - it was like the other time. I had to go back. I went down, through the wall of the tent and back into my body, and I woke up here, still sick.

One or another form of belief in reincarnation is to be found among a wide variety of hunting peoples throughout the world, the Australians representing one celebrated type. Although the intent of this paper is not comparative, it should be noted that there is considerable documentation for the distribution of reincarnation beliefs throughout eastern Siberia and northern North America. A far from exhaustive review of the literature indicates that reincarnation has been reported for the Yukaghir (Jochelson 1910), Chukchi (Bogoras 1904-10), Aleut (Veniaminov 1840: 126-7), Eskimo (Birket-Smith 1959: 163; Carpenter 1959; Marsh 1954: *inter alia*), Tlingit (Knapp and Childe 1896: 160; de Laguna 1954: 183-90; Krause 1985 [1956]: 192, citing Veniaminov and Heinrich Holmberg), Ojibwa (Hilger 1951; Hallowell 1955; Jenness 1935: 164), Upper Tanana (McKenna 1959: 160), and Kaska (Honigmann 1954: 137), as well as Kutchin (Osgood 1936: 140).

There is considerable variation in the forms reported, probably for two reasons: (1) variety and in some cases vagueness and attenuated nature of the concept; (2) lack of clarity on the part of some ethnographers on the usage of the term 'reincarnation.' The most discriminating discussion is Hallowell's for the Ojibwa. He distinguishes among *resurrection* (the coming to life again or reappearance in his own proper person of a deceased individual), *resuscitation* ('cases in which human intervention is said to have resulted in bringing the dead back to life' (1955: 154), *metempsychosis* (appearance of the deceased in the form of a non-human creature), and *reincarnation* (rebirth of a deceased person in a newborn child).

All of the types of concept distinguished by Hallowell have been features of the religion of the eastern Kutchin, traditionally hunters and fishers of the Western Canadian Subarctic. Several of the concepts have also existed among the Yukon Drainage Kutchin. The present discussion centres upon reincarnation among the Arctic Red River and Peel River

Kutchin, excluding from consideration the other kinds of revenance or spiritual rebirth, belief in which is also a feature of Kutchin culture. The present tense is used here not only in the historical or ethnographic sense, but because all of the concepts, with the possible exception of resurrection, have survived in contemporary Kutchin culture.

The Nature of Reincarnation

The Kutchin term for a reborn person or a reincarnation is *natli?*. The term refers at one and the same time to (1) the deceased person who has been reborn; (2) the more recently born person who now embodies the personality of the deceased; (3) the process or phenomenon of reincarnation. To a Kutchin there is no distinction between my senses (1) and (2), as they refer to one and the same personality. Sense (3) is distinguished morphologically in the Kutchin language, as the word *natli?* when used in the phenomenal sense belongs to a different noun class than when its referent is a person.

Reincarnation is a fairly rare phenomenon. Out of the present or recent eastern Kutchin population of about 650, I have been acquainted with 25 to 30 *natli?* in recent years. There are probably twice as many in actuality. In 1938–9 about one-tenth of the Peel River Kutchin were *natli?*.²

Most informants agree that reincarnation must occur within a year of the death – although there are exceptions to be noted. Usually at some time during the year, a pregnant woman will dream of the deceased. The first dream occurs when she feels the foetus move within her. At first she dreams of the deceased as a very small foetus; in repeated dreams, the deceased will appear larger each time. Just before parturition, the dead person will take the form of a small creature – some say a mouse – slip into the tent of the woman in labour, creep under her blanket, and enter her vagina.

When the child is born, it will be watched carefully for physical signs or mannerisms which can be interpreted as manifesting some resemblance to the subject of the dreaming. The child's first words are important; it may speak the name of the deceased or say something relative to him.

What Hallowell, writing of the Ojibwa, called 'precognition' (1955: 170) is the usual and most convincing sign of reincarnation. Here are some typical Kutchin examples.

When my daughter was carrying (pregnant with) Rebecca, she declared it was

her own dead elder sister. The baby girl certainly looked like my daughter who had died, but I did not think much of that because I supposed it was just family resemblance. But once, Rebecca said to her mother's brother, William: 'Before you were born, I was camped up the Rat River. A bunch of us girls used to play on swings.' It was true that we used to live up the Rat years ago, and that dead girl did play a lot on a swing (Mrs Julia Smith, Peel River, 1939).

Ben Kendi called me *sakikai* ('my DaHu'). Sure, he like me. We were good friends. After he died, Andrew Nersyoo was born. When he was four, he met me first time. Right away he said, 'Good morning, *sakikai*'. He like me a lot, too. Then he died ... Ben Kendi never came back any more (Roni Pascal, Peel River, 1966).

When he was five years old, my boy, Gilbert, pointed to a place we were passing and said, 'My Daddy kill a moose up there.' The year before Gilbert was born I did shoot a moose right there, and Wilfred was with me. He died about six months later (Edward Nazon, Arctic Red River, 1962).

Osgood, in a brief description of Peel River Kutchin reincarnation, states that 'the child is presumed to have omniscient knowledge of all his actions in the previous existence' (1936: 140). This is an overstatement in terms of my information; no such omniscience is expected.

For instance, Albert Johnson, the 'Mad Trapper of the Rat River,' dear to generations of journalists, who was hunted down by a posse in 1932 after he had killed a policeman and a special deputy, was reborn a year later as a Peel River female, now Mrs Ellen Gordon of Aklavik. Mrs Gordon is reputed to possess some special, albeit trivial, information once known only by Johnson. There is no claim, however, that she knows all that he knew. Indeed, not long ago, when Johnson was being discussed in her presence, 'Albert,' as Mrs Gordon is known to her friends, was interested to learn that Johnson had been a Swede. Her ignorance of this and of most other facts of Johnson's life by no means casts doubt upon the belief that she was his *natli?*.

Another locally celebrated and ill-fated White man, Inspector F.J. Fitzgerald, leader of the RNWMP (Royal North-West Mounted Police) patrol lost between Dawson and Fort McPherson in 1911, was also reborn as a Peel River woman. This lady not only claims no omniscience, but readily declares that she has forgotten most of the Fitzgerald memories that she possessed as a girl.

Three of the most knowledgeable informants on the subject have stated that *natli?* manifest the tell-tale resemblances and prenatal memories

when they are children, the peak of coincidence occurring when the reborn person is between ten and twelve years of age. After that, these signs fade.

Relationship between Original Incarnation and Reincarnation

In earlier years, several informants claimed that a reincarnation always appeared as a person of sex opposite to that of the original incarnation and, where both the original and the rebirth were Kutchin, in a clan other than that of the original. The three matrilineal clans are now obsolescent among the eastern Kutchin and are no more of a factor in reincarnation than in any other sociocultural process. As for sex or gender, among the forty-four cases known to me, the distribution is exactly even; that is, twenty-two reincarnations were in the same sex as the original, twenty-two in the other.

In considering the identity of those who, out of all others, happen to be reborn, two related questions arise: (1) what are the dynamics of choice, or what is the process of choice; and (2) what is the principle, if any can be discerned, upon which choice is based?

In addressing oneself to these questions, one must take care not to distort ethnographic reality by over-organizing and over-rationalizing it, on the ethnographer's terms. Ideas on reincarnation are often vague and mutually contradictory, not only as between individuals, but as entertained by a given individual at various times. It is by now a truism, as Fenton has remarked in discussing Iroquois religion, that 'ethnologists have demonstrated that societies often furnish mutually contradictory patterns for the individual to follow' (1941: 132).

For the Kutchin it cannot be said, as reported in some of the ethnographies cited earlier, that particularly good or particularly evil persons are those slated for reincarnation. It is also not true, as among some Inuit groups, that being named for a deceased induces a kind of reincarnation. When a Kutchin is discovered to be a *natli?*, he or she is named – or in modern times, nicknamed – for the earlier manifestation, but this is a *post hoc* action.

Several ethnographers of northern peoples have suggested that the reincarnated were those whose lives were cut short or unfulfilled in some way. For the Kutchin, this would be true of most *natli?*, but not all. Ben Kendi, mentioned earlier, lived a fairly long and full life. A band councillor of the Arctic Red River people is the *natli?* of his own grandfather, who died an octogenarian.

Of the reincarnations since 1900 on which I have fairly adequate information, the following characteristics have been noted. The earlier manifestation or original incarnation (e.g., Albert Johnson) is here termed the 'original.' The later-born person, or reincarnation (e.g., Mrs Ellen Gordon) is termed the 'rebirth.'

TABLE 1 Status of identified Peel River Kutchin reincarnation originals, 1900-70

	<i>Number</i>
I Incarnation linked by kinship or quasi-kinship	
(a) Sibling (including adopted sibling and cousin)	8
(b) Original a grandparent	2
(c) Secondary kin, members of same bilateral descent group.*	6 or 7
(d) Original a formal partner of a parent of the rebirth	2
II Original a local celebrity	
(a) Legendary or historic Kutchin of earlier times	4
(b) A chief of modern times	2
(c) A non-Kutchin who died in tragic or unusual circumstances:	12
(i) European or Euro-Canadian (7)	
(ii) Eskimo (1)	
(iii) Slave Indian (1)	
(iv) Japanese (2)	
(v) African Negro (1)	
(d) A remarkable person who left the area and the circumstances of whose death are unknown: one Kutchin, one Lapp, one American Negro	3
III. Residual category: Nothing distinctive known of the original, nor any close relationship to the rebirth.	4 or 5
Total	43-45

*The Kutchin bilateral descent group is a set of persons that appears to develop occasionally out of the 'local group' (Slobodin 1962: 54-7; Helm 1968: 118-25).

Repetitive Dreaming

The original incarnations represent a considerable range of personality type, ethnic group, age, kinship, and other status relationship to the rebirth. A common denominator is not easy to discern. However, there is at least one characteristic they all share: all were, or were said to have been, the subject of repeated dreaming on the part of a pregnant woman, the woman being the mother of the rebirth.

In a society wherein kinship remains a dominant organizing principle,

it is not unlikely that a close relative, especially one recently dead, will appear in one's dreams. In a community where gossip is a major preoccupation, and local stories are told and retold, an unusual person is also likely to play a part in dreams.

In three cases where the originals were local celebrities and where pertinent information was available, there were specific reasons why a particular woman should have dreamed about the celebrity in question. The mother of the reincarnation of Inspector Fitzgerald was married to one of the men who had helped to locate the bodies of Fitzgerald's lost patrol. The mother of the reincarnation of Albert Johnson is married to the only Kutchin on friendly terms with the reclusive and quarrelsome Johnson. The reincarnation of the Afro-American Black Tom was a granddaughter of Tom's occasional freighting partner, who had regaled his family with stories about this remarkable ex-slave (see *Afterthoughts*). Tom disappeared in 1888; his *natti?* was born about ten years later.

To suggest reasons why the image of a particular person should have appeared in the manifest content of a woman's dreams is not to explain why the dreams were repetitive; nor in itself does it explain the belief in reincarnation. As to the first problem, it may be noted that dreams, and the process of dreaming, have been and remain very important in Kutchin life. Dreams are a frequent subject of conversation, both in casual reference and in prolonged discussion. There are many formalized and traditional interpretations of dream images, and in addition, almost everyone improvises interpretations upon occasion. It is believed by many Kutchin that one can predetermine the nature of one's dreaming. It is possible, then, although I have no 'hard' evidence for it, that 'planned reincarnation' occurs sometimes among the Kutchin, although in a sense different from that described by de Laguna, who coined the phrase for the Tlingit (1954). Among the Tlingit, a person decides to become reincarnated, and arranges accordingly. Among Kutchin, it may be the mother of the rebirth who does the planning.

If one may believe Kutchin reports, repeated dreaming is a commonplace. Most such dreaming has nothing to do with reincarnation; it is simple wish-fulfillment or cautionary dreaming. I would guess that the reason more pregnant women do not have reincarnation dreams is that repetitive dreaming is something of a gamble for an expectant mother; it may prove advantageous to mother or unborn child, but it may prove to be a hazard. For example, if a pregnant woman dreams repeatedly about bears, her child may turn out to possess the sagacity or the

physical prowess of the bear; however, it may be excessively hairy, have a bear-claw birthmark, or turn out to be unapproachable and unsociable as an adult.

The fact is, as has been noted, that few rebirths closely resemble their originals in any significant qualities, but before their birth, there was always the chance that they might. This might be a good thing, but it might not.

Christianity and Reincarnation³

For over a century, eastern Kutchin have been subject to Christian missionary influence, which at times has been very powerful. Most people over the age of forty at Arctic Red River are devout Roman Catholics; their coevals at Fort McPherson are equally dedicated Anglicans; while some Kutchin living in the Mackenzie Delta towns of Aklavik and Inuvik have become Pentecostals. Younger people are, on the whole, fairly indifferent to religion, but have experienced a more formal Christian upbringing than have many of their contemporaries in urban centres to the south.

There is no place for the concept of reincarnation in the eschatology of any Christian sect or denomination. It may be worthwhile considering briefly why this is so, rather than taking it for granted, as the contrast may shed some light on the roots of Kutchin belief.

It was not always true that Christian doctrine presented a monolithic opposition to reincarnation. During the early centuries of the Christian era, when the central tenets of church doctrine were being hammered out in polemic, church councils, and religious wars, reincarnation in its various aspects, as distinguished by Hallowell (1955), was a marginal kind of belief, to which approaches may be found in the views of a minority of those Christian apologists whose writings have been preserved.

Primitive Christians developed a view of death in terms of resurrection of the body and the soul, a heritage of the central tenet of post-exile Judaic eschatology. 'That image, which was basically incompatible with the Platonic notion of immortality, competed for over a millennium with the image of immortality, and a theological *modus vivendi* was worked out in which, although the immortality of the soul was adopted as an axiom, the real locus of hope for mortal man was the resurrection of the body' (Gatch 1969: 162). It has often been noted that any argument in support of the immortality of the soul applies equally well to

pre-existence; and that, if the soul is pre-existent and immortal, it is unlikely that death should occur only once. Plato's cosmology includes reincarnation of the soul.⁴ Some of the Christian Fathers, profoundly influenced by Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas, were at the least troubled by the possibility of multiple rebirth, a possibility which seemed to them at variance with belief in individual judgment and redemption.

The Platonic view was given its most cogent and reasoned expression in the works of Origen (c. 186–c. 254 AD), generally regarded as the foremost Christian philosopher of his age. Origen's cosmology divides the world into spiritual and material realms, of which the former is good, the latter evil. The universe is populated by many rational, incorporeal spirits; insofar as these neglect their duty to and communion with God, they fall to lower levels and eventually assume corporeal form, 'harnessed to human flesh' (Danielou 1955: 218). Eventually the round of existence will come to an end and there will be a general return to a purely spiritual state; hell, or more precisely, purgatory, will be emptied, and all souls – even that of the Devil – will be saved.

Origen's teachings were condemned in church council, and although he died as a result of torture in a persecution of Christians, he was never granted official recognition as a martyr.

There appear to have been two principal reasons for rejection of these views as expressed by Origen and a number of other early Christian thinkers.

First, it could not be allowed that non-human animals, 'the brute creation,' possessed souls of the same nature as man's, whereas metempsychosis readily suggests the rebirth of the soul in non-human as well as in human form. 'For they must then, it was thought, have been provided for in a future state as well as our own,' it was pointed out in 1777 by Joseph Priestley, the chemist and Unitarian leader, in an ironical comment on the Christian doctrine of the soul.

Second, a more profound distinction: Christian cosmology is based upon a linear concept of the passage of time, a progression with no returning in any guise, a movement towards a goal. As far as I am aware, this is nowhere explicitly stated in Christian doctrine, but it pervades Christian, and hence Western, thinking. Reincarnation presupposes what may by contrast be called a circular or spiral conception of time.

Most Christians who are not professional students of religion with whom the question has been discussed are apt to say that there can be no place for reincarnation in Christian belief because it is incompatible

with individual responsibility and judgment, and with the continuing individual identity of the soul. This view was held by some of Origen's contemporary adversaries, for example, Tertullian. However, Plato and the Platonists managed to believe both in reincarnation and in divine judgment, for example, Plato in *Phaedrus* 248E-249D, *Phaedo* 82D-83C.

Far Eastern religions wherein reincarnation is a central tenet also encompass an eschatology of judgment, albeit quite different from that in Christian doctrine.⁵ This brief comment on Christian attitudes toward reincarnation may highlight by contrast several features of the Kutchin religious attitude.

First, in Kutchin belief, non-human animals have souls, of much the same kind as human souls – although in some cases, more powerful. In addition, there is a special relationship between all Kutchin and all caribou; in mythical time they were of one kind, and ever since, in real time, the Kutchin share something of the caribou's soul or nature, and vice versa.

The Kutchin concept of time is more elusive; to do justice to it or, for that matter, to our own, would require more than a glib metaphor such as 'linear' or 'circular.' Discussion and documentation of these ideas would be well beyond the compass of this paper. I must content myself with stating that Kutchin ideas about the passage of time are quite different from those prevailing in our culture and that there appear to be several scales or tracks of time in which various entities and kinds of being operate.

It is also true, as is noted hereafter, that belief in Christian eschatology has not taken firm root among the eastern Kutchin.

Survival of the Concept

One of the most striking facts about Kutchin reincarnation is the vigorous survival of the concept. Despite official Christian opposition, all Kutchin I have known, and most northern Métis in addition, accept the reality of the kind of occasional reincarnation described in this paper. This belief is held by young and old, churchgoers, scoffers, and the indifferent. To say that they 'believe in' reincarnation is to suggest more zeal than is felt. Kutchin simply take the phenomenon for granted. Among the Kutchin who provided detailed information on the subject, clearly regarding it as a fact of life (and death), were three ordained Anglican priests, two Anglican catechists, a Pentecostal lay reader, a dozen of the most devout Roman Catholic and Anglican laity, two

notorious freethinkers, (analogues of the traditional 'village atheist' – one of these was Roman Catholic and the other of Anglican upbringing), and eight or ten young people living away from home in the Delta, who do not appear concerned with religious ideas.

Most of these informants have been told that reincarnation is a belief that conflicts with received Christian doctrine. This injunction has failed to shake the conviction of any. One of the Anglican clergymen reported that the late Archdeacon C.E. Whittaker, long-time missionary in the region, had inveighed against belief in reincarnation until one of his daughters, born at Fort McPherson, turned out to be a rebirth. This, it is said, converted the archdeacon. The truth of this tale is doubtful, to say the least, but it is a fact that several long-time White residents do subscribe to the Kutchin idea of reincarnation, having witnessed, so they say, remarkable instances of precognition in young children, including in some cases their own offspring.⁶

In most respects, pre-Christian Kutchin eschatology has long been obsolete. I know only one living eastern Kutchin who holds to the traditional belief that at death most of the people make a long, adventurous journey upriver, southward, to what might be described as a happy hunting ground. Most eastern Kutchin are firm in the conviction that at death they will go to the Christian heaven. However, they have been remarkably impervious to the concept of hell and of judgment and punishment in the hereafter.

Generations of Christian indoctrination have failed to change the Kutchin belief that after the rigours of this life, everyone merits a long and pleasant rest in heaven – everyone, that is, except those restless souls who make their way into the dreams of pregnant women.⁷

Afterthoughts – 1992

The 1970 paper was based upon observations made intermittently during the period 1938 through 1968. In recent years there has been opportunity to compare those observations with later reports and analyses of the kind represented in the present collection. Such comparison generates questions which did not arise earlier.

Interval between Death and Rebirth

One of these questions is the interval of time that was felt to have elapsed between the death of the original and the rebirth.

Table 2 summarizes this information as well as can be done at this rather late date.

TABLE 2 Interval in years between death of original and rebirth, 1900-70
(See Table I for definitions of Categories)

	Total listed	up to				Information unavailable
		1 year	3 years	10 years	More than 10 years	
I Kinship						
(a) Sibling	8	4	2		1	1
(b) Grandparent	2		1	1		
(c) Secondary	6 or 7	2	2	1		1 or 2
(d) Parent's partner	2		1			1
II Local celebrity						
(a) Hero of yore	4				4	
(b) Modern chief	2	2				
(c) Non-Kutchin who died in unusual circumstances	12					
(i) European			1*	2**	2	2
(ii) Inuk			1			
(iii) Slavey			1			
(iv) Japanese				1		1
(v) African		1				
(d) Remarkable person who left the area	3	1	1***			1
III Residual category	4 or 5	1	1			2 or 3
Totals	43-5	9	12	7	7	9-11

*Albert Johnson, the 'Mad Trapper.'

**Inspector F.J. Fitzgerald, RNWMP, is one of these.

***Black Tom (Slobodin 1989). He disappeared in 1888. His *nalli?* was born in the early 1890s. As with most persons who have disappeared, it is not felt that Tom perished as soon as he was no longer traceable.

The Inuk was recognized in rebirth by several Inuit and by two White persons before the identity of the original was accepted, somewhat reluctantly, by Kutchin.

The Slave Indian was a riverboat deckhand who had drowned in the

MacKenzie River near the mouth of the Peel River. It was only when two kinsmen of his came downriver as deckhands a few years later that the rebirth was discovered. It was said that they had immediately recognized an Arctic River Kutchin boy as their relative reborn. The reincarnation then became accepted among Kutchin.

The Japanese were well known independent traders at lower MacKenzie posts. The African had apparently been a whaling-ship crew member who had settled in the Mackenzie Delta.

The reborn modern chiefs were Francis Charles, better known as Francis Tsik ('Slim'), Peel River band chief from 1897 until his death in 1905, and Julius Martin, Peel River chief from 1905 until his death in 1950. As of 1970 each had been reborn twice into the cognatic descent group from which all band chiefs had been chosen since Europeans first ascended the Peel in 1840, and probably well before that (Slobodin 1962: 71-2; 1969: 72-3). These rebirths might have been tabulated under 'Kinship.' In discussion, however, they seemed to be considered celebrity rebirths rather than kinship continuants. Of course they were both.

Incomplete though these data are, they include some interesting indications. As stated in the 1970 paper, most informants, both from the Peel River and the Arctic Red River bands, agreed that reincarnation 'must,' or at any rate does, occur within a year of the original's death. This was Kutchin ideology on the subject - or as some would put it, the folk model - conformable to that of other northern peoples. Yet of thirty-four rebirths where there is general agreement on the time interval between the death of the original and her/his return, only nine, or twenty-seven per cent, are felt to have occurred within one year. This is to be expected in view of the inclusion of historical or legendary personalities among the originals. It also conforms with a feature of eastern Kutchin culture not mentioned in the 1970 paper: the lively survival of myth, legend, and history. These three kinds of verbal heritage are intertwined; or rather, what are perceived by the outside observer to be three types of narrative are often, although not always, intermingled in Kutchin lore.

The most memorable White men reborn as eastern Kutchin were Inspector Francis J. Fitzgerald and the man known as Albert Johnson. In discussions of rebirth and of survival in the bush, the names of the two were often linked, although they perished a generation apart. Even the brief entries on them in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* suggest that they form a striking duality.

Inspector Francis J. Fitzgerald of the Royal North-West Mounted

Police was known in his time as a 'tough traveller,' high praise in the far north. Yet through hasty preparation and apparent overconfidence, he was lost with all his men in the winter of 1911 while undertaking a patrol between Dawson, Yukon, and Fort McPherson, NWT (Morrison 1988a: 787). This is an undoubtedly arduous trip of some 400 miles (670 km.) across the Cordilleras, yet it is one which in former years many Kutchin would mention making, 'perhaps as children or as nursing mothers' (Slobodin 1962: 15).

As for the 'Mad Trapper,' his shooting down a policeman who visited him to investigate a complaint is regarded by Kutchin as indeed the act of a madman. Yet with the passage of years he has come to be seen as a kind of hero, acquiring this status for his extraordinary skill, cunning, and endurance in eluding pursuit for weeks in the winter of 1932 before being found and killed.⁸

For those who fancy binary oppositions, comparison of Fitzgerald and Johnson is intriguing. One was a policeman who failed as a survivor; the other an anti-policeman and extraordinary survivor. Both were hunted down in the mountains west of the Mackenzie Valley by parties composed largely of eastern Kutchin men; Fitzgerald to be rescued or recovered, Johnson to be captured or killed. Rescue and capture in the bush are intertwined in Kutchin ideology (Slobodin 1960).

Black Tom was arguably the most remarkable non-Kutchin to be reborn into the community – in my view, the most remarkable outsider ever to sojourn among the people. Black Tom first appeared in Kutchin territory one spring in the late 1870s or the early 1880s, poling a raft on the Peel River. He reported to the Hudson's Bay Company post manager at Fort McPherson, saying that his name was Tom, that he had been a slave in the United States, and that he had been 'bent in putting as much distance as he could between himself and the land of his bondage. None of my fifteen or sixteen informants on Tom could recall his speaking of his past. However, many people had seen the welts and scars criss-crossing his broad back, badges of a recalcitrant slave and possibly a persistent escaper.

Black Tom worked part-time for the Hudson's Bay Company, as a packer and as a dog-driver, transporting furs and goods between Fort McPherson and its outposts on the Yukon side of the Cordillera. He stayed at various outposts or in the bush with the Kutchin, did a good deal of visiting and attended band feasts, at which he was an active dancer. He is also said to have led prayer meetings, leading the people in evangelical hymns. By all accounts he was immensely strong. When

not employed he spent time in reading the Bible he had managed to carry with him, or in meditation. When approached outdoors in summer, he might be seen sitting and rocking to and fro with eyes closed, tears running down his cheeks.

Black Tom disappeared in 1888. Kutchin tradition holds that Black Tom challenged the Earl of Lonsdale, when he stayed at Fort McPherson during his journey across the Canadian North and Alaska (Krech 1989), regarding upper-class British support of American slavery. It is said that Lonsdale invited Tom to travel with him to England where he would arrange an audience with the Queen. In the fall of 1888, Tom set out to cross to the Yukon valley and catch up with Lonsdale's party. He was never heard of again.⁹

On what basis Black Tom was said to be reborn as a Kutchin, I do not know. The reincarnate, whom I knew as an amiable and unexceptional woman, did not resemble Tom in any of his remarkable qualities. Nonetheless, the Kutchin felt confident that Black Tom, 'the only one [outsider] who never wanted anything from us,' as Chief Julius remarked, had been reborn as the granddaughter of Black Tom's freighting partner.

Secularization of Belief

Some features of Kutchin reincarnation belief raise questions more general than the time interval between death of the original and rebirth. These features seem to indicate that a process has taken place which sets Kutchin reincarnation belief apart in some respects from analogous cultural features discussed in this volume.

- 1 In 1938-9 I estimated that only one-tenth of the Peel River Kutchin population were rebirths. Of these, less than half were linked to their originals by clearly traceable kinship or quasi-kinship, although a distant genealogical connection may have existed in some cases. Fourteen of the forty-three to forty-five originals were not Kutchin. This inclusion of outsiders and especially non-Natives in rebirth cases is apparently rare among Amerindian and Inuit peoples.
- 2 All eastern Kutchin (Peel River, Arctic Red River, and Mackenzie Delta Kutchin) accepted reincarnation as a feature of existence. Some non-Kutchin, including Whites, appeared to accept some cases of alleged reincarnation.
- 3 Although universally accepted within the culture-bearing society,

reincarnation did not involve very strong identification between original and revenant, nor was it taken very seriously by most people. It was my impression that only a minority, albeit a fairly sizable minority, of the community regarded the phenomenon of rebirth in a religious light. Among these were devout persons of whom a close relative had been reborn as a relative. One such was the late Mrs Elizabeth Blake, a valued friend and informant: 'She had a daughter who died aged nine in about 1931. Ruth, born a year later, was clearly *natli?* [a reincarnation] of her deceased sister ... When she was about six, Ruth told her mother that she had died [in 1931], had gone into the sky up a steep and very narrow trail, had been met at a beautiful big gate by a man in white who identified himself as St Peter. She had proceeded along a road and had seen a lot of the old people. Finally she came to a big crowd of people and angels, and there was Jesus. She was frightened, but she was taken up to Jesus, who spoke to her kindly and told her, "This is not the time for you." So she turned away and didn't remember anything else. Ruth was born a year later.' As Mrs Blake told of the encounter with Jesus, her voice became very reverent and low (Field notes, Fort McPherson, NWT, 3 August 1966).

To Mrs Blake, a devout Anglican and good Kutchin, every detail of the foregoing narrative was blended in religious conviction.

To most eastern Kutchin, however, perception of reincarnation seemed a casual matter. At first glance, the rebirth of non-Kutchin seems to deny or form an exception to the general view of reincarnation among tribal peoples as a form of group survival or at least as expressing the value of group survival. However, such denial is not necessarily the case. True, the persons in categories IIc and IId of the tables, with one exception, were not Kutchin. However, their stories were very much a part of modern eastern Kutchin tradition. These originals were, to use a sociological term, 'significant others.' When alive they – with the one exception – had been outsiders, but after their departure their memory became part of Kutchin lore. Black Tom would be a conspicuous example.

In some respects this development is similar to the creation of folk heroes in our own culture. Among Kutchin the process lacks media facilitation, but it gains from the intensity of interaction within a small and rather isolated community. The return in spirit of such local celebrities may be seen as serving to maintain and to reinforce community ideology.

Most cases of perceived rebirth lack detail and strength of connection between original and revenant. The connection, such as it is, tends to dissipate early in the life of the reborn. This, to be sure, is true in other Native American cultures. However, in the case of the Kutchin, the 'weakness' of the concept (Stevenson 1974: 371) is coupled with its universality.¹⁰

A majority of community members view reincarnation matter-of-factly; people occasionally joke about it. Yet hardly anything in eastern Kutchin mental culture is accepted by as high a proportion of the population as is the presence of reincarnates.

Matter-of-factness and universality suggest secularization, a shift from the religious towards the prosaic and everyday. Use of the term is intended to suggest that at one time Kutchin reincarnation belief was embedded in religious conviction, part of a system of faith, and that by 1970, for many Kutchin it had lost a great deal of its religious character and had become an article of group ideology. Such belief celebrated and symbolized the cohesion and continuance of the community.

In the conclusion of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1929 [1902]: 505) attempts to define religious belief as felt by that majority of persons who have not had a mystical or a conversion experience: 'confining ourselves to what is common and generic, we have in the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come, a positive content of the religious experience.'

During the years I knew them best, a feeling of connection 'with a wider self' was evidenced not infrequently by Kutchin. To cite a small and quiet example, I recall having tea on the trail with a Kutchin companion one sunny winter afternoon. He asked me if I could hear anything. I replied, only the breeze in the branches and the rippling of the river. 'That's my old people talking to me,' he remarked. 'Telling me things are all right.' That, it seems to me, was a minor and reassuring religious experience. This feeling, I would maintain, is not to be found in most Kutchins' recognition of rebirth; although to a person such as Mrs Blake, her lost daughter's apparent rebirth was a religious event.

To clarify the present or recent position of Kutchin reincarnation belief, a partial analogy may be seen in the secularization of North American holidays originally religious and now largely civic. A case in point is Hallowe'en, the eve of Hallowmas or All Saints' Day. If Frazer is to be credited, it was established on the date of pre-Christian pastoral round-up time, especially the great Celtic fire festival of Samhain, which

was also the Celtic New Year, when the community's dead forebears returned for a visit (1913: 222ff). Although Hallowe'en as celebrated in North America is associated with ghosts as well as goblins and witches, it is doubtful if many people feel it as a religious occasion. Yet everyone is aware of Hallowe'en. There are obvious differences between the place of Hallowe'en as a largely secular event in our culture and the place of reincarnation as a partially secularized belief in Kutchin culture.¹¹ One is an annual festival; the other a continuous cultural feature. Moreover, Hallowe'en, like all festivals in our culture, is heavily commercialized. Nevertheless, there is an analogy between them as formerly features of religion, now weakly religious in overtone, not highly emotive, yet universal in their respective societies; although the secularization of Hallowe'en has gone much farther than that of Kutchin reincarnation belief.

Several questions remain. Is Kutchin reincarnation belief a decadent form? Why were there a significant proportion of non-Kutchin among the reincarnated personalities? Why do, or did, a noticeable number of non-Kutchin share the belief?

These kinds of questions must be examined diachronically, in terms of the total culture and the changes it has undergone during the past century and a half. They must be part of historical or developmental inquiry, a task for another place.

Notes

- 1 Originally published in the *Western Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1970. Slightly revised. Since the original publication there has been an organized movement to promote the ethnic name 'Gwich'in,' which is more nearly correct than 'Kutchin' (Ritter 1976). 'Kutchin' has, at least for the present, been established in the literature.
- 2 This estimate is based upon consensus and identification of revenants. However, Lucy Martin and another octogenarian woman stated that everyone must be reincarnated at least once.
- 3 For the section on Christianity and reincarnation I wish to acknowledge the research and useful comments of Ms Margaret Rees, graduate student in anthropology, and enlightening discussion with the Reverend Dr Peter Hordern and Dr Edward P. Sanders, both then in the Department of Religious Studies, McMaster University. As of 1992, Dr Hordern is at Brandon University and Dr Sanders at Duke University.
- 4 Especially in the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, but also in the *Laws*, *Republic*,

and *Timaeus*. *Phaedrus* 249 contains a beautiful description of the destiny of souls, wherein the philosopher or lover of wisdom may escape the wheel of rebirth in three thousand years, a much shorter time than is possible for souls less attuned to truth. These assertions are based in part upon Plato's doctrine of Forms, and upon his (or Socrates') argument for the immortality of souls. He says he does not suppose he is describing exactly what happens – his myth is metaphorical – but he does assert that something like this must surely be the case.

- 5 In the history of the Christian Church there was, it would seem, an additional reason for the hardening of opposition to reincarnation belief. This was the fact that in various forms, the belief was a feature of the Manichean heresies which involved the Church in violent struggles during many centuries (see, for example, Runciman 1961: 168–87). This historical factor, however, played no direct part in Kutchin-missionary relations.
- 6 Consider the diffusion of 'bush man' belief in former years to long-term White residents (Slobodin 1960). Few immigrants to the region during the past twenty years (1950–70) have been aware of this or any other feature of Kutchin mental culture.
- 7 In 1966 I was in conversation with a reputed *revenante*. Joan (not her real name) had a Peel River Kutchin mother and an Irish father; she was regarded as the rebirth of a maternal aunt. I had known her as a charming and beautiful girl.

We met again in the town of Whitehorse, Yukon, when Joan was in her thirties. She had been twice married and divorced and was supporting three children by working in a laundry. Still attractive and amiable, she had pretty clearly been through quite a lot.

After catching up on the highlights of her life since we had last met, I asked Joan if she expected to be reborn again. She laughed, saying, 'No thanks! Once is enough.'

- 8 In the Ogilvie Mountains, that section of the Cordilleras westward of the lower Mackenzie, Johnson evaded capture by a posse 'in a chase [that] lasted 48 days and covered 280 km. in temperatures averaging minus 40 degrees C ... Johnson was so skilled at survival that the police had to employ bush pilot "Wop" May to track him' (Morrison 1988b: 1113). Local people also point out that Johnson carried minimal provisions and was unable to light a fire for much of the time. He was eventually brought down, but not before he had killed another policeman and grievously wounded a special deputy.

I do not believe that Johnson has gained a place in local lore because he defied authority and killed agents of governmental control. He is not, or

as of 1970 was not, a symbol of resistance in any political sense. After all, he was a White man. It was, rather, his ability to survive under extremely adverse conditions that has given him a place in folk memory; in this respect he resembles certain heroes of traditional tales, such as the war leader called 'Without Fire' (Slobodin 1975).

- 9 As far as I have discovered to date, Black Tom has completely escaped the written record, including mention in Lonsdale's travel journal (Krech 1989). Tom was not the only escaped slave or ex-slave to reach the far north of North America, but he probably travelled farther than any other. Some of the stories told in Kutchin country concerning this remarkable Afro-American are related in Slobodin (1989).
- 10 'Weakness' is derived from Stevenson's usage of 'weak' (1974: 371 and elsewhere), with the distinction that Stevenson is discussing individual cases and evidence suggestive of the actuality of reincarnation.
- 11 An account of this festival as still markedly religious yet partially secularized is given in Badone's vivid description of the contemporary Breton celebration of Toussaint, All Saints' Day (1989: 258-77). 'A young woman from a Communist family points out: "It's religious, but it's also a custom"' (ibid.: 277).