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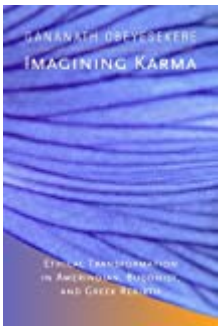

Gananath Obeyesekere. *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002. xxix + 448 pp. $25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23243-3; $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23220-4.

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Reincarnation

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Although the word does not appear in the title, this is a book about reincarnation. The approach is explicitly likened to that of early Levi-Strauss: a model or ideal type is set up analogous to an elementary structure of kinship, and empirical materials from a good number of cultures are presented as transformations of the model. Since the approach is primarily structuralist, the transformations are seen more as typological than historical although, as in Levi-Strauss, questions of origin and world history cannot be altogether eliminated. Thus in the small-scale societies the tendency is for a deceased individual to reincarnate as a new-born member of the same kin group, while in the larger-scale archaic literate civilizations one's next birth tends to be a function of moral behavior in the present life. The central instance of this is the doctrine of karma, familiar to the author not only from his own cultural roots in Sri Lankan Buddhism but also from his previous studies of that religion.

Among the small-scale societies, attention is focused on several from West Africa and Northwest America, on the Inuit and on the Trobrianders. In the south Asian tradition we read not only about Theravada Buddhists but also about the Vedic/Upanishadic Hindu background from which Buddhism emerged, and about other reincarnation doctrines, notably Jain, Ajivika, and Balinese. From the Greek world, with admirable intrepidity, the author explores the fragmentary texts that survive from a number of sources: Empedocles, Pythagoras, Pindar, Plato, and the Orphics, then Plotinus the neo-Platonist, with his curious offshoots on the fringes of Islam–the Druze and related Ismaili groups.

A useful conceptual tool is the distinction between two modes of "ethicization" (the author's word). In stage 1 it is the other world that is split or polarized so that in the simplest case one's good or bad behavior sends one at death to heaven or hell. In stage 2 it is the locus of rebirth that is affected: the fruits of behavior in a previous life carry one to a more desirable or less desirable reincarnation. Using the basic scheme and these two transformations, humanity has devised innumerable variations. These can bear, for instance, on the nature of the other world, the process of reaching it, the soul or whatever it is that cycles to and fro between the worlds,

the mechanisms or divinities that govern the process, the possibility of escaping from it (to nirvana or the like), and methods of gaining knowledge about past or future reincarnations. One important variation concerns the range of beings into which one can reincarnate–the kin group, the society, animals (including insects), and even plants. Considerable attention is given to the relation between reincarnation in animals and vegetarianism (ahimsa in India)–as well as to "endoanthropophagy" (i.e., endocannibalism).

Like any study, this one has its limitations. More attention might have been given to the history of reincarnation studies. Thus Marcel Mauss commented in 1906: "There exists an enormous group of societies, Negro, Malayo-Polynesian, Amerindian (Sioux, Algonquin, Iroquois, Pueblo, North-Western), Eskimo, Australian, where the system of reincarnation of the deceased and inheritance of the individual name within the family or clan is the rule."[1] Obeyesekere makes it clear that he is not aiming for a thorough sampling of societies with reincarnation beliefs, but the passage (cited by Levy-Bruhl in his best-known book, as well as in recent Anglophone work on Mauss),[2] shows that the phenomenon is even more widely distributed, and hence more important, than is here made apparent (moreover the list should certainly include South American Amerindians). Similarly as regards ethicisation: brief references are made to Axial Age theory, but the idea can be traced back at least to Tylor, and Hocart talks in the same vein of "spiritualizing."[3]

Since he disavows interest in origins, the author naturally avoids questions about the link between reincarnation and tribal kinship systems. However, it can be argued that the simplest logically possible kinship systems make ego the successor not of a parent but of a grandparent, real or classificatory, and it is interesting how often ethnographers mention that ego reincarnates a member of the grandparental generation. A more contentious issue is how to explain the similarities between ancient Greece and India. The usual answer is by a combination of independent parallel invention and influences of the East on the West. However, evidence is beginning to accumulate from comparative studies on Greek and Indian epic that some similarities are due to common origin–the negative evidence from the early Vedas does not rule this out. If so, it is possible that the history of reincarnation beliefs in the Indo-European world is longer than has been supposed. It is certainly an open question how far one can go in understanding early Indian and Greek world views without taking account of the light that can be shed on them by Indo-European cultural comparativism (mentioned here only obliquely, in a quotation from Nietzsche).

Another line of thought comes from Obeyesekere's basic model, whose essence has not changed since 1980.[4] The path of the soul is shown in the model as a circle bisected by a horizontal line separating this world from the other world; the circle is traced anticlockwise, passing from birth on the left to death on the right, so that the other world forms the upper half of the diagram. This choice of orientation is not discussed, but it could perhaps introduce bias or close off useful insights. For instance, it would be just as logical to draw the circle clockwise, thereby putting this world above the horizontal line and the other world below (i.e., showing it as Hades rather than Heaven). The diagram could then serve to show not only the path of the soul but also that of the sun: the soul's invisible passage through the other world from death to rebirth would correspond to the sun's invisible nocturnal passage behind or under the world, from its setting in the west to its rising in the east. Such macrocosm-microcosm thinking, which would correlate or put in parallel the sun's course from day to day and the soul's course from life to life, seems to me the sort of phenomenon one might well look for in India, especially given that Vedic Vivasvat, the Sun, last-born of the goddess Aditi, is father of Yama, the first mortal. But my main point (familiar to kinship theorists) is that the choices embodied in a diagram may be far from trivial.

So there is plenty here that can be built on. This is a serious and useful comparative study of just the sort that anthropology needs to undertake in order to fulfil its vocation and justify its grander claims.

Notes

[1]. Marcel Mauss, "Review of A. Dieterich, Mutter Erde," reprinted in Mauss's *Oeuvres*, vol. 2 (Paris: Minuit, 1969), pp. 135-139.

[2]. Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (Princeton and Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1985; orig. 1910), pp. 338-339; and N. J. Allen, *Categories and Classifications: Maussian Reflections on the Social* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), p. 26.

[3]. Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 2 (London: Murray, 1873), p. 187; and A. M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1970; orig. 1936), p. 78.

[4]. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Rebirth Eschatology and Its Transformations: A Contribution to the Soci-

ology of Early Buddhism," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 144.