

Reincarnation Beliefs of the Gumini People of the Simbu Province of Papua New Guinea

JOAN D. JOHNSTONE¹

ABSTRACT: This article describes the traditional reincarnation belief system of the Gumini, a small group of people living in the southeast of the Simbu² Province of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. This system embraces the belief that the spirit of some humans is, after death, reincarnated within the body of another living person of similar age and probably of the same sex as the deceased. This person, a stranger, then represents the continuation of the life of the person who died in terms of his/her social and kinship relationships. It is demonstrated that this belief system was functional in traditional Gumini society, but may not continue to be so in future due to rapid changes in rural and urban life currently affecting the people of Papua New Guinea.

THE GUMINI

The Gumini people live in the southeast of the Simbu Province, in the Highlands of New Guinea. They speak one of a variety of mutually comprehensible dialects of Kuman, the main language of the Province. They see themselves as culturally distinct from the Kuman speakers in a

¹ I did not go to Gumini in 1962 in order to study their reincarnation beliefs. The information presented in this article was learnt serendipitously, simply as a consequence of my interaction with the local people during my six months of research into eating habits.

² After Papua New Guinean Independence in 1975 the name Chimbu was changed to Simbu.

number of important ways. This contrasts with the view of many expatriates who tend to see the similarities rather than the differences between Simbu tribal cultures. I am unaware how widespread the reincarnation beliefs of the Guminis, as described in this article, are among the other peoples of Simbu or neighbouring provinces (Johnstone, 1995).

Today the use of the name Gumini is flexible, depending upon the context. Originally it was the name of a hamlet situated near where the Gumini Patrol Post, now Gumini station, is situated. Gumini station is the administrative centre for what is now the Gumini sub-district, an area of hills and deep ravines with scattered small hamlets, and having but one dirt road, which for much of its length is suitable only for four-wheel drive vehicles. Expatriates, and Guminis outside the sub-district, refer to the whole sub-district as Gumini, and the people living there as Guminis. This is the manner in which I use the name.

Gumini was a relatively densely populated area of the Simbu Province. The people live in hamlets comprised of a men's house, in which live a group of close kinsmen and their older sons, situated beside a cluster of women's houses where the wives, daughters and young sons of the kinsmen live. Each wife had her own house. In addition, wives had their own houses in their gardens situated some distance from the hamlet. Today this is changing. Men's houses are becoming redundant. Husbands live with their wives and children in their wives' houses in the hamlet. Men with more than one wife move from one to another. Land is being used to grow coffee (as a cash crop) and vegetables for local consumption.

Guminis, like Papua New Guineans in general, are not a people with a highly developed sense of curiosity. As children, they are discouraged from asking questions of their elders, being told that it is rude to do so, and that they will understand everything when they grow up. As a result, as adults they have become accepting of what they are told, and of the way that things have always been done, without questioning. For a person to think or behave or think differently to their kinsfolk, would endanger losing the cooperation of kinsmen and women that is so essential for many of the day to day and ceremonial tasks that every man and woman needs to carry out.

This explains why I was unable to obtain clear answers to some of my questions. People simply had not thought about many of the issues that seem significant to a social researcher. Added to this was the reticence that those people who claimed to be Christian felt talking about the spirit world. They had been told by missionaries that belief in their traditional spirits was wrong. To talk about spirits might, the Guminis believed, anger their new Christian god. It might indicate that they still believed in these spirits. Talking about reincarnation was easier because it had not been expressly

forbidden by missionaries who may not have been aware of the Guminis' traditional reincarnation beliefs.

REINCARNATION

Guminis believed that only some people were reincarnated. They were unable to predict who would be, and who would not be, reincarnated. Nor could they explain why some people were reincarnated and others not. It seemed to be arbitrary, depending upon whether an appropriate living person became available for the spirit of a deceased person to enter.

When reincarnation took place, the spirit of the deceased was transferred into the body of a living person of the same age, and probably, perhaps always, of the same sex. Age would be an approximation as no birth records were kept. The people who spoke to me were not sure whether reincarnation only took place between people of the same sex, but this would seem likely. Until I asked, they had not given any thought to the matter. If a young man died, his spirit might be transferred to the body of another young man. This young man would be a stranger to the kinsmen and women of the man had who died. A stranger would have no existing genealogical or social relationships with the kin group of the deceased person prior to the recognition of the reincarnation.

I found it difficult to determine when reincarnation was believed to take place—immediately after death, or when the kinsmen of the deceased person became aware of the presence of a person (a stranger) the same age as the deceased at the time of death, whom they believed was the reincarnation of the deceased person. I knew a woman, Nol, whom several years after the death of her son was still looking, hoping, to meet the man who she could identify as being the reincarnation of her son.

SPIRITS

The people of Papua New Guinea—and the Guminis are no exception—lived, and still do to a large extent, in a world full of spirits. Many, but not all, of these spirits are those of deceased ancestors and kinsmen, but are not identified individually. They have no physical form. They exist in the minds of people as a collection of influences. In rural life these spirits were, and still are to a very large degree, closely integrated into the lives of the living.

There is an absence of any sharp distinction between the human world and the spirit world. In the urban situation the influence of spirits on

Gumini migrants is widely felt even among those people who are devout Christians. This is partly a consequence of towns-people maintaining close links with their rural kinsfolk and *vice versa*. There is a continual coming and going of Guminis, mainly men, between town and country, in spite of the high cost of airfares. Flying is the only means of transport between Port Moresby and the major towns of Papua New Guinea, including Kundiawa, the only town in Simbu Province.

The Guminis believe that spirits can, and do, but not in large numbers, travel from their home area to other parts of Papua New Guinea, to places where other Guminis are living. They do not travel to Australia. This may be because there are few, if any, Guminis living in Australia. More importantly, for Guminis living outside of the Gumini area, is the belief that the spirits of the people into whose area they have migrated will have harmful effects upon them if they offend these local people, or other people who have migrated to the same town, and who may have a reputation for strong and aggressive spiritual powers.

Ancestor spirits are believed by the Guminis to be benign, always provided that time-honoured rituals are carried out at appropriate times. It is believed that these rituals give the ancestor spirits pleasure. Pig feasts of various kinds are the most common example of rituals that please the spirits. The sight and smell of cooked pig, and other edible delicacies, make the spirits happy. They are able to absorb, on a spiritual level, something of the essence of the pig meat and other cooked foods. Food is not set aside for these spirits who, it is believed, will become angry and cause trouble for people if their living descendants do not behave according to Gumini tradition and put on pig feasts at appropriate times.

An essentially evil spirit, which demonstrates the close integration of spirits and humans in Gumini society, is the *sanguma*, or witch. These are people, men or women, believed to be possessed by a spirit that causes people to do outrageous things that no ordinary human would ever do; in particular, to do harm to their own kinsfolk by, for example, making them ill, or even causing their death. A sudden, unexplained death is likely to be attributed to a *sanguma*, one who is a kins-man or -woman of the deceased. Male *sanguma* are kept with their kinsmen where they will be given every consideration so that they will not want to harm any of their kinsfolk. Female *sanguma* are banished to the hills with their young children.

After death, during the mourning period of a few days, the body is kept in the house of a wife, mother or kinswoman. It is then buried near to this wife's, or kinswoman's house. The spirit of the deceased leaves the body and either remains in the area, joining a collectivity of existing spirits hovering around a collection of houses, or enters the body of a person, a

stranger to the kinsfolk of the deceased, a person who is then believed to be the reincarnation of the deceased.

REINCARNATION AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Reincarnation was not expected to replace the deceased person physically, but some physical similarities between the deceased and the living person believed to be a reincarnation may be noted and may be of help to identify the person as the reincarnation of a dead kinsman or kinswoman. In some respects, at least initially, there would seem to have been two spirits in the one person, but this was not something that the Guminis thought about. Over time, it seems, the original spirit of the living person either faded away or became dominated by the new, reincarnated spirit. This without there being any physical change of the living person. Thus a new social identity was established for the reincarnated person, one that had been adopted into the kin group of the deceased because of the group's recognition that this person, this physical identity, contained the reincarnated spirit of a deceased member of their kin group. But he, or she, was not expected to act or have the knowledge of the person they were believed to have been in a previous life, but they were expected to take on the role of that person within the kin group and behave accordingly.

Given such a close integration and interaction between spirits and the daily lives of Guminis, it seems very plausible to the Guminis that these spirits, when released from a human body at the time of death, might enter the body of another human being, rather than hover in spirit form in the physical environment of the dead person and his/her kinsfolk. After all, the Gumini consider human spirits and the spirits in the physical environment as being essentially the same. (Note that the concept of a human spirit might well be experienced and referred to as human consciousness.)

To cite my own experience as the believed recipient of the spirit of a deceased Gumini woman: In 1962, soon after I arrived to live in a hamlet, Obil, ten minutes walk from the Gumini Patrol Post, my neighbour, to whom I was a stranger, recognised me as the reincarnation of her younger daughter who had died some weeks before I arrived in Gumini. At the time, and for some years after, I was quite unaware of this. All that was said to me in 1962 by this neighbour, Mon, was that she felt sorry for me being on my own, without any relatives nearby. She was now my Mother, she told me. I regarded this as simply a friendly act, an informal and temporary adoption. Sometime later I realised, from their behaviour, that all her other members, Mon's kin group, and the men in the nearby men's house, and their wives in the surrounding houses, had accepted me as their kinswoman.

I do recall that a casual remark had been made to the effect that my nose was similar to that of the deceased woman, but I had placed no particular significance on this comment. The dead woman's name was never mentioned.

Still later, after I had left Gumini and was living in Port Moresby, I found out that my relationship with Mon's kin group was not one simply of adoption. I was believed to be the reincarnation of Mon's younger daughter. The thing that had convinced her that I was her daughter was the fact that I had some scars on my left arm (in fact, vaccination scars). Her daughter had fallen into a fire as a child, and sustained scars on her left arm as a result. This was never explained to me at that time. No doubt they would have assumed I understood the entire situation once Mon had told me that I was her daughter.

Forty years later I am still regarded as a kinswoman of the group, but the younger, educated Christian urban members see it as a relationship based on adoption only, rather than one of reincarnation. But these younger members live in urban centres, in contact with people from all over Papua New Guinea. They are not involved in tribal fighting. There is an unwritten agreement that tribal fights in Gumini will not be duplicated in the urban environment (Whiteman, 1973).

Twenty years later, in 1994, I made a return visit to Gumini. A small ceremony was held to mark the occasion, and I was given the woman's name, Drikori. It had been too painful for the close relatives to mention her name until now.

ADOPTION

Adoption was, and is, a common practice in Gumini society, for a variety of reasons. It takes place mainly within kin groups as a means of distributing children more evenly among the women of each kin group. Children belong to their father and his kinsmen. It was believed that only men were responsible for conception. His wife simply looked after the child for her husband and his kinsmen both *in utero* and after birth. A conscientious mother and wife might be given some rights due to her children, but she had to earn them. She looked after her daughters until they married, and her sons until puberty. No formal procedure was required when a child was adopted within its own kin group, but some compensation might be given to the birth parents by the adopting parents. Birth parents maintain some rights in the child they give up, even after compensation has been paid. They would routinely be in regular contact with the adopting

parents when involved in group activities if both sets of parents remained in Gumini.

Adoption of a male born into a kin group different to the one he was to be adopted into was more complicated than the adoption of a girl child because social ties within a group are based on male genealogy. All kin groups, except those that have become unviable due to the loss of most of its male members, want to increase, rather than reduce their numbers. Reincarnation, simultaneously with adoption, was a way of giving a stranger (an outsider) a new social identity within the group that adopts him. Adoption was an essential part of the reincarnation process, but not all adoptions involve reincarnation. There was no need for adult women to be reincarnated in order to join another kin group. This happens routinely after marriage, and women from decimated kin groups are taken as wives in this polygamous society, without a brideprice having to be paid.

Interpersonal relationships based upon kinship and conjugal ties are of major importance in the structure of Gumini society. It would be almost impossible for a person to live as an individual without kinship ties. So much of Gumini life is organised on a kingroup basis, as was ownership of land. Reincarnation occurred with strangers who had become physically estranged from their kin group of birth, and were therefore free to take on the social identity of a deceased man or woman of the same age. This was facilitated by the fact that there was little variation in the life-style of Gumini people. All people of the same sex had more or less the same skills and degree of knowledge.

There are some details relating to Gumini reincarnation, beliefs of which I do not have knowledge. This is due in part because they relate to matters that were not raised by the Guminis themselves, and in part because I did not undertake a formal study of Gumini reincarnation beliefs. The information I have presented here was collected incidentally, mainly as a consequence of my own changed identity within Gumini society. Unfortunately I do not know whether reincarnation may occur after the death of an infant, or whether they are simply adopted with their mothers when they are taken into the conquering kingroup as wives if their husband had been either killed or his kingroup disintegrated due to lack of sufficient male members. If they did have children, would they become members of a new kin group by means of adoption or reincarnation? Kingroups are always looking for new members in order to strengthen their fighting ability.

I do not know how widespread the type of reincarnation beliefs of the Guminis were held outside of Gumini. The ethnographies of Papua New Guinea that I am familiar with make no references to reincarnation. This does not mean that Papua New Guineans other than the Guminis do not

believe in reincarnation. This would seem unlikely. There may simply be no records of such beliefs because the ethnographer, linguist or missionary working with a group of people had no particular interest in the topic, or had no interest in publishing their findings on the subject.

CANNIBALISM AND REINCARNATION

To the south of the hilly and relatively densely populated land of Gumini lies The Bomai, a wide open plain traversed by many deep river ravines. It is sparsely populated with people, but contains considerable wildlife, which does not exist in Gumini. The Bomai people, known collectively as the Bomai, live mainly from hunting and gathering rather than from vegetable gardening and caring for domesticated pigs, as do the Guminis. Gumini men from time to time braved the potentially harmful spirits of The Bomai to go on trading expeditions for Bird of Paradise and other feathers, cassowaries, and possum skins.

According to the Guminis, who were incensed if asked whether they used to be cannibals, the Bomais were still practising cannibalism in the 1960s. At that time there had been very little contact between expatriates and the people of The Bomai. The Bomai, Guminis told me, ate some of the flesh of well respected, recently deceased, leaders or sorcerers, in the belief that some of the mental characteristics, some of the deceased's spirit that had made the man a great leader or sorcerer, or enabled a woman to become a respected sorcerer, would enter the person consuming his/her flesh. This spirit would endow the consumer with some of the qualities that had made the deceased a great leader or respected sorcerer.

I suggest that such a belief could be classified as a reincarnation belief, the more so when considered in the context of Gumini reincarnation beliefs. It presents reincarnation as a method of direct spiritual transference from the deceased to the body of a living person. Whether, in addition to knowledge and mental qualities, physical characteristics were also believed to be transferred, I cannot say, but I consider it unlikely.

CONCLUSION

The following functional interpretation of Gumini beliefs in reincarnation was not made or suggested to me by the Guminis themselves, although my trend of thought may have been initiated by remarks made in a different context. "We are always looking for new members for our group, to make it stronger," I was told. Stronger for fighting in tribal warfare was

their main concern. I have already stated that Guminis, like many of the Highlands people of Papua New Guinea, live in small groups based on genealogy and specific geographical localities. Within any given neighbourhood there are groups traditionally considered to be friends and others to be enemies. It seems that there were no means by which enemy groups could become friendly groups or *vice-versa*.

Disputes between friends were resolved by compensation being paid either by both parties, or by the offending party, according to circumstances; disputes between enemies resulted in warfare and a continuing system of tit for tat, or pay-back. Consequently a continual state of friction and fighting existed between groups that were enemies. From time to time one group would be wiped out and disintegrated, its land and surviving women and children taken over by the conquerors and integrated into one of the conquering kin groups. The few remaining male members might also be absorbed into the conquerors' group through reincarnation. The Guminis were, and still are in their homeland, in an almost continuous state of warfare, a situation which continues, in spite of government attempts to stop it. In the past, these little wars were fought with bows and arrows; today guns are used (see also, Brown, 1973, pp. 29-32.)

This continual state of warfare meant that the number of able-bodied men belonging to a group was very important. The larger the number of men in a kin group, the more likely the group was to win its fights with enemy groups. Men were continually being killed in these fights, from one or two, to up to six, in a single incident. Consequently all groups were always looking for new members. The most important source of new members, apart from the birth of children, was from defeated groups.

Gumini reincarnation beliefs facilitate the absorption of a person into a new group of kinsmen. They defined his/her social relationships with those of the individual who had accepted him/her as the reincarnation of a kinsman or woman. Consequently other members of the group also accepted the reincarnation and took in a replacement member of their kin group. In addition men who no longer had a functioning kin group might simply be accepted into a new group without prior reincarnation, and over a period of time were regarded as members of the group, but this was a more hazardous route to full acceptance. And with this acceptance came land from the defeated group. The death of any kinsman or woman from any cause might give rise to the hope of their spirit being reincarnated. And the underlying cause for the desire for a reincarnation by individual members of a kin group may not always be, particularly in the modern situation, to bring an enlargement to a kin group.

The elderly Gumini woman, Nol, had lived in Port Moresby for many years. She returned to Gumini a few months after her son died in Port

Moresby in 1993, from liver failure. There she waited, hoping that her son's reincarnation would come and look after her.

Gumini beliefs relating to reincarnation have advantages for all those concerned. The kinsmen and women of the deceased, both the individual and the group, have a replacement for their lost one, a replacement who is able to perform the duties and activities that would have been the role of the deceased, including participating in tribal fighting.

The man, whose kin group has disintegrated, probably as a consequence of tribal fighting, is able to take on a new social identity with new kinsmen and women. He is no longer alone in the world. It would probably be impossible to survive for any length of time without membership of a kin group. And finally, the spirit of the deceased has another chance of life in this world with his/her own kinsfolk.

Could reincarnation beliefs such as those held by the Gumini and people of the Bomai have been the precursors of the more sophisticated reincarnation beliefs of some of the Asian peoples to the north and north-east of Papua New Guinea? Be that as it may, the Gumini beliefs are a demonstration of the fact that in the very early days of the development of human societies (i.e., the Stone Age), mankind had a belief in what today we call reincarnation. The Guminis' first contact with Europeans was during the early 1940s and there can be no doubt that the beliefs I have described were a part of their pre-contact social and belief system.

Stevenson (1974) writes that the different reincarnation types that he describes may be consequences of different cultures, and in particular of different religions of these cultures. He suggests that Hinduism is conducive to occurrence of many children who provide insights into what is claimed to be their previous life. The data presented in this article is very different in purpose, methodology and findings to that of Stevenson's comprehensive research into suggestions of reincarnation exhibited in various cultures. This makes comparisons difficult. However, I would suggest that the information I have gathered from the Guminis and Bomais indicates that a belief that there is a human force that can, after death, be transformed into spirits or transferred to another human being, goes a very long way back into the development of the human psyche. Could this be the cause, rather than the effect of religions such as Hinduism and, to a lesser degree, Buddhism?

* * *

Postscript: As of mid-2006, I have found no reports of beliefs in any way similar to those of the Guminis, including those of the Igbo of Nigeria. This does not necessarily mean that such beliefs do not exist either amongst other peoples of Papua New Guinea or amongst other peoples worldwide.

Researchers, notably, Stevenson, have been looking in a variety of societies, specifically at cases of children claiming to have memories of previous lives. Other types of reincarnation beliefs could have existed concurrently with the type reported in the present article, but which went unnoticed or unreported. Similarly, there may have been children with memories of previous lives amongst the Guminis, but they did not come to my attention.

REFERENCES

- Brown, P. (1973). *The Chimbu: A study of change in the New Guinea Highlands*. In A. Kuper (Ed.), *International library of anthropology* (pp. 29-58). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Johnstone, J. D. (1995). *The Gumini Bisnis-Meri. A study of the development of an innovative indigenous entrepreneurial activity in Port Moresby in the early 1970s*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Queensland.
- Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty cases suggestive of reincarnation* (2nd ed., revised and enlarged). Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Whiteman, J. (1973). *Chimbu family relationships in Port Moresby*. *New Guinea Research Bulletin No. 52*. Australian National University Monograph, Canberra.

*PO Box 384
Woy Woy
NSW 2256
AUSTRALIA*

Email: rlh123@optusnet.com.au