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# IMAGINING KARMA

Premakumara de Silva

*Imagining Karma : Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*, by Gananath Obeyesekere, University of California Press.

Gananath Obeyesekere, professor emeritus of anthropology at Princeton University, is no doubt one of the world's greatest living anthropologists. The impressive genre of works he has produced over the years has earned him a canonical status within the discipline of anthropology. His recent work, *Cannibal Talk: The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas* (2005), solidifies this status. Obeyesekere's prior work *Imagining Karma* (2002), a study of the concept and practice of reincarnation, is one of the grandest theoretical labours that speaks to the theme rebirth from a broad cross-cultural perspective. It explores in rich detail the beliefs of small-scale societies of West Africa, Melanesia, Siberia, Canada and the northwest coast of North America, and compares their ideas with those of the ancient and modern Indic civilizations and with the Greek rebirth theories of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Pindar and Plato. This groundbreaking study shows that rebirth eschatologies are not unique to Indian religious tradition, as many Indologists and intellectuals assume, but are found scattered in other parts of the world. In his words:


My initial rationale for embarking on this project was to justify decentering India as the home and ground of rebirth. But I go beyond my Buddhist prejudice to a vision of a larger purpose: I explore the common fate of those societies that through historical accident or through the circulation of ideas or through independent invention...in reincarnation as an integral part of their larger eschatological and cosmological belief systems (2002:XV).

Obeyesekere demonstrates the process by which a simple rebirth eschatology is transformed into the Greek rebirth eschatology and the Buddhist karmic eschatology. As far as

small-scale societies are concerned there were no ethical or moral (good or bad behaviour sends one at death to heaven or hell) questions that determined one's rebirth. But in "civilized societies" 'ethicization' affects a person's destiny after death. Obeyesekere argues quite convincingly that when ethicization is systematically introduced into any rebirth eschatology the latter must logically transform itself into a "karmic eschatology." Once reborn into a world where an ethicized morality already exists, the individual must perforce continue in his life trajectory doing good or bad, acquiring sin and merit. In such world kinship affiliation no longer determines who goes where after death but moral action does. In religions like Buddhism animals get demoted in such a way that human beings who do wrong or commit sin might be punished with rebirth as an animal or other lower form of being. Here, Obeyesekere gives considerable attention to elaborate relation between reincarnation in animals and vegetarianism.

There are seven long chapters in the book. The first chapter discusses the logic of karmic eschatology and rebirth in Indic religions, and the second chapter provides the comprehensive account of non-indic theories of rebirth. Chapter three presents a detailed analysis of the transformation of the rebirth eschatology and the emergence of the karmic eschatology. Chapters four and five, respectively, give brilliant accounts of Buddhist and Greek eschatologies of rebirth and karma. Chapter six explores the Greek rebirth theories and discusses the idea of God in relation to soul. The final chapter opens up debates on Trobriander, Buddhist and Balinese rebirth and raises important methodological issues in comparative studies.

This provocative work deals with the most fundamental questions of human existence and challenges us to reexamine the accepted ideas about death, cosmology and eschatology. One book blurb says, a few scholars would attempt this kind, of a project today, but Obeyesekere does it quite brilliantly.



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