

Antonia Mills

Antonia Mills (b 1942) is an anthropologist, reincarnation researcher and professor emeritus at the First Nations Studies Department at the University of Northern British Columbia. Mills is one of the most prominent researchers trained by the founder of the reincarnation field, Ian Stevenson. She specializes in reincarnation beliefs and experiences of indigenous peoples of the north-west region of North America, but has also investigated and analysed cases in India and the West.

Life and Background

Mills was born in Iowa City, Iowa, US, on 14 April 1942.^{[1](#)} She received her BA from Radcliffe/Harvard in 1964. In that same year she began field research with the Beaver First Nation, aka the Dane-zaa.

She recounts:

When I began my studies of the spiritual beliefs of North American Indians, I had little knowledge of the depth and breadth of reincarnation concepts within their cultures. Even after taking courses in Indian spirituality at Harvard University, I was not aware of how widespread this belief was. It was not until 1964, when I went to the Beaver Indians of north-eastern British Columbia, Canada, as a graduate student, that I learned how integral and vibrant the experience of reincarnation is among these Northern Athabaskan people. The experience of finding elders returned as babies among them was, and still is, very real for these people.^{[2](#)}

For her PhD thesis on Beaver spiritual customs, Mills made note of the importance of reincarnation in the Beaver worldview. She analysed the ten different regions of indigenous culture in North America for belief in reincarnation, discovering that it was widespread.^{[3](#)} This thesis earned Mills her PhD in anthropology from Harvard in 1982.

Mills has written and edited several books and many papers on general anthropological topics concerning north-western North American indigenous people as well as on reincarnation (see select bibliography below). As well as researching the customs and views of these peoples she is a passionate advocate for their rights to retain their millennia-old connections to the land in the face of corporate and governmental encroachments. Most notably, she was hired by the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en Tribal Council to write an expert report and testify in their favour in a landmark lawsuit to stop clear-cut logging on their lands. It resulted in a favourable judgment by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997.^{[4](#)} The report was published in book form as *Eagle Down Is Our Law: Witsuwit'en Law, Feasts, and Land Claims* in 1994.^{[5](#)}

Mills has four children and six grandchildren.^{[6](#)}

Reincarnation Research

During the early 1980s, [Stevenson](#) spent some time studying reincarnation cases among the Gitksan, who live in the Skeena River watershed in British Columbia, and other nearby tribes. In 1984, searching for more researchers to work on cases in the region, he inquired at UBC's anthropology department, which connected him with Mills. Mills had not heard of his voluminous work on reincarnation, but willingly agreed to add his methodology to her existing anthropological protocols in her fieldwork during the summer of 1984. Members of the Beaver tribe responded to the Stevenson approach by providing much more reincarnation information than previously, and the Gitksan, in a mere week, supplied her with 33 local reincarnation cases showing the characteristics Stevenson had delineated in his research worldwide:

birthmarks relating to wounds or markings; recognitions and statements from small children made from the point of view of the previous person; similarities of temperament, skills, and talents; and phobias and phobias explicable on the basis of the previous life but not the current one.[7](#)

In 1985, Mills was awarded a two-year post-doctoral fellowship by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to continue her work among the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en.[8](#)

Between September 1987 and January 1989, Mills made three trips to India, prompted by a request by Stevenson to try to replicate his results by finding similarly strong cases using his techniques.[9](#) At the same time, [Erlendur Haraldsson](#) and HH Jürgen Keil were doing likewise in Sri Lanka and Turkey respectively. The three researchers co-published their successful results in 1989.[10](#)

In 1988, Stevenson offered Mills two positions at the University of Virginia: research assistant at the Division of Personality Studies, now called the [Division of Perceptual Studies \(DOPS\)](#), of which he was then director, and lecturer in the anthropology department. She accepted and relocated from British Columbia to Charlottesville, Virginia, staying for six years.

Mills undertook numerous reincarnation projects during her six years working with Stevenson. She co-edited (with Richard Slobodin, the most prominent anthropologist sharing her specialty) an anthology of essays on reincarnation beliefs and experiences among North American indigenous peoples, entitled *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*.[11](#) Mills contributed the introduction and two solo chapters, one reporting three Gitksan reincarnation cases featuring [birthmarks](#) corresponding with ear-piercings the previous incarnations had received, which related to their identities as reincarnated chiefs in two cases, and a reincarnated warrior in the third.[12](#) In another chapter, she extended the cross-cultural work she did for her PhD thesis by collaborating with fellow anthropologist and reincarnation researcher [James G Matlock](#) on an inventory of reincarnation beliefs and how they manifest as customs for tribal cultures in North America, finding that they appear in more than half of these cultures.[13](#)

In 1990, Mills published the results of her investigations of interreligious reincarnation cases in India. She analysed eight cases of children of Muslim

families recalling past lives as Muslims, seven cases of children of Muslim families recalling past lives as Hindus, and eleven cases of children of Hindu families recalling past lives as Muslims. She found that parents in both religions found it troubling to have a child with memories, preferences and ingrained customs of a different religion, and offered this as a counterargument to the frequently-made claim that reincarnation cases are actually the result of parental or social cueing or coaching.¹⁴ She later expanded on this work in two more papers in anthropological and religious studies journals, including one longitudinal study exploring the effects of childhood past-life recall on the children, now young adults in 2006.¹⁵

Other projects begun during Mills's time at DOPS include a study of Western children's nightmares apparently resulting from past-life events,¹⁶ and a comparison of the experiences of American children with imaginary playmates and Indian children with past-life memories.¹⁷

In 1994, Mills left DOPS to accept a professorship at the University of Northern British Columbia, and continued her series of papers on Gitksan, Wetsuwet'en and Beaver reincarnation beliefs and cases. As well, she published a lengthy analysis of one strong Indian case she had written about previously; in it she measured the case's evidential strength using the Strength of Case Scale,¹⁸ a tool created by Stevenson's successor at DOPS, [Jim B Tucker](#), made an unsuccessful attempt to quantify the probability of the child's statements being correct, and evaluated the effects of childhood memories on the subject, now a young man of 25.¹⁹

Mills also collaborated with philosopher Kuldeep Dhiman to further investigate the Indian [case of Sumitra Singh](#), who had apparently died then awakened as Shiva Tripathi, a young woman who claimed to have been murdered in another village. As the subject had written letters subsequent to the change despite Sumitra having been illiterate, new letters shared by Shiva's father provided important new evidence, especially when translated into English for the first time. Mills and Dhiman updated the case history, revealing that the subject had felt herself to be Shiva until her death.²⁰

In March 2014, Mills presented a conference paper exploring the role of reincarnation in double-gendered people using three cases, two of whom were comfortable in their situation as it was entirely accepted and in fact highly-esteemed in their matrilineal cultures, and one of whom had been beaten for her masculine behaviours as a child as her culture was patrilineal.²¹

Mills has twice written chapters about reincarnation-related psychological phenomena for the American Psychological Association in successive editions of its anthology [Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence](#), first in collaboration with Steven Jay Lynn in 2000²² and then in collaboration with Jim Tucker in 2013.²³

Mills has completed a book entitled *'That's My Chair': Rebirth Experience of the Gitksan and Wetsuwet'en*, based on her many years of research among the two peoples. She is currently seeking a publisher.

Mills points out that indigenous North American concepts and experiences of reincarnation and other aspects of postmortem survival have proved durable despite 500 years of Western influence, lasting to this day. Reincarnation concepts are found in most of the world's major religions as well as among indigenous people worldwide, she writes, showing that they are 'part of foundational human religious experience.'[24](#)

Awards and Honours

Antonia Mills has received many grants and fellowships in her career, including a Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute Fellowship which provided the main funding for her longitudinal study in Northern India.[25](#)

In 2015, Mills was awarded the Paz Buttedahl Career Achievement Award from the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of British Columbia, in recognition for her contributions to non-academic communities through academic work.[26](#)

Mills was twice invited to appear as Banquet Speaker at the annual convention of the [Parapsychological Association](#), in 2001 and 2003.[27](#)

Video

A 1992 BBC Wales documentary on reincarnation, *In Search of The Dead*, shows Mills at work in British Columbia, with interview excerpts, recountings of cases by witnesses and close-up shots of apparent reincarnation-related birthmarks. Footage can be seen [here](#), running from 7.00 to 13.21.

Publications on Reincarnation

Books

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Articles in Mainstream Journals

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Mills, A. (2006). [Back from death: Young adults in northern India who as children were said to remember a previous life, with or without a shift in religion \(Hindu to Moslem or vice versa\)](#). *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 31, 141-56.

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Mills, A., Nyce, D., Nyce, E., Gosnell, J., Grandison, P., & Plante, L. (2011). The Nisga'a paradigm of rebirth. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 31/2, 85-95.

Book Contributions

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Additional Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Matlock (n.d.) Information in this article is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- [2](#). Mills (2008a).
- [3](#). Mills (2008c).
- [4](#). Mills (2003b).
- [5](#). Mills (1994g).
- [6](#). Matlock (n.d.)
- [7](#). Mills (2008a). This preliminary research was published in Mills (1988a).
- [8](#). See Mills (1988a, 1988b).
- [9](#). See Mills (1989).
- [10](#). Mills, Haraldsson & Keil (1989).
- [11](#). Slobodin & Mills (1994).
- [12](#). Mills (1994d).
- [13](#). Matlock & Mills (1994).
- [14](#). Mills (1990).
- [15](#). Mills (2006).
- [16](#). Mills (1994a).
- [17](#). Mills (2003a).
- [18](#). See Tucker (2000).

- [19.](#) Mills (2004).
- [20.](#) Mills & Dhiman (2011).
- [21.](#) Mills (2014).
- [22.](#) Mills & Lynn (2000).
- [23.](#) Mills & Tucker (2013).
- [24.](#) Mills (2008a).
- [25.](#) Mills (2006).
- [26.](#) See [here](#).
- [27.](#) See [here](#).