The Immortality of the Soul among North American Indians

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Abstract. The following article is founded on the material which I collected for a projected general investigation of the conceptions of life after death among North American aborigines. This project has, however, never been accomplished due to its enormous dimensions. My book on the soul concepts and the Orpheus traditions of the North American Indians are the published parts of the project so far. Other tasks, in particular general surveys of American Indian religious features, and latterly the publishing of my field research from the Shoshoni in Wyoming in the 1940s and 1950s, have demanded my attention. Here follows however one part of my eschatological studies, the study of immortality beliefs. It was presented in an abbreviated form at my Foerster Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, some years ago. It is here published in its original, more expanded version. It presupposes a general inventory of a large stock of books and articles on American Indians, but it is also based on my own observations in the field. As everyone knows the ethnographic literature on North America is next to boundless, and there is of course always the risk that some important facts have been overlooked. Nevertheless, the material gathered here should show the main guidelines to the concept of immortality as it was conceived among some – but in no way all – American Indians.


Some reflections on the concept of immortality

Immortality is a strong word, but is too often used in a corrupted sense. To Sir James Frazer, the well-known classic scholar and anthropologist immortality was tantamount to life after death, without further qualifications.¹ This was an interpretation that was natural in a spiritual milieu ultimately pervaded by Christian notions. In a comparatively modern folkloristic dictionary we learn that “the practice of burial among the prehistoric forerunners of modern man has led to the conjecture that man’s belief in immortality is as old as the species: preservation of the body so that the soul may have a dwelling-place.”² Immortality in this sense of the word, that man simply survives death in some form – except for some few wrong-doers –, was universal in North America. The idea of a future state changed with varying cultural, social or ecological conditions, and was coloured by different value patterns. If our goal was to portray aboriginal thoughts about afterlife in North America, our task would be an easy one, disregarding the amount of data.³

The Oxford Dictionary tells us however to stick to the linguistically correct interpretation of immortality: “undying, divine, unfading.”⁴ This object is exciting, for we are facing not only the problem if there ever was, among North American Indians, any belief in immortality. The problem is basically wider and more principal: do we at all face any ideas of immortality among tribal peoples?

There are two aspects of immortality that come to mind, immortality as an improvement of existence in man’s life on this earth, and immortality as a quality in life after death. The two aspects are not consistently kept apart in general debate, but ought to be so. Our main target will be the immortality of the soul, that is, man’s life after death.⁵ However, in order to make the picture complete some words will first be said about immortality as an improvement of life on earth.

May I also point out that in the following we are concerned with classic American Indian religion, before the appearance of the Ghost Dance, the Peyote religion and other religious movements partly derived from Christian teaching. As we shall find, it is not always so easy to decide if or to what extent ideas from these quarters have influenced recently recorded, traditional Indian beliefs of immortality.

¹ Cf. Frazer 1913.
² Leach 1949,1: 514.
³ It is a strange fact that there is no published paper on North American eschatology, despite the attractiveness of the theme. There is however an unpublished dissertation in Swedish on the subject by Karin Gustafsson (1969). See also Hultkrantz 1957: 34-55.
⁴ This was also, as far as I understand, the intention of Miss Edith Zweybruck when she inaugurated the Foerster Lectures. It is beliefs about immortality in the true sense of term that had constituted the object of this lecture.
⁵ On the connections between the living man’s soul and the “soul” that enters next life, see Hultkrantz 1953: 464ff.
Rejuvenation and the Gift Immortality

There was a time when North America was supposed to be a land of rejuvenation and immortality. Early Spanish explorers were fired by the information that there existed a wonderful spring that restored youth on an island north of Cuba. Vague reports from captive Indians had been mediated by Spanish writers and supplied nourishment for high expectations among some conquistadors.6

Americans are familiar with the account of how Juan Ponce de León, Spanish adventurer in the service of King Ferdinand of Castile, in 1512 set sail to this northern island— that is, Florida—to find the Fountain of Youth. This is a romantic interpretation of a cruel expedition— Ponce de León had most certainly other objects in view, land, gold, slaves or whatever. Carl Sauer is probably quite right in insisting that “Ponce, in vigorous middle age, was not spending his wealth in search of a fountain of youth, nor did his conduct in Florida support the romantic story that is still told in school books.”7 Nevertheless, we have reasons to suspect that some of his men had heard the story and believed in it.8

However, was the story of the Fountain of Youth an American Indian story? We know that in the Old World there existed beliefs in wonderful springs with magical qualities, springs whose waters blessed the fields, healed people from illness, made the dead revive. Folklore information from wide parts of Europe tells us how these springs were decorated with flowers on days when they were supposed to reveal their supernatural qualities or their water turned into wine. Whether originally representing the vagina of Mother Earth or not, these springs offered the water of life, and thus bestowed immortality.9

It is tempting to suppose that such ideas constituted the basis of the Spanish dreams of the Fountain of Youth. However, the idea of the water of life was known among North American Indians, although it was particularly at home along the Northwest Coast.10 Here, the dead were revived by being sprinkled with the water of life.11 The same theme recurs in California: there is the belief among the Western Mono that if a dead person’s bones are deposited in water he will be resuscitated.12 Waldemar Bogoras,
and after him Gudmund Hatt, have interpreted similar notions as proof of a diffusion of ideas from Asia over the Bering Sea.\textsuperscript{13} If so they were disseminated with the first immigrants to North America, for such revivalistic ideas are part of the animal ceremonial complex that is basic to North American hunting cultures.\textsuperscript{14} Like the animal, in particular the sea animal, man revives when sprinkled with the water of life – at least in the legends.

Tales of rejuvenation are common in North America from California over the Plains to the Northeast culture.\textsuperscript{15} And indeed, rejuvenation through water, or a Fountain of Youth, may be found among Indians as far apart as the Californian Wintun and the Micmac of Nova Scotia.\textsuperscript{16} It is not unlikely, although far from proven, that such ideas also occurred among some Southeastern tribes – say, the Timucua or some other Floridan group visited by Ponce de León. The rejuvenation theme is a reconstruction of the immortality theme. Whoever attains renewed youth is potentially immortal. The drive for youth and vigour in modern American culture is an expression of a similar line of thought.

So the idea of a water of life granting everlasting life may have been present in Florida or other places in America, but only as an idea in a wishful legend. There was no realistic thought that people could avoid death. A report that a Cáhita Indian (northwestern Mexico) thought he was immortal already in this life stands quite isolated in our source material.\textsuperscript{17} Man was condemned to die. Paul Radin has given us excellent examples of American Indian resignation in face of death. “I always think within myself that there is no place where people do not die,” complains the Tlingit Indian.\textsuperscript{18}

And the Crow of Montana sing,

“Sky and earth are everlasting,
Men must die.
Old age is a thing of evil,
Charge, and die.”\textsuperscript{19}

That death is unavoidable was rationalized in the myth of the origin of death. In western North America, there are, as Boas has shown, two major forms of this myth: in one, diffused over the Plateau and Great Basin and in California, the decision that man shall die is made in a discussion between two mythical personalities, usually the Creator and his tricky assistant (Coyote); in the other, diffused among Northern and Southern Athapascans, and in the Plains area, the decision is made – usually through

\textsuperscript{13} Bogoras 1902: 613; Hatt 1949: 70.
\textsuperscript{14} Hultkrantz 1979: 141ff.
\textsuperscript{15} Thompson 1929: 284.
\textsuperscript{17} Beals 1943: 62.
\textsuperscript{18} Radin 1927: 105.
\textsuperscript{19} Radin 1927: 103, from Lowie 1925: 19.
the same personages—by divination. That is, a certain object is thrown into the water; if it floats up, man shall revive, if it stays at the bottom he shall remain dead. Of course the latter alternative always wins.  It is interesting to note that in its “discussion” form the myth does not necessarily presuppose the inevitability of death, whilst in its divination form it proceeds from the fact that man is dead.

There is a third version of the origin of death myth, according to which the gift of immortality was lost when some Orpheus figure in the mythic past failed to recover his dead spouse. This is clearly an adaptation of the Orpheus motif to the origin of dead theme. In one Montagnais tale, from eastern Canada, there is talk of a gift of immortality enclosed in a Pandora’s package: a curious woman opened it, so immortality flew away, and since then mankind has been subject to death.

We also find stories recounting how man tried to move or persuade the Powers to make him immortal. These stories which are mostly at home among the Central and Coastal Algonkins and their closest Sioux neighbours invariably end with a refusal from the supernatural being who even punishes the human being for his immoderate request: the poor man is turned into a cedar tree or a stone. Indeed, in a Winnebago tale a young boy is granted the reverse of what he demands: he dies. This shows that only supernaturals are immortal, and that they are jealous of this privilege.

The possibility remains, then, that people become immortal after death, that is, that they pass over into another type of existence which may be everlasting. We now come to our main theme, the immortality of the soul.

Immortality of the Soul: the Scholary Discussion

It has been said by reputed scholars of religion that so-called primitive peoples—or peoples with a crude technology, like North American Indians some time ago—do not know any immortality of the soul. Before studying in detail the ethnographical testimony, let us look more closely into the arguments of these theoreticians. They have all made themselves acquainted with the North American materials, and a couple of them were well-known Americanists.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, the celebrated French social philosopher, argues that since the soul imagined by “primitive man” is not purely spiritual, but quite material as well, there is no belief in its immortality. “Everywhere one believes in a survival, nowhere does one imagine this survival without an end.” Life after death, says Lévy-Bruhl, is

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22 Le Jeune 1897: 159.
24 Radin 1927: 102, 203ff.
so alike the life of mortal man that it comes to the same termination. Excepting cases of periodical reincarnation the dead finish by disappearing definitely.\textsuperscript{26} Whereas the French author’s argument that immortality follows spirituality is rationalistic and artificial his analogism from the conditions of life on earth may seem convincing.

Lévy-Bruhl built his reasoning, to a certain extent, on American Indian materials. The Americanist Robert Lowie was of course even more dependent on these materials when, surprisingly, he took the same rationalistic stand as his French colleague. Proceeding from the indisputable fact that “primitive” belief in spirits does not imply immaterial existence he arrives at the conclusion, “hence continued life after death is not equivalent to immortality.”\textsuperscript{27}

It is difficult to see why this logic should hold. Lowie illustrates his thesis with a reference to the shadow which, among many American Indian tribes, is supposed to be a soul (free-soul) or a mysterious entity of its own.\textsuperscript{28} A shadow, says Lowie, is not a rock, but neither is it “beyond the realm of physical nature.”\textsuperscript{29} Lowie makes two false conclusions here. First of all, the ethnic idea of what is physical nature is not necessarily our own, or what science says it is. For another example, the northern lights are atmospheric electrical phenomena to us, but dancing spirits to the Eskimo and Northern Athapascans. Secondly, American Indians would scarcely draw the same conclusion as the old Greeks and their modern successors, Lowie and Lévy-Bruhl, that what is not immaterial is not immortal. They did not share Greek philosophical ideas, therefore, non sequitur.

Actually, scholars who are convinced that to tribal peoples there is no post-mortal immortality would do better to drop such logical exercises and express themselves simply in the same manner as Leopold Walk does when he states that “to primitive peoples, immortality mostly means unlimited continued life of the soul after death.”\textsuperscript{30} As we shall see, it is just the unlimitedness of life after death that characterizes native American ideas on the topic.

Ever so many anthropologists have, since the days of Edward Burnett Tylor, discussed American Indian ideas of the life after death in terms of beliefs in immortality. This often complicates our investigation and makes our conclusions sometimes insecure. On the other hand, there are anthropologists and other field workers who evidently mean immortality sensu stricto, when they speak about it. In his article, “The Idea of the Future Life among Primitive Tribes,” Franz Boas debates the possibility of a death of a soul. He admits that there are some indications of a belief in a second death but

\textsuperscript{26} Lévy-Bruhl 1927: 401ff.
\textsuperscript{27} Lowie 1934: 306.
\textsuperscript{28} Hultkrantz 1953: 257ff., 302ff.
\textsuperscript{29} Lowie 1934: 306.
\textsuperscript{30} Walk 1938: 191. My approval here does not imply that I accept the antiquated culture-historical scheme into which Walk transfers his material.
adds that "in the majority of cases the soul is believed to be immortal." This is a remarkable general statement by an extremely well-informed scholar and makes us perhaps wonder.

Another anthropologist, Boas's student Paul Radin, whose control of the American source material was quite extraordinary as concerns religious beliefs discusses the subject in the light of his division of informants into men of action and priest-thinkers. He argues that immortality of necessity implies a differentiation between things that have a termination and things that have not. "Who," he asks, "introduced this notion? Manifestly the priest-thinker." Radin's argument is, however, most speculative, and it is weakened by his concluding remark that both priest-thinkers and men of action posit "imperishability" in their interpretations of man's existence after death. Besides, the dichotomy between the two categories of men is too simplistic.

The lack of sophistication in many famous scholars who have speculated on North American Indian ideas of immortality is startling. It really demonstrates only one thing, that not much attention has been paid to the subject, and that no-one has bothered to find out how Indians have thought in this matter. Indeed, the authors just quoted have not surpassed Father de Charlevoix' superficial statement from his voyage on the Mississippi in the beginning of the eighteenth century: "La Croyance la mieux établie parmi nos Amériques est celle de l'immortalité de l'Ame."

We can never attain a secure opinion of the North American ideas in the matter unless we scrutinize the sources themselves.

The Ethnographical Evidence

The task before us is thus to make an inventory of the historical and ethnographical literature on death and future life, as far as this is possible – for there is a wealth of material – and to pick out whatever references there are to a belief in the immortality of the soul. Now, it is no easy task to handle, for most eschatological accounts are not always conclusive on this point. This is partly due to the vagueness of Indian pronouncements. There is a lack of interest in these things, perhaps because nobody knows enough if he has not – in trance or coma – made an expedition to the other world. There is also a shyness of talking about such things, they are of private nature, they might be dangerous to discuss. However, what particularly hampers us is the lack of preciseness of the writers: they usually drop the question of immortality, perhaps because to them it is of lesser interest. Of course, in many instances informants have

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31 Boas 1940: 602.
32 Radin 1937: 272.
33 Radin 1937: 273.
34 de Charlevoix 1944: 351.
nothing to offer. There are quite a few accounts where immortality is not mentioned but yet somehow perceptible.

Take, for instance, Anne Straus’s recent description of the Northern Cheyenne ideas of death. Their realm of the dead is situated at the end of the long fork of the Milky Way, a beautiful place. The dead live in generation after generation there. “Death is defined as transformation, not termination, of selfhood for those who have lived in the Cheyenne Way.” Is immortality implied or not? We should like to think so, but this is not definitely stated. Medicine-men take on a lasting spiritual garb by becoming guardian spirits after death, but that is another matter (cf. below).

The nature of the source material, and its dimensions, makes it perfectly clear that we cannot expect to find all instances of the immortality belief as documented; a complete review would be a superhuman task. However, we can achieve such a full documentation that, with reasonable confidence, we can establish the range of ideas on immortality held by North America natives.

The source material consists of statements made by the Indian themselves, or summarizing accounts by travellers, missionaries and ethnographers. There are problems with the latter, for sometimes they attribute a notion of immortality to Indian beliefs without proving it. In other words, the immortality concept is taken for granted by the recorder, possibly because in Christian religion future life and immortality are parts of the same parcel (cf. above).

Beside these insufficient statements there are, however, also more certain, affirmative pieces of information which deserve our great attention.

No rituals ever guaranteed everlasting life, if we distract from the partly Christian-inspired Ghost Dance. The secret rituals of the midewiwin society among the Ojibway at Lake Superior certainly tried to reduce the dangers of death – “I overpower death,” sings the initiated mide member – but immortality as such is not implied. The same holds good for the widely dispersed death and revival rites which occur in connection with puberty rituals and shamanic callings. Reference is there to the opposition between death and life, but immortal life is not thought of.

This leaves us with the written accounts of possible immortality beliefs, and we begin our survey with northernmost Canada.

Arsène Turquetil, Catholic missionary to the Central Eskimo, tells us that “the pagan Eskimo believes firmly in the immortality of the soul and in a moral sanction in the other life.” This is, to my understanding, a rather striking case of interpretatio Christiana. No details are given, we have just to accept Turquetil on his word. However, this we can scarcely do.

36 Hoffman 1891: 268.
37 Turquetil 1929: 62.
We are on a firmer ground if we accept W. L. Hardisty's description of Kutchin eschatology. (The Kutchin live in northeastern Alaska.) Hardisty's account of their paradise is most detailed: there are "pleasant hunting grounds, where there is an eternal summer, fat animals, no sickness, no death, with exemption from all labor beyond preparing the meat of the animals they kill for food."38 This painting of an Athapascan Schlaraffenland sounds convincing.

Another Athapascan group, the Tahltan of northern British Columbia, are said by G. T. Emmons to believe everybody to possess a spirit that is immortal.39 There is however no further statement that confirms such a belief. Certainly, as Emmons has shown the Tahltan believed in reincarnation; but reincarnation is not as such a proof of immortality. I think Emmons's statement is so vaguely made that it has to be dismissed.

If now we turn to the Plains area it seems that the Plains Cree of Saskatchewan have cherished a belief in the immortality of the soul, if David Mandelbaum is right. During the feast following a death a sacred pipe was pointed to the four cardinal directions where powerful spirits dwelt who could protect the deceased. Thus, the stem was pointed to the south, where Old Man (kice-yiniw) lived who, we read, "kept the souls in his Green Grass World where they remained eternally."40 This is a fairly detailed statement by a trained anthropologist, and there is no reason why we should not endorse his statement. The land of the dead, or Green Grass World, was reached through the Milky Way. In that country all men, women and children lived a carefree life.41

At the end of the last century Reverent E. F. Wilson lived with the neighbours of the Plains Cree, the Blackfoot Indians on the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rocky Mountains and the plains below. He interviewed the Indian Big Plume about what he thought became of the soul after death, and received the answer that all Blackfoot go to the sandhills north of Cypress Hills. The dead there may be seen from a distance, and their drums can be heard. Said Big Plume, "I cannot say whether or not they see the Great Spirit. I believe they will live for ever. All the Blackfeet believe this; also the Sarcees, Stonies, Assinas, and Crees."42 Big Plume's assertion about these latter tribes can be bypassed. But does his statement, "all Blackfeet believe this," refer to the immortality concept or to the general presentation of the realm of the dead? As it stands it seems to refer to the said immortality but we cannot be absolutely sure.

There is also some evidence that the Plains Indians south of Canada should have believed in the immortality of the soul; but in most cases there is a more undecided

38 Hardisty 1866: 319.
39 Emmons 1911: 108.
40 Mandelbaum 1940: 249.
41 Mandelbaum 1940: 251; Dusenberry 1962: 98f.
attitude. A Crow war party from Montana came across a big camp which proved to be populated by dead people. One of them, an Assiniboine, told the Crow not to fear death “for you are to be people twice” — that is, they would receive new life after death. The dead person was asked whether he was going to die again, but he said that he did not know. This strange tale was, according to Robert Lowie, recounted by the Crow Indian Gray-bull as “a personal adventure.” Lowie also tells us of a Crow who had died — that is, lost consciousness — and come back to life again. “He said that all who had died were still living and that they were better people than the Crow. The Crow believed it.” The problem here is, what does the phrase mean, “all who had died were still living”? Does the raconteur mean those whom he had known and who had died, or all dead people from the beginning of times? We can speculate but always in vain.

The information from other Siouan peoples of the Plains is just as vague. Speaking about all of them James Owen Dorsey states, “The author finds no traces of a belief in the immortality of human beings. Even the gods of the Dakota were regarded as being mortal, for they could be killed by one another. They were male and female; they married and died, and were succeeded by their children. But if for ‘immortality’ we substitute ‘continuous existence as shades or ghosts’ there will be no difficulty in showing that the Siouan tribes referred to held such a belief respecting mankind, and that they very probably entertained it in a crude form prior to the advent of the white race to this continent.”

Even an early writer as Mary Eastman, stationed at Fort Snelling in Minnesota in the 1840s, and surrounded by Eastern Dakota, had her doubts about the originality of their belief in immortality. She writes, “Some of the medicine men, the priests, and the doctors of the Dahcotahs, seem to have an idea of the immortality of the soul but intercourse with the whites may have originated this.” It is interesting to find that sixty years later an Eastern Dakota, named Charles Alexander Eastman (cf. above), made it known that “the Indian never doubted the immortal nature of the spirit or soul of man.” However, for an Indian who had become an M. D. in American white society, and who idealized his boyhood on the plains, immortality of the Indian soul was probably a matter of decency.

The information from old-believing Oglala Indians interviewed by the excellent field reporter James R. Walker, M.D., gives however a certain indication of what many Indians really believed — and possibly still believe. The remarkable medicine man Fin-
ger put forward that “Anything that has a birth must have a death. The Wakan has no birth and it has no death.” Wakan stands here for the great mystery, the Holy. Finger continued, “The spirit [of man], the ghost, and the familiar of man are not born with him but are given to him at the time of his birth. They are Wakan and therefore will never die.” However, one informant points out that “the spirit, the ghost and the guardian are not Wakan.”

We arrive at the same difficulties of interpretation with another Siouan tribe on the prairies, the Omaha. Alice Fletcher’s presentation of Omaha religion has been challenged by scholars who attribute a pantheistic inclination to her rendering of Omaha thought. For instance, she points out that Omaha ideas concerning life and death were interwoven with their conception of a “common and interrelated life, a living force that permeates, and is continuous in, all forms and appearances.” Furthermore, all these forms “exist in the realm of the dead as well as in that of the living and the life which informs them, like that which informs man, is continuous and unbroken, emanating from the great mystery, Wakonda.” The logic of this pronouncement would be that man is immortal because he is part of the Supreme Power, Wakonda. However, Miss Fletcher’s generalizations are not borne out by quotations from her informants and may be interpreted differently.

On the other hand, there was definitely in Omaha belief a prolongation of afterlife of a sort that comes close to immortality. Fletcher tells us that there were seven spirit-worlds, each higher than the one next preceding. People who had lived for a time in one world died and passed on to the next one above. This idea which reminds us both of the Mithras mysteries and the flight of the Siberian shaman to the upper world – there is probably a shamanic basis to all similar conceptions – contains as it were the seed of a concept of immortality. We cannot say more than that.

Among the Cheyenne of Nebraska (now Montana) some powerful medicine-men are said to go to Bear Butte, north of the Black Hills, after their death. Here they become guardian spirits for the people they have left. This may mean that they like most spirits live on indefinitely. However, the common people did not share this privilege.

It is highly likely that a belief in real immortality persisted among the Pawnee of Nebraska. George Bird Grinnell who knew them well reports that once a family of a

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50 Walker 1980: 34-36, 70f., 73.
52 Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 588.
53 Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 589.
54 See Hultkrantz 1979: 12f.
55 Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 589.
56 Straus 1978.
man, wife and child were dead it was said of them, "They have gone to that place were there is a living." Grinnell finds that this is a strong testimony to the Pawnee faith in a happy future life. It seems to be more than that, it gives us the impression that our life here is unreal, and that real life only exists over there. If so, the idea of immortality is implied.

The Wind River Shoshoni of Wyoming have several versions of the afterlife. One of their medicine-men, Tudey Roberts, told me in 1948 that "on the other side of the sky there is a people [the dead.]. I have never been there in the dream, but it looks like here... The dead person looks like the living person [but] he never dies." The informant was influenced by both Episcopal mission and Ghost Dance ideology, so the aboriginality of the last statement may be doubted.

We now turn to the Algonkian tribes of the Northeast. The case for the Ojibway, inhabitants of the regions north and west of Lake Superior, is a bit complex. Father Hugolin stated at the beginning of this century that after death, the children and the aged "eternally" kept close to abandoned camp fires on this earth; but this probably only concerned the earthbound ghosts and exaggerated the duration of their activity. There is much information in other sources on Ojibway death beliefs, but little on immortality beliefs. Irving Hallowell, speaking of the Saulteaux (Ojibway), assures us that the dead went to a distant region to the south. "It was in this country that Indians whose souls left their bodies went on living, presumably for ever; and it was a land presumably richer in game and bird-life than the northern country [of the living], a place where no one had any trouble in making a living, although life was in other respects a duplication of this one." We notice the words, "presumably for ever;" the scholar here makes his own interpolation. There is no certainty.

The Fox, once of Wisconsin, remember what one of their ancestors who had been instructed by the culture hero spoke to a dead man at his burial: "You will go to live where your fellow people live, where this one who continually shines (i.e., the sun) goes down out of sight shining. As long as this earth continues to have green grass on it, so long shall you continue to go there." The import of these words is a bit obscure. The phrase "continue to go" gives possibly the impression that future generations are supposed to go to the land of the dead. Or is the reference to the dead person only? Whatever the meaning, it is significant that after having told the ideological premises

57 Grinnell 1889: 131.
58 Grinnell 1909: 196.
59 Hugolin 1907: 334.
61 Hallowell 1940: 34.
62 Michelson 1925: 409.
of the adoption-feast following a death the informant sighs, “Perhaps it might not be true.” You never know the real conditions of the other world.

The Sauk Indian Wennebea told William Keating that after death the soul went towards the setting sun to become “an eternal inhabitant” in the village of the dead situated in a prairie. Life was most pleasurable there. The question is if Keating thoughtlessly added the qualification “eternal,” or if this really was Wennebea’s own word and intention.

Of particular interest are the Lenape beliefs. The Lenape, or Delaware, were originally at home in Delaware and Pennsylvania. In a manuscript from 1727 preserved in the Royal Library in Stockholm the Swedish bishop Jesper Svedberg reports on the eschatological ideas of the former Swedish Indians. “When you ask them what thoughts they have about eternity they answer, ‘After this life there is an infinite life.’” The character of the other realm was that of a happy hunting ground. However, in Svedberg’s rendering this country was for the blessed who had done well, whereas the wicked persons arrived at a place where they were pained forever – thus a mirror of Christian concepts.

Nevertheless, the same idea of immortality is talked about in David Zeisberger’s account from the Lenape during the period 1745-1778: “They believe also in the immortality of the soul.” Some likened themselves to corn which when thrown out and buried in the soil comes up and grows. Some believe their souls to be in the sun and only their bodies here. Others say that when they die their souls will go to God and suppose that when they have been some time with God they will be at liberty to return to the world and be born again. Hence, many believe that their souls have come from God and that they have been in the world before.” It reminds us that these Indians like many others in the Eastern Woodlands area tilled the soil and consequently easily likened the fate of man to the fate of their favourite food plant, the maize. Lewis Spence associates the immortality beliefs in North America with the death and rebirth of the plants. However, such ideas of regeneration were also focussed on the slain game animals in North America, and the animal ceremonialism is historically seen to be more basic than vegetational ceremonialism. In either case, there is no indication anywhere that the regeneration thoughts had anything to do with immortality as such. As to the Lenape, we have no

63 Michelson 1925: 433.
64 Keating 1825: 215f.
65 Svedberg 1985 [1732].
68 Loskiel 1789: 48; Harrington 1921: 59; cf. op. cit., 20, 52.
69 Spence 1914: 127.
decisive proof that they believed in immortality of the soul before the Christian message was spread.

The Lenape position might have resembled that of their Iroquois allies in upper New York state. According to their learned tribesman, J. N. B. Hewitt, the latter had different opinions on their soul. It was regarded "as immortal by some, but as subject to death and even annihilation by others."70 Father Jean Brébeuf's laconic statement in 1636 that the Hurons, next kin and neighbours of the Iroquois, believed in the immortality of the soul is too unqualified to be trusted.71

In the Southeast, the Iroquoian Cherokee apparently looked upon life and afterlife as two different lives in space, rather than as successive lives in time. "They do not, as a Christian would put it, live a mortal life, and an eternal life after that, but they move from their settlement in the Great Smokies to the 'place out west.'" 72 It is difficult to draw conclusions from this statement as to the durability of life in that other place. We receive the impression that this question is not relevant at all, or no conscious problem.

The neighbours of the Cherokee in Tennessee, the Yuchi, believed that the newly dead travelled over the rainbow eastwards and arrived in the sky world. Here he lived together with other spirits and supernatural beings. From time to time souls were reincarnated into newborn babies.73 The description of the other realm furnished us by Frank Speck, and particularly the account of the intermingling of mortals and supernaturals, makes it probable that the other world had no decisive end.

If now we turn to the northwestern coast of the United States we learn that among the Quileute of Washington "all souls stay in the underworld forever."74 Leo Frachtenberg who brings us this information has written extensively on Quileute eschatology, and we have reason to trust his word here. From the Quinault, southern neighbours of the Quileute, Ronald Olson reports that the dead man's spirit firstly lives some time in the realm of the dead, then dies again and becomes a guardian spirit for a living individual. This spirit lives on forever.75 It is not clear whether this fate is common to all individuals.

The Tillamook of the Oregon coast know that after death they travel to a country on the other side of a river. The river abounds with fish, there are beautiful birds, and game is plentiful. Old people become young again. Some time in the future the good people will come back to earth.76 This sounds like immortality, or at least an endlessly

71 de Brebeuf 1897: 121.
72 Mooney and Olbrechts 1932: 144.
73 Speck 1909: 108.
74 Frachtenberg 1920: 339.
75 Olson 1936: 163.
76 Boas 1923: 11. Of course, influences from the Ghost Dance ideology cannot be excluded.
continued life. Some Hupa of northern California apparently consider that life after
death relates to the individual's degree of faith. True believers achieve eternal life, we
are told, whereas those who only half believe do not attain immortality.77 However, it
is quite obvious that such discriminations of individual faith attitudes could not be
original but must reflect evaluations that have arrived with Christianity.

Farther to the south the belief in immortality of the soul is reported from some
southern Californian and Southwestern Indians. An older source on the Juaneño Indians
of the Los Angeles area points at the possibility of immortality beliefs, but not more.78
The Yuma, situated in southernmost California and neighbouring parts of Arizona,
have their realm of the dead, a happy country, somewhere in the sky south of Yuma
territory. One informant told Darryll Forde that “It is the same as earth only there is
no death; they eat the same sort of foot but it is very good and plentiful, there is no
frost and it is green all the year through.”79 It is apparent that immortality is here not
a philosophical idea but a natural consequence of the life quality in the region beyond.
Forde adds that there is a story recounting that in the end souls become nothing but
bits of cinder. However, he says, the more general belief is that souls live on indefinitely
in the hereafter.80

Mohave eschatology presents an interesting case, revealed by George Devereux:
“From the point of view of immortality there are two categories of human beings.
Except for certain accidents they may meet with while in human shape the souls of
twins are immortal. The souls of other persons are mortal.”81 At the death of an ordinary
person the chief one of his four souls, the “real shadow,” is brought by a whirlwind to
the land of the dead, which is a pleasant replica of the land of the living; however, after
a while the dead person dies there a second time and is cremated. The twins, however,
return to heaven from whence they once came.82

Also the Cocopa at the mouth of the Colorado River believed in a particular fate
for twins. These were considered supernatural and after death were thought to go to
heaven. Whereas the ordinary dead ultimately perished in their realm, deities and
twins remained immortal.83

There is a report that some Walapai, next kin and neighbours of the Mohave in
Arizona, believed in the immortality of the dead.84 However, others think that all is
finished at death, and many profess no knowledge in the matter.

77 Driver 1939: 413.
78 Harrington 1934: 51f.
79 Forde 1931: 179.
80 Forde 1931: 180.
81 Devereux 1937: 417.
82 Devereux 1937: 418f.
83 Gifford 1933: 306, 308.
84 Kroeber 1935: 149.
Finally, a piece of information from the pueblo San Felipe in New Mexico: Those who have lived a decent life in accordance with tribal tradition come to a good place in the underworld where Our Mother dwells. They will live there forever and suffer no more.\footnote{Bunzel 1928: 290.} It holds of the Pueblo Indians generally that the dead tend to become supernatural spirits (katcinai) and thus may avoid the extinction that is threatening after death. We shall return to this point.

This ends our review. There is a sea of information on North American Indian beliefs about the future life, but only few sources have anything to tell about their ideas of immortality. What information there is I have tried to collect in this short survey.

Conclusions

It remains for us now to sort out this information and to find some clues to the Indian belief in the immortality of the soul. As has been said before, routine statements of immortality which simply stand for life after death will not be considered. Similarly, unqualified statements made by, for example, Christian missionaries will be excluded since they reflect anticipations derived from their own faith. In other cases, as among the Eastern Dakota, Lenape, Hupa and Walapai, aboriginal beliefs may have been influenced by Christian beliefs. The repeated reference to a variety of opinions on immortality, as among the Iroquois and Walapai, may testify to a general uncertainty, a dissolution of traditional ideas, or secrecy in front of an interviewer of foreign extraction.

The general lack of information on the issue is probably a reflection of the fact that few Indians had any conscious ideas of immortality. There was on the whole not much that could be said with certainty about life after death, and the information that existed mostly derived from extraordinary experiences that some medicine-men and some seriously ill persons had had in states of soul flight. Their message concerned the quality of postmortal life rather than its duration. However, there were some observations made by these seers which concerned this question, but they referred to the end of life in the other world, and not to its prolongation.

Thus there are, as we have seen, reports from the Crow (?), Omaha and Mohave that the spirits of the dead suffer a new death in the other-world realm. This phenomenon which is known also from other cultures is in India called punarāmrīti, "second death." In North America the idea is widely spread among tribes of the Northwest Coast, the Middle West and the Southwest.\footnote{Due to limited space the sources of the relevant literature cannot be reproduced here.} If we disregard the many
cases, particularly among Northern and Central Algonkins, where feeble deceased persons (small children, aged persons) succumb on the journey to the land of the dead, and the cases where wrong ritual behaviour at the burial jeopardizes continued life on the other side for a deceased (as for example among the Fox), then we can state that second death has been supposed to occur quite frequently. Often we hear that the dead die several times, after successive existences in the land of the dead: the Tlingit, Haida and Kwakiutl die four times, and so do the Dakota, Kamia and Cocopa, whilst the Mohave and Omaha die five times. Sometimes reincarnation into new human beings or transmigration into animals saves the dying ghost from complete annihilation. However, in general reincarnation and transmigration take place on another conceptual level, without affinities with man's fate as a being in the land of the dead.

The rationale behind the second death has been reconstructed in different ways. Boas associates to Tylor's train of thought in postulating that the dead person represents the memory-image of a deceased individual. From this it may be inferred that there should be a death of the soul "at the time when all those who knew the deceased are dead and gone." However, Boas insists that in the majority of cases the soul is believed to be immortal (which we may interpret as a doubtful statement). He admits, however, that there are a considerable number of cases of a second death but points out at the same time that they are not of such a character that they may be explained by the fact that the dead person has become forgotten. "They seem rather to be due to the imaginative elaboration of the continued life of the soul which is necessarily thought to be analogous to our own life and in which, therefore, death is a natural incident." This seems to be a correct observation. The first hypothesis mentioned by Boas, that the spirit of a dead person dies when his memory fades away among the living, is wrongly thought and is not substantiated by our sources.

A third hypothesis has been put forth by Philip Drucker who thinks that the four consecutive deaths of a Kwakiutl Indian reflect his successive stages of mouldering; his fifth death should mark the end of his existence. This is to my mind a difficult explanation — why should there be a correspondence between the degree of decay of the corpse and repeated existences?

If then the rule holds that the spirit of a dead man dies analogous to the death of man on this earth we may well ask how the idea of immortality could enter the picture. We should of course be careful not to see immortality in the light of Greek or Christi-

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87 Cf. Mills and Slobodin 1994. Waldemar Bogoras emphasizes that final annihilation is a direct consequence of the fact that the dead in the beyond is merely a double or second part of man: when the double is dead there is nothing left to be resurrected. See Bogoras 1925: 250.
88 Boas 1940: 601ff.
89 Drucker 1950: 290.
an thinking; immortality is not a self-evident category of thought, but derives from an idealism which negates mortality just as, as Raffaele Pettazzoni has said, monotheism negates polytheism. Only when Christian impact had changed native religions and contributed to the birth of the Ghost Dance and the idea of the return of the culture hero did immortality come into focus, as a result of the resurrection theme. Unless encapsulated in the doctrine of a unilinear development earthly life – death – final judgement – everlasting life, as in the southwestern Asian religions, or distinguished as an elevated quality set apart from the common life conditions after death, immortality is no normal perspective of the future life in Amerindian thought.

There are two main roads leading to the belief in the immortality of the soul.

(1) The deceased person takes part of the qualities of the supernatural world and is therefore unmolested by death. Ideally each surviving entity of man, sometimes identified with his so-called free-soul in life, is part of the supernatural reality. In practice, however, this does not lead automatically to immortality – as the quotation from Dorsey has shown also gods, at least among the Dakota, may be subjected to death. It is only by virtue of specific associations with the supernatural world that man’s soul stays immortal.

First of all, the dead person has come to the supernatural realm where spirits and gods dwell. We have seen how the Yuchi dead join the supernaturals after death and become immortal together with them. There are occasional reports of dead living together with the supernatural beings in their world, but there is no definite proof that this makes them immortal. The Hare in northernmost Canada, the Haida, Bella Coola and Bella Bella on the Northwest Coast, the Fox, the Mandan and the Omaha of the Middle West, the Lakota and Cheyenne of the Plains, the Creek and Choctaw of the Southeast and the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest all furnish us with information of the cohabitation of ghosts and spirits in the other world. In most afterlife conceptions there is however a clear barrier between them, the spirits living in the almost ubiquitous world of mystery, the dead reclused in a particular realm of the dead supervised by some superior spirit.

When dead people go to the world of the gods there is usually something supernatural about them. We have seen how the Quinault ghost may turn into a guardian spirit. The Fox make a difference between common people who go to a land of the dead and people who are partly manitous, that is, spirits or supernaturals. Up there in the region of “White River” (Milky Way) these happy dead are assembled in a lodge where the Supreme Being or the Great Spirit is the chief, and where the Thunderers are most welcome guests. Indeed most of the stars one sees in the night

90 Cf. Hultkrantz 1981: 270, 280. The resurrection theme is, as Lowie has pointed out, not American Indian but European: Lowie 1924: 199f. The reappearance of the culture hero, earlier withdrawn from the world, at the end of times is an enigmatic theme that needs further investigation. There are possibly complications here.
sky are people who have died and come there. However, it seems that particular ritual observances could grant even common people a place in the supernatural realm. In the southeast, where sacred kings ruled up to the early eighteenth century, the king and members of his family went to live with the Sun after death. The court ritual surrounding such monarchs as the Natchez “Great Sun” clearly shows that he was of divine nature, and therefore part of the supernatural realm after death. However, we are not really told if he was immortal.

The Pueblo Indian beliefs constitute a particular case, since they more or less divinize all their dead. Particularly in Zuni and the Rio Grande pueblos most dead become cloud and rain spirits, *katcina*. Sometimes it is said that their priests turn into these spirits, sometimes all villagers become *katcina* after death. There is no direct indication that this change made them immortal. In any case, it would be wrong to classify them as simply dead – they have become spirits of nature.

A particular case is that dead who are twins are transmitted to supernatural status after death. This is the case with Mohave and Cocopa twins, as we have seen, and renders them immortal. However, it is a rather common conception in North America that twins originate from and after death return to the supernatural world. Here are some examples. The Kwakiutl believe that twins are salmons who, when they die, become salmons again. They are supernatural and have supernatural power. This idea that twins are salmon is common on the southern Northwest Coast, whereas on the Plateau twins are bears. Dakota twins come from and die to a specific twin country, whereas twins among Yuman tribes after death return to their original home, the sky. They are considered supernatural. It is only from the Yuman peoples that we have information of twins’ immortality, or at least their incessant living on. Among the Akwa’ala of Baja California twins arrive from a mountainous twin country to which they return at death. They allow themselves to be born and die as they please, in a series of reincarnations. It is a moot question whether we should call this immortality or not.

(2) The deceased person arrives in a paradise, and since everything there is thought to be happy he cannot be supposed to die. In other words, immortality is a function of

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92 Michelson 1925: 413.
93 See e.g. Hudson 1976: 327-334.
95 It is not possible to discuss here why twins are supernatural, but we can observe that many tribes have twin culture heroes which might be represented in human twins. On the pre-existent supernatural state of twins, see also Hultkrantz 1953: 420.
96 Boas 1932: 203, 206.
97 Dorsey 1889: 157f.
98 References are here to the Yuma proper, Akwa’ala, Cocopa, Maricopa and Mohave.
99 Gifford and Lowie 1928: 343f.
the state of paradisaic happiness. We have found this correlation between paradise and immortality among the Plains Cree, Sauk (?), Pawnee, Quinault, Yuma and San Felipe Indians. This does not mean to say, however, that wherever we find happy hunting grounds there is also immortality – far from it. All we can say is that in many places where a happy afterlife is believed in for the good and decent tribesmen there is a tendency to include never-failing life among its qualities. There is the possibility that Christian impulses have changed original native ideas in the direction of immortality, but this is difficult to prove and in my view not very probable in most cases.

This is all there is to American Indian concepts of immortality: people who are of divine or supernatural origin may live on for ever, and good tribesmen who go to a paradise after death have a good chance to do the same. Maybe immortality is too strong a word to use since it is so sharply defined. The concept of immortality was primarily determined in Classical Greece. As Benson Saler writes, “A distinction between agelessness and immortality on the one hand and aging and mortality on the other was important in Greek thought, and agelessness and immortality were attributes primarily associated with the gods.”\textsuperscript{100} Such a dichotomy was certainly not conscious to American Indians.

Their gods and spirits were intrinsically immortal, but not unconditionally so. The Algonkin supernatural Caribou owner could be killed, and so could some Dakota gods. Man was at most vaguely immortal. As we have seen, Yuchi and Yuma Indians prefer to speak about spirits of the dead living an indefinite time. It is probable that this notion was more widespread than our sources show; we almost divine it, for example, behind the Cheyenne conceptions of the next life (cf. above). This more flexible rendering of what we call immortality is in line with American Indian concepts of time. Time is seen not as a course between two definite poles, beginning and end, as in Western thought patterns. It is an endless chain of cyclic courses of events, symbolized in \textit{rites de passage}, hunting and vegetational rites, and annual rites. Everything is going on all the time, there is no final showdown. A concept like immortality becomes, seen in this perspective, relative, not absolute.

Perhaps it would be better to replace the philosophically chiseled concept of “immortality” with such a word as “lasting”. Lasting life after death, that is what in optimal situations a North American Indian could hope for.

\textsuperscript{100} Saler 1982.
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