

# Testing Children's Past-Life Knowledge

In reincarnation cultures where children sometimes talk of a past life, the parents of both families (the child and the person whose life the child remembers) may set the child tests to try to establish the truth, by means of recognitions of people, places or objects. This article examines the kinds of tests that have been carried out, referring to specific cases.

## Reasons for Testing

[Ian Stevenson](#), the founder of scientific [reincarnation](#) research, pointed out that the possibility that children might have acquired their claimed past-life knowledge in an ordinary manner must be ruled out before a researcher can have confidence that a case is genuine. It is for this reason, for instance, that Stevenson mostly passed over same-family cases, in which knowledge of ancestors could be relayed as family history. He preferred to publish ones where the current and former families clearly had no contact prior to the child relating past-life memories.<sup>[1]</sup>

But even where there was little or no contact, he noted, the researcher must rule out other possibilities for transmission of information by normal means. Stevenson was ever wary of fraud, and careful in his cases to weigh possible motivations such as public attention and financial gain. In fact, he unearthed some cases in which parents made false claims about who their children had been in past lives, including Mahatma Gandhi in one Indian case.<sup>[2]</sup>

Stevenson was also careful to rule out self-deception, which may be exemplified by the Turkish case of Kenedi Alkan, whose father was so convinced his son was the assassinated American president John F Kennedy reincarnated that he named him based on the claim.<sup>[3]</sup> The unfortunate boy retained the belief into adulthood.<sup>[4]</sup>

Two further pitfalls for researchers trying to determine genuineness of reincarnation cases are cryptomnesia, also known as source amnesia – knowledge acquired normally of which the acquisition is forgotten, leaving the person thinking it derived from a past life – and paramnesia, or simple natural distortion or inaccuracy of memory.

Confabulation can also be a danger: Stevenson described how parents can hear a child make a few statements, 'begin to give them a coherence that they may not have had', conceive what sort of person the child might have been, find a family with a deceased member whose life matches and convince them, collaboratively elaborating on the story. 'In this way a myth of what the child had said might develop and come to be accepted by both families.'<sup>[5]</sup> Motivation for this, Stevenson noted, can be the two corresponding desires to know who a deceased loved one has become and to know who a living child previously was. He noted that members of the Druze sect of Shia Islam, who believe in reincarnation, particularly like to trace reincarnations.<sup>[6]</sup>

Stevenson was careful to point out, however, that many families, even in reincarnation cultures, are inimical to their children remembering past lives, or to other families claiming their child is a deceased relative, and that most cases, including Druze ones, have features that defy this explanation. Three studies on memory accuracy and consistency that Stevenson authored or co-authored yielded good results.<sup>[7]</sup>

Stevenson noted that in tests of recognition, the families often contaminate the process. 'They frequently ask the child leading questions, such as "Do you see your wife here?" and the expectant stares of the encircling people toward the previous personality's wife may then make it impossible for the child to answer incorrectly', Stevenson wrote.<sup>[8]</sup> In fact, in one case ([Ramoo and Rajoo](#)

[Sharma](#)), Stevenson had to flag a series of statements as tentative due to the subjects' father reporting that leading questions had been asked.<sup>[9]</sup>

On the other hand, he credited 'responsible adults' for controlling the conditions of recognition 'so that persons the child might recognize were presented to him in a secluded and tranquil setting, and the only question asked was: "Do you recognize this person?"'<sup>[10]</sup> As an example he gives [Gnanatilleka Baddewithana](#) (see summary below).

There are many other examples of adults testing the children's knowledge as well, both with and without investigator help. Having various reasons for wanting to be certain the reincarnation is genuine, they can be quite adept at setting up challenges to the child's knowledge. A representative but by-no-means-complete sample follows.

### **Gnanatilleka Baddewithana**

In this Sri Lankan case, the recognitions were carried out under the guidance of careful investigators, first the Sri Lankan scholar and journalist HSS Nissanka, then Stevenson. Nissanka recorded Gnanatilleka's statements in writing before he set about verifying them. He brought three teachers to Gnanatilleka's home, only one of whom had been her teacher in her previous life. Correctly, she recognized just the one, who had been very dear to her, then climbed into his lap and re-enacted part of a story he had been teaching her previous incarnation, Tillekeratne, shortly before his death. The teacher was moved to tears.

Gnanatilleka's meeting with her prior family took place in an inn, and Tillekeratne's family members and other associates, along with other people he had not known, entered the room where the girl was, one by one, except for two groups of three, silently. She identified every person correctly, pointing out the strangers as strangers. Later Stevenson brought a friend of Tillekeratne's and another stranger into Gnanatilleka's presence, and she again named the friend (with a slight error) and was unable to identify the stranger.<sup>[11]</sup>

### **Swarnlata Mishra**

This Indian case is another in which written records were made of the child's memories prior to contact with the former family. It is extraordinary in that little Swarnlata was able to perform dances accompanied by song in a language she had not learned in her current life. It was investigated by Indian parapsychology scholar HN Banerjee and Stevenson.

After her previous incarnation had been identified, Swarnlata's former family visited, intending to trick her in order to discover the truth of her claims. Her former younger brother arrived first, unannounced and concealing his identity, and though she got his name partly wrong on the first try, she correctly remembered the nickname her previous incarnation had used for him.

Next, the widower and grown-up son of her former incarnation arrived, accompanied by nine other men, some of whom she had known and some she had not. Meeting her former husband, she assumed the bashful manner of Hindu wives in the presence of their husbands. She also picked him out in a forty-year-old photograph. Her former son insisted for a full 24 hours that he was not her son but someone else, and also tried to pass off an accomplice as her other former son. Swarnlata stood firm that she was correct about both. She was also able to pick her former father's cousin, brother-in-law's wife, and a midwife her previous self had known out of a crowd of forty people.

Finally, one of her former brothers avowed that she had lost her teeth, to which she answered that she had had gold fillings. Unaware of this, the brothers consulted with their wives, who confirmed her claim.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **Toran (Titu) Singh**

[This Indian case](#) of a boy who had worked as a radio retailer and smuggler until his brutal murder was investigated by reincarnation researcher [Antonia Mills](#), as part of a replication of Stevenson's investigative methodology. Mills published it as one of three cases presented in detail in a journal paper published in 1989.<sup>[13]</sup>

Titu (as everyone knew him) began speaking at eighteen months and soon began talking about a past life in which he had been named Suresh and had owned a radio shop named Suresh Radio in Sadar Bazaar in the city of Agra, about eight miles from his current home. His brother travelled to the city to see if such a shop existed, found that it did, and initiated contact between the families. However, Suresh's family suspected that the case had been fabricated.

In an attempt to fool Titu on his first visit to Agra, his former family tried a trick question, asking which of two former sisters he had just met was his elder sister. In fact, as he correctly answered, neither of them was; his elder sister was not present. Next, they drove him to his brother's shop instead of to Suresh Radio, claiming it had been his. He was not deceived. They then drove him to his former father's house, which he correctly said was not his. When Suresh's sons returned from school, they came into Titu's presence among a group of other children, but Titu nonetheless recognized his former elder son and asked why he had not greeted him properly by saying 'Namaste'.

When Suresh's family quizzed Titu on factual matters such as where his wedding had been and how he had travelled there, he passed handily (though Mills notes that at this point he might have received this information by normal means). Ultimately, most members of the family accepted Titu as the reincarnation of Suresh.

## **Imad Elawar**

Investigation of the Druze case of [Imad Elawar](#) of Kornayel, Lebanon, was made more interesting and challenging by initial errors on the part of the parents.<sup>[14]</sup> While still a toddler, Imad mentioned the names 'Mahmoud' and 'Jamileh', said he had been a member of the Bouhamzy family in the nearby village of Khriby, described an accident in which a man had been run over by a truck which broke both his legs and killed him, and was clearly delighted that he was again able to walk. The parents inferred that he had been a man named Mahmoud Bouhamzy of Khriby, who had had a wife named Jamileh and had been killed in such an accident.

However, many of these inferences (listed in Stevenson's tabulation of statements) turned out to be wrong.<sup>[15]</sup> Furthermore, re-examining his notes, Stevenson realized that Imad had never actually said the truck accident happened to him. In the course of interviewing members of the Bouhamzy family, Stevenson learned that the person who had been run over in the manner Imad described was not Mahmoud Bouhamzy, but rather his relative Said Bouhamzy. Said's family had long been convinced that another young man, Sleimann Bouhamzy, was Said reborn, having during his childhood shown knowledge of Said's life.

Stevenson judged that Imad's statements were a closer fit with Ibrahim Bouhamzy, Said's cousin and good friend. Ibrahim Bouhamzy had had a mistress named Jamileh, had been strongly affected by the accident that had happened to Said, and had been unable to walk for the last two months of his life due to spinal tuberculosis, which eventually killed him.

Imad was tested by being taken to the former houses of both Said and Ibrahim; he recognized nothing about Said's house but did recognize many aspects of the interior of Ibrahim's. On being asked non-leading questions such as 'If you had a dog here, where did you keep it?', 'How was the dog held?' 'Which bed was yours?', 'When you were ill, how did you talk with your friends?', and

‘You said something just before you died; what was it?’ he answered each correctly. His answers included some strongly distinctive information, for example, an accurate repetition of Said’s last utterance.<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Nazih Al-Danaf**

The Druze case of [Nazih Al-Danaf](#) was investigated by reincarnation and paranormal researcher [Erlendur Haraldsson](#), who called it a ‘truly remarkable case’, saying ‘no case that I have investigated equals it in how perfectly the remembered statements fit the facts in the life of the previous personality’.<sup>[17]</sup>

According to his mother and other family members, Nazih began saying unusual things at eighteen months, such as ‘I am not small, I am big. I carry two pistols. I carry four hand-grenades. I am *qabadai* (a fearless, strong person). My children are young and I want to go and see them’. He recalled being shot to death in an attack on a building he was guarding, said his name was Fuad and demanded to be taken to Qaberchamoun, a small town about eleven miles away from his home, saying his house was there.

In one visit to Qaberchamoun, Nazih’s directions enabled family members to find relatives of Fuad Khaddage, a man whose life and death matched Nazih’s statements. Fuad’s widow, seeking evidence, tested his knowledge by asking him who had built the foundation for the gate of the house; he answered, ‘a man from the Faraj family’, which was correct. Asked whether she had had an accident when they had lived in another village, he described it accurately: she had slipped and fallen while picking pinecones for their children to play with, dislocating her shoulder, and Fuad had taken her to the doctor who casted it. She also asked Nazih if he remembered how their daughter had become severely ill, and he answered correctly ‘She was poisoned by my medication, and I took her to the hospital’.

Nazih seemed equally determined to test his former wife, asking her whether she remembered being helped on the way to Beirut by Israeli soldiers who charged their car battery, or the night she had locked him out of the house because he had returned home drunk. These memories further strengthened the case.

When Nazih visited his brother Adeeb, Adeeb asked for proof, and Nazih said he remembered giving Adeeb a handgun as a gift, correctly identifying the make: Checki 16, a gun considered precious in Lebanon.

All of Nazih’s former family members were convinced by his knowledge that he was the reincarnation of Fuad.

## **Tibetan Testing Traditions**

Part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is systematic methodology for finding and identifying the reincarnations of prominent lamas (monks). Unique in the world as a method for the selection of a political elite, the process is crucial to the maintenance of Tibet’s political structure, and continues despite the nation’s occupation by China. The discovery of the current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, said to be in his fourteenth incarnation in the position, was summarized by British author Vicki Mackenzie in her 1988 book *The Boy Lama*.

First, shortly after the death of his predecessor, his underlings looked for signs, and saw that the corpse’s head moved one night toward the northeast, and two plants grew in northeast corners in the Potala, or royal palace, shortly thereafter. Next, the regent appointed to govern until the new Dalai Lama was found went to a sacred lake where he had visions of a gold-roofed monastery, a small

house with distinctive turquoise tiles, and a mother with a baby by a peach tree. Three search parties were sent out, and the one that travelled northeast arrived at the gold-roofed monastery of Kumbum, and then the village of Takster, where they found the house with the turquoise tiles and peach tree.

Switching his clothes with those of a lesser official, the monk who headed the search party went to the house, where he was shown into the kitchen. The boy ran to him delighted and climbed onto his knee. He grabbed the rosary the monk was wearing around his neck, which had belonged to the previous Dalai Lama, and said 'this is mine'.<sup>[18]</sup>

At this point, the more esoteric aspects of the search were abandoned in favour of testing the child's recognition of belongings. This had been done in other cases: in the second volume of his two-book series *Reincarnation and Biology*, Stevenson records two instances where belongings of the previous person, mixed together with other similar objects, were shown a child to see if he could pick out the correct ones: the case of Thiang San Kla (various articles)<sup>[19]</sup> and the case of Maung Soe Myint (clothes).<sup>[20]</sup>

A rosary, a drum and a walking stick that had belonged to the thirteenth Dalai Lama, mixed together with similar objects that had not, some similar-looking and some more attractive to children, were presented to the four-year-old boy the search party had found. He chose correctly and was enthroned as Dalai Lama.<sup>[21]</sup>

'The boy lama' referred to in the title of Mackenzie's book, *Lama Osel Hita*, was also tested in this way to confirm his identity as the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe Thubten, as Mackenzie described,<sup>[22]</sup> though he was barely more than a baby, only fourteen months old. One rosary of Yeshe's and four others including one in an eye-catching colour were placed before Osel first, and he chose correctly. Next, eight bells, including just one that had belonged to Yeshe, were shown him, and – after playfully ringing them all for a while – he again chose correctly. He was duly enthroned as Lama Yeshe's incarnation shortly thereafter.<sup>[23]</sup>

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## Literature

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- 1.^ Stevenson (2001), 151.
- 2.^ Stevenson, Pasricha & Samararatne (1988), 10-15.
- 3.^ Stevenson, Pasricha & Samararatne (1988), 22-26.
- 4.^ Stevenson (2001), 152.
- 5.^ Stevenson (2001), 154.
- 6.^ Stevenson (2001), 155.
- 7.^ Stevenson (2001), 157.
- 8.^ Stevenson (2001), 113.
- 9.^ Stevenson (1975), 346. Mills (2003, 76-77) shows how this can work, in reference to a video-taped meeting of a child with the purported previous family.
- 10.^ Stevenson (2001), 113.
- 11.^ For the full case report, see Stevenson (1974), 131-49.
- 12.^ For the full case report, see Stevenson (1974), 67-91.
- 13.^ For the full case report, see Mills (1989), 156-71.
- 14.^ For the full case report, see Stevenson (1974), 274-320.
- 15.^ See Stevenson (1974), 286, Tabulation 1. Angel (1994) argued that Stevenson selectively chose which of Imad's statements to credit but Barros (2004) showed that the identification of Ibrahim Bouhamzy did not rest on Imad's parents' mistaken inferences (Matlock, 2019, 105-6).
- 16.^ For the full case report, see Stevenson (1974), 274-320.
- 17.^ Haraldsson. & Matlock (2016), 26. For the full case report, see Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin (2002) and Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 13-26.
- 18.^ Mackenzie (1988), 150-51.
- 19.^ Stevenson (1997), 1584.
- 20.^ Stevenson (1997), 1266-67.
- 21.^ Mazkenzie (1988), 151.
- 22.^
- 23.^ Mazkenzie (1988), 100-101.