

The popularity of sky burials in Tibet

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“*Sky burial* [disposing corpses by giving them to vultures] *may seem barbaric to outsiders*”¹. If we examine this practice, however, it is completely logical and understandable. In Tibet, people bury dead people according to the four Elements (Air, Fire, Water, Earth)² and from these types of funerals sky burial is the most popular one³. All Element burials have the similarity of offering the corpse to Nature. In this essay, I will describe the death and dying practices of Tibetans, with special focus on sky burials, as it is most often used. The causes of the popularity will be investigated in the area of geography, history and in the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, so as to analyze why sky burial is the most popular type of funeral in Tibet.

Firstly, a description of a sky burial is given, from the transfer of the corpse until the very end of the funeral. Then geographical and historical aspects are examined as they could have seriously contributed to the development of the ritual for practical reasons. Henceforth, the traditional death and dying practices are shown as they are essential in the understanding of the *bardo* ritual and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. After that the philosophical aspects of the liturgy and sky burial are analyzed as the possible ideological background.

Description of sky burial

At the prescribed time of the funeral, which is determined by the astrologer, the corpse is placed in an embryonic position, as it was born to the Earth, and it is wrapped in a white cloth. Then the dead body is taken to a platform and men carry it out in a specific direction which will be favourable in the forthcoming rebirth of the deceased. The rite is led by one or, in richer families, by several lamas. On their way to the spot of the sky burial they carry incense and instruments in order to symbolically show the path of the dead. The close relatives are usually not present in the burial itself, so that the soul of the dead person would not stick so much to his body.

After arriving to the cemetery the corpse is put face down on a large flat rock. It is unclothed and from this point a so-called corpse-cutter continues the ritual. This man is an expert in disposing the body.

Firstly he burns a heap of purifying incense, he sharpens his knife with a stone, and he fixes the body to a rock by a rope on the dead body's neck. Next, the limbs of the deceased are tied together⁴. The ceremony is usually held in a valley, therefore vultures are able to observe the whole procedure from a higher altitude. They wait and they do not disturb the acts of the corpse-cutter.

He cuts the body lengthwise several times, often having small breaks in order to let the strong smells leave the body⁵. He cuts the flesh from each limb and lifts it out. After that he opens the abdomen of the corpse and takes out the organs one by one.

When he is ready, the corpse-cutter lets the vultures eat by motioning with his wrist. Within a moment a lot of birds, around fifty or more, reach the corpse and in a few minutes they consume the organs and the remaining flesh on the dead body. At this point the corpse-cutter comes back, and the scavengers leave.

He systematically breaks all the bones of the body. The only exception is if a family member or a lama requests the skull for later use, then it is not harmed⁶. After that he adds the smashed bones to *tsampa*, which is made up of tea, yak butter and barley flour⁷. The mixture is given to the vultures, and in this way the whole body can be consumed by them.

Geographical aspects of sky burials

The popularity of sky burials could be related to the unique location of Tibet, which gave the country the nickname 'the roof of the world'. The territory has an average elevation of 4900 meters, the highest in the world. Besides the inner part of Tibet, the Tibetan Plateau, is the highest and biggest plateau in the Earth.⁸ This high elevation has also resulted in small forest coverage throughout the territory: "Tibet's forest coverage has risen to 11.31 percent"⁹. The average temperature in the country is quite low, because of the extreme elevation. The mean temperature in Tibet is around 6-8° C¹⁰.

It is assumed that features of Tibetan geography—the extreme elevation, the low temperature, and the lack of wood—must have contributed to the widespread use of the sky burial. At such high altitudes the soil is usually very thin, and under it there is rock, which can hardly be dug. Hence the burial on earth is quite difficult for practical reasons. Even where appropriately deep soil can be found, the low temperatures must make it really stiff, so it could be another reason for not burying under the earth often. The lack of forests and, hence, wood, must prevent the popularity of cremations. A sky burial can be carried out almost anywhere, because the vultures are the most crucial aspect of the ritual.

Historical aspects of sky burials

The ideology of sky burials is based on the *bardo* ritual. By understanding this ritual, we can divide the historical approach into two parts. The first one is the possible similarities in the ideology of the funeral, and the second one is the possible similarities in the practice of the burial. Following this concept first I will talk about the origin of the *bardo* ritual, and then I will describe a similar burial type from a neighbouring country, because they both could have affected each other in the past.

Today's *bardo* ritual in Tibet could have originated from the merging of the Indo-Buddhist belief of afterlife and Tibetan beliefs concerned with the soul. As Cuevas (2006) contends: "Both perspectives share conviction in the possibility of controlling the forces of death and positively affecting the post-mortem status of the deceased"¹¹. The Indian Buddhist model is based on the Abidharma literature of the Sarvastivada school. In these writings, the concept of *antarabhava*—in Tibetan, *bardo*, the intermediate state between death and rebirth—is explained, including the four stages in the life cycle (*samsara*) and the role of the soul. Tibetan beliefs, which could have influenced the contemporary *bardo* ritual, might have originated from the religion of Tibet before Buddhism; "This ancient royal religion was both a result and reinforcement of ideas about the creative and destructive powers of nature and the constitution and persistence of the soul"¹². The similarity in both models resulted in a new, mixed ritual: the unique Tibetan *bardo* ritual, best described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The Parsees, followers of Zoroastrianism, live close to Tibet, in North India and in Iran. Their natural burial process is to leave the naked corpse in the so-called Towers of Silence, where the vultures can consume the body¹³. This ritual shows similarity to the Tibetan sky burial¹⁴. Tibetan Buddhism derives from Indian Buddhism, thus the traditions of that territory could have influenced the religious rituals of Tibet.

Dying practices

In order to explain the philosophy of the sky burial, first it is essential to get acquainted with the customs preceding the funeral.

When a Tibetan person approaches death, his or her family supports him or her in several ways, mostly to provide a better rebirth. The relatives particularly care for the atmosphere around the deathbed, because the state of mind of the dying person at the moment of death is especially important. As Rinpoche (1992) argues, “the last thought and emotion that we have before we die has an extremely powerful determining effect on our immediate future”¹⁵. If a person has negative *karma*—the outcome of acts which determine the next rebirth—rebirth can be improved with an adequate frame of mind, while a worried state of mind can even spoil our positive *karma*. In creating a favourable atmosphere, where there is “love, compassion and devotion” and where the agonizing person can “let go of grasping, yearning and attachment” only our family, master and friends can help¹⁶. It is essential, when creating a peaceful atmosphere, that crying and grieving friends and relatives should not be present near the deathbed, because they can evoke attachment in the dying person. It will benefit mostly in the phase of *bardo*, because the agonizing person will not feel attached to this world. That is why it is advised for the friends to express their love and say goodbye instead of crying during the last moments.

In the process of dying the presence of the master or the spiritual friend of the sufferer is central. When the dying person is close to death, his supporter reintroduces him to the Tibetan Buddhist teachings of the mind. The supporter reminds the dying person about the stages of the dissolution process and calms him or her. At this point, *phowa* techniques, a special Vajrayana death meditation, can be carried out, as well as providing description of *bardo*. At the end the supporter retells the realms of Buddha and prays to be reborn there. It is repeated three times, and in the state of *rigpa* he blesses the dying person.

During the last days it is recommended for the sufferer and his acquaintances to do the *phowa* techniques. It is basically the transference of consciousness, through the mixture of yoga and meditation. The principle is that at the moment of death the dying person directs his consciousness into the wisdom of Buddha. It can be done both individually and with the help of a master or a spiritual friend. In the practice of *phowa* the most popular invoked presence is Buddha Amitabha, or the *Buddha* of Limitless Light. As Rinpoche (1992)

stresses, “He represents our pure nature and symbolizes the transmutation of desire, the predominant emotion of human realm. More intrinsically, Amitabha is the limitless, luminous nature of our mind”¹⁸. At the time of death the real nature of our mind will appear, though not everybody can recognize it. That is the importance of the *phowa* practice: it eases this realization.

It is suggested in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* that “The ideal way for a person to die is having given away everything, internally and externally, so there is as little as possible yearning, grasping and attachment for the mind at that essential moment to latch onto”¹⁹. It means that we have to try to free ourselves of devotion to our belongings and friends. We cannot take anything with us, hence it is recommended to give everything away as presents or as offerings to charity. It is fundamental, because then in the *bardo* of becoming we will not see our relatives quarrelling over our goods.

As it is recommended to die in a state of praying, it is important to learn to say prayers effectively. According to Rinpoche (1992), the most effective prayer is the Guru Yoga, where the sufferer “merges his or her mind with the wisdom mind of his master, or *Buddha*, or any enlightened being”²⁰. If he dies in this state, the possibilities of grace of the master are limitless: the supporter’s blessing can even evoke sounds, colours and lights in the *bardo* of the true nature.

In Tibetan Buddhist teachings the position for dying is emphasized. It is preferable to lie down on the right side, in the same way the historical Buddha died. The position is called the sleeping lion. The left hand is on the left thigh, while the right hand is under the chin, covering the right nostril. The legs are stretched out and a bit bent. As Rinpoche (1992) maintains, “[this] facilitates a person’s recognition of the luminosity when it dawns at death. It also helps the consciousness to leave the body through the aperture at the crown of the head”²¹. This helps the person to achieve a better rebirth during the *bardo*, because the soul leaves the body through an advantageous area, on the head.

Death practices

In Tibetan Buddhist teachings death is characterized by the dissolution of our senses and the four elements. During this process the body loses its strength and its control over body fluids, it cools down and breathing stops. As death has occurred, the person starts his journey in the *bardo*²².

When death happens, Tibetans call for an astrologer (*tsipa*)²³. He prepares a special horoscope, the so-called 'death horoscope', based on the astrological characteristics of the deceased, like the date of birth and death. It is made by using the picture of Srid Pa Ho with a big Golden Turtle (see Image 1). It consists of the depictions of elements, astrological symbols, *mevas*, squares of nine numbers, and *parkhas*, trigrams which help the astrologer's work²⁴. It is really important, because it determines the way and time of the burial, the right moment for the corpse to be taken out from the house, the direction in which it should be carried out and the procedure of the funeral ceremonies. The *tsipa* also describes which practices should be done for the benefit of the deceased, such as ritual readings and offerings of butter lamps. These instructions are closely followed because it is widely-accepted that negative effects would be experienced, like sickness and poverty in the family, if they are not²⁵. According to Cornu (1990) Wednesdays, Fridays, and the days of the Hare and Monkey are the most suitable for funerals. On the contrary Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays should be avoided, as well as the days of the Dragon, Snake and Horse.

Similarly to dying masters (lamas), friends can help the deceased to achieve *enlightenment* or at least better rebirth. When someone dies, Ground Luminosity rises. The more experienced someone is, the more time he spends in this state. Therefore, most people do not even recognize it, and they immediately sink into a state of unconsciousness. This is the *bardo* of the moment of death, which lasts for three and a half days. After that, consciousness really leaves the body.

According to Rinpoche (1992) this is why in Tibet no one touches the dead body for three days. If they moved the corpse, they would attract the consciousness of the deceased. It may leave the body there instead of the fontanel on the crown of the head, and it may result in an unlucky rebirth²⁶.

After this period the soul continues his journey in the *bardo* of true nature. According to *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* this is the best time to support the deceased

spiritually. The easiest and most effective way of helping the dead is to practice *phowa*, preferably carried out near the deceased, before the corpse is touched. Furthermore, if someone thinks of a dead acquaintance it is recommended to say a mantra. It should be the mantra of the *Bodhisattva* of Compassion (enlightened being, who stayed on Earth in order to help others) —OM MANI PADME HUM—which purifies negative emotions, or the mantra of *Buddha Amitabha*, the *Buddha* of Limitless Light—OM AMIDEVA HRIH.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is simultaneously read out loud with other practices. Since we cannot know when the dead sink into unconsciousness, we have to cover any eventuality and read the book continuously. From *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or originally the “Liberation Through Hearing During *Bardo*”, all texts should be read out, so that the deceased is able to realize his situation.

Another common rite is the “The Practice of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities”. The practitioner imagines that his entire body is the *mandala* of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities. The peaceful ones are visualized in the energy centre of the heart, while the wrathful ones are pictured in the brain. Then he imagines that the Deities send out rays of light and purify the negative *karma* of the deceased. The mantra of purification the practitioner uses is the mantra of Vajrasattva, who is the central deity of the *mandala*. It is also called the “Hundred Syllable Mantra”.

Furthermore the “Three Jewel” practice is advised, when a supporter asks for help from the buddha (the state of buddhahood), the dharma (the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni) and the *sangha* (the community of practicing Buddhists) to cease the three poisons, greed, hatred and delusion of the deceased, which cause *dukkha*, or suffering²⁷.

Philosophy of sky burials

As previously mentioned, there could have been practical causes in Tibet as to why the practice of sky burial evolved. This kind of funeral also reflects Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and death and dying ceremonies are based on the concept of *bardo*. Nevertheless, there is also evidence which suggest that the burial appeared in Tibet because of the influence of Tibetan Buddhism on rites.

The *bardo* ritual is based on the idea that practically anybody can be enlightened. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says a master can enlighten the deceased even if he had never performed any spiritual practices²⁸. This theory is brand-new and completely different from other Buddhist teachings, because it emphasizes the importance of the *bardo*, where the mind is much faster and clearer. If this concept did not exist in tradition, the importance of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the *bardo* ritual would not exist either. In that case Tibetans would have had to develop another liturgy and way of disposing dead bodies, which would fit the philosophical requirements of a differing belief.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, life can be divided into six *bardos* (or intermediate states). The first three are during life (*bardo* of birth and life; *bardo* of dream; *bardo* of meditation) and the second three are from the moment of death (the *bardo* of the moment of death; *bardo* of the luminosity of the true nature; the *bardo* of becoming). The last three last for a maximum 49 days²⁹.

In the *bardo* of the moment of death not much happens. The elements (earth, air, fire, water) and the senses of the body dissolve. The Ground Luminosity, the pure nature of mind, dawns and if the dead person is prepared to be enlightened, he or she does. Most people immediately fall unconscious and they continue their journey³⁰.

The next phase is the *bardo* of the luminosity of the true nature. In this stage karmical illusions appear. It is divided into fourteen days. In the first seven days the 42 peaceful (see Image 2), while in the second seven days the 58 wrathful deities (Image 3) are formed as mental pictures. It is important to emphasize that they are visualized only in the mind of the deceased. If the dead person cannot find his protective deity, he goes on his way in the *bardo*.

The next and last stage before a possible rebirth is the *bardo* of becoming. There the imaginary body of the deceased suffers a lot from demons and painful attacks, but finally he arrives at the karmical confrontation led by the Lord of Death. He is the scary god of the

underworld. In that situation the god of the deceased measures the positive *karma* with white pebbles and the demon of the body measures the negative *karma* with black pebbles. There is no need and possibility to lie, because the Lord of Death checks every act in the mirror of *karma*. Then it also tortures him, but at the end the dead person arrives to close the future womb of his mother, or at least to choose a better rebirth.

All funeral rites are made according to the actions of the different *bardos*. Therefore, from this special concept of death, the ritual of sky burial could have evolved, too.

In a sky burial the corpse is given back to an Element of Nature, to the Air ³¹, so the last offering of a Tibetan is his own body. He does not need it any longer, since his soul has left and he may fortunately be enlightened. The corpse is no more valuable, because it cannot help anymore in the way of finding *enlightenment* and *nirvana*, liberation from *samsara*.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to analyze the possible reasons for the popularity of sky burials. Throughout this process it became clear that the special location of Tibet, the similar anthropological analogies in the territory and the peculiar philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism mainly based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, are the most important causes for the development of the frequent usage of the rite. These are geographical, historical, religious and, hence, cultural approaches.

All these aspects must have contributed to the high popularity of sky burials, though for different reasons. The geographical and historical evidence suggest practical, while the religious aspect shows the ideological background of the funeral. Of the four Element burials, which were all appropriate for the Tibetan Buddhist requirements, the sky burial evolved to be the most popular, because it fit the conditions of Tibet best.

In conclusion, an understanding of the development of sky burials showed that the high popularity of the ritual can be explained by geography, history and, of course, religion.

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Appendices

Image 1: Srid Pa Ho and the Golden Turtle.

Available from: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/world/images/s82.jpg> [Accessed 16/07/2010]

Publisher Inc., San Francisco, 1992.



Image 2: 42 Peaceful Deities

Available from:

http://www.dharma-media.org/media/general/dwnld/thanka/deity_peaceful/bardo_deities_42.jpg

[Accessed 16/07/2010]



Image 3: 58 Wrathful Deities

Available from:

<http://img114.imageshack.us/f/bardo58b14co.jpg/> [Accessed 16/07/2010]



Glossary:

Reincarnation: Buddhist concept; the soul wanders after the death of the body and it is born to another one. It is like lighting a candle: the flame is not the same, but it is not different either.

Enlightenment: it means the freedom of desires, therefore awakening and obtaining nirvana.

Tibetan Buddhism: it is the hybridization of Indian Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism and the traditional Bon religion of Tibet.

- Tibetan words:

Bardo (antarabhava): it means intermediate state. It can be understood both as the phases of the life cycle (six bardos), or as the intermediate state between death and rebirth.

Tsipa: Tibetan astrologer

Tsampa: a mixture made up of yak butter, tea and barley flour. It is both a food and a material used during sky burials.

- Sanskrit words:

Samsara: the continual cycle of death and rebirth

Dukkha: it is the suffering which people experience in their lives: pain, misery and death

Nirvana – Parinirvana: nirvana is the liberation from samsara and dukkha. Parinirvana is the final nirvana, which is achieved after death.

Buddha: someone who has reached enlightenment.

Karma: the word itself means act, although it refers to the law of cause and effect. Both positive and negative karma can be obtained during life and it determines the next rebirth.

Meva: it is a square of nine numbers, and in each row the sum of the three numbers is 15; it is used by Tibetan astrologers.

Parkha: it is the eight trigrams of the Tibetan astrology; each person is born under the influence of a particular Parkha and it influences his future.

Bodhisattva: a person who has reached nirvana, but decided to remain on Earth and help people, who have not managed to enlighten yet.