

## STATUS AND DEATH: MORTUARY RITES AND ATTITUDES TO THE BODY IN A TIBETAN VILLAGE.<sup>1</sup>

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Michael Vinding, in his paper on Thakali death-rituals in this same volume, makes the point that the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in a village situation is likely to differ considerably from the precepts of the Great Tradition as they are represented in a more sophisticated environment. In the present article I shall be concerned with different kinds of funeral ceremonies in a Bhotia (ethnically Tibetan) village, as they express a blend of elements from the Great and Little Traditions.<sup>2</sup> From the data presented, I hope to show how the funeral practices that I shall describe, as well as beliefs relating to the corpse, correspond to universal modes of behaviour in the context of death.

The phrase 'universal modes of behaviour' suggests a scope which is by no means intended even if it were possible, and I certainly do not wish to attempt an answer to the vexed question of conceptual universals. For the purposes of the present study, however, I shall assume that there are certain cross-culturally consistent patterns in man's attitude to death and the disintegration of the body. Following the principles presented in Robert Hertz's 'Contribution to the study of

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<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was carried out in Nepal in 1981-2 towards a D. Phil. degree for the University of Oxford. I wish to thank Dr. Nicholas Allen and Dr. Michael Aris for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Thanks are also due to David Gellner, Michael Oppitz, Rajindra Pradhan, Frances Ramble and Michael Vinding. The research was made possible by a studentship from the Social Science Research Council.

<sup>2</sup> Since there is no generally agreed definition for the terms Great and Little Tradition, I can do no more than to indicate, without an attempt at justification, the sense in which they are used in the present context. By the Great Tradition I mean the religion, either Buddhism or (reformed) Bon as it is represented in the texts. The Little Tradition I take to be all aspects of religion which are not so prescribed in the literature, as well as any local variations in the performance of rituals belonging to the Great Tradition. Broadly, the distinction is the same as that expressed in Tibetan between *lha-chos*, divine religion, and *mi-chos*, the religion of men. But this distinction cannot be too finely drawn since the Tibetan Great Tradition itself contains many features of the indigenous religion which were incorporated when Buddhism was introduced from India.

the collective representation of death',<sup>3</sup> I hope to support his assertion, which may sound like a truism, that one cannot 'see in death a merely physical event. ... Death does not confine itself to ending the visible bodily life of an individual; it also destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual' (pp 76-77). Hertz adds that the importance of the social aspect is vindicated by 'the fact that in one and the same society the emotion aroused by death varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased, and may even in some cases be entirely lacking' (p76). I shall not attempt to gauge the level of emotional intensity occasioned by the death of people of greater or lesser social importance, but I hope to demonstrate that a clear hierarchy of importance does exist, and is affirmed by the kind of funeral accorded to individuals depending on their status.

This essay falls into two sections: in the first, I shall begin by describing in some detail the procedure following the death of the average adult, after which the funeral ceremonies for individuals of different status will be outlined. The criteria which I shall use to define status are age, sex, wealth and spiritual achievement, since these are the main categories that are distinguished in practice. The villages in the Muktinath area represent a range of "ranks" (*rgyud-pa*, a term which is more usually applied to lineage or clan), such as Nobles (*sras-po*) and Labourers (*'u-lag*), but the criterion of rank distinction does not apply within the village which is the focus of this study, since it is comprised exclusively of the rank known as *Bla-mchod* (distinct from the ceremony of that name) or *mchod-gnas*, Priests. Likewise there is no distinction of political status, since no village offices are permanent, but in most cases rotate annually or biannually. There will be little detail about the textual aspect, and orthodox and popular beliefs concerning the fate of the individual after death will not be discussed. Consequently, a certain emphasis will be placed on describing "local" features of the ceremonies. In the second part I shall be concerned with the principles, as proposed by Hertz, which are represented in the relationship between the status of the individual in life, the attitude of the living to his body after death, and the kind of funeral he receives. Themes related to pollution and to the products of the body will also be introduced, and in conclusion some comparisons will be drawn between the representation of death in the Great and Little Traditions.

The data are taken from the village of Lubra (Klu-brag), a small settlement in a valley to the east of the Kali Gandaki between Jomsom and Kagbeni. The village is situated in the predominantly Tibetan Muktinath area of South Mustang, but it must be emphasised that the data are not generalisable to this region as a

<sup>3</sup> In R. Hertz 1960. *Death and the Right Hand*. Aberdeen (Tr. R. and C. Needham.) All further references to Hertz are from this source.

whole, much less to the vast area of Tibetan culture, though of course there is a great deal of common ground and frequent references will be made. The people of Lubra are followers of Bon, but for the purposes of this article this is not relevant, except insofar as Bon—"White" Bon (*bon-dkar*) as opposed to "Black" (*bon-nag*), which is equated with the craft of the *jhākri* and associated blood sacrifice—represent the quasi-Buddhist influence of the Tibetan Great Tradition.

### Ceremonies following the death of an adult

Immediately a person dies the body is taken into the house's shrineroom (*chos-khang*), or is set outside it near the door, and is bound into a sitting position with the feet together and the knees drawn up. The arms are secured around the thighs with the hand tied between the legs, and the back is broken by pulling the head up and jerking it forward. The head is then pushed down between the knees and the corpse is left to stiffen in that position. It is believed that breaking the back prevents the dreadful possibility of a *ro-langs* ("rising corpse"), which I discuss later. All the village lamas<sup>4</sup> are summoned to the house to read the text entitled *Klong-rgyas*, which takes about one full day, and they are fed by the family of the deceased. One of the lamas then makes an astrological computation to determine when the funeral should take place, usually within a three-day period, and to discover which of a number of possible supernatural beings is responsible for having withdrawn the deceased's soul (*srog*) from his body. Generally it is a *bdud* (demon), *klu* (serpent-god; Sanskrit *nāga*), *btsan* (fierce aerial demon), a *rgyal-po* (in this case a category of god), a *gshin-'dre* (or *shi-'dre*: ghost), or a *gson-'dre* (goblin). I was informed that there is no particular course of action, such as requesting the return of the soul, if it is discovered to be one or another of these, and that the divination is performed "just so that it is known".

For every funeral there is one man who acts as a kind of general factotum, the *rtogs-ldan-pa*, but the manner in which he is selected or appointed varies from village to village. In Lubra, a man simply volunteers to perform this duty, whereas

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<sup>4</sup> The term lama is used here in a colloquial sense to mean any village ritual specialist. This is a hereditary position in Lubra and does not require celibacy. The transliterated form *bla-ma* I shall use later to designate a monk of high status who is generally a recognised incarnation.

Familiar Tibetan words I shall render in an anglicised form while others will be given in transliteration. Words in the local dialect for which I have not been able to find a definite Tibetan spelling will be presented roughly phonetically and in inverted commas.

in other villages in Mustang it is an office which rotates annually, and the *rtogs-ldan-pa* is responsible for any funerals that take place during his term of office. In Central Tibet, the *rtogs-ldan-pa* comprised a class whose occupation was the dismemberment and disposal of bodies, the so-called "corpse-cutters". The term *rtogs-ldan-pa* "those with superior understanding", suggests that such unusual qualities were attributed to members of this class.

On the appointed day, a bier (*ro-bcug sa*) is constructed out of four crossed birch poles and the corpse is set in the centre. A framework of four short upright poles is erected around the corpse, with a fifth bound horizontally across the shoulders to represent the arms, and this is covered in clothing appropriate to the deceased's sex as an effigy (*sob*, a term usually applied to stuffed animals) of that person. The head is formed from a large ball of wool and it is covered with a white scarf (*kha-btags*) or any piece of white cloth. The face is represented by a sheet of paper on which features are roughly sketched in black ink. Apart from the usual, and generally the deceased's most opulent, clothing, the *sob* is further adorned with headwear indicative of the sex. In the case of a man, the crown-like ritual headdress consisting of five painted wooden leaves (*rigs-linga*<sup>5</sup>) is worn, while a woman is distinguished by the 'shule', a strip of thick cloth set with turquoises, coral and gold attached at the centre of the hairline and worn over the head and down the back. The photograph here shows the *sob* that would be constructed for a dead noblewoman (*sras-mo*), who would not wear the 'shule' of the commoner (*phal-pa*) but the *rgyan-cha* as illustrated.<sup>6</sup> Such a *sob* would therefore never be built in the exclusively *phal-pa* village of Lubra. The *sob* of a woman may also wear the *rigs-linga*, but this is rarely practised.

Everyone present in the house is purified by a lama by being sparged with sacred water (*khrus*) administered with a sprig of juniper. The water's purifying property derives from the fact that it contains needles of juniper (*shug-pa*) and the petals of any saffron-coloured flower (*gur-gum*). This purification is performed following the death of a person of any status, and is used in all situations where pollution of any sort is likely to have occurred. The bier is then carried by eight pall-bearers in procession with the lamas. In some villages in the Mustang region, four pall-bearers carry the bier, and if the deceased was a prominent member of the community the bearers will be replaced every few yards by four others from

<sup>5</sup> *Rigs-linga* : "the five Buddha families". Each leaf depicts one of the so-called "Dhyāni Buddhas".

<sup>6</sup> *Rgyan-cha* is a general term for jewellery, especially in Central Tibet, but in the local dialect refers specifically to this headdress.

amongst the men who follow the bier, as an expression of their respect. Amongst many Tibetans only those who are fit, in astrological terms, to carry the bier, may do so,<sup>7</sup> but this restriction does not apply in Muktinath or Mustang.

The direction in which the corpse faces depends on the *bum-stong*, or "empty vessel", an astrological term referring to the region in which inauspicious forces are concentrated at any particular time. This may be determined simply by consulting the calendar (*zla-tho*). For example, to the sixth Tibetan month (*Hor-zla drug-pa*: July-August) of the Male Water Dog year (*chu pho khyi lo*; 1982), the relevant line reads, '... until the eighth of the Western month, the empty vessel is the north'.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, for a funeral held during this period the corpse is turned to face south. The funeral procession is led by a lama carrying a censer of juniper incense (*bsang*). The three lamas following him play a conch (*dung-dkar*), a shawm (*rgya-gling*) and a pole-drum (*rnaga*) respectively. After them, and immediately preceding the bier, is a lama who holds an hour-glass drum *damaru* in his right hand and in his left, draped over his little finger, a long white scarf of silk which he draws along the ground after him. This scarf may be over six feet long, and is intended to indicate to the deceased the route to the site of dismemberment (*dur-khrod*). For this reason it is called a *lam ston*, "that which shows the way."

When the procession reaches the *dur-khrod*, which is above the village and to the east, the corpse is removed from the inside the *sob* and laid out on a large flat rock, on its back if it is of a man, face down if of a woman. I have not been able to obtain an explanation for the reversed positions, but it is interesting that they should be the opposite of those in which the bodies of men and women are laid on the funeral pyre in certain Hindu communities. According to Parry, in the Bengali community in Benares 'the corpse of a man should be laid face down on the pyre and the corpse of a woman face up, for this is the position in which the two sexes enter the world'.<sup>9</sup> Bennett, on the other hand, notes that in the Brahman-Chetri village near Kathmandu where she worked this practice was generally unknown but was advocated by one 'old and respected pandit' on the grounds that, "this is

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<sup>7</sup> Cf L. A. Waddell. 1895. *The Buddhism of Tibet*. Delhi. p 490.

<sup>8</sup> *Phyi zla 'i tshes brgyad bra bum stong byang*. Quoted from *Bla-ma bSod rnams 'brug rgyas lo tho*, p 57.

<sup>9</sup> J. Parry. (To be published 1982). 'Sacrificial death and the necrophagous ascetic', in *Death and the Regeneration of life*. Eds. M. Bloch and J. Parry. Cambridge, p 81.

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the position in which they have sex".<sup>10</sup> I am not competent to discuss the Hindu example; but if indeed there is no single authoritative explanation, and in the absence of such an explanation for the Tibetan practice, it is possible that in both cases the positional reversal is simply a means of further distinguishing the funeral ceremonies for men and women.

The *rtogs-ldan-pa*, who may or may not have an assistant, proceeds to dismember the body with a khukuri, chopping it into pieces small enough to be eaten without difficulty by the vultures, for, as Manning quaintly puts it, when protesting against their close game laws; "They eat no birds, but, on the contrary, let the birds eat them".<sup>11</sup> The big bones of the arms and legs sometimes present a problem for the birds, so they are pounded down and mixed with the brain into small balls. When the dismemberment is complete conches are blown to summon the vultures, and all the men remain to watch that the corpse is completely consumed. The idea that the remains of their relatives are lying unattended and unrespected is abhorrent to the people; '*sems-pa tshig-gi*,' they say—"it burns our hearts (with grief)". Sooner or later the vultures, Himalayan griffons (*bya-rgod*) and lammergeiers ('*jomo koltog*'<sup>12</sup>), descend to consume the body. Sometimes the vultures arrive while the dismemberment is in progress, and in this case the *rtogs-ldan-pa* is assisted by four or five "protectors" (*srugn-mkhan*) who beat the vultures back with sticks to prevent them from inflicting severe wounds on him. In the unlikely event that the vultures do not come, the remains are still not simply left to disappear, as of course they would through the agency of jackals and perhaps village dogs, but are carried down to the valley and thrown into the river to be eaten, it is said, by fishes. In northern Mustang, however, if the vultures do not appear following the blowing of the conches, the *rtogs-ldan-pa* must eat a small piece of flesh from the corpse's heart, to set a precedent for the birds, as it were.

The group returns to the village along precisely the route by which it left, since any deviation from this course will result in bad luck for the whole community. A small piece of bone from the body is kept by the *rtogs-ldan-pa*, who conceals it under a rock by the side of the path for use later in the subsequent series of funeral rites. Before the men reenter their houses they must be sprinkled with *khrus* by a

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<sup>10</sup> L. Bennett. (To be published 1982). *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters*, Chicago Ch. 3 Quoted with the author's permission.

<sup>11</sup> L. A. Waddel. 1905. *Lhasa and its Mysteries*. Delhi. p 422. The Manning referred to is Thomas Manning of the East India Company, who visited Lhasa in 1811.

<sup>12</sup> The name means 'tonsured nun', and is apparently derived from the white head and black face of the lammergeier.

member of the family, and must pass through the smoke from a fire of juniper branches which will have been kindled by the door. In this way they are completely freed from death-pollution and even those who have carried the bier or performed the actual dismemberment are not considered to be particularly tainted, and require no additional purification. The clothing of the *sob* is carried back in a bundle by the *rtogs-ldan-pa* and is purified by washing in the river, a task usually performed by women, although the *rtogs-ldan-pa* himself may do it. The bier, however, is irredeemably polluted and is thrown away.

Three days after the death of the person the lamas congregate in the village gompa (*dgon-pa*) for the ceremony known as *zhag gsum-pa* ("the third day") when one of a number of texts, including *Klong-rgyas*, may be read. The effigy of the deceased is reassembled and set between the two rows of lamas, facing the altar. In front of it is a low table on which stand five cups containing water, *chang*, *a-rag* (Nepali *raksi*), sweet tea and salt tea respectively, from left to right of the *sob*. Milk may be added to this list and one of the other drinks duplicated to give seven cups, and the same may be done with two others until the maximum of nine is reached; an odd number must be maintained. Following the *zhag gsum-pa* ceremony, the six beverages are poured around a fire of juniper branches that has been lit outside the gompa and the *sob* is again dismantled. The essence (*bcud*) of the liquids is believed to have been extracted by the deceased.

The third day is also the first of the deceased's forty-nine-day sojourn on the *bar-do*, the "intermediate stage" which precedes rebirth, and provision is made both for his guidance and also for his enjoyment. A large earthenware jar is coated with white clay or lime (*btsag dkar-po*) and is suspended from a roof-beam against an inside wall of the deceased's house, generally over the place where the corpse was kept before its disposal. If the deceased was a man, a *rigs-lnga*, such as that which adorned the head of the *sob*, is fastened around the mouth of the jar, and a string of ornaments appropriate to men, such as *gzi*-stones (onyx), small turquoises and perhaps coral beads, is hung around the neck. In the case of a woman, noble or commoner, a *rgyan-cha* is hung around the neck of the jar together with a string of large turquoises and corals. Every morning and evening, embers from the hearth are put into this jar and juniper incense is sprinkled onto them. A mixture of parched barley-flour (*dkar-phye*; Central Tibetan *rtsam-pa*) and butter is added to the fire and a number of different drinks such as tea, milk and beer are mixed together in a cup and poured onto a patch of wall near the jar. The soul of the deceased (*rnam-shes*<sup>13</sup>) is drawn to this banquet and feasts on the smells (*dri-ma*) or essence (*bcud*) of the

<sup>13</sup> I have loosely translated both *srog* and *rnam-shes* as 'soul'. In fact *srog* is the life-principle which does not exist independently of the physical body, and when it

foodstuffs and the juniper, and takes up residence in the jar, which thenceforth becomes known as the "spirit place" (*thugs-sa*). This ceremony is called *gsur*, and takes its name from the roasted mixture of *rtsam-pa* and butter. Each time it is performed, a pair of small, high-pitched cymbals (*ting-shag*) is struck to provide pleasant music for the *rnam shes*. It used to be the case that, immediately preceding the offering of *gsur*, one of the household women (irrespective of the sex of the deceased) would go onto the roof and wail, calling the name of her dead kinsman and beseeching him to return to the jar if he has wandered away from it. This custom, though still in evidence, is less common than it used to be.

Seven days later, the first of seven ceremonies known as *bdun-tshigs*<sup>14</sup> is conducted in the house by a lama, ideally the *rtogs-ldan-pa* himself if he is literate. This, briefly, consists in reading from a text for the guidance of the *rnam-shes*, the so-called "Tibetan Book of the Dead" (*Bar-do thos-grol*), following which consecrated bread, grain and lumps of *rtsam-pa* dough (*tshogs*) are distributed to all the villagers. The *bdun-tshigs* is performed every seventh day following this up to and including the forty-ninth.

After three or four weeks, on a day that is found to be astrologically appropriate the merit-making ceremony (*dge-ba*) for the deceased is held. This is organised and paid for by his or her relatives, specifically by his heirs if he was a householder. All the lamas assemble in the village gumpa to read one of a number of appropriate texts, and they and everyone else in the village are provided with food and *chang* which will have been brewed for the occasion about a fortnight earlier. Until now, the lamas have been paid for their services in food and drink only, but now a pecuniary offering (*'bul-ba*) of Rs. 7-10 is made to each. As in the *zhag gsum-pa*, the *sob* is reconstructed and set between the two rows of lamas and the procedure with the five drinks is repeated. On the same day, a block-print of a human figure representing the deceased is made on a sheet of paper, and the name and sex of the person is written on it. The *rnam-shes* is thereby transferred from the *thugs-sa* into the print which is known as a "purification picture" (*sbyang-par*). The latter is set on the altar with a butter-or oil-lamp (*chos-me*) burning in front of it, so that it and the *sob* face each other. The jar itself is taken outside the village and thrown away. I was told that the *sob* represents only the body, since the consciousness, the *rnam-shes* is at all times in the *sbyang-par*, except when it leaves to consume the essence of the, beverages.

Before a *dge-ba* held in a neighbouring village one informant recommended

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is withdrawn death results. *Rnam-shes* is the principle of consciousness which survives on the *bar-do* as a sensible entity.

<sup>14</sup> This may be translated roughly as the 'weekly link'.



that I should come to watch it, since the women would be "singing songs" which I could record. This was, in fact, a good-humouredly sarcastic reference to the obligatory and somewhat stylised wailing of all the village women at the end of the *dge ba*, when close relatives of the deceased embrace the *sob* in a final gesture of valediction. The *rtogs-ldan-pa* carries the *sob* out of the village, where the clothes are removed and bundled up to be washed later, and the wooden frame and paper face thrown away. The duties of the *rtogs-ldan-pa* are now complete, unless he is responsible for performing the *bdun-tshigs* ceremonies, and the family of the deceased reward him with a gift of their late relative's clothing, from which either he or his wife will benefit. A generous family will contribute a substantial wardrobe, whereas a more miserly one will give only a few items.

The final *bdun-tshigs*, known as the *sbyang-par* after the term for the print embodying the *rnam-shes*, is held on the forty-ninth day. During the ceremony it is necessary for the deceased to perform prostrations at certain intervals, and this is done on his behalf by one of his relatives, who places the *sbyang-par* between the nape of his neck and his shirt-collar before prostrating himself. However, only certain categories of kin may represent a dead person in this manner. An older man is replaced by his son, and a woman by her daughter. A young man, whether or not he is married, is represented by a sibling of either sex, just as a young woman's brother or sister performs prostrations in her stead. A boy or girl who has only just entered the second twelve year life-cycle (*skag*), particularly in the absence of older siblings, will be represented by his or her mother's brother (*a-zhang*). In all cases the surrogates are the deceased's cognates, never his affines, but there is no consistent requirement that they should be either uterine or agnatic kin, or even of the same sex.

The end of the *sbyang-par* ceremony is marked by the expiry of the *rnam-shes*'s term on the *bar-do*. The officiating lama takes the print between his hands and, holding it in the flame of the butter lamp, pronounces that the sins of the deceased are annulled as the fire consumes the paper. It is this expiation that gives the print its name of *sbyang-par*, or purification picture. The *rnam-shes* departs from its burning receptacle in the form of an (*invisible*) white letter A (*a-dkar*), on its way to immediate rebirth, to heaven, or to buddhahood. The piece of bone which was buried by the path between the cemetery and the village on the day of the body's dismemberment is retrieved and ground into powder which is mixed with the ashes of the *sbyang-par*. The lamas and the family of the deceased then mix this with black clay to make a number of *tsha-tsha*, small models moulded in the form of a cone or a deity. These *tsha-tsha* are taken from the village and set in various "clean places" (*sa-cha tshang-ma*), such as caves, grassy verges, streams and the branches of trees. Unlike ordinary *tsha-tsha*, which contain no ash or bone, these are never used to consecrate sacred monuments in the village.

One year later, a merit-making ceremony similar to the *dge-ba*, known as 'durin', is held in the *gompa*. This corresponds to the Tibetan *Io-mchod*. There is no *sob*, and the women do not wail, but the lamas and the other villagers are feasted as before, and the former are also paid for their services. Again, a variety of texts may be read, but in Lubra this is most commonly *dMar-khrid*.

The above outline represents the minimum that may be done following the death of a man or woman over the age of thirteen. Now there are two possible additions to the funeral ceremonies which are optional, according to whether the family of the deceased is rich enough to afford them. The first is known as *kha-tog* (actually a colloquial word for "snacks" in Central Tibetan), which takes place on the day of the *dge-ba*. In addition to the food and drink, one 'drudra' (slightly less than a *mana*) of uncooked grain is presented to every single member of the village. In fact Lubra has a long-standing reciprocal arrangement with two other villages, Kagbeni and Tiri, whereby a *kha-tog* held in one of them will include all the inhabitants of the other two. Children or low-caste artisans are usually sent by each household to collect the gift. The *kha-tog* itself has several minor variations, also based on the wealth of the donor. For example, wheat may be given instead of rice, or there may be a compromise whereby everyone receives wheat and the inhabitants of Lubra receive rice in addition. It should be noted that the *kha-tog* is not specific to funerals but is often included in other merit-making ceremonies, and the same is true of many of the texts, such as *dMar-khrid*.

The second possible addition involves a ceremony held one year after the 'durin', that is, two years after the *dge-ba* which follows the actual death. This is known as 'yarin',<sup>15</sup> and is almost identical to the 'durin'. The same text is generally read, everyone is again given food and drink and the lamas receive payment in cash. Following the reading, the person (or people, if they were joint heirs) who sponsored the event is presented with a ceremonial white scarf (*kha-btags*) by one of the lamas on behalf of the village, and expressions of congratulation ("You have done your duty well", etc.) are made from all around.

I have said that both of these ceremonies are optional, but whereas the *kha-tog* is often not performed, only the very poorest families would omit the 'yarin'. No congratulatory *kha-btags* is presented to a sponsor following the 'durin' even if it is known that there will be no further demonstrations of filial or familial piety.

<sup>15</sup> I have not been able to discover the etymology of either 'durin' or 'yarin'. It is conceivable that they may be colloquial pronunciations of *dud-ran*, 'appropriate homage', and *yang-ran*, 'further appropriate homage', the latter perhaps being a contraction of *yang dud (-pa) ran (-pa)*. Alternatively, the second syllable may be *rin*, referring to the expenditure necessary on these occasions.

### Children's funerals

A person ceases to be a child at the age of thirteen (twelve by western reckoning, since a child is held to be one year old at birth in the Tibetan scheme). This marks the first *skag*, the critical period which occurs every twelve years in one's life. At the end of the first cycle, various social restrictions and requirements which do not apply in childhood come into operation. For example, rules of pollution begin to be observed, and a man may not drink from a girl's cup, even if she is his daughter, once she has reached this age. But the term child itself covers a range of meanings, and I shall begin at the lower end of the social spectrum with the stillborn infant.

#### (a) Neonates

Hertz remarks that 'the death of a new-born child is, at most, an infra-social event; since society has not yet given anything of itself to the child, it is not affected by its disappearance and remains indifferent' (p 84). This notion of giving nothing to the child is quite literally applied in Lubra, where a stillborn infant is defined as one which has not received milk from its mother. The body is wrapped in a cloth and taken into the *chos-khang*. The following day, a single lama is asked to the house to perform the rites, which involve little more than the reading of a text. He does this in the *chos-khang* and is paid in kind with a meal and some *chang* or *a-rag*. Hardly any ceremony surrounds the actual disposal. One man carries the small bundle out of the house in his arms, preceded by another bearing a censer of juniper incense and a vessel of sparge (*khrus*). The men are members of the household, but in their absence any neighbour may perform this role. The body is then taken a short distance outside the village—in no particular direction, but generally near the river—and buried in a shallow grave. Both the grave and the baby are first sprinkled with *khrus*, and later the clothing in which it was wrapped is purified by being washed in the river.

The religious content of this funeral is sparse by any standard, but it is particularly so in the context of a society where even the adjustment of a hearth demands more ceremony. Even this meagre ritual content is not considered to be obligatory, and in the majority of cases the body is disposed of (the term used is *dbyug*, to throw away) without even the reading. In fact, the text used is *gNam-sa snang-brgyad*, which is read as a blessing on a multitude of other occasions, such as the building of a house or ploughing the fields in spring. The death of a new-born child is indeed an infra-social event.

## (b) Older children

If the child does drink its mother's milk, however shortly thereafter it dies, the procedure is different from that for neonates. The body is laid in the *chos-khang* and one person from each household, generally a woman, will take a small quantity of oil to the bereaved mother to light a lamp (*chosme*), and will give her four or five rupees by way of condolence. A lama is asked to consult the calendar or the appropriate text to determine the most auspicious direction, as in the case of an adult. The following day the body is carried in the arms of the father (or another man, if he is absent) actually in that direction to a point outside the village. The method of disposal is for the parents to choose. The body is usually dismembered and fed to the birds or thrown into the river, though it may also be cremated. Burial is never practised in this case. Two or three days later the merit-making ceremony (*dge-ba*) takes place. Four lamas assemble by the river and conduct a ritual during which *gtor-ma* and milk are thrown into the water; they are given a meal and a drink, but no cash payment. The feast for the *dge-ba* is held not in the gompa but in the house of the dead child's parents. It is called a 'yorten' (probably *Hg.yos-rten*), and the only participants are children of the village who are less than thirteen years old. This 'yorten' marks the end of the funeral ceremonies for the deceased.

## (c) First-born sons

In none of the death-rituals described above is any difference of status between the sexes implied, since the reversal of positions on the rock slab prior to dismemberment cannot be seen to represent the superiority of one sex over the other. To my knowledge, there is only one situation in which the distinction is made. As in most of the Tibetan world, inheritance in Lubra is patrilineal and the traditional form of marriage is fraternal polyandry. This is effectively a form of primogeniture, since the younger brothers are seen merely to share in the eldest brother's marriage and inheritance. For this reason, considerable importance is attached to the first-born son, who in local lineage histories is referred to as the *gdung-'dzin*, the "holder of the bone", where the term "bone" is the well-known Tibetan metonym for the patrilineage itself. When the first son that is born to a couple dies, even if he is stillborn, the body is not disposed of immediately. On the day when the funeral would normally take place, the infant is placed in a wooden box full of salt which is then sealed and kept in the *chos-khang*. The rites which usually accompany the death (such as the 'yorten' or the reading of *gNam-sa snang-brgyad*) proceed as if the body had been disposed of in the ordinary way.

Although it still occurs, it is my guess that this practice of infant-mummification is dying out. Thakali monks whom I have approached on this subject referred

to it with some disapproval as an "archaic custom" of their Bhotia neighbours<sup>16</sup>, and I know of a number of people in Lubra who chose not to preserve the bodies of their first-born sons. I am in some doubt as to the length of time the body should be kept in the house. I was told that it is not removed until the mother has borne another son, since the whole object of this practice is to prevent the potential for bearing sons from being lost, but in the single example I have witnessed the mummy was disposed of six months after death on an astrologically appropriate day. I shall take up this point again later in the paper. In any case, when the time for disposal comes, the body is taken out of the village in the auspicious direction (unless the child was still-born, in which cases this is not a consideration) and cremated. Air-burial is not practised, since the process of desiccation renders the flesh too hard to be dealt with by the birds. Beyond a few prayers, no religious rites attend the cremation, and the ashes are not kept. Because of the difficulty and expense of preserving a large body, this form of mummification is never done with children more than a few months old, nor is it ever done if the parents already have a living son.

#### Funeral rites for saints and "true" bla-ma

So far, I have dealt with types of funeral relating to factors of wealth, age and sex. I shall now concentrate on the ceremonies surrounding the death of a person renowned for his spiritual achievements. This usually applies to any *prul-sku* or 'bla-ma ngo-thog' (a "true" bla-ma as opposed to a village lama), but in fact it may be extended to anyone covered by the term *rig-'dzin*, an expression which literally means "knowledge holder". "Rig-'dzin" (Sanskrit *vidyādhara*) may be loosely applied to any particularly intelligent individual, but is used here in a technical sense more or less consistent with Das's definition as 'a kind of spirit to whom a high degree of wisdom is attributed by the Tantras'.<sup>17</sup> Laymen are occasionally honoured with such funeral rites, but only if they have led lives dedicated to religious endeavour and are believed to have attained a certain degree of spiritual achievement. As may be expected in a lay community such as Lubra, such funerals are a rarity, but there are fortunately both written and oral accounts through which I hope to present some of the salient features.

The first account concerns a monk of the last century by the name of bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma, who belonged to the gLo-bo chos-tsong clan. The clan, which is presently one of the two largest in Lubra, had its origins in Mustang (gLo-bo or "Lo"),

<sup>16</sup> But the Thakalis themselves practised temporary mummification until comparatively recently. Rich families sometimes preserved the bodies of adults who died when the sweet buckwheat was in flower, a time when cremation was forbidden. (See Michel Vinding's article in this volume.)

<sup>17</sup> S. C. Das. 1970. *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. Delhi. p 1179

where it used to provide client priests (*mchod gnas*) for the king. bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma went to Eastern Tibet around 1859 and spent many years there with his teacher, Grub-pa'i dbang phyug, before returning to Lubra where he ended his days. His death is referred to in a few lines from the 'Prayer to bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma, the protector of living beings':

After winding up his worldly affairs, he performed concentrated meditation;

He generated the Fire-God, and the essence of his body disappeared'.<sup>18</sup>

Oral history provides a more detailed version. bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma entered the chapel room of his family's *bla-brang*,<sup>19</sup> where he died while meditating. He remained in the post-mortem contemplative state known as *thugs-dam* before a red issue from one nostril and a white one from the other heralded that his meditation was over.

*Rig-'dzin* are never given an air-burial but are almost always cremated. The back is not broken, since it seems to be accepted that the body of a *bla-ma* will not become a *ro-langs*. However, when I pressed one informant about the possibility, he admitted that it was conceivable but added with resignation that "if the corpse rises, it rises, and that's that". Furthermore, the body is bound into a cross-legged, meditative posture instead of the hunched position of the ordinary individual. No *sob* is constructed, and the body is carried exposed but dressed in fine clothing, to the pyre. This consists of a circle of rocks a few feet high, with a raised stone floor beneath which the ashes will collect. Firewood is heaped onto this floor and the body is placed on top, sitting within the circle. For seven days after the cremation two lamas visit the site and sprinkle it with consecrated water (*khros*). On the eighth day, the ashes are collected up and taken to the river to be washed, and while most are carried away by the stream, the residual fragments of bone are kept.

However, when the body of bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma was set on the pyre, a bright blue flame appeared from the region of the chest, and a sharp noise was heard as his soul (*rnam-shes*) released itself from the body's head. (There is actually an inconsistency in this account, since this mystical release, '*pho-ba*', is the event which is

<sup>18</sup> *Zang zing brol nas bsam mgon thugs dam mdzad/me lha skyed nas rang spur rtsi bcud yal.* From '*Gro mgon bstan 'dzin nyi ma'i gsol 'debs . . .*' (Note : this and other quotations from unpublished texts are unedited.)

<sup>19</sup> *Bla-brang* : literally, "*bla-ma's* house"; in Tibet this was the residence attached to a reincarnate *bla-ma's* estate and was often extended to mean the land itself. In Lubra it refers to the private house or temple of a clan, separate from the main household, and having its own land attached to comprise a single landholding unit (*grong*). There used to be two in Lubra until one was dissolved a few years ago.

generally believed to terminate the contemplation.) In any event, the body was consumed in its own fire, an occurrence which is attributed in the lines quoted above to his successful meditation on the Fire-God.<sup>20</sup>

The remains of bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma were enshrined in a stupa built specifically for that purpose (*sku-gdung* or *sku-rten*, both abbreviations of *sku-gdung mchod-rten*) near his *pla-brang*. The senior man of the lineage in Lubra still has several relics of bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma, such as the clothing which he wore during his *thugs-dam* as well as various other possessions. He also has several *ring-b.rel*, fragments of bone (generally, as in this case, the skull) which were not destroyed during the cremation. These remains, which are set into a small piece of wood shaped like a stupa, are treated with the utmost reverence, and are never taken out of the brass box in which they are kept without appropriate prayers being said and incense being lit. The receptacle bears a label which reads 'klu-brag *bla-ma* bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma'i, '*phel-gdung*,' 'the relics of Lama bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma of Lubra'.

Miraculous or extraordinary circumstances often seem to surround the deaths and funerals of *bla-ma* and saints. Another clan which flourished in the village for several centuries before finally dying out five generations ago is the Yang-ngal lineage, one of whom, Yang-ston bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, was the Twelfth Century founder of Lubra.<sup>21</sup> The Yang-ngal lineage history<sup>22</sup> describes the circumstances surrounding the deaths of numerous illustrious members of the clan. One of these was Yang-ston Blo-gros rgyal mtshan, who led a life of religious dedication until.

Finally, at the age of sixty-six, on the tenth day of the third month in a horse year, a rainbow tent appeared and a rain of flowers fell, amongst many other wonders, and his spirit passed into the Bon heaven. His

<sup>20</sup> *Me-lha* (Sanskrit: *agnideva*) does not actually refer to any one god in particular but is 'a general names for gods or deities; gods are supposed to eat the sacrificial offerings through the help of fire which is called the mouth of the gods' (Das, *op. cit.*, p 972)—hence the Sanskrit synonym of *agnimukha*, or fire-mouth'.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. D. Snellgrove. 1967. *The Nine Ways of Bon*. London. p 4, n 4, and D. Jackson. 1978. 'Notes on the history of Serib and nearby places in the upper *Kali Gandaki*, *Kailash*. p 204.

<sup>22</sup> *Kun kyis nang nas dbang po'i 'dangs ma mig ltar sngon du 'byung ba gshen yang ngal bka' rgyud kyis gdung rabs un chen tsangs pa'i sgra dbyanggers zhes bya ba bzhus so.* Contained herein is the voice, so-called, of Brahma, the lineage history of the gShen Yang-ngal clan which is like sight, the foremost of all the senses'.

This text, of which a translation is currently being prepared, is kept in Lubra. All following quotations relating to the Yang-ngal clan are taken from this work. They are given in their unedited form with provisional English renderings; I wish to acknowledge the considerable help given me by Lobsang Phuntshog in making the translation.

body took fire by itself, and on his bones there appeared the six syllables and innumerable images of deities and so on, and he became a great lamp of the doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

However, that the sanctity of saints' bones is not inviolable is illustrated by the case of one of Yang-ston Blo-gros rgyal-mtshan's descendants, an ascetic by the name of Yang-ston Mi-'gyur rgyal-mtshan:

Because of an unfortunate accident, his life did not end naturally. On the seventeenth day of the third month in a wood horse year, when he was thirty-one, his spirit departed to the Bon heaven. Although many things such as the six syllables, images of deities and tokens of his achievement appeared on his body, as a result of contamination some of these flew away and some disappeared.<sup>24</sup>

I am told that in the Bon monastery of Samling in Dolpo, which, according to the same document (where it is called bSam-bstan, [i.e. gtan] gling) was founded by the great-grandson of bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, there are the skeletal remains of one of the Yang-ngal lineage. Lubragpas who have visited the monastery tell me that the bones bear the marks of sacred syllables and the forms of various deities such as those which once adorned the skeleton of Blo-gros rgyal-mtshan.

But it is not always merely the bones that are subject to reverence. In the case of exceptionally high-ranking spiritual leaders (such as the Dalai Lamas) mummification was sometimes practised, and the preserved body was encased in silver or gold as an object of worship. I know of only one example connected with Lubra. This concerns one Yang-ston 'Bum-rje, the elder brother of Yang-ston bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan himself. Shortly before his death,

<sup>23</sup> *mThar dgung lo drug cu re drug nas shing rta zla gsum pa'i tshes bcu la gzha' 'od gur khang me tog gi char pa la sogs ngo mtshar du ma dang bcas ste dgong pa bon nyid kyi dbyings su gshegs so/sku spur la zhung me rang bzhes dang gdung rus la yig drug lha sku la sogs grang rtsi mi theb pa dpag du med par byung zhing bstan pa'i sgron me chen po gyur legs so (fol. 51 bar-ma).*

<sup>24</sup> *Bar chad kyi dbang gi sku tshe mthar ma phyo bar dgung lo sum cu so gcig nas shinig rta zla sgum pa'i tshes cu bdun la dgong pa bon nyid dbyings su gshegs so/sku gzugs la yig drug lha sku sha ri ram la sogs du mar 'byung kyang/sku grib kyi dbang gi la las 'phur badang/ la las yar ba la sogs 'byung (fol. 51 'o'—g-ma a-b).*

In this passage I have translated *sha-ri-ram* as 'tokens of achievement' and in the following as 'sacred relic'. It is clearly a Tibetan rendering of the Sanskrit term for body (*sarīra*), which may also mean bones (cf. M. Monier-Williams, 1963. *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*. Delhi. p 1057), and hence 'sacred relics'. But this is certainly not the intended meaning in the next extract; the meaning of *gdung sha-ri-ram* has been explained to me as 'a fruition sign of the cosmic body (*dharmakāya*) made manifest' *chos kyi sku mngon du byas pa'i 'bras rtags*).



He said, 'Do not burn my body, but carry it into the mountains.' His disciples sought to make his body into a mummy for the sake of future living beings and made a request. From inside his nose there appeared a sacred relic, and it still exists today.<sup>25</sup>

In the first part of this essay I have described all the different kinds of funeral which I know to be, or have been, practised in Lubra, but for one or two exceptional forms which are mentioned below. They each correspond to the dead person's status as defined by one of the criteria listed above. In most cases, the ways in which the status of the deceased is represented in the funeral are self-evident, or have been elucidated during the course of the description, but there are several more theoretical aspects of this correspondence which are not obvious, and these I shall consider now.

### Double burial

One of the principal themes in Hertz's essay is the subject of double burial, a practice which is in evidence in a great many cultures in one form or another. In one sense, he says, death is not a discrete event but a long process corresponding to what he calls the 'intermediary period', in which the body is reduced to a condition of harmless inertness. The period of decomposition is both polluting and dangerous not only to the living but also to the deceased himself, who must be 'freed from the mortuary infection' (p. 32). Thus the people of Lubra, perhaps trying to rationalise their revulsion at the notion of burial, say that sin (*sdig pa*) will accrue to the soul of one who is interred. For them, there is something sinister about gradually decomposing under the earth and being eaten by worms. Fish are not such ideal agents as vultures, which are regarded to be incarnations of *dākini* (*mkha'-gro-ma*), but they do not have the same insidious quality as subterranean maggots which eat slowly and from within. This may be a purely subjective exegesis on the part of my informants, but it clearly demonstrates the impulse to hasten and control the process of stabilisation and to avoid 'the horror of a slow and vile decomposition', as Hertz calls it. Of course, these feelings about burial do not apply to stillborn infants which, apart from being very small and therefore quick to decompose are, socially speaking, not really human anyway.

In the matter of status, we should not be misled by the fact that cremation is usual with both *bla-ma* and children. In the latter case, burning is an expedient form of disposal (because very little wood is required), hardly any ceremony is involved, and the remains are not kept. In the case of the *bla-ma*, on the other hand,

<sup>25</sup> *Phung po ma sregs ri la skyol gcig sgungs/bu slob rnams kyis phyi rab 'gro ba'i don du sku gdung gcig zhu tshal/zhus pas/shang nang nas sha ri ram gcig 'byung ba da lta yang yod do.*

the full cremation ritual (*ro sbyin-sreg*) is conducted and the remnants of bone are enshrined more or less in perpetuity. The way in which these two are perceived is perhaps comparable to a Westerner's concept of the difference between a crematorium and a mortuary incinerator. More generally, we should be careful to distinguish aspects of the different funeral ceremonies on grounds of function and purpose, not of appearance. Hertz points out that 'there is a difference of duration and of means between cremation and the various modes of temporary sepulture, but not a difference of kind' (p 43). The incineration of a dead child is the final disposal whereas the cremation of a *bla-ma* corresponds to Hertz's intermediary period.

The distinction in meaning is not as sharp where the mummification of *bla-ma* and of children is concerned, although the rationale behind the desiccation of the first-born son is not entirely clear. In the case of the *bla-ma*, it is apparent that his spiritual qualities are considered to have permeated his flesh and bones, and that the preserved body will continue to radiate its benediction as long as it is kept—except as we have seen, in the event of some untoward contamination. The fact that the mummified body of an infant is removed even before the birth of the second son belies the explanation that its presence in the house ensures the appearance of a male heir. A more plausible interpretation is that the very process of desiccation is a kind of metaphor for the preservation of the patrilineage, since bone (*rus-pa*), is the principle which is transmitted agnatically. Although there seems to be no single term for this practice, it was invariably described to me using the significantly ambiguous expression "keeping the bones in the house" *rus-pa khang-pa nang-du 'bor-mkhan*<sup>26</sup>).

Whatever the correct explanation may be—if indeed it is valid to speak in terms of single explanations—it is evident that the condition of an individual in the context of kingship and society or in the sphere of religion, is absorbed and expressed by his physical form. As Hertz says, 'the bones of the dead are usually sacred and magically potent; they are "warm with spiritual power"'.<sup>27</sup> The *sku-gdung mchod-rten* in which sacred relics are housed are revered with circumambulations and prostrations, and they are reconsecrated (*rabs-gnas*) annually with offerings of clay *tsha-tsha*, which often contain grain.

<sup>26</sup> *Rus-pa* is simply the non-honorific term for *gdung*. 'Bor is used in the local dialect where colloquial Central Tibetan would use 'bzhag' (i.e. '(jog') to put or keep. It is never used in the usual sense of 'to throw'. *mKhan* is the usual gerundial particle.

<sup>27</sup> p 72, quoting a saying from the island of Saa.

**The transfer of spiritual properties through necrophagy and coprophagy**

In some cases, those who seek to derive benefit from sacred mortal remains are not content to do so merely by receiving their emanations. The belief that a dead body is somehow charged with the essential qualities of its discarnate owner is illustrated more vividly in the practice which Hertz terms endocannibalism, 'the ritual consumption of the deceased person's flesh by his relatives'. He adds that 'by this rite the living incorporate into their own being the vitality and the special qualities residing in the flesh of the deceased' (p 44). As far as I know, necrophagy based on the deceased's position as a kinsman is not practised in Lubra or anywhere else in Tibet, but there are reports that the bodies of yogis (*rnal-'byor-ba*) are consumed by tantric practitioners in order to ingest the sacred properties present in the flesh. Alexandra David-Neel records an episode in which the body of an adept, which has miraculously floated upstream into Tibet from India, is consumed in this manner.

So invested with magical properties is the corpse that not only does it not decompose, but when a piece of the flesh is not eaten it mysteriously disappears.<sup>28</sup>

But such beliefs are by no means unique to Tibet. In India, the bodies of certain Saivite ascetics are not burned but buried :

Provided that (the ascetic) has 'taken' *sāmadhi* while still alive (*jīvit-samādhi*), rather than being given it after death, his body is immune to putrescence and decay although it remains entombed for thousands of years.<sup>29</sup>

The Christian tradition itself abounds with such examples, that of St. Francis Xavier being merely the most famous.

When my wife was ill in Lubra, the present head of bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma's lineage offered her a hair from the head of his illustrious ancestor, to be heated and rolled into a small pill before swallowing. He explained that the hair was both a medicine (*sman*) and a blessing (*byin-rlabs*) by virtue of having belonged to such a holy personality. In Tibet itself, sacred relics were recommended for consumption shortly before death, and a recent manual on mortuary practices advises that :

One or two relics of a saint, added to the milk of a yak or a cow should be poured into (the dying man's) mouth and he should be made to swallow it. As the saying which concerns this goes : 'the last utterance is the will, the last food is a sacred relic and the last drink is a blessed potion;<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> A. David-Neel. 1971. *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. London. pp 128-9.

<sup>29</sup> J. Parry, *op. cit.*,

<sup>30</sup> Quoted from Thupten Sangay. 1974. *Tibetan Ceremonies of the Dead (Bod mi i 'das mchod)*. Dharamsala. p.l. My translation.

However, inert remains such as hair and bones are presumably not as potent as unstable flesh, which is a powerful agent of either pollution or empowerment.

Bodily excretions, which are usually even more polluting than flesh, may also be regarded as vessels for a person's power. Another member of the Yang-gnal clan who figures in this context is Yang-ston Drung-pa rin-chen dbang-rgyal, whose close association with divinity is expressed in a rather surprising metaphor :

He spat on a rock and the (sacred) letter A appeared<sup>31</sup>. Above, all, the guardians of arcane Bon, three fierce protectors of the doctrine, accompanied him as if they were his body and smell.<sup>32</sup>

To cite another example, it is reported (though I concede that the source is probably unreliable) that in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the faeces of the Dalai Lamas used to be 'piously stored to pound into medicinal pills'.<sup>33</sup> One of the first European visitors to Tibet, writing in the Seventeenth Century records a similar practice :

The Great Lama (i.e. the Dalai Lama) is worshipped with such veneration by everyone that the man counts himself blessed who can obtain some of the Grand Lama's excreta or urine. People obtain these things through the kindness of the Lamas, whom they are accustomed to bribe with very great and costly gifts. . . . They wear the excreta around their necks and mix the urine with their food—what abominable filth ! While attacking every physical infirmity in this way, they quite stupidly think that they will remain perfectly healthy and safe against the attack of ill health—poor fools !<sup>34</sup>

The Tibetan belief in the sanctity of the Dalai Lama's faeces is attested to by no less a figure than Voltaire, whose information may well have been taken from Athanasius Kircher's account, partially quoted above. As an illustration of "theological religion" (*la religion théologique*), which he condemns as 'the source of all follies and of all imaginable trouble; . . . the mother of fanaticism and of civil discord', he describes a hypothetical situation where two sects who are at variance on some point of doctrine seek the advice of the Dalai Lama.

<sup>31</sup> The subject of the sacred letter A is further discussed in Michael Oppitz, 1968. *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa*. Innsbruck and Munich. p. 36 n.4.

<sup>32</sup> *K Jags chil pha bong la gtor plai yi ge A Khrungs so/khyad par gsang gter bon kyi srungs ma/bka' bskyongs dreg pa de gsum gyis kyang/dong sgrogs lus dang drib ma shin tu/i.e. dri ma bzhin du/byed do* (fol. 44 b).

<sup>33</sup> Han Suyin. 1979. *Lhasa, the open City*. London p 47.

<sup>34</sup> A. K ircher. 1979. *China Illustrata*. Kathmandu. (Tr. Fr. John Locke S.J.) First published 1679.

... who is immortal and also infallible. The two factions send him an official deputation. The Dalai Lama begins, as is his divine wont, by distributing amongst them his night-commode (i.e. its contents).

The two rival sects at first receive it with equal respect, dry it in the sun and mount it on little rosaries which they kiss devoutly.

But the dispute is soon rekindled, and, 'and the Dalai Lama laughs about it, and again distributes his night-commode to whomever truly wishes to receive the emissions of their good father, the Lama'.<sup>35</sup>

Both coprophagy and necrophagy are practised in certain Tantric sects, but there is a major qualitative difference between this form and the examples I have given above. The Tibetan examples concern an ingestion of special properties inherent in the body of a spiritually superior individual. In the case of Saivite Tantrics such as the Aghoris, the consumption of human excrement and (often putrid) flesh seems to be a kind of religious inversion consistent with living in cemeteries, wearing and eating from skulls and generally behaving abnormally, in accordance with the belief that there are no real distinctions in the universe.<sup>36</sup>

To summarise, it is not just the inert remains of a saint which are invested with his spiritual power. Dead flesh and bodily excretions may normally be sources of pollution, but in the case of high *bla-ma* foul becomes fair, and means are sought to extract and benefit from their sacred properties. There are two methods of doing this: by preserving them and receiving their emanations, and by consuming them. Examples have been given in which all three—flesh, bones (or hair) and faeces—are treated in both ways.

### **Mourning and death pollution**

Although it is not my purpose in the present discussion to attempt to distinguish the origins of attitudes to death and the dead, as expressed in social behaviour and ritual, it is perhaps worth pointing to a certain ambivalence on the part of the people in this context. Outside the realm of the miraculous, when bodies do not putrefy, the unstable corpse is dangerous to the living, and death as a physical event has its correspondence in the social world. This is the institution of mourning, which is 'the necessary participation of the living in the mortuary state of their relative, and (which) lasts as long as this state itself' (Hertz, p 86). The requirements of mourning vary in severity and duration according to the mourner's pro-

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<sup>35</sup> F. Voltaire./1821. *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Paris. Vol. VIII. p 40. (1st edn.1764, Geneva). My translation.

I am grateful to Michael Aris for bringing this passage to my notice.

<sup>36</sup> J. Parry. *op. cit.* p 100.

ximity to the deceased in terms of kinship. In Lubra, a widow does not wash her hair between the death of her husband and the *dge-ba*, and may not wear jewellery or fine clothing or take another husband until after the 'yarin', the final ceremony for the dead. In Tibet, where the *lo-mchod* marked the end of the overall mourning period, the observances were essentially the same. According to the same manual of mortuary practices :

As an indication that they are in mourning, the relatives (of the deceased) undo their braids and remove their ribbons; they do not wash their faces and wear no earrings or other jewellery; clothes that have grown old and are black in colour are worn, and some people even lower the prayer flags from their roofs. Until the forty-ninth day after the death they do not dance or sing songs . . . and each day, morning and evening, a small cymbal is sounded and roasted flour is put into a red clay pot that has not previously been used.<sup>37</sup>

However, this passage reveals differences from the Lubra observances that are particularly interesting in connection with Hertz's assessment of the institution of mourning. We see that in Central Tibet (or at least that area of it to which the writer's descriptions apply) the main period of mourning lasts for the full forty-nine days of the deceased's term on the *bar-do*, and that the performance of *gsur* continues for the same length of time.<sup>38</sup> Thus the Tibetan example is more consistent with orthodox belief, since the 'mortuary state' in which the relatives of the deceased participate coincides precisely with that period. There is no single occasion corresponding to the *dge-ba*, but the forty-ninth day is celebrated with festive eating and drinking, and the mourners wash their faces, braid their hair and don their usual finery. On this day, moreover, the 'red clay pot' that accommodated the *nam-she*s is disposed of.

In Lubra, on the other hand, the period of mourning comes to an end at the *dge-ba*, and I believe that it is this occasion which marks the final "burial" of the dead, rather than the more obvious *sbyang-par*. It is true that on the day of the *dge-ba* no part of the actual corpse receives its final sepulture, but the events of the day are strikingly reminiscent of a death and a funeral. The *nam-she*s departs from the *thugs-sa* and is transferred into a printed sheet of paper, and the vessel which embodied it is taken outside the village and destroyed. Likewise the *sob*, the effigy which came into being at the time of death, is embraced and tears are shed

<sup>37</sup> Thupten Sangay. *op. cit.* p 3. My translation.

<sup>38</sup> In fact this is not clearly stated in the extract, but I am reliably informed that this is indeed the case.

over it as if it were the deceased himself. The important thing is that at no time does the consciousness of the deceased reside in the *sob*. It represents the body alone, and its removal from the village is tantamount to a second funeral. In effect, a surrogate of the corpse has remained in the village all the time. After this final disposal, the period of death is over and the *rtogs-ldan-pa* welcomes the mourners back into the realm of the living by anointing the head of each with a daub of butter. The *sbyang-par* ceremony on the other hand concerns the deceased alone, for it is a purely esoteric rite that has no bearing on death as a social phenomenon.

It should be mentioned that men are not subject to such stringent requirements as women. For example, it is not obligatory in Lubra for a widower to wear old clothing, and he may remarry before the 'yarin'. The most likely explanation is that women are generally more vulnerable to pollution of any sort. Thus a woman who has sexual relations with a man of lower rank (*rgyud-pa*) is irredeemably reduced to her partner's level, whereas a man in an analogous situation may be restored to his former status through the performance of certain purificatory rites. Although widows (*yugs-sa-ma*) may remarry, they generally do not because of the difficulty of finding another husband. A widow is permanently tainted and is regarded with some apprehension, for she is said to have 'eaten the flesh of her husband' (*khyo-ga 'i sha zas-song*). Consequently, widows may not enter the house of anyone who is dangerously ill after noon, when the declining day is already weakening the patient. They are politely turned away from the door and begged not to take offense. Widowers (*yugs-sa-pa*), on the other hand, do not seem to carry this stigma.

But the most negative reactions are aroused by the phenomenon of 'bad death' :

All those who die a violent death or by an accident, women dying in childbirth, people killed by drowning or by lightning, suicides, are often the object of special rites. Their bodies inspire the most intense horror . . . (Hertz p 85).

I have no information from Lubra to suggest that the form of funeral in the event of bad death as defined by Hertz is any different from the usual procedure, but Lubragpas tell me that the bodies of those who have died in this way are a source of particular dread. According to Hertz, 'it is the last sight of the individual, as he was when death struck him down, which impresses itself most deeply on the living' (p 86). The clue lies precisely in this resultant indistinctness of the threshold between life and death, for the apprehension of the Lubragpas and of Tibetans in general is seated in profound fear of the type of vampire known as *ro-langs*<sup>39</sup>. According to

<sup>39</sup> The *ro-langs* does not actually drink the blood of its victims, but it is vampire-

this belief, the corpse is reanimated either by an evil spirit or by the original inhabitant of the body, the suddenness of whose departure has led him to doubt that he is dead. Lubragpas say that, in any case, breaking a corpse's back generally ensures that it will not become a *ro-lang*s; in Mugu, where airburial is generally reserved for victims of bad death, the desired effect is achieved by a prescribed mutilation of the body with a knife, and the rib-cage is subsequently inverted in order to indicate to the *rnam-shes* that it may no longer make use of the body.<sup>40</sup> But the latter explanation is clearly exegetic, for the kind of funeral that is accorded to an ordinary individual—cremation in this case—would prevent the occurrence of a *ro-lang*s just as surely as dismemberment. The important thing is probably that the procedure is somehow different from that which follows a natural death.

However, victims of certain diseases are treated quite differently from other adults both in Lubra and in Mustang as a whole. Those who have succumbed to diseases that manifest externally—particularly measles, leprosy<sup>41</sup> and, in the past smallpox—are neither given an air burial nor cremated, since this would bring misfortune upon the whole village. The bodies are not kept in the house and no *sob* is constructed for them, but they are immediately removed from the village and thrown into the river or buried. This is not the case with victims of, 'internal' diseases, such as pneumonia and the ubiquitous tuberculosis. Moreover, if a person dies during the period when the sun is "staying in its house" (*nyi-ma khyim la bzhugs-pa'i sgang du*) and is believed to be at its hottest, the body may not be disposed of. The period is called *dbyar nyi-khyim*, the "summer house of the sun"; during this time the days neither lengthen nor decrease since the sun is said to rise and set in exactly the same places. If the body is cremated or given to the birds during this time, the entire village will be polluted and it is likely that people and animals will

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like insofar as it belongs to the 'living dead', and infects those whom it touches with its own condition. There are different categories of *ro-langs*, apparently classified according to the method whereby they can be killed. Thus a *khrag-lang*s will succumb to blood being drawn from it, while the most feared kind, the *rman-langs*, has a single small mole which is its only Achilles' heel and which may be anywhere on its body. *Bla-ma* (and to some extent lamas) can bypass these conditions and destroy them with magic, but in Lubra it is said that they may also be killed by wolves.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Clarke, personal communication referring to fieldwork carried out in 1974. Because of the scarcity of firewood in Mugu it seems that here too wealth and status are factors determining the type of funeral received.

<sup>41</sup> One need not actually die of the disease to become a candidate for inauspicious burial, but simply manifest the symptoms at the time of death. Conversely, a person is not considered to be tainted if he recovers from smallpox and merely bears the scars.



fall ill and die, or that some natural disaster will occur as a direct consequence. Accordingly, the body is placed in the river and weighted down with large rocks so that the current will not carry it away. The flesh will decompose only very gradually in the cold, swiftly-running water, and the body must remain thus for however many days of the *nyi-khyim* period are left, following which it is removed and disposed of in the normal way with all the appropriate ceremonies. This year 1982, the *dbyar nyi-khyim* extends from the first to the fifteenth of the third month (24 April to 5 May).<sup>42</sup>

Superimposed on this representation of the body as powerful and polluting is another which sees it as being of no real consequence, and even mildly beneficial in the scheme of things. This is suggested in the orthodox characterisation of the corpse during the funeral. Any number of functional considerations may have been responsible for the practice of air burial in Tibet, and, as Waddell asserts, 'this revolting mode of disposing of the dead in doubtless owing in part . . . to the scarcity of wood for cremation, and the difficulty of digging the frozen soil for graves' (1950, p 233); but it is interpreted by Tibetans as an act of charity on the part of the deceased, who acquires merit by donating his body in this fashion. In the list of the 'ten possessions of the Buddhist which he should be ready to bestow' (*sbyin-parnam bcu*), the last is in fact 'his own flesh' (*rang gi sha*).<sup>43</sup>

This conflict between the precepts of a Great and Little Tradition is, according to Hertz, a feature of many cultures and religions such as Christianity, where funebral rites consistent with an impulsive or instinctive response to death have been supplanted by the cold spiritual logic of a World Religion. In Tibet, at least, such a logic has wrought a complete reversal in the response to the death of a spiritual (generally synonymous with temporal) leader. It has dramatically upset the principle that individuals of higher social status occasion greater emotional turbulence by their death and than those of lower. Following this principle, we might expect the death of high *bla-ma* to inspire chaos comparable to that described by Hertz as following the death of the chief in certain preliterate tribal societies. If, in Tibet, this emotion does actually manifest itself, then it is spontaneously sublimated by the influence of the Great Tradition into a celebration that the deceased's spiritual qualities are not lost to the world. This reversal of mood is eloquently expressed by Sir Edwin Arnold, in his exposition of the Buddhist belief that

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<sup>42</sup> The apparent disparity in the number of days is due to the fact that the tenth day of the Tibetan month is 'cut' (*chad*).

<sup>43</sup> The definitions are from Das, *op. cit.* p 939.

...When the mild and just die, sweet airs breathe;  
 The world grows richer, as if desert stream  
 Should sink away to sparkle up again  
 Purer, with broader gleam.<sup>44</sup>

It is indeed a radical inversion at the core of a society's view of the universe to characterise what would otherwise be a crisis where social life is shaken to its foundation, as a beatific occasion of miracles, tents of rainbow-light and rain of flowers.

But whatever else they may be, funerals and dead bodies are an inconvenience and there seems to be a kind of unexpressed wish that the dead would look after their own corpses. I am not referring to the inauspicious situation where a person dies (usually violently) and the body cannot be found, but to the belief that some of the most spiritually accomplished individuals leave no mortal remains. It is worth recalling that until the time of Gri-gum lde-btsan the kings of Tibet did not die but reascended to heaven by means of a mystical rope (*dmu-thag*). When the unfortunate Gri-gum was separated from his body by superior magic, it became necessary to introduce into Tibet Bon-pos who were specialists in funerary matters. According to one tradition, this marked the beginning of the phase of Bon known as *dur-bon*, which was concerned primarily with death-rituals. The same sentiment is apparently expressed in an incident, related by Chogyam Trungpa, where a saintly individual dies and enters the contemplative state of *thugs-dam*, having left instructions that his body should not be touched for a week. At the end of this period the door of his room is opened to reveal that the body has shrunk away to nothing, leaving only the hair and fingernails.<sup>45</sup> But the ideal situation is perhaps represented by the case of Yang-ston Sems-dpa'-gsal, the grandson of bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, who simply 'shook his body three times, and went to heaven in a rainbow'.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusions

Finally, I shall make some general observations based on the material presented above. At the root of this system of funerary rituals and beliefs is the conviction that a corpse is not merely a corpse, but a record of the particular life which once animated it. The corpse should be regarded and dealt with in a way befitting the departed personality, whose essential identity may be defined by a number of

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<sup>44</sup> 1888/*The Light of Asia*. London.

<sup>45</sup> Chogyam Trungpa. 1969. *Born in Tibet*. London.

<sup>46</sup> *sku lus thena asum spru'cs nas ja 'od dang nas dbyinas su asheas so.*

criteria. In Lubra, which has been the focus of this study, the criteria are wealth, age, sex and spirituality, though we may imagine that in other societies such factors as political status and rank or caste distinction become a consideration.

It would be mere speculation to try and isolate the variables in mortuary practices which represent differences in status, since this would require a detailed consideration of the terms as they are defined in the textual aspect of the rituals. The literary dimension would have to figure prominently, for it would be futile to speculate on whether one form of funeral intrinsically expresses more status or respect than another. We may, however, see some significance in the hierarchy of beings which are the beneficiaries of the body as an offering, ascending from worms, to fish, to vultures (*dākinī*) and finally the gods, whose mouth is the fire itself. This clearly corresponds to the Buddhist belief that more merit accrues to the donor of a gift the worthier the recipient of it.

But it is at least possible to relate an individual's status to the influence that his death has in terms of space and time. The death of a newborn child evokes no response outside the house, and the event is forgotten a day later when the body is buried (unless it is a first-born son, in which case the time factor is increased by several months). While the rites for an older child still do not extend beyond the confines of the house, the social space of the proceedings is extended to encompass all the other children of the village as beneficiaries of the 'yorten', and the time is lengthened by a few days. The death of an adult affects the entire village and the gomba, the focus of social and religious life, becomes the centre of the funeral activities. The time involved is increased to a minimum of one year, but the factor of wealth may extend the dimension of time by a further year for the 'yarin' and that of space to include two more villages as the recipients of *kha-tog*. But the death of a saint or *bla-ma* introduces a different order of time and space, insofar as the remains are preserved ostensibly for ever, and 'for the good of all living beings'.