

Survival and Evolution of Sky Burial Practices in Tibetan Areas of China

by Pamela Logan

The Practice

When I first saw a sky burial in 1997, what struck me most was how quickly it was all over: vultures devoured the man's flesh in just thirteen minutes.

The charnel ground, (*durtro* or *dursa*), was set in a large fenced meadow with a few small temples and outbuildings, and a large circle of stones where the ceremony took place. The body was brought up in a slow procession, the family of the deceased following behind. Meanwhile, vultures circled.

This site was operated by Drigung Thil Monastery, a much-venerated institution of the Drigung [Drikung] Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhism, located about 130 km east of Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. Besides its primary function as a place where monks study and practice, Drigung has long been a provider of funerary services to central Tibet. Its reputation is such that some people from the capital would spend considerable time and money to bring their deceased family members to Drigung, rather than choosing a closer site.

I was told that sky burials were held daily at Drigung. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that the birds were ravenously hungry. After the man's body was laid upon the bier, they came down and clustered around, jostling and pushing to get closer, but three men kept them away by shouting and waving sticks.

The coroners in their long white aprons went about unwinding the white fabric that swathed the stiff, swollen body. They whetted their cleavers on a nearby rock; then, with a few swift cuts, removed the dead man's organs for separate disposition. The men chatted while they worked, for this was not a religious ceremony. The religious formalities were already finished: a day of chanting in a nearby temple to allow transference of the man's *namshe* (consciousness) through the posterior fontanelle of his skull and out of his body. With the man's consciousness gone, the coroners' task was only to dispose of the empty shell.

I do not remember if the deceased's family watched the process. Some accounts state that next of kin do not usually watch but remain nearby; however, one related that family members not only watched, but participated by crushing the skull.¹ The order of cutting up a body varies from place to place and can also be tailored to the individual: their gender, age, cause of death, and life history. Some coroners dismember the body; others make only a few cuts and let the birds do the rest.

While the coroners worked, the vultures edged closer. Then someone gave a signal, and simultaneously all of the men fell back. The vultures darted in and fell upon the body in a

¹ Gillian G Tan, *In the Circle of White Stones: Moving Through Seasons with the Nomads of Eastern Tibet*, University of Washington Press, 2017. Pp. 81-82.

frenzy, heads diving like spears to drive sharp beaks in. Even from a hundred yards away, I could hear the sound of vultures chittering and flesh tearing as meat came away from bone.

After the flesh was completely consumed, the men pulled out what remained of the corpse--only a bloody skeleton--and shooed away the remaining birds. They took out mallets and set to work pounding the bones. The men talked while they work, even laughing sometimes, for according to Tibetan belief the mortal remains are merely an empty vessel. The dead man's spirit was gone, its fate to be decided by karma accumulated through the actions of all past lives.

The bones were soon reduced to splinters, mixed with barley flour and then thrown to crows and hawks, who were awaiting their turn. Remaining vultures grabbed slabs of softened gristle and greedily devoured them. Half an hour later, what had once been a human body had completely vanished.

Now the vultures took to the air. This species is eerily impressive: wings spanning more than 2 meters, top-feathers of dirty white, and huge, gray-brown backs. Their heads are virtually featherless, so as not to impede the bird when pushing into a corpse to feed. As they gained altitude, I could hear their enormous wings chuffing like steam locomotives over my head.

I was too far away to see the gore, so I felt only awe at the magnificence of the giant birds as they carried the man's mortal remains to the sky. Truly, in that moment, I felt his spirit aloft and soaring.

The Body-Cutter's Profession

I have never met a body-cutter (*rogya-pa, shashinpa*), but a friend of mine did, a tourist guide who frequently visits the Tibetan grasslands. She chanced to meet a coroner who was staying in a home she was visiting, and subsequently shared what she learned.

The man was a lama, and very unusual-looking: almost seven feet tall. He slouched habitually, and his beard and sideburns formed a halo of hair around the moon of his face.

The man had come to the coroner's profession when he was a *traba*, or student monk. One day, when he was fifteen, a boil broke out on his neck. His teacher, a high lama, told him the meaning of the boil was that the young man would travel to many sacred places and he would be a body-cutter. Ever since then, the man has performed the duties of a coroner, meanwhile visiting many holy sites in Amdo and Kham.

The man owned a human thigh bone made into a horn, and he had a piece of skull which he used routinely as a bowl for food and drink. He had an ivory bracelet on which to place the skull when he set it down, and a finely-made cloth case in which to carry the skull and bracelet. These items had belonged to his teacher, who had used them for many years before giving them to the young acolyte shortly before the teacher's death.

One famous and venerated site where the man had worked was the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Serthar (Ch: Seda) County, in Sichuan. There, it had been his job to summon the

birds the night before a body was to be disposed of. The birds came from India, he said. To summon them, the night before he performed a ceremony using preserved pieces of human skin cut in the shape of an arm and hand. He would call a particular number of birds -- say, 75. He stated emphatically the exact number requested would always appear.

The burial lama said that he was accustomed to working with corpses. He said, "If I were afraid at all, in the least bit, I could not do this work at all. I am completely unbothered by anything having to do with dead bodies. I could eat the meat and drink the blood!"

This was not idle boasting, for in fact he had eaten human flesh on one occasion, at a funeral in a nomad region of Kham. Two young people, a man and a woman, had died in a fight. He and the other coroners had laid out the bodies, but the birds refused to come. The coroners waited all day for the birds to do their work, but they did not. Finally, in desperation, the lama took a bite of human flesh to show the birds that the meat was good. When the birds saw him do this, at last they came down and fed.

Sky Burial in Buddhism and Tibetan Culture

Tibetans have traditionally used several ways to dispose of their dead, but sky burial has been the most common. The Tibetan term is *jhator* (བྱུག་ལྷོ་རྩེ་) -- literally "bird-scattered." The Chinese term is *tianzang* (天葬). Indeed, *jhator* is very practical in a land where fuel is scarce and the earth is often too hard to dig.

Offering flesh to the birds is also an act of generosity in accordance with Buddhist values. One oft-told tale is about a philosopher-ascetic wandering in the mountains who comes upon a hungry tigress with her cubs. Shocked and saddened by the sight of the dying creatures, he decides to hurl himself from a mountaintop so that the tigress and her cubs can be saved by feasting on his flesh. In Tibet and other places where Mahayana Buddhism is practiced, such self-sacrifice is lauded as a sign of a compassionate mind, for it demonstrates the intention to attain Buddhahood not for oneself, but for the benefit of all sentient beings. Offering one's own flesh at a sacred site such as Drigung is regarded as a gateway to liberation from *samsara* -- the endless, suffering-laden wheel of life, death, and rebirth.

To dispose of physical remains, if sky burial is not available or appropriate, Tibetans sometimes use cremation, which is discussed in the next section. The bodies of people who died of sickness are released into rivers, perhaps to protect birds from infection.² Earth burial also happens but is uncommon because the size and location of cemeteries impose practical limits on the number of graves that can be accommodated. I personally knew one (Tibetan) individual who had been director of the Derge Printing House when he died of illness; he was interred at a small cemetery at the edge of Derge town among other local luminaries and officials. In Dawu County, adjacent to a memorial to Chinese martyrs, there is a cemetery known as "the Tibetan graveyard" where the tombstones bear both Tibetan and Chinese inscriptions.³ These

² See Tan, p. 84 for a description of the "water burial" of a 6-month-old infant. Traditional Tibetans do not eat fish because of their perceived role in disposing of corpses.

³ Åshild Kolas and Monika P. Thowsen, *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier (Studies on Ethnic Groups in China)*, University of Washington Press, 2005, loc 1198 of 5242 (Kindle edition).

examples suggest that Chinese cultural influence plays a role some families' choice of earth burial.

Tibet has produced a very elaborate and profound set of teachings on death and dying called *Bardo thodol*, believed to have been formulated by philosopher Padmasambhava in the 8th century. This work is the source of chants that are performed around the time of death to guide the spirit through the *bardo* – the intermediate states that precede rebirth. It is popularly (but inaccurately) known in English as “The Tibetan Book of the Dead,” owing to a translation published in 1927.

Tibetan religious traditions as set forth in *Bardo thodol* and elsewhere emphasize the concept of impermanence as intrinsic to human existence, a concept that is particularly relevant to mourners seeking to make sense of loss. Visible destruction and dissipation of the remains underscore that teaching, perhaps helping those close to the deceased to process their grief.

After consciousness has left the body, great efforts are taken to ensure the spirit's safe passage to the next life. Following death, seven weeks of prayer are directed toward the spirit as it makes its way through the *bardo*. If the person has accumulated sufficient positive karma in their previous lives, they will be reborn as a human; otherwise, possibly an animal or insect.

Sky Burial and the World Outside Tibet

You wouldn't be reading this, and I would not be writing it, if it weren't for the curiosity – some might say morbid fascination – that sky burial inspires in non-Tibetans who hear about it. Thanks to an article I posted online, in September of 2006 I was contacted by a producer at Traveling Light Media who was putting together a video production on the subject of dust. She was interested in Tibetan sky burial and wanted to interview me on-camera; she also wanted to know if I had any photos or video footage. The production was planned as an episode of a science series called “Mr. Know It All.”

I had no problem being interviewed, but I was perturbed by the producer's stated aim of acquiring footage of a sky burial to air on television. I told her that a funeral in Tibet is a deeply personal affair, and that airing such footage without permission would violate the privacy of the deceased individual and their family. I explained that, before seeing the burial described in my article, I had sent a messenger to the next of kin asking for permission, promising to stay at a respectful distance and take no photos whatsoever. She listened politely, but I could tell she was not convinced.

In due course, I went into a studio in Burbank where I sat on a stool on a brightly-lit stage in front of a green screen. The producer, hidden in the shadows behind the camera, asked questions. I don't remember most of them, but the subject of privacy came up again. In that moment, I hit upon an apt analogy: that filming a sky burial can be compared to filming the birth of a baby.

For nearly a year after that, I heard nothing. When I contacted the producer to inquire, she had moved on to a different company but stated that the episode had been completed and sent to the network, but as far as she knew it had not been broadcast. I don't believe it ever was.

Perhaps my comparison with childbirth struck a chord with network decision-makers, or perhaps they couldn't find the footage they needed to make the episode successful.

Still, it's inevitable that someone should record a sky burial on film for screening overseas. Thankfully, one American filmmaker who chose it as a subject, Russell O Bush, took care to be sensitive to the feelings of Tibetans. His 2013 film, *Vultures of Tibet*, frames the topic as emblematic of the power imbalance between Chinese and Tibetans, highlighting the practices of local officials selling tickets to sky burials and tour operators bringing groups of tourists to witness them. (I do not know how prevalent this practice is, whether monks and families are coerced into it, and who profits). He studiously refrained from showing images that would be disturbing to the family of the deceased -- and to movie-goers. The documentary was reviewed favorably in the West and won several awards.

There is irony in Mr. Bush's exploitation of sky burial to further his filmmaking career while simultaneously decrying exploitation of it by others. Yet there is clearly a difference between footage obtained and screened with a family's consent and a mob of tourists recording video on their smartphones for later posting on social media.

I could not find any on-line reviews of *Vultures of Tibet* written by Tibetans, perhaps reflecting ambivalence about a foreigner making a documentary about such an intimate and deeply Tibetan topic.

Regarding sky burial tourism, Tibetan guides have, on several occasions, offered to take me to witness *jhator*, so it's not just Han Chinese who are involved. Lacking information on the financial arrangements, I cannot be sure who is exploiting whom. Tibetans are not without the means to stop it, as will be revealed further on in this article.

Sky Burial in a Modernizing World

In the early years of New China, the Communist Party took the position that sky burial was primitive and backward; during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, they attempted to ban it. Accounts differ on how long the ban lasted, and I would guess that it was imperfectly enforced due to sky burial's obvious convenience in a place of poverty and cold winters.

Fast forward to the 21st century. A friend from central Tibet told me that, around the turn of the century, authorities there were trying to promote cremation over sky burial, but had not taken the extreme step of reviving the ban. Cremation is also being promoted in Qinghai Province, according to a 2012 *China Daily* article.⁴ The province built its first crematorium in a Tibetan area in 1984 in Serchen (Ch: Gonghe) County, but it wasn't until 2010 that the industry really took off. From 2010 to 2012, eleven crematoria were built in predominantly Tibetan areas of the province.

⁴ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-12/13/content_16015555.htm, accessed on Nov 8, 2019.

The article reports that Serchen County's facility performed 380 cremations in 2011. Given an overall county population of 125,900 in that year and China's nationwide mortality rate of 7.1 per 1,000 people⁵ (Serchen's mortality rate is almost certainly higher) there were likely at least 894 deaths in Serchen in 2011, suggesting that at least 57% of deceased individuals were disposed of using means other than cremation – probably sky burial. The numbers, while not conclusive, suggest that sky burial was popular among Serchen residents in 2011.

Many Han Chinese do not accept cremation because of their commonly-held belief that the soul cannot be at peace unless the body is buried intact; however, Tibetans are more amenable because cremation has been long used to honor the remains of high lamas. Cremation therefore confers honor and dignity to the deceased. When choosing between cremation and sky burial, a family may be influenced by relative cost. An incarnate lama in the Yushu area who was interviewed by *China Daily* stated that sky burial was more expensive than cremation because of the custom that the yak that carries the deceased's body to the charnel grounds must be set free afterwards. Yaks cost thousands of yuan, compared to the 680-yuan cremation fee charged in Qinghai in 2012. (Use of a yak to carry the body seems to be a local custom; in other Tibetan areas, families transport their deceased loved ones in cars or on motorcycles).

Another reason to opt for cremation is that sky burials do not always succeed in fully disposing of the remains due to a decline in the population of vultures and other carrion eaters, likely caused by poison used to control rodents in some areas. And, as more people pass away in hospitals instead of at home, birds sometimes refuse to eat the bodies, probably because of the strange odors. It is considered inauspicious if the body is not fully consumed, which would naturally lead families to choose cremation in areas where birds are known to be low in numbers or finicky.

Even when bird populations are sufficient to take care of people who die from natural causes, they can fall far short during mass casualty events such as the 2010 earthquake at Yushu. This tragedy was magnified by inadequate means to dispose of the more than 2,000 dead and the resultant threat to sanitation and public health. The Yushu earthquake no doubt played a role in the provincial government's decision to invest in crematoria.

To better understand whether sky burial appeals to modern people, in 2019 I conducted a very unscientific poll using the survey platform on Twitter.com. The poll was open to all users, and the question posed was "If you died at a place like Tibet where sky burial is available and commonly practiced, would you want your remains disposed of that way?" The available answers were "Yes," "No," and "My family can decide." In less than 24 hours, my poll had received 9 responses, all saying yes. One respondent commented, "Sky burial reminds me of the Milarepa's song about death - where he said he would be happy if his corpse being eaten by birds and worms."

The positive response to sky burial is not strange when you consider that, in the West, there is a fledgling movement away from earth burial and cremation due to their negative impact on the

⁵ <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/population-county-level-region/population-qinghai-hainan-gonghe>, accessed Nov 11, 2019.

⁶ <https://knoema.com/atlas/China/Death-rate>, accessed Nov 11, 2019.

environmental. In 2019, Washington State enacted a law to legalize composting of human remains. Entrepreneurs have developed a process called “natural organic reduction” using mixture of organic materials that accelerate natural decomposition when placed with a body in a temperature- and moisture-controlled vessel and rotated. The result is mulch. American farmers have long used similar processes to dispose of the remains of livestock.

While cremation is gaining ground in a modernizing Tibet, sky burial is itself getting updated, at least at one location: the charnel grounds of Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Serthar County, in Kham. This particular site is very well-regarded and consequently heavily used.

Anthropologist Gillian Tan, visiting in 2006, reported that it was being used to dispose of up to twenty corpses per day, though on the day she visited it was handling only one. She described the site as “a large rectangle of flattened earth, darkened by blood.”⁷ Photos taken by visitors in 2010 show blood, a large accumulation of trash and cast-off clothing, as well as what appear to be bone fragments and other biological materials.⁸

Noted Zen Buddhism teacher Joan Halifax describes a visit to a sky burial site near Mount Kailash, in western Tibet, where she performed “walking meditation among piles of bones and pools of blood, fat, and feces,” and also observed “two faces shorn of their skulls.”⁹ After first feeling fear and disgust at the sights and smells, further contemplation led her to see them as liberating her from the fear of death, “because it’s harder to fear what one more clearly sees.”

Most educated outsiders would not take such an enlightened view of a clearly unhealthful situation at a place where people gather and work. The deteriorating condition of the Larung Gar site came to the attention Metrul Tenzin Gyatso (美智•丹增嘉措), an incarnate lama who is an accomplished scholar and deputy dean at the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute. He decided to renovate it, leading a 3-year project to realize his vision of a new *durtro* that would honor the people who had passed away as well as better accommodate the carrion-eating birds that are essential to the sky burial tradition.

Over many visits to inspect and measure the site, Tenzin Gyatso Rinpoche developed a master plan and set of drawings. Construction was difficult because of the steep and rocky terrain, yet in the end resulted in a spacious paved pavilion with a rectangular stone bier at its center. Behind the pavilion, set into the hillside, is a spectacular set of stone sculptures and reliefs, rich in Tibetan Buddhist iconography, especially skulls. At the center of this macabre but impressive construction is a full-size stairway heading up into the mouth of Yama, Lord of the Underworld, a wrathful deity who symbolizes impermanence. There are many other details that make the site a fascinating cultural study but are too numerous to describe here.

To some observers, the new Larung Gar *durtro* resembles a Bollywood movie set. If anything, it has increased the site’s attraction to tourists, especially because they built a large parking lot for the convenience of visitors. These features have led to on-line rumors that the improvements

⁷ Gillian Tan, p. 80

⁸ <https://read01.com/a78nP7.html#.XcmZQC-ZPow>, accessed on Nov 11, 2019.

⁹ Upaya Zen Center blog excerpted from *Standing at the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet*, by Roshi Joan Halifax.

were masterminded not by a local Tibetan, but by government officials (usually described as Chinese) seeking to increase tourism profit.

While some in the Tibetan diaspora have criticized the Larung Gar design as overly commercial and “Disneyfied,” I would guess that the Khenpo is a good judge of customer preferences, and I would not be surprised to see similar improvements at other sites.

The more things change

Back at Drigung Monastery, sky burials continue as before, for it remains the most sacred *durtro* in central Tibet. A friend of mine who hails from that area told me that the monastery has enacted a strict ban on tourists, and they fenced off the charnel ground to keep looky-loos away. Their funeral business is brisk, in part because roads are much better now, allowing more families to make the journey. Because of strong demand, customers must contact the monastery to reserve a slot in the schedule; this how the monks adjust the supply of corpses to the appetites of the birds.

Many Tibetans still regard sky burial as an important expression of their Buddhist faith. As my friend said, sky burial “is very precious. It shows the true nature of our mind, that our flesh is the same as any others’ flesh. It’s not about lack of fuel, it’s a last gesture of generosity.” He told me that hundreds of relatives in his extended family had been sent into the sky with the birds.

Conclusion

Sky burial continues to be widely practiced in Tibetan areas of China despite threats from reduced bird populations, competition from cremation facilities, sanitation challenges, and an influx of tourists. At Drigung Thil Monastery in central Tibet, monks have taken measures to prevent tourists from watching; it’s unclear whether this is occurring elsewhere. In Kham, the enormous investment by Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in renovating their site demonstrates an expectation that sky burials will continue for the foreseeable future.

As one Tibetan said: “It’s our belief and our faith. I don’t think it’s ever going away.”