The Deceased's Life Cycle Rituals in Nepal

Present Cremation Burials for the Interpretations of the Past

Terje Oestigaard

BAR International Series 853
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Acknowledgements

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Preface

After witnessing several death rituals, Nigel Barley remarked in *Dancing on the Grave* that "...in Africa, my constant presence at funerals was rapidly noted. "You are like a vulture", one man remarked coolly. "I see you climbing the hills and I know someone else must have gone"." (Barley 1995:13). I had the same feeling when I was running after funeral processions, although I ran to the river. I could be speaking with people or just relaxing in the village, when I heard the funeral procession coming, I had to go. Needless to say, there are many ethical questions and considerations related to this topic. Mircea Eliade once referred to an anonymous British psychoanalyst who reportedly said: "We are born mad; then we acquire morality and become stupid and unhappy; then we die" (Eliade 1977:13). Finished! But the problem is that it is not that easy, death is still an ambivalent theme in Western societies. In writing about death the best the anthropologist can probably aspire to is the discovery of something about the world of the living (Parry 1994:7), in this case not only in Nepal, but hopefully also in a more general sense. The only thing death is about, is life; it is about humans, and being human. So far so good.

But there are several ways of presenting death and there are different ways of presenting the recent remains of death. Anthropologists are mostly concerned with the rituals, the archaeologists with the remains, often several thousand years old. But I have also documented the transition from rituals to remains. When I witnessed funerals, I was often allowed to take photographs. Some of these pictures are used in my thesis together with photographs of remains that I found lying exposed at cemeteries. Although death is a quite common theme too write about, it is rarely presented and documented by pictures. Moral questions arise in the real world, and a knowledge of the real-world relations in which they appear is essential if we want to seek answers to them (Regan 1993:9). I have taken some aspects into consideration in presenting these pictures:

Firstly, I will emphasize that when archaeologists study graves or mortuary remains, it is not merely a study of artefacts as it is often presented. People have died; it is the context of death. The emotional, social and spiritual setting of funerals within a society is important to understand in order to interpret the material remains. Or in other words, the Christian notions of death are insufficient in interpreting past funerals.

Secondly, the transition from rituals to remains or from death to decay is important archaeologically. Thus my intention is that the pictures of the remains will inspire to analogical reasoning based on the documented material.

Thirdly, my moral judgement is in the end an ontological quest; if we can’t face the non-being (or an existence without the organic and fleshly nature of humans), how can we face the being? Nevertheless, the main problem is the relatives, because the dead are a problem of the living. To put the question to its basic: if the deceased had been any of my relatives, and if I had allowed an archaeologist or anthropologist to take photographs during the funeral, or even if it was me who was dead, would I have had any objections if the photographs were used within an academic discourse afterwards? No. However, I cannot assume that all of my relatives would have shared my opinion. Ethical questions will normally be answered by many voices, I have but one, and there might be ones contradicting mine. If I have offended any of the deceased’s relatives, either by my behaviour and presence in the funerals or with the presented pictures in this thesis, I do apologise and I take the full responsibility.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Death as Knowledge

Ancient funeral practices and mortuary remains are a major source to the understanding of prehistoric societies. Hegel wrote once that history is the record of “what man does with death” (Whaley 1981:1). The diversity of death rituals and their manifestations in the archaeological material are expressions of the universal impact of death. Nigel Barley has described the problem in this way (Barley 1995:28-29):

"In fact, "funeral" is a very broad category, rather like "party". A dinner party at the palace can be a fearful ordeal of rigid hierarchy, decodable into little else but statements of formal relationships of relative "place". The food will be inedible and largely irrelevant. An undergraduate party can be a wild festival of unstructure, senses jammed by drink, music and flashing lights, a sexual free fire zone where anything goes and the loss of identity and hierarchy is one of the avowed aims of the event. Both are parties. Funerals around the world can show the same huge range of variation from rigid formality to blind disorder. The word funeral is what has been termed an "odd-job word"."

Approaches

I will combine two approaches to mortuary remains in this study. First, conceptions of death are pervaded by religious and cosmological ideas of the great Beyond, the soul’s afterlife, what death represents, and accordingly, these considerations are manifested in the funeral rites and thereby the remains left behind. Second, funerals are a part of a set of rituals by which the living deal with the dead. They are their own interpretation of the meaning of ordinary life (Morris 1992:1).

In these rituals, people may either make explicit the social structure by the use of symbols, or it may be implicitly woven together in their actual performance of the rituals.

In the realm of this an archaeologist is the uninvited but curious table cleaner who the day after wonders what has happened. While anthropologists often seek to investigate death rituals as part of life and society, archaeologists are mainly concerned with burials since they provide an important context for the deposition and preservation of artefacts. In archaeology problems arise when the aim is to elaborate the signifiance of mortuary rituals in the past, and how these funeral practices were related to the prehistoric people and societies as a contextual whole.

My aim with this analysis is to present an ethnoarchaeological analysis of life cycle rituals from the funeral practice and its manifestation in the mortuary remains of Brahms and Magars in Central Dhaulagiri Zone of Nepal. I will try to explore how the complexity and the diversity of funeral practices may enable archaeologists to penetrate into the social world behind the remains of death. Ian Morris reminds us not to forget the fact that archaeologists excavate burials and not whole funerals (Morris 1987:36), but I have had the possibility to go beyond the artefacts to the humans who died and those who performed their funeral rites, and thereafter look at the mortuary remains.

Although my underlying assumption is that religion and hereby various funeral practices reflect some of the deepest and most resilient traditions and values in a society, I will not fall into religious determinism. I will stress the importance of the rituals and the social actors who produce and reproduce social systems. As Fredrik Barth argues, because of variation among individuals, the importance is to focus on the processes whereby shared social and cultural constructions are created (Barth 1993:4-5), and “look at how people through their collective and separate activities reproduce and modify the realities of their past and present lives, elaborate features or loosing them, enhancing their coherence or dismantling it” (ibid:8). Thus it is possible to “transcend received theory and knowledge and to learn from the only fully valid source: people speaking and acting in a living society” (ibid:25), and thereby extend the comprehension of cultural processes and change.
Chapter 2: The Problem of Interpretations

The Practice of Archaeology

“If new ideas are to have more than a superficial impact, they need to be related to the practice of archaeology” (Hodder 1995[1992]:1). A problem archaeologists face is what is the (ultimate) goal with archaeology or what is “archaeology”? My aim is neither to define what “archaeology” is, nor to refer to various definitions. There are a lot of advantages being un-disciplined and many disadvantages and constrains imposed by trying to claim a disciplinary status (Miller & Tilley 1996). The point is that different definitions of the ultimate goals of archaeology have significant implications for what is considered as archaeological activities (Trigger 1994[1989]:371). The problem then becomes “how do we do archaeology at all” (Hodder 1994[1986]:4)? We accept the scientific account of the world, not as certainly true, but as the best at present available (Russell 1992[1950]:12). This involves an epistemological quest. All archaeology is a theoretical practice, but not all theoretical practice is archaeology (Solli 1996:21).

One of the archaeological practices is the use of analogy, but this practice is often a neglected area of scientific research. Thus there is a disharmony in interpretations, between meticulous studies of artefacts and a loose and ad hoc use of analogies. “All archaeology is based on analogy and the process of analogical reasoning can be explicit or rigorous. But we cannot strictly test the analogies and hypotheses, which result from their use. Archaeologists cannot prove or falsify their hypotheses on independent data. All they can achieve is a demonstration that one hypotheses or analogy is better or worse that another, both theoretically and in relation to data” (Hodder 1982a:9). If the analogies are unreliable, then they must also be unscientific (ibid:12-14), because the problem “...archaeologists feel (is) that it is all too easy for different people to read different thoughts and meanings into the past” (Hodder 1987:43). These interpretations derive from the interpreter’s own experience of the world combined with some degree of ethnographic and historical knowledge (ibid.). The distinction between argument and assumption, use of untested generalizations and unsupported inferences reconstructed by a process of sympathetic imagination are some of the main weaknesses of many post-processual interpretations (Trigger 1995:455). Archaeology as a discipline is concerned with archaeological data which it clusters in archaeological entities to illuminate archaeological processes studied in terms of archaeological aims, concepts and procedures (Clarke 1968:13).

When archaeologists use material remains from past activities to infer about prehistoric societies, several problems arise. What does the material culture reflect and how is it possible to make interpretations of a particularly prehistoric society? How do we decide which interpretation or group of interpretations are (most) correct (Hodder 1987:45)? “It seems logically to be the case that, if we interpret the past by analogies to the present, we can never find out about forms of society and cultures which do not exist today” (Dalton 1981, op. cit. Hodder 1982a:14), so how is it possible to (fully) understand the variety of prehistoric societies? The answer is probably that it is not possible, “so what would be the point of repeating our knowledge of contemporary societies by tagging labels on to societies in the past” (Hodder 1982:14a)? And is archaeology then more than just prehistoric ethnography (Spaulding 1988:268)?

When archaeologists consider archaeological remains, one should ask, why do these data matter, or more precisely, what do we want to do with these data? I agree with Randi Haaland (1997) who argues that the interesting statements refer to the inferences we make about what the objects “say” as regards the way the people of the past lived and how they coped with constrains in their natural and social environment. This the object cannot “say” directly, only indirectly via our interpretative acts. It is by looking at the objects in such theoretical frameworks that we should try to derive hypotheses about what the objects “say”. The objects are from this point of view evidence which may corroborate (not verify), weaken or refute our theoretically derived hypotheses. She thus suggests that the distinction between direct and indirect evidence does not serve any interesting scientific purpose and that we consequently should drop it (Haaland 1997:374).

In other words, the material or the archaeological remains are not superior to the interpretations of them, because “that objects do not speak for themselves, and that we have to speak for them” (Haaland & Haaland 1995:106). Instead of implicit idiosyncratic interpretation, the interpretative assumption should be made explicit, and then it has to be grounded in theoretically based frameworks (Haaland 1997:374). This can only be done through an adequate set of general theories so that the relevance of particular analogies can be assessed and the validity of cross-cultural correlations can be acknowledged (Hodder 1982a:212). The problems may be solved through an examination of the use of analogies as a part of contextual archaeology.

Formal and Relational Analogies

An analogy is “a partial similarity between similar features of two things, on which a comparison may be based, it is a reasoning in which one thing is referred to as being similar to another thing in a certain respect, on the basis of the known similarity between the things in other respects” (Webster’s Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary). Analogies tend to become similar in appearance by a process of convergence. In archaeology analogies are generally divided into formal analogies and relational analogies. The value of analogy in archaeology is
shadowed by a lack of conception of the nature and proper use of analogy (Hodder 1982a:14).

According to formal analogies, if there are similarities in some aspects, there are probably also similarities in other aspects. When two situations are compared, the formal analogy is strengthened by an increasing number of similarities between the two cases, and other similarities are to be expected. Thus the formal analogies, no matter of time or space, have been declared as cross-cultural laws (ibid:16-18), whereby it should be possible to “test” the interpretations by embracing a logico-deductive or hypothetical-deductive procedure. Implications are thereby deduced logically according to a “law” or a generalization (ibid:211). On the other hand, relational analogies “demonstrate that similarities between past and present situations are relevant to the “unknowns” that are being interpreted, whereas the differences that can be observed do not really matter; they are not relevant because there is little link between what is different and what is suggested as being the same” (ibid:19). Therefore it is necessary to examine why one variable is relevant to another, i.e. the relevant causal links between different parts of an analogy (ibid:21). It is “an assessment of what similarities are relevant and what are relevant for the successful fit of an analogy. To be able to assess relevance there must be a good theoretical knowledge of natural and social processes” (ibid:210).

“Science, in its most fundamental definition, is a fruitful mode of inquiry, not a list of enticing conclusions. The conclusions are the consequence, not the essence” (Gould 1987[1985]:417). In this regard ethnographic data and analogies are mainly a source of ideas to broaden the horizons of possibilities about how the past might be interpreted (Hodder 1999:46). These data are subsequently used to develop models and theoretical frameworks which may illustrate how processes worked in the past (Oestigaard 1999:388). “It is well to remember that experience of the West Saxon reeve at Portland some time between 786 and 802; he thought that the three ships of Northmen were traders, but he was wrong. Scholars may now make the same mistake, if with less lethal consequences for themselves” (Wormland 1982, op. cit. Samson 1991:123). We are dependant upon contemporary knowledge when we interpret the past, the interpretative process happens in the presents and it is impossible to reach the “original” meaning, and therefore is ethnoarchaeological one of several approaches to broaden up our horizons for interpretations.

General Theories

The distinction between “theory”, “model”, “hypothesis”, “explanation” and “interpretation” is often clouded and blurred in archaeology, and a stringent use of the different terms is difficult to establish. A discussion of the differences of the terms is a derailment from the focus, because my point is that whether we are talking about theory, model, hypothesis or explanation, they are all parts of an archaeological practice involving analogies. Thus they should be subordinate to the same scientific, analogical criteria.

Bjornar Olsen distinguishes between epistemological and social or cultural theories (Olsen 1997:16). By a “general theory” I mean a social or cultural theory based on contemporary data and used for analogical reasoning. This general theory has to be related to a specific archaeological context. Theories bring new knowledge into being, which is what a good theory should do; it is also what a bad theory does, if the new knowledge is empirically or evidently unjustified (Obeyesekere 1992:57). If we are going to accept general theories without testing them against particular cases we do not need to dig at all (Anthony 1995:86). Others can use similar data to produce a counterdemonstration that “invalidates” the previous theory or interpretation. It is a procedure of disagreement through an act of counterdemonstration (Obeyesekere 1990:272). As Clifford Geertz said, it is a process of appraisal; “we must measure the cogency of our explications (…) not against a body of uninterpreted data (…) but against the power of scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers” (Geertz 1973:16). In a theory of practice, theory is transformative and it asserts that we cannot passively observe. Henceforth, science cannot be separated from society (Hodder 1995:3), and this also implies that interpretations of the prehistory are based on contemporary knowledge. In archaeological terms, a general theory, which draws on insight from other disciplines, is the basis for analogical reasoning and archaeological interpretations of prehistoric societies.

One way of understanding archaeological practice is the application of theory in specific contexts (Hodder 1995:4). This view combines both general theories and the use of relational analogies. In making a theory of particular events, it involves translating these events into terms which we can understand and which therefore have some generality (ibid.). And as Barth argues, “such models become believable if we can show how the observed degree of coherence is brought about and reproduced in the lives of people, through processes involving those people’s own ideas and activities” (Barth 1993:7). Coherence implies comprehension of complexity and contradictions, as Bourdieu argues, “the ambiguity of many symbols and ritual acts and the contradictions which, although they are practically compatible, set them against each other on one point or another, and the impossibility of bringing them all into a single system that can be simply deduced from a small number of principles” (Bourdieu 1995a[1980]:13).

Neither anthropological nor archaeological theories based on ethnographic data will totally correspond to a particular prehistoric society, but they might give a fruitful approach to interpretations that may corroborate with the archaeological material. These analogies have to be linked with the archaeological remains whose context is cultural and historical unique. In relating theory to data, it is necessary to combine various models, theories and approaches in such a way that the interpretation creates the best coherent whole which corroborate with the material, whether the aim is to explain one specific context in the past or to discuss cultural change through prehistory. “It is
inadequate to assume that some cultures in space and time are more “like us” than others are” (Shanks and Hodder 1995:10). It is the individual archaeologist who explicitly has to argue why the choice of one or several theories or analogies best hold their own in competition with other theories. Otherwise the scientific practice is implicit and clouded, and accordingly in some ways unscientific.

A contextual emphasis does not mean that archaeologists can interpret without generalizations. It is impossible to approach the data without prejudice and without some general theory. Context does not only refer to the things of the past. They are inevitably bound up in archaeological projects (ibid:15). The archaeological practice has to be seen in the realm of hermeneutic discussed in length by for instance Gadamer (1996[1975]). The movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Gadamer expresses it this way; “understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory” (ibid:290). Thus the archaeologist’s contemporary knowledge and prejudices are necessary conditions of understanding; “at the beginning of all historical hermeneutics, then, the abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and the knowledge of it, must be discarded. The effect of a living tradition and the effect of historical study must constitute unity of effect” (ibid:282). Ethnographic knowledge is a part of the explanations in archaeology and the practice of ethnoarchaeology is a way of extending this knowledge.

My aim is that the archaeological implications of my ethnoarchaeological fieldwork can be used as a general theory for analogical reasoning. The applicability of the theory has limitations, it is a tool which we test by applying it, and which we judge as to its fitness by results of its applications. The relevance, to which degree it might help to extend the context, depends upon the archaeological material in each particular case. With the word of Peter Ucko;

“the real test whether or not any set of material from a particular area is really relevant to the interpretation of earlier material from the same region must again depend on the procedures inherent in the comparative method; it must depend on the closeness of the fit between the facts revealed by the archaeological data and the model which can be constructed from other sources, whether these be from the modern practices of human groups elsewhere in the world or from ancient practices of people in the same region. If the historian tradition is the important variable, then the fit will be closest with this material; if the common dominator is human experience, then the fit may equally well be with unrelated groups of people” (Ucko 1969:263-264).

The results of history lie strewn around us, but we cannot observe the processes that produced them. How is it possible to be scientific about the past? The answer is that we have to develop criteria for inferring the processes we cannot see from the results that have been preserved (Gould 1990[1983]:123). “Although theories may be winnowed and preserved empirically, their sources are as many as people and time and traditions and cultures are varied” (ibid:93). With the same material archaeologists ask different questions and want to solve different problems. A contextual approach enables this because everything is assumed to be related to others in a relational whole, and “the point of entry into the context is arbitrary” (Hodder 1987:45). This is in theory, but in practice the archaeologist is constrained by the available data (ibid.). Thus the nature and amount of the data put limits on the interpretations and choice of approach. Furthermore, it implies limitations in question possible to answer.

But it is possible to seek a “best explanation” within a frame of reference that defines those aspects of empirical reality that are relevant, it is not The Truth, but it is an explanation that is empirically adequate as long as it is not contradicted by the data as they stand (Anthony 1995:87). It involves a process of intelligibility. Different approaches to an event or a process give different answers, but it is still the same subject for discussion. There must always be many version of the world and this does not imply that these should all be reducible to one, but a version is correct or incorrect within its frame of reference. Different people have different versions of the world (Winch 1958, Douglas 1992:245), in the past as well as in the present. These versions of the social reality are rather different alternatives than rivals (Eriksen 1993a). But the archaeological discourse is a debate among fellow scientists without possibilities to other versions of the prehistoric world except than their own interpretations of the remains. A scientist chooses the best hypothesis within the references of the phenomenon he investigates. Thus there will always be a plurality of interpretations based on the same archaeological material. Among the colleagues, choosing the best hypothesis is a collective act (Douglas 1992:240).
Chapter 3: Methodology

Ethnoarchaeological Practice

Although different human and social sciences influence archaeology as a social practice, ethnography and anthropology are the most natural sources for extension of the archaeological context. Christopher Tilley argues that, if there has been a paradigm in archaeology at all, the decisive break was in 1982 with Ian Hodder and not in 1962 with Lewis Binford (Tilley 1989:185). Ethnoarchaeology was the most novel and far-reaching contribution of post-processual archaeology because it enabled a new approach to the understanding of the relation between material culture and social organization (Trigger 1995:449, Olsen 1997:63-66). The importance of ethnoarchaeology is, however, often shadowed. Thus, in my opinion, it is necessary to distinguish the different ways in which an ethnoarchaeological practice is exercised in order to illuminate the role of ethnoarchaeology in archaeological interpretations:

1) “Ethnoarchaeology” is a combination of two disciplines: archaeology which is techniques for recovering and recording material remains of culture and ethnography which is the study of human behaviour and social organization in living societies (Haaland 1988:130). On the basis of the previous discussion, this definition implies that an ethnoarchaeological interpretative practice is an integrated and necessary part of archaeology since all inference is via analogies. It also implies that the individual interpreter without having to do fieldwork in living societies himself, has to rely entirely upon published anthropological and ethnographical literature as an explicit or implicit basis for analogical reasoning. I will call this practice “passive ethnoarchaeology”.

2) “Ethnoarchaeology” is a method of extending the context by collecting primary data in a non-excavation situation directly related to archaeological problems. These data are subsequently used as theoretical frameworks and analogies (Østigård 1997). The specific aim is to understand the processes between the artefacts and the cultural environment they are produced within (Haaland 1977:1). Ethnoarchaeology may include studies of “living” or “action” archaeology along with other approaches (Gould 1977:162). Thus it may be done in two ways:

(a) In a general way on the basis of a known archaeological problem. By exploring the connection between material culture and human behaviour in different ethnographic societies, is it possible to combine the meaning of archaeological objects in the past with living societies today, comparing ethnographic and archaeological patterning, with special reference to excavated material. These studies are not directly related to a specific archaeological material and thereby provide a primary adjusted analogical framework and approach to particular questions and problems (e.g. Barndon 1992, Sætersdal 1995, Anfinset 1996).

(b) In a particular way on the basis of a specific archaeological material. The archaeologists themselves provide the sufficient ethnoarchaeological documentation they need to put forward a hypothesis on how the material culture was used by the prehistoric people (e.g. Hodder 1982b, Haaland 1995). I will call both practices (a) and (b) “active ethnoarchaeology” because it is the archaeologists themselves who study human behaviour in relation to the material culture in living societies and make the theoretical framework and analogies for inferences and synthesizes.

Common for all ethnoarchaeological practice is that ethnographic documentation is a source for analogical reasoning and extension of the context, and hereby an essential part of the archaeological practice. How it is done should therefore be subordinate to scientific criteria and debate. As practicing archaeologists, Watson argues, “we will surely benefit from the necessity of entering that portion of the anthropological field vacated by others, and carrying out archaeologically oriented, ethnographic research ourselves” (Watson 1979:301).

Fieldwork

If one could predict the results, why do the fieldwork? One has to justify and validate one’s assertions empirically (Obeyesekere 1992:xxii). Ethnography is in many respects the most basic form of social research (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996[1983]:2). Common for all fieldwork are problems and limitations, over and over again. Nevertheless, it is carried out in different ways, according to the discipline and the objectives of the study. I divided my fieldwork into two parts. The first fieldwork was from mid December 1996 to the end of March 1997, and the second from the beginning of September 1997 to the end of November 1997. As a part of the second fieldwork I also spent ten days in Varanasi (Benares) in India in order to see how the funeral rites were performed there, because it is the preferred place to die, as it is one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites to Hindus.

Limitations, Problems and Disadvantages

The field method was participant observation with surveys and structured as well as unstructured interviews. I am aware that I might have done all the mistakes Gananath Obeyesekere warns anthropologists against in his book Medusa’s Hair (1981:11-12):

(1) Few informants and interviews in each village. Since I have visited several villages, I have to rely on few
informants in each case, and often with the typical anthropological interview of one or two sessions. As Obeyesekere says in regard to his study, information supplied in the initial interviews was often contradicted in later ones, and if he had relied on the first interviews he would have come to totally false conclusions.

(2) The problem with language and its nuances in accordance with the “interpreter effect”. Some of my informants spoke sufficient English, but otherwise I have totally relied on interpreters. During my first fieldwork, I had several interpreters with various backgrounds and knowledge, both in regards to fieldwork, anthropology (I often gave up explaining what ethnoarchaeology is) and my subject. Time limitations to the interpreter, problems of communication and misunderstandings brought together necessitated the use of different interpreters. Especially during funerals that I mostly witnessed alone, some of the relatives and villagers explained what happened. Since these are specially emotional situations where events happen fast, I didn’t want to interrupt more than what in my opinion was morally justifiable (if I was right in my judgements is another question). Often in situations were I have got the most valuable information, I am unable to give an account of whom actually are the informants and the interpreter, I had never seen them before, nor have I seen them again.

(3) The relationship with the informants. Of course, although I have divided the fieldwork into two parts and went back to the same villages, any relationships with the informants have to be more or less superficial. As Obeyesekere argues, “all interview data are useful, but earlier information may be distorted by the informant’s resistance. As one’s relationship with the informant progresses, there is increasingly less resistance on his part to talking about intimate and sensitive events in his personal life” (ibid:193).

There are a lot of other methodological problems and considerations as well, but I will add only two more, which, in my opinion, may have influenced the fieldwork and its results:

(4) Gender. “Any study that does not include the role of women -as seen by women- as part of the way the society is structured remains only a partial study of that society” (Weiner 1976:228). I have to admit immediately that I have not spoken to any women, mind you, from an academic point of view, of course. This has to been seen and understood in the realm of the duty of the Householder (see chapter 5). The man represents the family and the village, and thus, it was unnatural and difficult for me to speak with women. The study includes women and the role of women as far as possible, but unfortunately, only seen by men (informants). Nevertheless, gender identity is both constructed and lived. The individual or person is only intelligible with reference to a culturally and historically specific set of categories, discourses and practices. Thus are there different ways in which the categories “woman” and “man” and the discourses which employ those categories are involved in the production and the reproduction of notions and personhood and society (Moore 1994:51). The death rituals are mainly a male domain, and thus it should be legitimate to say that I have a gender perspective, although from a man’s point of view.

(5) Psychological vulnerability. Obeyesekere (1990:231-236) discusses the problem of the ethnographer’s psychological vulnerability in the field, which also involves ontological problems. The problem is how the anthropologist himself or herself handles and expresses emotional, personal and practical problems in the field because it affects the fieldwork and the data collected and presented, or with other word, all the empirical “facts”. The sight and smell of numerous rotten corpses as well as burnt bodies, death in some of its many facets, have necessarily influenced both me and the data to some degree, but honestly, I do not know to what extent and what to do about it. Nevertheless, I just want the reader to be aware of this problem, the presented data are not emotionless and “hard” facts collected by some kind of an objective and non-sensible “scientist” who has seen death “as it is”.

When I combine all these complaints with the fact that I am a novice in doing fieldwork, logically a question arises: to what extent can I trust my data? The consequence is limitations, in both my comprehension of the processes in the society and thereby my interpretation of them. Accordingly I have to include these considerations in my evaluation of the data. I have been aware of these problems during my fieldwork. Nevertheless, I still chose to continue my strategy, because it is partly possible to justify, and in my opinion, it enabled me to procure some archaeological implications to a greater extent.

Advantages and Possibilities

I wanted to stress the importance of an awareness of the ambivalence and ambiguity between the social processes in a society and how they are expressed in the archaeological material. The main problem with “passive ethnoarchaeology” when anthropological literature is used as analogies for interpretations, is different approaches to the complexity of the societies. Whereas anthropologists tend to concern themselves with aspects of culture not directly manifested in archaeological remains, the archaeologists are left with the material complexity with few possibilities to relate it to the social world. The intention behind my strategy of fieldwork was to collect data in such a manner that my study may provide a primary adjusted analogical framework and approach to other studies of funeral practice and mortuary remains:

(1) Several villages and graveyards. When I compared several villages and graveyards I got a clearer picture of the contradictions, the ambiguity and the complexity in the way the material culture is used among the Brahmans and Magars within a small but still arbitrary area. It may increase the number of known similarities and thereby simplify an analogical reasoning based on the discussion of the scientific criteria for this practice. This may be a contribution to the archaeologist’s problem of finding the most reliable analogy. If I had been in one village, the result of my study would not have differed much from
other anthropological studies, except may be my approach through the material culture.

(2) Who make the archaeological material? When I related the material remains to the social life, it enabled me to illuminate aspects which the informants themselves were not aware of. Some of the material expressions may be perceived as the unintended consequences of action (Giddens 1982:30), but they are important data for archaeologists. In a way this solves the anthropologist’s or ethnoarchaeologist’s practice of finding the most gifted or knowledgeable folk philosopher or informant. It is not possible to find the one perfect informant with detailed knowledge of everything. This is not necessarily the aim either, since most of the archaeological remains are produced by people without this information. Or in other words: everybody dies. Ordinary people present different views than the priests, nevertheless, most of the material remains are made by people without the “best” knowledge, so who am I supposed to talk with? In reality, coincidence often lead me to both my research villages and my informants. As Rosalie Wax says, “the most valuable thing any fieldworker can take with him into fields is good luck” (Wax 1985[1971]:268), and I think I have to admit that I have to some extent been lucky, or at least, I can see where everything could have gone much worse.

(3) How to interpret the data? The problem is how to find the “right level” of analysis, to ask the good questions and to find a fruitful approach. When people act and perform rituals without explicit knowledge of what they do, how can I know? The answer may be that “the truth of the Truth exists in symbolic forms and rests on ambiguity, metaphor, over determination. It need not reside in a single place, but might be scattered in rites and myths, so scattered or so illusive that words cannot express its reality” (Obeyesekere 1990:223). Regarding death and eschatological concepts, I agree, and then it is the analyst who has to interpret and elucidate the hidden meaning (ibid.). Thus we must always struggle to get our ontological assumptions right, to ascribe to our object of study only those properties and capabilities that we have reasonable grounds to believe it to possess (Barth 1987:8). This brings me to the next problem: how to grasp the complexity and variability?

The Problem of Variability and Diversities

I have to a great extent used Barth’s approach and ideas of how to handle the diversity. In Balinese Worlds (1993) he describes the problem. “The reality that is being created, in any community or circle must be diverse. (1) There are variations in the level of “expertise” in the population: which level could hold authority for all? (2) There is diversity of received traditions. (3) There is a varied particularism of local history, contention, and context. (4) There are all the differences between people in positioning and experience, besides that of expertise: old and young, male and female, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable. (5) Finally, there is the pragmatics of purpose and interest: differing representations for different tasks. Which should be the anthropologist privilege? Or do we adhere to a belief that, if only it is thoroughly abstracted, it all coheres in its essence?” (Barth 1993:4-5).

As a result of this, naturally the archaeological remains must also be diverse and ambiguous. The problem which arises is how to grasp this reality in archaeology, how to comprehend the complexity in the archaeological material. Since archaeologists can not choose any one of these privileges, the solution is often abstraction until it makes coherence. My intention is to show how these diversities are expressed in the complexity of funeral remains: (1) “The challenge as I understand it is above all theoretical and concerned with how to model an account for variation and disorder, even more than how to merely assemble the data on variation” (Barth 1993:22). (2) The aim is to analyse the society (Barth 1994:124), but only when “looking at the social life that surrounded me as my only reality and authority” (Barth 1993:25), and I will also include the material remains to this reality.

Bourdieu explains diversity and abundance in his book The Logic of Practice in this way:

“The practical logic, through the choice of the fundamental schemes it applies and through its exploitation of the polysemic of symbols it uses, it adjusts in each case to the particular logic of each area of practice. This explains the uncertainties and even incoherences that are encountered as soon as one tries to compare methodically all the particular applications of the systems of schemes “(Bourdieu 1995a:261).

Or in archaeological terms, diversity and ambiguity in the archaeological mortuary material are not always good indicators of different ethnic groups or religions (Ucko 1969:273), they might just be different uses and practices as a consequence of the actor’s level of knowledge. Hence the complexity must be understood in a wider social context. Giddens’ theory of action is a useful approach. He defines social systems as “relations of interdependence, involving the situated activities of human subjects”. Structures are properties of social systems or collectives. Social systems only exist in and through structuration, as the outcome of the contingent acts of a multiplicity of human beings. “Structures” can be identified as “sets or matrices of rule-resource properties governing transformations”, and thus “structure is both enabling and constraining” (Giddens 1982:35-37).

The archaeological remains are the result of human action where structures are enabling and constraining. This is the archaeological reality. However, the informant’s explanations of the social reality may not always correspond with the actual remains of the described action. If the aim is to interpret the way of life of the people of the past, is it then possible to incorporate this ambivalence into archaeological theories, models and hypothesis?
Chapter 4: Brahmans and Magars of Nepal

Geographical Features of Nepal

The kingdom of Nepal is situated between Tibet and India. The country embraces an area of 145,391 square kilometers, stretches 885 kilometers from east to west with an average of 160 kilometres from north to south. The altitude ranges from 100 meters above the sea level in the southern Tarai area, to more than eight thousand meters in the northern Himalayan area, with Mount Everest as the highest point on Earth with 8,848 meters. Thus the climate varies from tropical to alpine. I have carried out my fieldwork in the Baglung, Myagdi and Parbat districts in Dhaulagiri Zone in Western Region of Nepal (Map 4.1).

Political Organization and Population

Nepal is administratively, politically and economically divided into a development-planning structure. The country is divided into 5 Development Regions with 14 zones, which are further subdivided into 75 administrative districts. The major organisatory unit in the rural area in each district is the “Village Development Committee” (VDC). Each VDC is normally organized and divided into 9 smaller wards where each ward has its own chosen political leader. A VDC unit and a ward unit are not natural but political units. One village may contain one or several wards, and there might be several villages in one VDC.

“With few exceptions the great majority of the Nepali people live in well defined, specific geographic regions...Immediately south of the Himalayan are attractive mountain valleys. This region is inhabited by various Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan speaking hill and valley people” (Bista 1980[1967]:xi).

The population was according to the 1991 Population Census of Nepal 18,491,097 inhabitants. There were reported 60 different castes/ethnic groups that accounted for about 96 % of the total population. The remaining 4% comprised of “others”, “no caste” (foreigners) and “not stated”. Of the total population, twelve groups consisted of more than two percent of the total population, and these groups together accounted for more than 70% of the country’s inhabitants. The three largest groups were Chhetris, Hill Brahmans and Magars with respectively 16.4, 12.5 and 7.6 percent of the total population (CBS, 1993, Vol. 1, Part VII; 1993, Urban Tables, Computer Printouts). In the Baglung and Myagdi districts the population was (Table 4.1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Brahman</th>
<th>Chhetri</th>
<th>Magar</th>
<th>Damai</th>
<th>Kami</th>
<th>Sarki</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baglung</td>
<td>232,486</td>
<td>54,660</td>
<td>43,035</td>
<td>65,605</td>
<td>9,115</td>
<td>29,301</td>
<td>10,317</td>
<td>20,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myagdi</td>
<td>100,552</td>
<td>7,744</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>43,768</td>
<td>5,120</td>
<td>12,669</td>
<td>3,325</td>
<td>10,926</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Research Locations

The research locations in the Baglung, Myagdi and Parbat districts are divided into two groups (Map 4.2): (1) villages where the relation between life cycle rituals and mortuary remains are investigated (group A villages/cemeteries), and (2) villages and cemeteries which illuminate the complexity of the funeral practice and mortuary remains in the area (group B villages/cemeteries):

Group A villages/cemeteries:

Argal VDC, Baglung district
Hila VDC, Baglung district
Tara VDC, Baglung district
Baranja VDC, Myagdi district
Bhakimly VDC, Myagdi district

Group B villages/cemeteries:

Baglung Bazaar, Baglung district
Beni, Myagdi district
Bhakunde VDC, Baglung district
Bhimpokhara VDC, Baglung district
Bhuskat VDC, Baglung district
Bihu VDC, Baglung district
Ghsmeli Village, Baglung district
Khaniya Ghat VDC, Parbat district
Masangdi Khola Ghat, Baglung district
Nire Ghat, Baglung district
Resha VDC, Baglung district

The population by caste/ethnic groups in the research villages (group A) where the relations between life cycle rituals and funeral remains are investigated is (Table 4.2):
Map 4.1 Western region of Nepal with the Baglung, Myagdi, Parbat and Mustang districts in the Dhaulagiri Zone.

Of special importance is Mt. Dhaulagiri, Kaligandaki River and Baglung and Beni as the regional centres in the Baglung and Myagdi districts respectively.
Map 4.2 The research locations:

- Baranja
- Beni
- Myagdi District
- Parbat District
- Tharpu
- Myagdi Khola
- The Ghat
- Pula
- Bhuskat
- Bhu
- Baglung
- Deurali
- Sayakatera
- Dhamja
- Bhumikhara
- Masangdi Khola
- Tangram
- Baglung District
- Mulpani
- Bihukot
- Sigaha
- Bih
- Resha
- Bihu
- Lekhani
- Majhkharka
- Harichor
- Ghusmeli
- Argal
- Deurali
- Tabang

- Bhuskat
- Bhu
- Baglung
- Deurali
- Sayakatera
- Dhamja
- Bhumikhara
- Masangdi Khola
- Tangram
- Baglung District
- Mulpani
- Bihukot
- Sigaha
- Bih
- Resha
- Bihu
- Lekhani
- Majhkharka
- Harichor
- Ghusmeli
- Argal
- Deurali
- Tabang

- Regional center
- Main cemetery
- Group A village/cemetery
- Group B village/cemetery
- Village

Scale: 0 5 km
All research locations are among several other villages located in an area of 300 square kilometres. This is a hill area below about 3000 meters above sea level with steep ridges undercut by torrential streams. Baglung Bazaar and Beni are respectively regional centres in the Baglung and Myagdi districts, situated along Kaligandaki River, one of the most holy rivers in Nepal. The altitude is here about 800-900 meters, while most of the other villages are located between 1500-2500 meters. However, from most of the area the great massifs of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna are seen in the background, with Dhaulagiri, the world’s seventh highest mountain peaking at 8,167 meters as the most spectacular. The road ends in Baglung Bazaar, and from here I can reach the research villages within 1-2 days by walking.

Except from Baglung Bazaar and Beni with some urbanization, the major subsistence basis in the rural areas is agriculture. The peasant farming is mainly non-irrigated agricultural terrace cultivation supplemented with animal husbandry and intensive use of forestry products. In these areas there is a population pressure on the cultivated land, not measured in absolute population density, but in terms of the availability of cultivated land, i.e. it has a low proportion of agricultural land, and in levels of agricultural technology and endowment of other economic resources (Sill & Kirkby 1991:119). Thus the terrace building is both directly by under-cutting steep slopes and indirectly through altering water movement, the cause of instability and landslides, which increase the pressure on cultivated land.

The Caste System

Officially the caste laws (differential punishment for offenders of different castes for the same offence) were abolished in 1963 (Bista 1991:55), but still parts of the caste structure remains. The problem is: what is the caste system and how does it work?

The caste system in Nepal is based on the classical Hindu varna system. This is a religious categorization. The Bhagavad-Gita (Bg) distinguishes four castes: “Brahmanas, ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras are distinguished by the qualities born of their own natures in accordance with the material modes (…)” (Bg. 18.41). The duties and the qualities are further described: “Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness - these are the natural qualities by which the brahmanas work. Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and leadership are the natural qualities of work of the ksatriyas. Farming, cow protection and business are the natural work for the vaisyas, and for the sudras there is labour and service to others. By following his qualities of work, every man can become perfect” (Bg. 18.42-45). Thus there are four classes in the hierarchical order: (1) the sacerdotal and learned class, the members of which may be, but not necessarily priests, (2) the regal and warrior caste, (3) the trading and agricultural caste and (4) the servile caste, whose duty is to serve the other three. The problem is that this religious origin does not tell which group is where in the hierarchy, it is not connected to the people.

Caste systems may be defined as “moral systems that differentiate and rank the whole population of a society in corporate units (castes) generally defined by descent, marriage and occupation” (Marriott & Inden 1974:982). It is based on a social principle; hierarchy, and thereby distinctions between the castes. This is related to oppositions of purity and impurity in one or another way (Dumont 1970[1966]:44-46). It defines groups in a hierarchy of ritual purity and pollution and prescribes inter caste relations, especially regarding marriage and commensality (Bennett 1983:8). The caste groups are interdependent, but there are barriers between free social intercourse and differences in culture and occupational specialization (Berreman 1963:198). Two views of caste systems have been seen as mutual exclusive; Louis Dumont’s view of a holistic social order based on the principle of hierarchy and McKim Marriott’s concept of the individual and a society open to change and decay. However, these Hindu world-views act more as “ideologies” in a Marxian sense where each rely upon the other for their power (Parry 1994:112-115).

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Officially the caste laws (differential punishment for offenders of different castes for the same offence) were abolished in 1963 (Bista 1991:55), but still parts of the caste structure remains. The problem is: what is the caste system and how does it work?

The caste system in Nepal is based on the classical Hindu varna system. This is a religious categorization. The Bhagavad-Gita (Bg) distinguishes four castes: “Brahmanas, ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras are distinguished by the qualities born of their own natures in accordance with the material modes (…)” (Bg. 18.41). The duties and the qualities are further described: “Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness - these are the natural qualities by which the brahmanas work. Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and leadership are the natural qualities of work of the ksatriyas. Farming, cow protection and business are the natural work for the vaisyas, and for the sudras there is labour and service to others. By following his qualities of work, every man can become perfect” (Bg. 18.42-45). Thus there are four classes in the hierarchical order: (1) the sacerdotal and learned class, the members of which may be, but not necessarily priests, (2) the regal and warrior caste, (3) the trading and agricultural caste and (4) the servile caste, whose duty is to serve the other three. The problem is that this religious origin does not tell which group is where in the hierarchy, it is not connected to the people.

Caste systems may be defined as “moral systems that differentiate and rank the whole population of a society in corporate units (castes) generally defined by descent, marriage and occupation” (Marriott & Inden 1974:982). It is based on a social principle; hierarchy, and thereby distinctions between the castes. This is related to oppositions of purity and impurity in one or another way (Dumont 1970[1966]:44-46). It defines groups in a hierarchy of ritual purity and pollution and prescribes inter caste relations, especially regarding marriage and commensality (Bennett 1983:8). The caste groups are interdependent, but there are barriers between free social intercourse and differences in culture and occupational specialization (Berreman 1963:198). Two views of caste systems have been seen as mutual exclusive; Louis Dumont’s view of a holistic social order based on the principle of hierarchy and McKim Marriott’s concept of the individual and a society open to change and decay. However, these Hindu world-views act more as “ideologies” in a Marxian sense where each rely upon the other for their power (Parry 1994:112-115).

caste to the lower caste status of the spouse, and thereby becomes impure from his or her original caste. In this way castes are not permanent, it is possible with social mobility downwards, and in rare cases, also upwards. The nature of death pollution is one of temporary impurity. Distinctions between the castes are expressed and acted out through food, water and admission to the house.

In the caste system it is necessary to distinguish between varna and jat. Varna means “class or caste”, so does jat. Varna classification emphasizes the common ritual pollution between groups within a varna, in relation to other varnas. Jat classification distinguishes each group either in terms of ethnicity or different levels of pollution within a varna. Thus may jat groups be perceived as ethnic groups. The Nepali Varna system consists of these four castes (Figure 4.1): (1) Brahmans, (2) Chhetris, (3) Matwalis (liquor drinking) and (4) Sano Jat (Sudras). The last group is untouchable (or polluted). The Brahmans, Chhetris and the Sudras have mainly an Indo-Aryan language origin, while the Matwalis to a great extent have a Tibeto-Burman language origin.

Dor Bahadur Bista argues that “though Nepal is considered to have long been Hindu, its native Hinduism has not included a belief in caste principles, which remain a foreign importation with little popular support. Only in the past hundred and thirty-five years has the caste system gained any kind of endorsement” (Bista 1991:29), and it “has only marginally penetrated its society which is confined to particular classes of particular ethnic groups” (ibid:35). When more than sixty groups (jats) are placed into a Hindu hierarchical system of four categorizes with different qualities and duties, there must be contradictions in the comprehension of how the system works and what it is, especially when many of the groups are Tibeto-Burman with a Buddhist origin. However, the people generally tolerated the new system as long as it did not try to contradict their own religious faith and practice (ibid:32).

There are no caste systems in Nepal as the classical model of Hindu caste hierarchy prescribes, but there are hierarchical principles that work and are legitimated in a corresponding way to various extents. The reality is not static, and the mutual relationship between each group is neither clearly hierarchised orderly in the respective castes (ibid:43), nor is the caste (varna) to all the respective groups (jat) clearly orderly in the daily life (Rystad 1996a:26). The understanding of the caste system depends upon the caste from which one looks at it (Figure 4.2), and this comprehension depends of the status of the respective caste. Therefore, a holistic model of the caste system as presented in fig 1 is to some degree deceptive, seen from the Brahman’s point of view it does not do justice to the social reality in Nepal. Today most of the people in the villages are farmers, but the personal religious qualities and the duties associated with the classical varna groups are incorporated and used. Hence it is impossible to understand a caste system without a comprehension of purity in Hinduism, however, these principles may still be used and have a stratifying effect in a society without it necessarily being a caste society.

The Brahmans and the Magars

Fredrik Barth’s “Introduction” in Ethnic Groups and Boundaries from 1969 is a classical study of ethnicity. In the words of Barth, “ethnic groups are seen as a form of social organization... A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense” (Barth 1969:13-14). Although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, they are not the sum of “objective” differences, but only those the actors themselves regard as significant (ibid.).

Fundamental is “the principle that ethnic identity implies a series of constraints on the kind of roles an individual is allowed to play, and the partners he may choose for different kinds of transactions...regarded as status, ethnic identity is super ordinate to most other statuses or personalities” (ibid:17). The Brahmans (Bahuns) and the Magars are culturally distinctive ethnic groups. Hierarchical distance between different groups is largely a matter of rules and regulations of ritual purity and pollution.

Nepali is the state and dominant language. It is of Indo-European origin and it is the language of the Brahmans and Chhetris (Sill & Kirkby 1991:94-95). Originally the Magars spoke a Tibeto-Burman language, today only 32% of the Magars in Nepal speak Magar language as their mother tongue. In my research area the situation is worse:

| Table 4.3 Population distribution by mother tongue for the Baglung and Myagdi districts¹ |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Baglung                       | Total           | Nepali          | Magar           | Other           |
|                               | 232,486         | 226,933         | 457             | 5,096           |
| Myagdi                        | 100,552         | 95,909          | 105             | 4,538           |


¹ According to Om Gurung, these are probably not true statistics because historically it has been a government policy to undernumerate ethnic people in order to decrease their social and political strength (Gurung 1996:14).
### Caste Hierarchy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sanskrit Varna Equivalent</th>
<th>Nepali Varna or Caste Groups</th>
<th>Castes or Jat</th>
<th>Ritual Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahman</td>
<td>Brahman</td>
<td>Upadhyya Brahman Jaisi Brahman*</td>
<td>Tagadhari (wearers of the sacred thread)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ksatriya</td>
<td>Thakuri Chhetri Thakuri</td>
<td>Khatri-Chhetri(jharra) Chhetri (jharra) Khatri-Chhetri(jharra) Chhetri (thimbu)</td>
<td>Chokho (pure, water acceptable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaisya</td>
<td>Matwali (liquor drinking)</td>
<td>Jyapu Newar* Gurungs* Magars* Tamangs*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudra</td>
<td>Sano Jat (low caste)</td>
<td>Kami Sarki Damai</td>
<td>Pani Nachalne (impure, water not accepted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key**
- Parbatiya Hindus of Indo-Aryan stock who migrated into the Himalayans over the last 1000 years
- Tibeto-Burman Ethnic Groups
- * Rank not clearly established within caste groups
Figure 4.2 Diagrammatic representation of different views of caste in Kathmandu valley. From Bista 1991, p. 43

**Diagram 1:**
Classical Model of Hindu Caste Hierarchy

- BRAHMAN
- KHASTRIYA
- VAISHYA
- SHUDRA
- UNTOUCHABLE

**Diagram 2:**
Nepali Model of Caste Hierarchy (Viewed by Bahun-Chhetri)

- BAHUN
- THAKURI
- Tagadhari (Sacred-thread wearing).
- CHHETRI
- SHRESTA
- MATWALI/ OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS
- PANI NACHALNE/ water unacceptable/ untouchable

**Diagram 3:**
Nepali Model of Caste Hierarchy (Viewed by the Majority)

- CHOKHO JAAT (Clean caste)
- PANI NACHALNE JAAT (Water unacceptable)

**Diagram 4:**
Secular Hierarchy (Viewed by Majority and Practiced by all)

- POLITICALLY OR ECONOMICALLY POWERFUL (Mostly Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri, Rajput, Shresta and Chhetri)
- COMMON, POOR AND BACKWARD (Matwali and ethnic communities)

Key:

- Impassable barrier
- Permeable barrier
However, the Magars’ loss of their language is a recent phenomenon. In Tara VDC for instance, the Magars speak Nepali, with the exception of a few kinship terms, but with an intonation and accent others find difficult to understand (Gurung 1996:23). In several of my research villages my informant’s grandparents were among the last who spoke Magar language. In the same villages, approximately sixty years ago, all villagers started to change from round to square houses, no matter of caste or ethnic group. Within a twenty years time, there are indications that they also changed from ceramic vessels and pots to utensils made of copper (Oestigaard in press), and the Magars stopped raising pigs. According to the informants, these changes happened quite peacefully among themselves, simply because it was a new fashion of the time, or so I was told. But there have been other mechanisms at work as well (see chapter 7).

The term “Brahman” is both a conceptual category and an ethnic group (Das 1977:6). The Brahmans rank highest in the caste hierarchy, and are normally perceived as the group together with Chhetris by which the caste system is introduced to Nepal. According to Bista, the Brahmans migrated to the western hills of Nepal from India for the first time during the twelfth century when they were dislodged by the Muslim invaders (Bista 1980:2). Traditionally the Brahmans are perceived as the leading group in terms of economy, education and admission to political positions as well as the leading ideologists who dominate the Hindu religion. Part of this explanation is probably due to the fact that the Hindu priests are only allowed to come from the Brahan caste. Thus the priests are literate and earn money by performing religious services to other Hindus. Nevertheless, the great majority of the Brahmans in the villages are like most Nepalese illiterate and poor farmers.

Even though the Brahmans represent a varna and are conceived as an ethnic group, there is a great variety among the Brahmans themselves, and different Brahmans are also ranked in a hierarchy of purity and pollution. Thus the prescribed rules of purity are not only working between the varnas, but also within the Brahan varna (Raj 1996:15). The more pure a Brahman is or wants to become, the more regulations and restrictions the person has to submit to regarding consumption of food and ritual participation. Some Brahmans are not allowed to eat any kind of meat and also have restrictions on vegetables, while others can at least eat goats and roosters. According to the level of ritual purity, Brahmans usually marry monogamously even though polygamy is frequently found. Cross-cousin marriage is prohibited. Nowadays a new type of Brahman identity is created in urban areas, less concerned with ritual purity and disregarding a lot of rituals, but marriage within the caste is to a large extent maintained (Glenton 1994:126-127).

The Magars are ranked as Matwalis in the Hindu caste system. According to oral legends and traditions, the Magar tribe is one of the eldest tribes in Nepal. The original home was called Bara Magarant, which means “The twelve regions of the Magars”. Albeit they are a part of the Hindu caste system because of later migrations of Brahmans, and even though they as a group consist of several different clans, the Magars are egalitarian (Bista 1980:63-65, Gautam 1994:22-27). The preferred marriage is between a man and his mother’s brother’s daughter (maternal cross-cousin marriage).

Originally, the Magars were animists and later Buddhists, but generally they have been influenced by Hinduism and Brahmanism through ages (Hitchcock 1966:20, Gautam 1994:34). The same situation appears in the Baglung and Myagdi districts in villages where the Magars are in great majority. The Magars have more or less the same life cycle rituals as other Hindus, but with different contents. Furthermore, there are great local variations in content and elaboration of the rituals and ceremonies among the Magars themselves (e.g. Shepard 1982, Dhakal 1994, Khatri 1995, Gurung 1996). Hinduism and Buddhism share many religious concepts, but it would be wrong to conclude that the two religions are really one, and the coexistence is not always as peaceful and harmonic as presented (Gellner 1994[1992]:89), “the degree to which Hindu ways of thinking predominate over Buddhist varies from individual to individual, as well as according to context” (ibid:85). Although there are still some remains of ancient Buddhist features among the Magars in my research area, the main cultural and religious patterns reflect a thorough Hindu orientation.

I will finally make some concluding remarks on the ethnicity of Brahmans and Magars:

(1) Us and them. Ethnic classification implies stereotypes like us and them, and these may be imposed from the outside, by dominant groups, on those who themselves do not want membership in the group to which they are assigned (Eriksen 1993b:33). Definitions of whom belongs to which ethnic group, jat or varna, depend upon a choice of internal or external views. Especially as a result of the caste system, individuals and groups may define themselves in different terms than other people do. External definitions are embedded within social relationships between ethnic groups, and thus external groups may have possibilities to define others as groups either by power to or authority relations (Jenkins 1994:199). In the case of the Hindus, these external categories are produced by people who have the legitimate authority by virtue of their superior ritual status (ibid:217), as with the Brahmans’ notion of the caste system.

I will mention three problems with the caste hierarchy as a framework for assigning ethnic membership. Firstly, intermarriages between castes. According to the ideas of purity, a high caste person changes caste to the lower status of the spouse, thereby becoming impure for his or her original caste. This is normally what happens, but in rare occasions it does not, and the opposite might happen. Secondly, the internal hierarchy among the Brahmans. Although Brahmans themselves have their own hierarchy of purity, by which water and food from certain Brahmans are not acceptable to others, the remaining castes are not really concerned with this because they are all lower then the Brahmans according to the latter group. Thirdly, the large groups of Tibeto-Burman speaking people; although
influenced by Hinduism, a large number are still either Buddhists or has maintained Buddhistic oranimistic features. Some Magars eat meat from bull (i.e. low caste behaviour), but the Brahman cannot treat them as low caste if the Magars are in an overwhelming majority in the villages. Albeit Nepal is declared in its constitution as a Hindu kingdom, it might be perceived as an oppression to classify the Tibeto-Burman groups in Hindu caste terminology. 

(2) Natural differences? I have given loose definitions of Brahmans and Magars because I do not want my categories to exclude people from their group. Thus I have combined both an internal and external view. In the single village this is not a major problem. It arises when I compare different villages with people termed as belonging to the same ethnic groups. Even though Magars know that neighbouring Magars have different traditions and values, and emphasize other features in ethnic classifying, they acknowledge each other as equal Magars and the relationship is perceived as unproblematic (Rystad 1996b). The problem is what the differences then reflect? Barth’s approach to ethnicity is ahistorical because he presented a general model for understanding ethnicity, and if we incorporate the social and historical circumstances in the local cultural historical context in which the ethnic configurations have been developed (Eriksen 1991:128-129), some of the contradictions and the ambivalence in the mortuary remains might be seen as results of different historical processes.

(3) Ethnic dichotomies. According to Barth, the cultural contents of ethnic dichotomies are of two orders: (a) overt signals - the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, and (b) basic value orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged (Barth 1969:14). Ethnicity may either have a material expression or not. To what extent are the funerals used as ethnic markers? Implicit is an assumption that ethnic markers in the culture imply similarities in the actual and respective remains. Although the rituals and the performances are similar and may represent basic value orientations, it is not necessary that the remains are equal. The problem is then the interpreter’s attitude to what similarities and differences in the remains represent. When cultural differences make social differences ethnicity occurs, but which conceptualisation of ethnicity is the most useful in comparison (Eriksen 1996)? In this regard, archaeologists have set aside a crucial problem; the medium of ethnic differentiation and dichotomization is not necessarily the message. Ethnic signifiers may change due to changes in context; this indicates that the ethnic signifiers themselves are arbitrary (Eriksen 1991:129). In other words, artefacts may indicate ethnicity in one context, but not in others; the meaning has changed (e.g. Sætersdal 1995:120-121). Thus ethnicity is not connected to the items themselves but to the context in which the artefacts are embedded and occur. In this regard it is an underlying aim to see if the mortuary remains might reflect ethnicity, and if not, how it is possible to deal with variation.
Chapter 5: Life Cycle Rituals

Rites de Passage

Arnold van Gennep (1960[1909]) was the first to separate *rites de passage* as a special category of rituals, “ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined” (Gennep 1960:2). These rites are normally connected to changes, transitions and occasions as birth, initiation, marriage and death. van Gennep subdivided these rituals into rites of separation (preliminal rites), rites of transition (liminal rites) and rites of incorporation (postliminal rites). Although a *rite of passage* theoretically includes all these three stages, sometimes the phases are neither equally elaborated nor equally important (ibid:11).

Victor Turner developed further this conceptual framework (Turner 1991[1967], 1995[1969]). Although *rites de passage* are found in all societies, in relatively stable and cyclical societies the changes are dependent on the biological rhythms (Turner 1991:93). What is unclear in a society is unclear. Transitional persons are thought to be particularly polluting since they are in a liminal phase. Transition is dangerous, and it is controlled by the ritual ideas concerning pollution and purification (Douglas 1994[1966]:97).

There are differences between static and dynamic pollution situations. The static pollution notion concerns states which are ambiguously defined, while the dynamic pollution notion derives from ritualised transitions between states (Turner 1991:97). The pollution beliefs are related to the culture’s moral values, they reinforce the cultural and social structure but also reduce the ambiguity in the moral sphere. Thus are the *rites de passage* not purificatory but prophylactic. They do not redefine or restore a lost former status or purify from the effect of contamination, but they define entrance to a new status (Douglas 1993[1975]:54-56).

Bourdieu, on the contrary, prefers the term *rites d’ institution* rather than *rites de passage*. He emphasizes the distinctions between the stages rather than then the documentation of the rituals. The importance is the establishment of new social roles and their function in the society. The crucial point is the difference and the separation between those who have undergone the rituals from those who have not, because it creates a hierarchy of legitimate distinctions and social practices (Bourdieu 1996:27-28). I will combine both these two approaches, because it is the person’s achieved status in his lifetime which is manifested in the mortuary remains. Thus I have emphasized the individual’s achieved status through the life cycle rituals. These status differences are expressed in the funeral rituals and thereby in the archaeological material.

Hinduism

Though the Hindu law books and the religious texts prescribe how the rituals are to be performed, they cannot be used as a dogma. Hinduism includes diversity. The religion has never insisted on the necessity of one supreme figure in religious matters and has never agreed on certain articles of beliefs as essential for all Hindus (Kinsley 1993[1982]:6). Therefore, there are variations in the performance of the rituals, even among the Brahmans, and to a greater extent among the Magars. The Magars have more or less the same life cycle rituals as the Brahmans, but to some degree with a different content. I will nevertheless try to generate some general patterns within a Hindu framework concerning the relationship between life cycle rituals and burial customs. A fruitful approach to this ritual plurality might be Bourdieu’s analysis of the practice of rites (Bourdieu 1995a:18):

“Rites are practices that are ends in themselves, that are justified by their very performance; things that one does because they are “the done thing”, “the right thing to do”, but also because one cannot do otherwise, without needing to know why or for whom one does them, or what they mean, such as act of funeral piety. This is what the work of interpretation, which seeks to restore their meaning, to grasp their logic, makes one forget: they may have, strictly speaking, neither meaning nor function, other than the function implied in their very existence, and the meaning objectively inscribed in the logic of actions or words that are done or said in order to “do or say something” (where there are “nothing else to be done”), or more precisely in the generative structures of which these words or actions are the product, or even in the oriented space within they are performed”.

From this point of view it is not to anticipate that the social reality will totally tally with a reciprocally, coherent holistic model, although in certain respects it will. Nevertheless, the same patterns appear among the Magars as the Brahmans, although the Magars give them another content. A practical understanding of a general equivalence of a relation between life cycle rituals and burial customs, may justify using Brahmanism as a Hindu framework for life cycle rituals. In this regard, I will use the Brahmans as the point of departure, and start with some brief remarks on Hinduism.

In the Hindu Triad of Gods Brahman is the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer. However, Shiva is also the Recreator, worshipped as the god of reproduction, symbolized with a lingam, a phallus. The religious concepts of purity and pollution are fundamental in Hinduism. One central conceptual opposition is *samsara* and *mukti*, the phenomenal world and release or salvation respectively. *Samsara* is “the round of birth and death”, and it works according to *karma*, the law of moral cause
and effect, whereby people’s actions are repaid through their own suffering. The final goal is mukti, release, salvation from samsara into transcendent reality (Bennett 1983:36-37). It indicates the rhythms of the cosmos because these rhythms are revelations and manifestations of the fundamental sacred powers behind the cosmos (Eliade 1993[1958]:388). Ascetic values penetrate the religion as rules of purity and pollution. Especially the organic processes; eating, urination, defecation, copulation, menstruation, birth and death, are all perceived as polluting. Through rituals the individuals try to stay pure, which is necessary for release (Bennett 1983:40-41).

There are a lot of symbolic purifying activities. Especially the ascetic actions of fasting, sexual abstinence, vows of silence and giving of ritual gifts, give merit and purification. Since almost everything is ranked in a conceptual hierarchy of purity and pollution, some elements have active purifying powers, e.g. fire, water, gold and the five products of the cow (milk, curd, clarified butter, dung and urine) (ibid:43).

In the classical Western philosophy everything consists of four elements (Lund, Pihl and Slok 1992[1962]:70). In the Hindu philosophy there is five elements, i.e. sky (in Bhagavad-Gita the term “ether” is used, and “space” is also used (Ramanujan 1973:173)), air, light, water and earth. In each of the five elements dwells a god. Shiva dwells in the sky (or ether), Visnu in the air, Agni in the light, Varuna in the water and Brahma in the earth. Agni is the God of Fire, and appears in three phases - in heaven as the sun, in mid-air as the lightning, on Earth as ordinary fire. He is considered as the mediator between men and gods and the protector of men and their homes (Dowson 1995[1982]:6). Varuna personifies the God of Water. It is “one of the oldest of the Vedic deities, a personification of the all-investing sky, the maker and upholder of heaven and earth. As such he is the king of the universe, king of gods and men, possessor of illimitable knowledge, the supreme deity” (ibid:336). However, in later times he has become the god of the seas and the rivers (ibid.). In this form he destroys all the demons of the underwater world (Chatterjee 1996:21). When a person dies, each of the five elements goes back to its origin, whether the body is burned or buried, but it happens in a different order. “On account of difference being shown in deep sleep and death (between the individual soul and the Brahman)” (Brahma-Sutras 1.3.43). This is the doctrine that the body corresponds to and even is identical with the universe. The body as a being is a microcosm and thus encompasses the world, the macrocosm and the gods in particular ways (Goudriaan 1979:57-58).

Even though I said that the Hindu scriptures cannot be used as a dogma, I will use and refer to some of the Sanskrit texts as explanations of the life cycle rituals and the obsequies. In Hinduism, the manual of the life cycle rituals is known as the Grihya Sutras, the rules of Vedic domestic ceremonies. In Hinduism there are no books like The Tibetan Book of the Dead, a book of liberation through an understanding of the in between. “The in between” refers to the whole process between death and rebirth, and thus the book is also “The Tibetan Book of Birth” (Thurman 1994).

The Garuda Puranas, however, are used by the Brahman priests during the funeral ceremonies, and the performance and the meaning of the death rites are described complementary.

Regarding the meaning of objects and rituals, if my informants knew anything about this, they often referred to the holy scriptures (even if they could not read the texts themselves) or they read and quoted from the Sanskrit texts because they wanted to tell me the “truth” and the story “as it is”. There have been some changes and local adaptations both regarding meaning and content, still, many of the ideas prevail. Even the best informants might not know the meaning of the texts he presents although he could be an excellent performer. The meaning may be hidden from the informant because it is buried in a tradition, and to unravel a hidden meaning involves an archaeological thrust: an investigation into the past (Obeyesekere 1990:221-222).

Thus, in my opinion, it is possible to use the holy texts as a source as long as they are used in the rituals and cohere with the information I have got, either by the informants or by observations. However, it gives rise to another problem that I will discuss in chapter 7; to what extent are the ideas of Brahmanism representative of the common people?

The Hindu Life Cycle Rituals

“As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a chance” (Bhagavad-Gita 2.13). Hinduism makes a distinction between domestic rituals and public rituals. The domestic rituals are rituals performed at the occasion of birth, initiation, marriage, and the propitiation of ancestors (Das 1977:8). These rituals are a part of the life cycle rituals in Hinduism. The Brahmans (or the Hindus in general) have five main or orthodox life cycle rituals (samskaras):

(1) Birth. I will include the pre-natal samskaras in this category. The pre-natal rituals consist of (1) the conception rite by the performance of which a woman receives semen scattered by her husband, and (2) the quickening a male child rite by which male child is produced (Pandey 1969:48-69). Among the birth ceremonies is mwaran, the name-giving ceremony, the most important, because “name is the primary means of social intercourse, it brings about merit and it is the root of fortune. From name man attains fame. Therefore, the naming ceremony is very praiseworthy” (ibid:78). The name-giving ceremony is performed on the eleventh day, after the mother has completed her birth pollution. The family’s priest, a pandit, will give the baby a name according to the astrological calendar whereas the child’s father gives his thar (clan or surname) and gotra (clan as an exogamous agnatic unit) to the child and thereby accepts it into the family’s caste and patriline. With this ceremony, where the child is a member of its father’s patriline, the child’s entry into the rebirth has begun (Bennett 1983:55-56). The Magars, however, may
have less days of birth pollution, and not all use Brahman priests in the ceremony.

(2) Pasne, the first rice ceremony. The rice feeding ceremony is the rite where the child receives its first rice meal. This is also the first meal of solid food. By this ceremony the child has entered the world of rice, and as the cooked rice is extremely vulnerable for transmission of pollution, the child has thus entered the sphere of purity and pollution. The ritual is performed at the age of five months for girls and six month for boys, at an auspicious day and hour appointed by a priest or an astrologer. According to Lynn Bennett, females are usually connected with odd numbers and males with even numbers in Hindu symbolism (ibid:120), however, my impression is the opposite, namely that males are connected with odd numbers (see chapter 6). Anyhow, men are usually superior to women and boys are superior to girls. This dominance is expressed in the two next life cycle rituals, and also in the Grihya-Sutras. Why girls undergo pasne before boys is uncertain, and the Sanskrit texts give no explanations. Among some of the Magars, they also use meat as a part of the meal. According to the Grihya-Sutra which prescribes the rite, different food items are connected with different qualities in life. The boy should be fed with “goat’s flesh if he is desirous of nourishment, flesh of partridge if desirous of holy lustre, fish if desirous of swiftness, boiled rice with ghee if desirous of splendour - (such) food prepared with milk curds, honey, and ghee, he should give (to the child) to eat” and “let the mother eat the remnant” (Sankhayana-Grihya-Sutra, I Adhyaya, 27 Khandha, 2-11). The boy shall receive the food with the Mantra (holy verse): “Lord of food, give us food painless and strong; bring forward the giver; bestow power on us, on men and animals” (ibid), whereas with the rite only (without the Mantra) for a girl (Asvalayana-Grihya-Sutra, I Adhyaya, 16 Kandika, 5-6).

(3) Bartamande, the ceremony of initiation into caste and patriline. The bartamande ritual is only for boys, and consists of several parts. The two most important rites are the chewar rite (the hair cutting ceremony) and the upanayana rite (the investiture with the sacred thread). The chewar rite is done by all varna or jat groups, whereas the upanayana rite is only for the Brahmans and Chhetris. The specific meaning of the tonsure ceremony is interpreted in different ways, as a procedure for getting release from sin (Parry 1994:26), as castration anxiety through shaving, the act being a symbolic form of castration (Obeyesekere 1990:43) or as a metaphor not only for purification, but also death, because the child must die before the adult can be born (Leach 1976:79). Moreover, a tonsure ceremony is also performed as the entrance to the sons’ death pollution in the mourning period.

Brahmans and Chhetris are in Nepal the tagadhari jats, which means that they are twice born because they are wearing the janai, the sacred thread. In the Sanskrit texts the Vaishya jat is also considered as a twice-born jat, “the three first castes are all called Dvijas (twice born) because after the first birth from mother they are born again with the sacred girdle girting round their body” (Garuda Purana I, I.94.24). “The sacred thread investiture of Brahman shall be performed in the eight year from conception or nativity, that of a Ksatriya in the eleventh year and that of a Vaishya in the twelfth year or according to some, as is the convention in the family” (Garuda Purana I, I.94.1, Gobhila-Grihya-Sutra, II Prapathaka, 10 Kandika, 1-4). “Until the sixteenth year the time has not passed for a Brahmana, until the twenty-second for a Kshatriya, until the twenty-fourth for a Vaishya. After that time (has passed), they become patitasavitrika (i.e. they have lost their right of being taught the Savitri (the holy verses of the Vedas)). Let them not initiate such men, nor teach them, nor perform sacrifices for them, nor form matrimonial alliances with them” (Gobhila-Grihya-Sutra, II Prapathaka, 10 Kandika, 5-6).

Albeit there are some differences in the relation to the holy scriptures, the meaning of the content is still the same. The first three of these rites are directed toward the child’s achieving full responsibilities of action and ritual purity, karma caleko, to get “activated karma”, bringing the child into samsara (Bennett 1983:53). In the word of John N. Gray (1995), “the second birth is a religious event occurring when a boy reaches a level of maturity that enables him to “understand the Vedas” - around the age of eight for Brahmans and twelve for Chhetris. Because he is able to appreciate the sacred texts, the boy’s actions become morally significant in that they affect his future re-birth (karma)” (Gray 1995:32). After this ceremony the initiated has to behave according to the caste rules and prescriptions. The importance of receiving the sacred thread is to become an adult capable of understanding the Vedas and hence “marry as befits the Householder. Being a Householder, a man who consummates his social life by having children who will mourn his death and continue his lineage as well as fulfilling his responsibilities to the gods through the sponsorship and/or performance of sacrifice” (ibid:34). This has to be seen in the realm of dharma, the moral action and religious duty, the duty of the Householder.

The Magars (or the Matwalis) in Nepal are not twice-born, and in that manner they only perform the chewar ceremony. I will henceforth distinguish between bartamande (Brahmans/ twice-born) and chewar (Magars/Matwalis). The Brahmans perform the rite as they traditionally have done, when the boy is between the age of eight and twelve years. The age of which the chewar is performed has being gone down, and the Magars normally perform it at the age of three, five or seven years.

Gupha basne, the female initiation rite when the girl gets her first menstruation. It marks the transition of a girl from presexual to a sexual being. Gupha basne means “staying in the cave”, and the most important feature is the seclusion of the girl in a dark room (Bennett 1983:235-236). However, it is not considered as one of the orthodox life-cycle rituals (samskara). Though this rite is of special importance regarding purity and pollution, it does not affect the girl’s karma in a way corresponding to the way the bartamande affects a boy. The women become karma caleko only after the marriage ceremony, whether it is before or after the gupha basne (ibid:59). The women’s inferiority is expressed in the fact that they are dependent upon a husband to become karma caleko. The gupha
basne ritual is mainly performed by the Brahmans and the Chhetris. The Magars are to a less extent concerned with menstrual pollution, and they traditionally do not observe this ceremony. However, in one of my research villages, the Magars have recently started performing this ritual (see chapter 6). Nancy C. Luktehaus argues that “the utility of looking at female initiation rites not only in relationship to male initiation, but, more importantly, as part of a larger corpus of rituals that celebrate not only the life cycle of a woman but the life cycle of the public groups or larger community in which they are embedded” (Luktehaus 1995:28). In this context the marriage is the most important rite.

(4) Marriage “marks the beginning of the productive and socially responsible household stage for which, in the case of males, the bartamandhe is a necessary preparation. As such, marriage is a major expression of the value of fertility and conventional religion in the Hindu conflict between ideals of the householder and those of the ascetic” (Bennett 1983:71). It is the most prestigious family ceremony and the main occasion which the greatest number of members of the caste and other persons gather together (Dumont 1970:110).

In marriage the decent and affinity is transferred as well as the subsistence production, that is the access to land and thus the relations of production and consumption. Therefore the marriage is an important happening in the village as it establishes new relations. It “brings” the woman into the man’s household, “the household appears as a patrilineal core of men with women attached to it by marriage who enable these men to morally satisfy their passion and to realize their dharma through their wife’s reproductive fertility” (Gray 1995:50). The various duties of the householder are among other scriptures also referred to by the Garuda Puranas, “after giving fees to the preceptor and taking the ritualistic bath with his permission and concluding his student age he shall marry a girl endowed with good characteristics. She shall be a virgin. (...)” (Garuda Purana I, I.95.1-3).

If the girl is married before the menarche, she acquires the caste of her husband automatically, and if she marries afterwards the children become “half-breeds” (Parry 1994:111). The maiden’s father will be duly rewarded in heaven by giving her away in marriage for the continuance of his ancestral line (Prasad 1993:76). The women’s inferiority in Hinduism has its counterpart in Buddhism where a female rebirth is to some extent seen as less favourable, because the women undergo certain sufferings the men are free from; she has to leave her parents’ family, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and she has to wait upon a man (Harvey 1990:215). Though being born as a human is precious and a rare and valuable occasion, samsara as a hole is characterized by suffering and the aim is liberation from it (Samuel 1993:200). But salvation is only possible to those who are living in samsara, i.e. only human beings who are subject to rebirth may attain liberation (Long 1977:78).

Nowadays the normal marriage age is either around the end of the teens or the early of the twenties. In the past, however, the Brahman bride should be married before her first menstruation. If the bride was married after the menarche, the bride’s parents should donate a cow’s calf to the bridegroom’s parents as a compensation for her loss of purity. Since the bride should be married before her first menstruation, she would have achieved the state of karma caleko before gupha basne, and therefore the latter rite would be without importance for her karma. Although the marriage age has increased and marriage nowadays happens after the gupha basne, it does not affect the state when she becomes morally responsible for her own actions. The women’s inferiority in relation to men is expressed in the fact that they are dependent upon a husband to become karma caleko whereas the men achieve this status by themselves, and that all aspects connected to their biological, reproductive role are connected with impurity. Thus there are more taboos and restrictions for women than men.

(5) Death ceremonies. The death ceremonies are in a way never ending. There are two classes of deceased ancestors, firstly the father, grandfather and great grandfather of any particularly person, and secondly the progenitors of mankind in general. In honour of both these groups of ancestors sraddhas rites are performed. Sraddha constitutes “a debt to the dead” that ought to be repaid assuming the dead ones being alive and living with us. It is believed that one owes three main debts. First is the debt to the gods, next the debt to the guru, and finally the debt to the forefathers. Sraddha seems to be the outcome of the karma theory and establishes bridges between the living and the dead (Pathak 1997). There are four levels of ritual obligation:

a) Kiriya basne, “sitting in mourning”. The main rites are (1) disposing of the corpse, (2) feeding the preta (a ghost or a malevolent spirit) and reconstituting its “body”, (3) changing the preta into a pitri (forefather), and (4) purifying the family and the chief mourner (Bennett 1983:98). The mourning period is for the Brahmans normally thirteen days, whereas there are great local variations among the Magars, from three to thirteen days. My main research objective is this kiriya basne part of the death ceremonies in relation to the deceased’s life cycle rituals. In archaeological terms, participation in the various life cycle rituals determines whether the deceased is buried or cremated and the presence or absence of grave goods, i.e. the main archaeological remains after the death ceremonies.

The next three levels of mourning obligations have not been a primary object of research. The three levels are b) the year of mourning and its monthly rites, c) the annual commemoration and d) the collective celebration in which food offerings are made to many ancestors at once (Bennett 1983:107-120). In these three sraddha rites the offering of pindas (rice balls) are essential, as the gifts are meant to enable the dead to be ferried from the world of karmic miseries to the abode of the blessed (Prasad 1995:xi).

The mode of the annual sraddha is prescribed in the Garuda Puranas and thus provides information about the purpose and the procedure of the performances (Garuda...
The performance of *sraddha* removes sin and releases the soul from ghosthood, and has to be seen in the realm of the eternal soul. “For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain” (Bṛg. 2.20), because we “are permanent, (we) want permanent residence. We do not wish to die because in actuality we are permanent. Nor do we want to grow old or be deceased because these are all external or nonpermanent states. (...) If somehow we can get out of the material body, we can escape the miseries that are integral with it” (Bhaktivedanta Swami Bhaktivedanta, 1972:45).

The son is absolved from his debt to his parents by performing obsequies. Thus he commits a double sin if he omits or fails in the performance of these rituals, the ancestors will suffer and he himself will reap the fruits of his actions in the next life, where he probably will meet his ancestors. It is his duty as a man and as a Householder in his actions in the next life, where he probably will meet his ancestors. It is his duty as a man and as a Householder in his actions in the next life, where he probably will meet his ancestors. It is his duty as a man and as a Householder in the realm of dharma. Moreover, “whatever gifts are made by one during the life time, become beneficial later” (Garuda Purana II, II.13.19) because “whatever gifts a man has given himself they stand in his favour (at the hour of death)” (ibid:II.4.16). They are gifts made to men in the sight of the gods, “a generosity towards them”, in the terms of Marcell Mauss, because those gods who give and return gifts are there to give a considerable thing in the place of a small one (Mauss 1993[1925]:14-17).

The importance of having a son to perform the death rituals is expressed explicitly in the Garuda Puranas: “There is no salvation for a man without a son. He can never attain heaven without a son” (Garuda Purana II, II.13.18 & III, II.29.4). “A man is released from his debt to the manes on seeing his son’s face. A man is released from three types of debts (to the sages, gods and manes) on seeing his grandson. On seeing his son, grandson, and great grandson he attains eternal or celestial worlds” (Garuda Purana III, II.25.33-34). “Even a man having sons, dying without the performance of these rites, does not attain salvation. A man without son by doing these rites beforehand shall have a happy journey on the Great Highway” (Garuda Purana II, II.14.14). The funeral of an old man is often described as “the second wedding”, and the funeral procession as a marriage party which accompanies the grooms to the house of the bride (Parry 1994:157).

This illuminates the fact that death is not separated from, but rather integrated in the social structure and the society. Therefore is marriage as a social institution fundamental in the understanding of death, the necessity of having a son and the traditional valuation of women in the Brahman society. In the household, men are associated with the whole household and the goal of the moral actions in the world, while women are means and thereby subordinate to men (Gray 1995:49).

Thus widow burning (*suttee* or *sati*) was practiced in the past, “a woman who enters the fire after her husband prospers in heaven like *Arundhati* (the epistle of the chaste and faithful wife, a model of conjugal excellence).

Until and unless the woman burns herself after her husband’s death she is never released from the bond of her sex” (Garuda Purana II, II.4.95-96). “Rise up, woman, into the world of the living. Come here; you are lying beside a man whose life’s breath has gone. You were the wife of this man who took your hand and desired to have you” (Rig Veda 10.18.8). The wife of the dead man should lie with the face down beside him, probably miming copulation (O’Flaherty 1994[1981]:53-54). Widow burning was prohibited in Nepal with the Mulukin Ain (Civil Code).

However, even after the first Mulukin Ain of 1854 a slave wife married to a freeman was allowed to practice widow burning (Hofer 1979:126). The practice of *sati* has to be seen in the light of widow remarriage which the Mulukin Ain of 1854 does not prohibit (ibid:169).

The Deceased’s Life Cycle Rituals

The crucial features of the burial custom in relation to life cycle rituals depends upon karma and the person’s achieved social position in the society. To what degree the deceased has entered samsara, “the round of birth and death”, depends upon karma *caleko*, the extent to which the karma is “activated”. The level of entrance into this world, determines the accurate entrance to the next, i.e. when a person dies. The individual’s social status in the society is expressed in the funeral rites and has three physical manifestations in the mortuary remains: (1) The presence or absence of grave goods. (2) The treatment of the corpse, i.e. whether it is cremated or buried. (3) The widow’s jewellery in her husband’s funeral.

(1) The presence or absence of grave goods. The overwhelmingly dominant and important grave goods, and normally the only one, is food. Raw rice is the major determinant regarding the presence or absence of grave goods. Deceased without *pasne*, the rice feeding ceremony, cannot receive raw rice or any other grave goods as a grave gift. If the person is introduced to the world of rice, then raw rice is always the fundamental part of the grave goods, often combined with lentils used in the daily meal. Participation in the *pasne* ritual determines whether the deceased will receive grave goods or not. The raw rice is a symbol of fertility. The seed will germinate and give life to others. Nepal is the land of rice. The God Lord *Goraknath* promised the Nepalese people that their country was made of rice, as well as that in this country they should never starve or suffer of hunger. Therefore the Nepalese are never beggars, but they work hard and pray for rice and fertility, for the seed which will sprout, become many and give new life. *Goraknath* was a medieval master Yogi of northern and western India, a famous saint and worker of miracles. He is considered a representative or even an embodiment of Shiva (Briggs 1973[1938]:179-181). Thus raw rice is a symbol of the forthcoming life, the rebirth. The daal or the lentils help the soul to receive this freedom or salvation. If other food items are used as gifts to the deceased, they contribute to the fulfillment of this aim. Whether the food is put into containers or not, is a practical solution which depends upon tradition.
(2) The treatment of the corpse. The karma caleko state of the soul demands cremation as the burial custom, if the funeral rites are to be performed accurately. On the contrary, if the soul of the deceased has not become karma caleko, then the corpse is buried. In other words, men with bartamande and married women are cremated, while unmarried girls and boys without bartamande, are buried. Differences in grave and cremation constructions as physical monuments and structures, are of minor importance, because the funeral practices belong to either cremation as a category or burial as a category.

(3) The widow’s jewellery in her husband’s funeral. When the Householder dies, the widow changes her status in the society as well as in the household. She becomes partly stigmatised, she is neither socially allowed to marry again nor does any man want to marry her. Still she has to carry out some of her husband’s duties as a Householder, and thus she gets other responsibilities and obligations in the family. Because she leaves one position in the society and enters a new social role, the widow has to mark this transition. She has to dispose of all things her husband was responsible for and obliged to give her. In the house she will take off her jewellery and break the bracelets and place them on the deceased husband’s chest. Thereafter he is carried to the cemetery, and either cremated or buried with his wife’s jewellery on his chest (Figure 5.1). The widow will also change her clothes and take off the tika (a mark of blessing placed on the forehead). The widow is in a sense morally responsible for her husband’s death and must expiate the misfortune she has brought to him for the rest of her life. She has become a “half corpse” (Parry 1994:174). This has to be seen in the light of festivals observed only by women who are married or of marriageable age. Especially the Teej festival reveals all the hidden wishes of a Hindu housewife. They fast for a productive marriage, good fortune and a long life for their husband (Anderson 1988:116ff, Jha 1996:89ff, Kaushik n.d.).

Nowadays the widow’s gold and silver jewellery have become heirlooms within the family, but silver jewellery can still be found as grave gifts (Figure 5.2). However, the broken personal decoration consists of bracelets and jewellery made of plastic (Figure 5.3). This ritual happens in the household for two reasons, the change of status is connected to the domestic sphere and the Brahman women are not allowed to participate in the funeral ceremony at the graveyard. The Magar women are allowed to attend the funerals, but local practices and traditions decide whether they participate or not. When unmarried girls and women die, the jewellery and bracelets are broken and placed on her chest in the cemetery.

General Remarks on Life Cycle Rituals and Burial Customs

Except from the nwaran, the name giving ceremony, is it possible to trace all the orthodox life cycle rituals (samskara) in the mortuary remains: (1) The presence or absence of grave goods for both men and women depends

Figure 5.1 A 65-year-old Sarki from Bhimpokhara is cremated with his wife’s jewellery on the chest at Nire Ghat
upon \textit{pasne}, the rice feeding ceremony. (2) The treatment of the corpses of men depends upon \textit{bartamande}. (3) The marriage determines the treatment of the corpses of women. It is also possible to trace the marriage ceremony in the man’s funeral. It is extremely rare that older people in villages live unmarried. Thus is it possible to decide whether the deceased man’s wife was alive or not when he died. If the husband has got jewellery as grave goods, then his wife has become a widow, on the contrary, if not, it is most likely that his wife had already died. The last assumption is based on negative evidence, but it is possible to justify this inference from a contextual approach.

Even though this is the practice the religion prescribes, there are a lot of local variations and adaptations within this general framework. There is always a distinction in grave goods connected to \textit{pasne}, normally the absence or the presence of food. When it is possible to cremate, on the other hand, show a greater variation, and among some of the Magars the distinction between cremation and burial is not connected to one of the orthodox life cycle rituals. However, the change in the widow’s status is practiced and expressed in a similar way in all the villages among both Brahmans and Magars. Except from the difference with the jewellery, the treatment of deceased women is similar to that of men within a village when they have the same moral status, whether they are \textit{karma caleano} or not.

Albeit only the orthodox life cycle rituals are possible to trace directly in the mortuary material, other life cycle rituals have a major significance for the deceased’s rebirth. \textit{Chaurasi} is in this manner of special importance. The ceremony is celebrated when a person is a thousand full moons old, that is in his or her eighty-fourth year. The old one is worshipped as a living ancestor and a god on this day (Figure 5.4), and the ritual reduces the person’s sin.

Moreover, after \textit{chaurasi} the old man or woman has an honoured position in the society.
Chapter 6: Funeral Practices and Mortuary Remains

Children

The death of a child is of course a more tragic event than a natural death of old age or decrepitude. Children in the villages are normally not buried in cemeteries, but closer to their home. Boys younger than bartamande and girls up to the same age are usually buried in the nearest non-arable land to the house. It is a bit uncertain why this custom is practiced, but the parents want to keep the presence of the child’s soul and spirit close to their home. The deceased child’s soul might influence the mother’s fertility and her next pregnancy. In one village, a family buried their child in a cemetery some distance from the house, and the mother was never able to bear a child again. The mourning period is shorter for children than for adults, since the children have not become karma caleton.

Cemeteries and Holy Rivers

Ghat means “water-pot”, “steps leading to water” or “crossing-point”, but is also used as the name for cemeteries. The location of cemeteries at the banks of holy rivers is fundamental in Brahmanism. The Indian concept of a river is that of a sustaining mother, a fertility Goddess, both a physical and spiritual cleanser (Singh & Nath 1995:83). Although water is a pure medium in itself as one of the five elements and has an auspicious nature, rivers have different degrees of holiness. According to one of my informants, it is important to distinguish between streams and rivers. There are a lot of streams in the hill regions in the Baglung and Myagdi districts, but they are not rivers. Kaligandaki River, however, is one of the most holy and sacred rivers in Nepal and has an important religious function all over Western Nepal.

There are several reasons why Kaligandaki River has this special religious role: (1) Kaligandaki River comes from the Himalayas, therefore the river is perceived as a god. The mountains are holy in general, but Dhaulagiri has a special function in this area. According to folk tales and folk beliefs Dhaulagiri is the giver of water to the rivers. Kaligandaki River has its source in this holy mountain, and thus Dhaulagiri is the everlasting source of water and thereby life. However, from a geographical point of view, Kaligandaki River has its origin in other mountains further north than Dhaulagiri. (2) By the act of a hermit or a sadhu rivers may become holy. Sadhus are persons who have withdrawn to a solitary place for a life of religious seclusion, who do tapasya, religious penance. Places may become sacred after kings, holy men or gurus have meditated there. A connecting river to Kaligandaki passes by the pilgrimage place Muktinath in the Mustang district (the district north of the Myagdi district). The Muktinath temple with its 108 waterspouts is the second most sacred Hindu place in Nepal, visited by both Hindus and Buddhists. (3) Kaligandaki River contains the ammonite fossils known to Hindus as saligram (Figure 6.1). From a geological point of view an ammonite fossil is the remains of an aquatic animal that is preserved in rock, normally in an internal mould, dated to be 65-345 million years old (Hamilton 1974:250-256). In the Hindu religion, on the other hand, saligram is an embodiment, a physical manifestation or visible incarnation of Vishnu. In the word of Mircea Eliade, “a sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (...from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality” (Eliade 1987[1957]:12). Kaligandaki River is the river where almost all saligram in Nepal is found. (4) The river leads to Ganges. Mother Ganga is the most sacred river to the Hindus, which flows to Benares (Varanasi), the holy pilgrimage. A cremation in Benares ends samsara, “the round of birth and death”, and the deceased attains salvation and release immediately.

Figure 6.1 Saligram
Nire Ghat outside Baglung Bazaar, located to the Kaligandaki River, has a very special religious function as a cemetery in the Baglung district because of the sacredness of the river (Figure 6.2). Dead people from up to ten-twelve hours of walking from Baglung Bazaar are carried to Nire Ghat, if the deceased's family has the possibility. The Sanskrit texts do not contain references to Nire Ghat, whereas other holy places in the nearby areas are mentioned. According to oral legend or myth, the two kings or Saints, Rajanga Rishi and Rajarshi Nirga Rishi, discussed and decided important religious and cultural matters on this place, and for the future it became a cemetery.

The Funeral Rites

The aim with this chapter is to present the death as a process in order to illuminate the complexity of funerary rites and archaeological mortuary remains. There are variations within the Hindu mode in the way of performing the obsequies, “the arrangement for cremating the corpse should be made as far as the means allow” (Garuda Purana II, II.4.43). Henceforth, there are other possibilities than the described funerals, which also explains the differences in the mortuary remains. I will present data from two of the funerals I witnessed at Nire Ghat, combined with interviews, explanations given in the Garuda Puranas and other relevant literature. The two funerals are the cremation of an 85-year-old Brahman man from the Bihu village, and the burial of a 96-year-old Magar woman from the Resha village.

In the Hindu cosmology, death is not an integrated part of the domestic rituals. Ideally a Hindu should not die in the house, but on the ghats or on the banks of a sacred river (Das 1977:8). “If he dies at a sacred place he attains moksa (release from re-birth) after dying there. If he dies in the way, each and every step he has taken in reaching this place procure for him the fruit of performing a sacrifice” (Garuda Purana II, II.4.38). It is only the Asvalayana-Grihya-Sutra in the Grihya Sutras which describes the procedure to be followed at cremation. Therefore, according to Das, it seems likely that cremation of the dead was not an intrinsic part of the domestic rituals (Das 1977:94).

Normally a person dies in his village. When a person is dying, the yard outside the house should be cleaned and besmeared with cow dung. “If the corpse is kept on unsmeared ground, the foul spirits enter the corpse” (Garuda Purana II, II.211). Then the dying person is brought out and laid down on mats, close to tulasi grass and saligram. The grass prevents the soul from being attached by evil spirits, and thus the soul will go to heaven. “Undoubtedly one attains salvation if one dies near a Salagrama stone which is powerful for annihilating all sins and defects” (Garuda Purana III, II.38.9). A silver coin is put under the dying person’s tongue. If he is really about to die, he will swallow it, if he is going to live, he will spit it out. Thereafter, the relatives pour water into the mouth of the dying, otherwise the throat will dry and the person will not die peacefully. It may be a different kind of pure water for the regeneration of life, i.e. combinations of sacred products, for instance water poured over gold or saligram, by which the symbolic power is strengthened (see Figure 6.3 for equipment used during the funeral rites at home). When the person is dead, a mixture of five gems should be put into the mouth, and then the life will flourish in the next life. The relatives take off the old clothes, sprinkle holy water on the body, dress the deceased in new clothes, give tika (a blessing) on his forehead, and mala (yellow flower) around his neck.

“The hands and the feet of the dead together with the covering cloth should be tied to the bamboo bier. If this is not done, there is a risk of an attack by the pisacas (malicious super humans, their chief activities being leading people astray, haunting cemeteries, eating human flesh and indulging in every kind of wickedness). If the dead body is taken out during the night there is fear of spirits roaming in the sky. The body should not be left unattended” (Garuda Purana III, II.35.41-43). The direction of the deceased lying on the bamboo stretcher on the way to the burial ground varies. Some are carried with the head towards the cemetery whereas others with the feet. According to some priests, the corpse should be taken to
the ghat with the head first because this is the way a baby is born (Parry 1994:175).

The funeral procession of the deceased Brahman consisted of about sixty men. In front of the funeral procession a couple of men blew on conch shells, to symbolize and notify the death, together with another man who threw “way-food” of mixed grains. Thereafter came several people who carried a “way-cloth” in front of the stretcher with the dead. The “way-cloth” is a long piece of white cloth fastened to small bamboo sticks, which leads the dead to the cemetery. The more honoured a person is, the longer the “way-cloth” is.

The period between the moment of death and the performance of funeral rites, is the most dangerous time for the deceased. This is, in my opinion, the real liminal phase during the funeral rites. “The structural “ invisibility” of liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 1991:96). When a person dies, the soul changes condition immediately into a vulnerable and dangerous condition. The soul wanders around in a state of unhappy restlessness, and is not allowed to mix with the other dead. The condition is called preta, which means “deceased” or “departed”. The preta represents the soul during this transitional period. Through subsequent rites, the preta becomes a pisaca and finally he reaches the dignity of the pitr.

However, the term preta is also referred to as malevolent beings along with other hostile spirits of the dead (as the pisacas). These ghosts and demi-gods are normally conceived in human forms, caused by their crimes, misfortunes or unnatural death (Kumar 1983:145ff). The departed soul is in a helpless condition, because “man is born alone; man dies alone; he enjoys his merit by himself; he reaps the bitter fruits of his sins by himself” (Garuda Purana II, II.12.22).

Moreover, all of the ghosts try to attack the departed soul, thus the soul is totally dependent upon the relatives performing the rites in an accurate and prescribed manner. Even if the karma should have predicted a good incarnation, an inappropriate performance of the death rites might destroy everything.

“If the funeral rites are not performed in the prescribed way, the soul of the deceased (in rebirth) deviates from the righteous path and falls in the company of the wicked. Then Vrisha (setting free a bull on the occasion of a funeral rite or a religious act generally) is the only rite to redeem him” (Garuda Purana II, II.20.42). At death the soul becomes a pret, but the rite performed at the end of the mourning period enables the deceased to rejoin his ancestors and become a pitr himself (Parry 1994:75).

Similarly, crying and wailing by the mourners is of no avail and is not done, “they should abstain from shedding tears while giving the water-offerings after cremation. But if they shed tears and vomit cough, the departed spirit consumes the same helplessly” (Garuda Purana II, II.4.80). Yama, the god of Death, is also roaming around at the cemetery where the spirit of the departed dwells. He is the Lord of the Hells where the sinners are punished after their death. Yama and Varuna are the kings the dead man meets on the way to heaven. But the water (Varuna) over-powers Yama, so those who bathe in holy water cannot be punished by Yama or his men (i.e. other ghosts or demons)(Kumar 1983:104f). Therefore the bamboo stretcher with the dead man is placed with the deceased’s feet into the river immediately after the procession enters the cemetery, while the grave or the pyre is built (Figure 6.4). Thus the dead person does not have to suffer from the pains of hell.
“(...) The soul in the human body is of the size of a thumb. When it is dragged out of the body by the messengers of Yama, it cries painfully looking wistfully at his erstwhile home. The disgusting body without life and breath becomes untouchable suddenly, smells foul and is disliked by all. The body suffers in three ways: Either it is eaten by worms or transformed to feces or reduced to ashes” (Garuda Purana II, II.15.20-24). During the cremation “the fire consumes the body but the merit and demerit accompany him. The body is burnt by the fire but the actions perpetrated by him keep his company” (ibid:II.12.26-27).

The pyre should preferably be made of shrekanda (sandalwood) on the ground on which no other dead has been cremated presently, i.e. it should be clean. The firewood is expensive, and may cost one month salary. When the cremation pyre was erected, the old Brahman was laid naked on the pyre with a few pieces of cloth covering the abdomen, because a person is born naked and should therefore leave this world naked. Clothes may disturb the soul’s abandonment of the body. Several of the relatives sprinkled water from the river on the deceased (Figure 6.5), thereafter the oldest son placed a coin into the mouth (a piece of gold may also be used), then he gave raw rice (often combined with raw daal and raw lentils) and finally ghee to his father (Figure 6.6).

A small portion of the flesh from the corpse should be removed and wrapped in white cloth or some kind of leaf. This flesh should either be buried in the ground before the funeral, or thrown in the river together with the ashes after the cremation. However, even though some informants have described this practice, I have never seen it during funeral ceremonies. Moreover, several other informants were not familiar with this custom; thus I will assume that it is not a common practice.

The oldest son lit his 85-year-old father’s pyre by setting fire to a piece of cloth immersed with ghee in the deceased’s mouth (Figure 6.7). When the pyre is going to be lit, it is preferred to start lighting either the food in the mouth or behind the deceased’s head. Thereafter the pyre is lit in all directions, moving around the pyre from the right. The only allowed combustible item used during cremations, is ghee. The deceased’s polluted cloths and the “way-cloth” were laid on the top of the pyre (Figure 6.8). The bamboo bier was taken apart, and the relatives used the two long bamboo sticks to re-establish the pyre during the fire and to break the half-burnt and charcoaly corpse into pieces, in order to perform a total burning of the body (Figure 6.9). In the Hindu thought it is inauspicious if remains of the skeleton are left at the cremation patch. Furthermore, the “vital breath” is released from the charred corpse of the deceased by cracking open the skull by the bamboo-sticks, and precisely at that moment the death pollution begins. (Parry 1987[1982]:79). Thus the two sons’ hair is shaved (Figure 6.10), and the remains were left in the cemetery (Figure 6.11). When the cremation was completed, the sons collected pieces of charcoal (and if possible the remains of the body) in a piece of cloth, and threw it into the river (Figure 6.12), in the same manner the remains of the bamboo stretcher were given to the river. When the ashes are given to the river, the holy water, the soul will always attain freedom. Thus the next incarnation may start.
Figure 6.6 The sons offered ghee to their father

Figure 6.7 The pyre was lit in the deceased’s mouth

Figure 6.8 The polluted clothes were burnt on the pyre
Figure 6.9 Bamboo-sticks were used to re-establish the pyre. A cremation of a 51-year-old deceased Chhetri at Nire Ghat.

Figure 6.10 Cremation
Before the funeral procession left the cemetery, they all went northward in the cemetery and had a holy bath in the river and purified themselves afterwards with *ghee*. Finally, money collected from the lineage and the relatives was distributed to the participants in the procession. Thereafter the procession went back home to their village, and the sons observed *kiriya*, the death pollution, for thirteen days. The cremation itself took about two and a half hours. According to Hindu beliefs, the time it takes to burn the body depends upon the deceased’s sins. The more sinful a person has been, the longer time the cremation rite takes. In Varanasi I was told that the pyre of a sinner could burn for at least six hours.

Similarly, when the Chief Minister of Bihar of India was cremated in Varanasi in 1983, the corpse burnt only with the greatest difficulty, despite the size of the pyre and the amount of *ghee* applied to it. The reason was supposed to be the enormous burden of sin accumulated with his corrupt earnings (Parry 1994:127).

The Magars perform the cremation rites more or less in a corresponding way. Women as well as men participated in the funeral procession of the 96-year-old Magar woman from the Resha village. At her home, the deceased had that day got a cigarette and water was offered in her mouth. When the procession reached the riverbank, the bamboo stretcher was carried around one of the big trees at the riverside, before the procession went down to the riverbed.

Orange grave clothes covered the dead body. Her sons built the grave, and she was buried in a cairn located half into the river, sitting in Buddha or lotus position facing south, with a big stone at her back to the north (Figure 6.13-14). The relatives claimed that the reason why she was buried like this was that she had been a Hindu. As the grave was built, it was continuously filled with wet sand and stones from the river. The stretcher was taken apart and given to the river. Only during the construction of the grave, the daughters performed ceremonial weeping, sitting in front of the grave in a row. Approximately half a kilo of raw rice was offered as a gift in a white “way-cloth” on the bamboo stick, placed by the deceased’s head when the grave was completed. Thereafter the relatives sprinkled water from the Kali Gandaki River on the grave, and the procession went further north in the cemetery and had a holy bath. The funeral took less than one hour all in all.

"Forsaking the body like the serpent casting off its slough, the subtle soul of the size of the thumb roams about in its aerial form oppressed by hunger" (Garuda Purana III, II.25.14-15).
"It is true that a man lives for a hundred years as stated in the Vedas. But due to the influence of misdeeds he dies a premature death" (Garuda Purana III, II.24.10).

"When the actions of previous birth ripen, man succumbs to death. From the time of conception to the fifth year even a slight sin may cause death. It is due to major sins that man dies after the fifth year. Usually, he completes the allotted span of life, dies and is born again. It is a result of the influence of sacred rites and gifts he is able to complete his life’s term” (Garuda Purana III, II.24.31-33).
Nire Ghat

In the following I will first present the material or mortuary remains from Nire Ghat and thereafter the differences in life cycle rituals and mortuary remains from the research villages. The variation in the remains and practices are probably larger within the research area since I have only been in some of the villages.

The burial and cremation ground shows a great variation of different burial practices. All castes and groups may bury or cremate their relatives at Nire Ghat (Figure 6.15). Most of the mortuary remains are less than one year old. In the rainy season in the summer time the river washes away the funeral material with the monsoon flood. Thus the inhumation may be perceived as a combination of burials and water-burials.

Likewise, after cremations the ashes are thrown into the river, but remains of charcoal and ashes are still left as cremation patches on the riverbed. When the monsoon flood washes away the cremation patches, these funerals may also be seen as completed because then the cemetery is cleaned. The funerals are to a great extent located half into the river. The closer the funerals are to the river, the better (Figure 6.16). Thus the remains from the time immediately after the monsoon period in the autumn are located close to the riverside, while during the springtime and in the dry season, the funerals are located far out on the riverbed.

Nire Ghat is oriented north-south. There are three stone stairs from the riverside leading down to the riverbed where the funerals take place. The funerals are almost strictly located between the northernmost and the southernmost of these stairs, between which there is a distance of approximately 300 meters.

When I was at Nire at the end of February 1997, it was about half a year since the last time the river had washed away the mortuary remains. Then I counted 86 graves of various types and 38 cremation patches. In the end of September 1997, after the monsoon flood, there were 52 graves and 7 cremation patches, seven weeks later; the respective numbers were 74 graves and 13 cremation patches. However, these numbers are not “hard facts” even though they are the most quantitative data I have collected.

In September I recognized a few graves which I counted in February also. The river this year had not been as strong as in the previous years, thus some of the well built cairns had “survived” whereas cremation patches were washed away. And because of the monsoon flood, the river had grubbed up older inhumations in the riverbed.

Furthermore, as a result of disturbances caused by natural processes as well as animals (Figure 6.17-6.20), it has in some cases been difficult to determine which remains did belong to which individual, e.g. which skeleton remains belong to which skull. After an evaluation of the taphonomic processes, the presented numbers of the graves in relation to cremation patches are probably higher than the real situation. Still, the tendency is clear, regardless of ethnicity, even though most of the deceased should have been cremated, the majority is buried on the riverbed.
Figure 6.17 – 6.20 Taphonomic processes. Burial sites disturbed by natural processes as well as animals. Thus it has been difficult in some cases to determine which remains did belong to which individual, e.g. which skull belonged to which skeleton remains.
As a result of poverty and difficulties in getting firewood for the funeral pyre, burials are more common than the religion prescribes. If the deceased had a good reputation and was appreciated in his village, all the villagers in the procession might carry one piece of firewood to the funeral pyre as a last honour, and he will still be cremated. According to Brahmanism, if the deceased is buried when he should have been cremated, it causes negative karma for the forthcoming life and rebirth. A part of the karma did not get a proper funeral, i.e. cremation. In that respect the deceased will get a less good start in his next life. A fatalistic view may penetrate the attitude towards this destiny; it was not the intention that the concerned person should get a proper funeral in this life. Moreover, and even worse, is the destiny of the buried after the funeral ceremony. Since the graves are built of loose stones, after some time a lot of the skeletons can be found lying exposed, either naturally because the stones have rolled away, or by predators, dogs and carrion birds who eat the corpses. In the past, thieves also stole the grave goods when jewellery of gold and silver were given. These “tragic lives” of the corpses are a double sin in Hinduism, both the deceased’s soul and the miserable animals who eat the corpses suffer. However, ordinary people have other eschatological conceptions than Brahmanism and the pandits. The local folklore and tradition in the area give a different explanation. A burial at Nire Ghat is preferable because of its special sacredness compared to other cemeteries. After some years, the water will transform the deceased’s bones into saligram. Thus they have become an incarnation of Visnu.

The most common grave constructions are small Cairns made of loose water rolled stones. However, there are at least four types of graves: (a) the bamboo stretcher which the deceased is carried on is placed on a stone packing made on the riverbed. Subsequently the corpse is barely covered by a few layers of stones. Often the handles on the stretcher are jutting outside the grave (Figure 6.21), and thus the sizes of the graves are just a little bit longer than the length of the dead. Similar graves are erected without the deceased lying on the bier (Figure 6.22). The overall majority of the graves are located more or less north-south with the head in either of the directions. Still there is a minority of the graves located east-west or in directions in between the two axes. The body may be placed in any of these directions, and the head might be turned another way. (b) The deceased are buried in a cairn and sitting in Buddha position (Figure 6.23). The deceased may sit in this Buddha position facing south, north and east, and I will also assume west, although I have not seen such a grave at Nire. (c) Two-three feet deep inhumations in the sand in the riverbed where the deceased is laid in supine position (Figure 6.24). (d) In the past, people were buried in deep graves in riverbed sitting in Buddha position, at least facing north. Albeit I have not confirmed it, I assume that there are other possibilities concerning inhumations in the riverbed. The funeral pyre is built either with or without a stone setting.

The pyre can also be built on the top of a stone packing or platform (Figure 6.25). This practice may facilitate the cremation itself in the way that it becomes more inflammable in addition to the fact that the cremation can take place closer to the river. The size of the pyre is rarely larger than what is needed to fulfil the cremation, i.e maximum two meters in length, and one meter in width and height. Most of the cremation patches are placed north-south parallel to the river. Still a minority is placed in other directions. Unfortunately, many of the stone settings are circular, henceforth it is often impossible to decide the direction (Figure 6.26). Indeed, it can be even worse when there are no stone settings.
(1) **Brahmans (or Hindus in general)**. They are supposed to both bury and cremate in supine position oriented north-south. Whether the head should be pointed to the north or to the south and the feet vice versa, depends upon tradition. Most people prefer to point the head of the deceased to the north, although there is a general agreement that north is in other situations an inauspicious direction, e.g. people never sleep with their head to the north. However, it seems like very few are concerned with why they point the deceased to the north, except that they follow their tradition, and that the deceased should be laid on the north-south axis. South is the direction of Yama’s kingdom (Parry 1994:173).

(2) **Magars**. Their funeral practice depends upon several factors. (a) Religion. Whether they are Hindus or Buddhists, and to which extent remains of an ancient animistic religion and practice penetrates into or has survived in these Hindu or Buddhist believes may influence the choice of funeral practices and burial customs. (b) Geographical location. Magars who believe in Hinduism prefer, like other Hindus, to carry their deceased to Nire and Kaligandaki River, regardless if they live in Baglung Bazaar or in the nearby areas. However, Magars living in Baglung Bazaar who are stated Buddhists, do also use Nire as their cemetery because they do not have their own. (c) Disagreement. Among the Magars in Baglung Bazaar which are Buddhists, there is no general agreement of what the right funeral practice is. As Buddhists they are a religious minority. There is an increasing consciousness of their ethnicity, and some Magars have changed their religion from Hinduism to Buddhism as a part of this strategy. In this manner they do not have a continuing Buddhist tradition from the past to the present, and therefore there is a confusion as to what the real Buddhist burial custom is. Some claim that as Buddhists, they should be buried, others argue that they should be cremated. Still, some are in favour of a combination, to bury the ashes after the cremation. Thus the Magars have different funeral practices at Nire: (a) Cremation. The body may lie on the pyre with the head either pointing northwards or southwards. (b) Buried lying supine in small cairns. The orientation depends upon their tradition, and varies from north-south to east-west. (c) Buried in Buddha position in small cairns. (d) Buried in Buddha position in deep graves in the riverbed. At least until two generations ago, Magars with Buddhist beliefs were buried in this lotus position facing north. Still it is likely that there are other Magar burial practices, in the present as well as in the past.
Beni

The cemetery is situated in the cross-point of Myagdi Khola and Kaligandaki River (Figure 6.27). Thus it is a sacred and holy place for the nearby districts in a way corresponding to that of Nire, although the cemetery is smaller. The location between two rivers is favorable because when the rivers wash away the remains, the deceased receive merit from two rivers. When I was there in the end of February 1997, I counted 5 graves and 4 cremation patches. In the end of September 1997, there were 5 graves and 1 cremation patch, seven weeks later; the respective numbers were 13 graves and 7 cremation patches.

The cemetery is heavily disturbed, partly by animals and the rivers, but mostly by extensive quarrying of stones from the riverbed. I found scattered remains of skeletons all over the area, as well as small charcoal remains because of an intensive flow of water on the riverbed, thus these counts also represent tendencies rather than accurate numbers.

In February the cemetery was located eastwards to Kaligandaki River (area A), whereas in September it had moved westwards to Myagdi Khola (area B). In November, the funerals had again taken place along Kaligandaki River (area A) whereas there were no new remains along Myagdi Khola (area B). Both the graves and the cremation patches along Kaligandaki River were directed north-south. The funeral remains along Myagdi Khola show a greater variation in orientations. Because of the disturbance on the riverbed is the problem of representativeness on this cemetery equal to Nire Ghat. The problem is that very few dead bodies “survive”.

The post mortem processes are complex and numerous, and may be regarded as an interplay between preservation and destruction (Boddington, Garland & Janaway 1987:4). There are both intrinsic and extrinsic factors to bone preservation. The intrinsic factors stem from the nature of the bones itself, i.e. the chemistry, shape, size, density and age. The extrinsic factors are mainly of three categories; the environment (geography and geology), the nature of local fauna and flora and finally the activities of man.

The environmental processes are water, soil, temperature and air, whereas all kinds of micro-or macro organisms may destroy the bones. But humans are the most important factor in determining the relative preservation of the skeletons. The mode of disposal is crucial in this regard (Henderson 1987).

All these factors work against the preservation of the bones at both the Nire Ghat and Beni Ghat. At the latter, however, it seems also like taboos connected to the graveyard have stepped aside for man’s quarrying of stones. Thus the cultural and religious ideas have either preserving or destructive effects.

Figure 6.27 The cemetery in Beni. Picture towards north.
Magars in Argal VDC

In the Argal village in Argal VDC the Magars perform *pasne* when the girls and boys are five and six months respectively, and the *chewar* ritual is performed when the boys are either three or five years old. Without the *pasne* ceremony, deceased children do not receive food as grave gifts. Boys without *chewar* and unmarried girl are not allowed to be cremated.

Even though Magars may practice cremation, inhumation is the most common practice, partly of economic considerations, or so they say. However, the economic situation is not worse than in general in rural areas. The gift to the deceased for his journey to the afterlife is his favourite cooked meal, made of the eldest lady of the house. A person is dependant upon food when he is alive, and therefore he is also dependant upon food when he is dead. Then he will get peace in the afterlife. In burials, the food is placed in a copper pot or a bamboo basket, and placed under their right arm in the grave. When they cremate, the cooked food is placed directly over the deceased’s heart when he or she is lying on the pyre. There is no difference in the meaning or the symbolic value whether the food is placed under the right arm or over the heart.

The deceased is carried on the stretcher with the feet towards the cemetery and the head towards the house, otherwise there is a possibility that the soul may haunt the home as a ghost. On the way to the cemetery, “way-food” is thrown in front of the funeral procession. The “way-food” is a mixture of different raw ingredients likes rice, maize, wheat and soya beans. If there are any left-over of the “way-food” when the procession reaches the cemetery, the food is placed together with the cooked meal, either in the container or over the heart. However, “way-food” is only used for boys after the *chewar* ritual and for women after marriage. The death pollution lasts for three days only.

There are nine cemeteries in Argal VDC, although some are out of use nowadays. The Magars in the Argal village have their own graveyard separated by a stone wall (Figure 6.28). The cemetery is situated north and above the village in the middle of a hill, further north is a sacred forest. The burial practice is inhumations in small flat graves without any kind of stone structures. The deceased is supposed to be laid supine with the head to the north-east and the feet to the south-west, and the face turned to the north. I was told that this direction of the face is because, according to myth, their forefathers migrated into the area from the north. However, the graves are located in all directions between the north axis and the south-east axis.

The Magars are subdivided into several clans and lineages, and have classified themselves into two groups after when they migrated into Argal, as the “first comers” (*raithane*) and the “later comers” (*pasuwa*). The *pad* (or *thar*) division of the Magars refers to the patrilineal groups. A *pad* group is exogamous from a marriage point of view, although different *pad* holders may have the same surname. Thus the *pad* is a means of exclusion, of constructing smaller sub-
groups within the larger group of Magars. The surname comes after the pad name, and marriage can take place between the same surname holders (Khattri 1995:39). The categorization of the groups in terms of settlements is as follows (ibid)(Table 6.1):

Table 6.1 Categorization of Magar groups in the Argal village in terms of settlement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The groups</th>
<th>Pad</th>
<th>Surname</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“First comers” / Raithane</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Char Thare – First</td>
<td>Osasha</td>
<td>Gharti and Roka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Char Thare – Second</td>
<td>Nausa</td>
<td>Gharti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Char Thare – Third</td>
<td>Pulisa</td>
<td>Gharti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Char Thare – Fourth</td>
<td>Pun</td>
<td>Pun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Later comers” / Pasuwa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roka</td>
<td>Sinjali</td>
<td>Roka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naisa</td>
<td>Naisa</td>
<td>Gharti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roka</td>
<td>Ramjali</td>
<td>Roka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thapa</td>
<td>Palpa</td>
<td>Thapa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Argal village, each pad has its own place in the cemetery where they have buried the dead since their ancestors’ time. Thus the internal organization on the cemetery may be perceived as a reflection of the marriage structure.

The Osasha Gharti Magars were the first migrants to the village according to legend, thus their graves are located on a central place in the cemetery. Successively the best areas were occupied by the first arriving pads, whereas the last migrations of Magars have the outskirt areas of the cemetery. There are no visible boundaries between these different areas in the graveyard. Thus it is impossible to trace this social structure in the archaeological material, although the actors intentionally manifest it in the funeral rites. Another noteworthy feature of the Magars in the Argal village is that they also bury the children in this cemetery. The children have their own area where they are buried irrespective of their pad, and they are never buried among the adults.

In the Argal village, compared with other groups, the Magars have their own river where they practice cremations. This cemetery is situated between two rivers, located north of the other cemetery, since the Magars originally migrated from north. The ashes are thrown into the river, and the remaining cremation patches are washed away by the flood. The pyres are not enclosed in stone settings. The dead person is laid supine on the funeral pyre with the head to the north and the feet to the south. If a mother dies in childbed, the baby is taken out and buried in the cross-point between the two rivers, the mother on the other hand, is buried by the riverside. Both are laid with their head pointing northwards. The mother gets either a copper pot or a bamboo basket with a cooked meal, whereas the child does not receive food as a grave gift, since it has not undergone pasne.

In the Sile village in Argal VDC, one hour away from the Argal village, the Magars follow more or less a similar practice. Children without pasne cannot receive food as grave goods. But boys as well as girls have to be married if cremation is to be performed. Inhumation was the most common burial custom in the past. Nowadays cremations are more usual among adults. However, the poor people are mainly buried whereas the rich people are cremated. Deceased children up to two-three years of age are buried somewhere in the vicinity of the house. The relatives carry these children in their arms. Corpses carried on stretchers are placed with the feet pointing to the cemetery and the head to their home. The deceased are both buried and cremated with the head pointing northwards and the feet southwards. Raw food is placed under the right arm, the same ingredients as in a meal, e.g. rice, vegetables and buffalo meat. However, some decades ago, they used cooked food as grave goods, and then they put it into a bamboo basket and placed it under the deceased’s right arm (Figure 6.29).

Nowadays all the funerals take place along Masangdi Khola. Inhumations take place at the riverbank whereas cremations at the cross-point between two rivers. The Magars in the Sile village have changed graveyards several times. The oldest graveyard was made into arable land. Thereafter, they moved to a cemetery named Govanpani, located half an hour away from the Masagdi Khola, situated in the middle of a steep hill landscape in a calm place. But since few people lived there and the access to the graveyard was difficult, it was abandoned two decades ago. Still there are remains of the graves in the cemetery. The graves are small, long burial cairns, all oriented more or less north-south. The size is maximum two meters in length. The abandonment of Govanpani is probably connected to the access to water resources in the village. There is a natural spring at Govanpani, which has supplied the village with water. But two decades ago, other alternatives, easier and better water sources became available. Thus Govanpani was turned into a remote place where nobody actually needed to be.
The Magars in the Hila village in Hila VDC celebrate *pasne* at the age of five months for girls and six months for boys. Without participation in this ritual, infants cannot receive food as grave gifts. Cremation as a funeral rite may only be performed after marriage for both men and women. They perform *chewar* at a boy at the uneven age of three or five years, but the exact purpose of the ritual is uncertain. Similarly, recently they have started performing the *gupha basne* ritual for the girls at the menarche. The period of seclusion from the society is observed for either three, seven, nine or thirteen days. As opposed to the more traditional way of performing the seclusion of the girl inside the house (i.e. the “cave”), the liminal person is shut out from the house. She cannot cook, and she has to work and sleep outside the house. The eldest son observes the mourning period for both the father and the mother for three days. During the death pollution nobody speaks at all to the person in *kiriya*.

The food given to the deceased is called *hirin*. It is the food the dead will eat in the afterlife. If the deceased had the habit of smoking, they may also give tobacco, but it is not necessary. *Hirin* consists of cooked rice and either buffalo, chicken or goats meat, mixed with *ghee*, wrapped in a piece of cloth and placed beside the corpse either in the grave or on the pyre. Grains are used as “way-food”, and if any food remains when the procession reaches the cemetery, it is placed on the corps. If the deceased has not undergone *pasne*, “way-food” will not be given.

The burial practice depends upon the economic capacity, however, in the past burials were the common funeral custom. In the Hila village the Magars have their own burial ground defined by a stone wall (Figure 6.30). The deceased is supposed to be buried with the head towards their home, i.e. to the north. Nevertheless, I found that the graves of which it is possible to determine the direction, are oriented east-west, although the graveyard is south of the village (Figure 6.31). The graves are small cairns of between half a meter to two meters in length. Small children are buried in the vicinity of the house with the head towards their home and the feet to the forest. The cremation ground is further south in the Ghusmeli village in Hila VDC. They also cremate with the head towards home, which means the head is facing north. Except from Nire Ghat and the cemetery in Beni, the *ghat* in Ghusmeli is the biggest cemetery in my research area. This *ghat* is located at the cross-point between three rivers (Figure 6.32). The dead will accumulate merit from all the three rivers. Henceforth the cemetery has a special religious function in the nearby villages as a preferable place for the performance of obsequies.
Magars in Tara VDC

The rice feeding ceremony is performed when the babies reach the age of six months, and the chewar rite when the boy is either three or five years old. What the deceased has eaten in life is given as grave goods, because either the soul or the body will receive it. Infants without pasne are given water, milk and buttermilk since they have not yet eaten rice or solid food. After pasne, the meal consists of cooked rice mixed with curd, milk, water and ghee -and for grownups, also raksi. The food is put into a piece of a bamboo stick, which is placed beside the head in burials.

Cremation is not connected to marriage. People younger than the age of fifty are rarely cremated, and traditionally the deceased are buried. Inhumation is still by far the most common practice, but nowadays some old people prefer being cremated.

There is one big cemetery in Tara VDC, and several smaller cemeteries around the houses. Deceased older than ten-twelve years are carried to Audara, the big cemetery, to be either buried or cremated (Figure 6.33). However, corpses are always carried to Audara in the same direction as the river’s flow of water, and never in the direction against the water flow. There are no inauspicious directions considering the orientation of the corpse in the funerals rites among the Magars in Tara VDC. The topography of the landscape determines the direction of the grave or the pyre, because “there is only one possible way” to direct the deceased on the cemeteries. Generally, the cemeteries are located in hilly landscapes. In slopes the head is laid higher than the feet. At Audara, the river flows from west to east. The graveyard is a defined area with a steeper acclivity from south at the riverside to north, than from east to west. Thus are east-west the “only natural” way to bury and cremate, with the head to west and the feet to east.

The family members and bone brothers observe the death pollution for three days. The sisters’ or daughters’ husbands feed the mourners as well as cooking and preparing food for the dead. The food is put in a small basket and is hung from the ceiling for the deceased, the next day it is buried in the ground where the mourners are placed, and new food is prepared. The three-day mourning period is concluded with a ritual meal. The final death ritual takes place a year after the death, on the 24th of Kartik (mid-November). Whether the death occurs before or after the 24th of Kartik in a calendar year, the final death ritual is observed the first coming 24th of Kartik, thus this annual death ritual is an important socio-economic, cultural and religious event. On the 24th of Kartik relatives gather at the house of the deceased, they all contribute to the ritual feast, and all members of the funeral procession are invited. After completing the death ritual, the Magars celebrate the birth of new children, and a dance group walks from door to door and welcome the new babies into the society (Gurung 1996:24-28).

Magars in Bhakimly VDC

The rice feeding ceremony is performed at the age of six months for both boys and girls. The chewar has to be performed at the uneven age of either five, seven or nine. If
the boy has not undergone the ceremony, the hair-cutting ritual has to be done on the marriage day, and then he is allowed to get married. Children younger than five years old are buried near the house, whereas after the first possible age for performing chewar, the boys are cremated. Girls are similarly allowed to be cremated from the age of five to nine years. The relatives observe Kiriya for either three, five, seven, nine, or thirteen days. Regardless of the burial custom, approximately half a kilo of raw rice and some raw mas (a type of grain) is placed under the head of the deceased. Camphor is also placed in the mouth of those who are going to be cremated. This food is perceived as the last food, although the dead is unable to eat it directly, the deceased receives the merit of the food as a symbolic meal. The preferred funeral rite is cremation in Beni, and some of the rich Magars carry their dead to this cemetery, but the common burial practice is either burial or cremation in the village. There are two cemeteries in Bhakimly VDC, Dole is the upper cemetery and located in ward no. 1, and Chilbasne Dana is the lower cemetery located in ward no. 4. Both cemeteries are located on top of hills with perfect views to Dhaulagiri, which is north of the village. On the way to the funeral, the dead body is carried on the stretcher with the head towards the cemetery. Whether the practice is inhumation or cremation, the deceased is lying in supine position with the head to the north and the feet to the south. The deceased is pointing to Dhaulagiri. The mountain is perceived as God (Figure 6.34), thus this is the auspicious direction. Moreover, it is the only possible direction. The sun is also a god; the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. They are not allowed to insult God by showing the feet to him, tacitly, you do not kick God. Consequently, it is impossible to bury someone laying them in an east-west direction.

Nevertheless, graves and cremation constructions are also built in north-west and north-east directions, even though Dhaulagiri is directly north of the village and the cemeteries. The graves are either small cairns or flat graves with few traces on the surface. Which cemetery the particular family uses, depends upon tradition and forefathers. All villagers may bury their deceased in the cemeteries. People living in ward no. 1-2 uses the Dole cemetery. Each caste group has its own cremation structure where it performs the funerals, and the ashes are just left there (Figure 6.35-6.36). The funeral rites are usually performed in the village, and the deceased are rarely carried to Beni (or another river), because there are no ancestors there. Ward no. 3-5 may use the Chilbasne Dana cemetery, but most of the inhabitants carry their deceased to Beni, even though it is expensive. However, if they perform cremation at Chilbasne Dada, the same day two-three persons from the funeral procession, not the sons, will carry a small piece of the deceased’s flesh and remains of the ashes to Beni, and throw them into the river. The piece of flesh is called astu, and means literally “a dead man’s skull bone” or any “small bone”. The flesh and the ashes will float with the river to Benares, and then go to heaven. When the ashes are carried in a copper pot to a holy river and scattered into it, it is a cremation burial. The only difference from other cremation burials is that the ashes are offered to the river instead of buried in an urn in a cemetery.
Figure 6.35 Cremation structure at Dole cemetery pointing northwards (towards Dhaulagiri).

Figure 6.36 Cremation structure at Dole cemetery pointing to northwest or northeast.

Magars in Baranja VDC

The cemetery in Baranja is divided into different areas without any visible boundaries. Villagers from ward no. 4-9 use this cemetery, whereas villagers from ward no. 1-3 who live closer to Myagdi Khola take their dead to cemeteries along the river. Each ethnic group and each Magar group from each ward has its own place for both inhumations and cremations on the cemetery. These separate geographically locations are a tradition which they follow from their ancestors. The cremation constructions are solid built stone structures. These funeral pyres are used for cremations over and over by the relatives because they have been family properties since their ancestors. The ashes and other remains are just left as they are since there is no water there, however, if they cremate by a river, they give the remains to the river. The graves may either be flat graves without any visible structures on the surface, or rectangular cairns built as square monuments. Rich Magars are carried to Beni or another cemetery along Myagdi Khola to be cremated, whereas the poor people are either buried or cremated in the village. It is preferable to get a funeral in Beni because it improves the condition for and the possibilities of the spirit after death. They believe that if they cremate in Beni, the deceased will get a place in Heaven. On the other hand, there are no opposite eschatological concepts connected to ordinary funerals in the village, e.g. that the deceased’s soul will go to hell.

The rice feeding ceremony is performed at the age of six months for both girls and boys. They perform the chiewar only when the boy is either five or seven years, and it has to be done before he changes his milk teeth. If they are unable to do the ritual before he has changed his teeth, his sister or brother-in-law has to abduct him and cut his hair outside the home, without telling anybody. When the children loose their milk teeth, it marks the distinctions in the burial practice both for boys and girls. After changing teeth, the children have become adults. If the children have not changed their teeth, then they are buried, whereas if they have undergone the change, then they are allowed to be cremated, but the burial custom depends upon the relatives’ economic capacity.

Within Hinduism there is a notion that children are ineligible for cremation before they have teeth to masticate with, similarly, an animal is unfit for sacrifice until it has its teeth cut (Parry 1994:185). The social or religious reasons of performing chiewar are ambiguous. The kiriya is observed for thirteen days for adults, but only one day if the children have not changed the teeth. Then the children are buried close to the house.
When the deceased is carried to the funeral on the stretcher, the head points to the home and the feet to the cemetery. Raw ingredients for the deceased’s favourite meal are placed under the head, together with wine and cigarettes if the person had such habits. At a crossroads on the way to the cemetery, maize is offered, on a hillcrest close by, a fire is made and ghee offered, and all the members of the funeral procession wash their face in the neighbouring pond (Figure 6.37). Then the deceased’s spirit will not follow or harm them. “Way-food” is also offered at other spots on the way to the graveyard. The food is thereafter placed on the chest when the dead is either buried or cremated. Moreover, the deceased also receives a symbolic gift of money for wealth and prosperity, e.g. one rupee.

The deceased is supposed to be laid with the head towards Dhaulagiri because of its sacredness, i.e. towards the north. But the cemetery is located southerly in the middle of a hill in an east-west oriented valley. Thus it is impossible to see Dhaulagiri from the grave field. The informant showed me the cemetery, and most of the graves and the cremation constructions were pointing to the north (Figure 6.38). Nevertheless, partly because of the natural landscape, some were constructed east-west (Figure 6.39). I was standing with my compass, and asked him why these graves and cremation structures where lying in this direction when they were supposed to point towards the north. I was told that this was not true. They were not constructed east-west. They were pointing towards the north.
Brahmans

As mentioned before, the Brahmans have a more uniform burial custom and follow the practice the Hindu religion prescribes as far as possible. However, there are differences, both regarding the orientation of the deceased and the treatment of the corpse as a consequence of economic considerations. If the deceased is not carried to a special sacred place as Nire, a general principle is that Hindus are supposed to go to the nearest holy river; they do not cross a river either to bury or cremate. Therefore, if there is a cremation site on each side of the river, they probably belong to different localities. The cremation site may in this way reflect a specific geographical area. As a rule, the Brahmans tend to cremate their dead at the most holy ghat in the area.

The Brahmans in the Hila village cremate their dead at the ghat in the Ghusmeli village. The cemetery in Masangdi Khola is used by the Brahmans in both the Argal village and the Sile village in Argal VDC as well as Bhuskat VDC (Figure 6.40). This ghat is used by all castes in both Argal VDC and Bhuskat VDC. The practice is either inhumation in the riverbank in flat graves without any visible structures, even though thorns may cover the graves preventing them from being disturbed by jackals or other carrion eaters, or small cairns of water rolled stones, situated close to the river. Some may carry their deceased to Nire, but this is not the normal practice among the common people. The Brahmans in both Bhakimly and Baranja are supposed to bring their deceased to Beni, either to cremate or bury them. In rare cases, due to poverty and indigence, they might not have other possibilities than bringing their dead to the local cemeteries in the villages. However, I have received this information from other groups in the villages, and it is not confirmed by any Brahmans.
General Remarks on Burial Customs

(1) Neighboring places to Kaligandaki River. Despite of the short distance to Nire, people living in villages close to Kaligandaki River may prefer and chose to perform the funeral rites along the river closer to their home village. Thus there are scattered cremation patches along the riverside for instance between Baglung and Beni.

The Khaniya Ghat village (Figure 6.41) in the Parbat district is located on the other side of Kaligandaki River and Nire Ghat, but the villagers perform the death rituals on “their” side of the river. The old cemetery (A) in the village was moved to the north (B) because they built a school. They wanted to avoid the bad smell of both dead corpses and pyres because the funerals might give the school children traumatic, harrowing and perturbing experiences.

In the village there is a Shiva temple named Shukleshor Mahadev, built in the first part of the nineteenth century. The temple was built by a widow in honour of her husband, Shukleshor, and artists from Kathmandu came to engrave the pillars. As with a Shiva temple located next to the cemetery in a village named by the ghat, the creative forces, the life-giving aspects and the fertility of Shiva are emphasized, not the destructive elements. This is expressed through elaborate sexual engravings (Figure 6.42). However, according to legend, the rulers disliked the engravings and the artists were penalized by the loss of their hands.

(2) Accidental death. If a person dies in an accident; he is eaten by predators, falls of a cliff or suffers any other misadventure, it is rarely manifested in the material mortuary remains. Common for both Brahmans and Magars in my area is that the funeral rituals are more elaborate because they want to prevent and protect the deceased’s soul for two reasons.

Firstly, the lack of elaborate rituals might have negative consequences for the deceased’s forthcoming rebirth and life. Secondly, and connected to the first reason, people who die unnaturally, and especially young people, have a greater chance of coming back to the villages as evil spirits.

Thus it is in the interest of all to perform these rituals. As far as I know, the only type of unnatural death expressed in the mortuary remains in my research villages, is that of a mother who has died in childbed. They are buried instead of being cremated. But there are probably other exceptions as well.

Figure 6.41 Khanyia Ghat village, Parbat district.
(3) Preferential Treatment. Especially holy men (sadhus) or persons with special religious functions (e.g. shamans) have a particular status in the society. This status often has a distinct material expression in the funeral rites deviating from the prescribed pattern. Sadhus are mainly buried, but may also be cremated in an erected or standing position facing north. Similarly, in Bhakimly a shaman was buried in a standing position facing north at Dole Cemetery. In Baranja there are two ancient hill forts, which has turned into holy places, one on the top of each of the two hills in the village (Figure 6.43). Next to the hill forts are old cremation structures, were honoured people as well as sadhus have been cremated.

(4) Other studies of the death rituals of the Magars. Michael Oppitz published the article “Death and kin amongst the Northern Magar” in 1982. Unfortunately, he refers only to “the Northern Magar of Dhaulagiri region in West Central Nepal” (Oppitz 1982:378) without mentioning the particular village(s) where he has undertaken his fieldwork. In my opinion, after an evaluation of the article, the fieldwork was carried out in one single village with a following generalization of the Northern Magars as one homogeneous group. Moreover, I also suspect that his study is north of my research area. Despite of this shortcoming, the article is useful and contains a lot of ethnographic information. I will therefore use it as an external example to illuminate the complexity and diversity of Magar death rituals. Of special interest is the language since they spoke a Tibeto-Burman dialect of the Western Bodic branch called Kham (ibid:379).

The deceased is laid supine in an east-west direction in the grave and the head is pointing west, since the Magars think a dead person should be able to see the sunrise. Moreover, the course of the sun in a day from east to west is thought of as being the same as the course of a man through his life. Thus it is the inversion of the ideal sleeping position, with the head pointing east and the feet pointing west, because sleep belongs to the realm of life. This is the burial practice for the laymen. However, the magical healers or shamans sit upright in a cairn built above the ground, facing northwards, because their origin according to myth was in the north (ibid:384). The inhumation will take place at a locality chosen by the dead man himself, or by his son. Still, the Magars may choose to cremate. Whether this is due to Hindu influence or it is a part of their original religion, is difficult to say, however, myth may support that cremation is also a part of their tradition regardless of Hinduism. The choice of inhumation or cremation may be determined by economic considerations, notwithstanding, the shamans have no choice, they are always buried (ibid:387-390).

On the way to the funeral, “way-food”, consisting of maize, barley, millet, rice and wheat, is put on recognizable spots, stones or rocks, at distinct intervals. The dead should be comfortable during his journey, neither thirsty nor hungry, nor even deprived of his human addictions. Therefore he is given cigarettes if he was a smoker. Whether the food is raw or cooked, and if the deceased receives additional food as grave goods, is not mentioned (ibid:387-388). Another distinct feature is, after a year or so, an inscribed stone is erected in his memory at a place outside the village, which will become a resting-place for travellers. This is of major importance to the living; the deceased has become an ancestor (ibid:394).

Unnatural deaths are of two types; stillbirth and accidents. If a child is delivered stillborn to a couple, the little body will be buried outside the village by old people. Children who die before the age of five are lesser social beings than adults are, and need less social and public participation in the funeral. The burial of such children is conducted on a small scale. Adults affected by accidental death receive a full death ritual (ibid:396-398).

Figure 6.42 Sexual engravings emphasizing life giving aspects.

Figure 6.43 Hill forts in the Baranja village.
Chapter 7: The Limits of Cultural Elaboration

The Problem of Cultural Elaboration

I have borrowed the title of this chapter from Obeyesekere’s book *The Work of Culture* (1990). Culture imposes limits on elaborations and the comprehension of symbols, on the creators or makers of the symbols, on the collective representations and on the interpretation of the symbols by researchers (Obeyesekere 1990:49ff). The limits of cultural elaboration are not solved by a method, because the human sciences are "ontological" in the broad sense of a concern with human existence, "and any attempt to diverse ontology from epistemology cannot succeed but can only produce a shallow ontology" (ibid:104). Theories in human sciences are ontological in their basis because the human sciences are about human beings and being human. Thus the ontological inquires have to be investigated empirically. The less archaeological material (excavated as well as non-excavated data) available should imply the limitations to cultural elaborations if the interpretations are to be scientific, in order to avoid a situation where the less data the more to say.

I will in this chapter provide a contemporary analysis of the funeral practice. Ian Hodder (1980) distinguishes between three levels of interpretation of burial data: regional patterning, within-cemetery patterning and within-grave patterning (Hodder 1980:161ff). I will discuss the regional patterning as a part of the process of Sanskritization. The different meanings of cremation and inhumation will be illuminated as the within-cemetery patterning, and the meaning of grave goods as the within-grave patterning.

The Deceased, the Descendants, the Society and the Spiritual World

The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty said that "neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as experiences of my own, since, if I thought of them thus, I should be assuming myself to be pre-existent to, or outliving, myself, in order to be able to experience them, and I should therefore not be genuinely thinking of my birth and death" (Merleau-Ponty 1995[1962]:215). Death is a problem of the living. Dead people have no problems (Elias 1985:3). After all, they are dead (from a profane point of view). Death is a gradual transition. People’s customary responses to death provide possibilities for probing into the nature of human life (Metcalfe & Huntington 1993[1991]:25). The funeral practices revitalise what is culturally conceived to be most essential to the reproduction of the social order (Bloch & Parry 1987[1982]:7). The rituals tend to acquire moral connotations where the moral evil has to be reprobated and combated (Hocart 1954:96). The importance of death as the context of social elaboration and social creation is based on encompassing principles of opposition and exchange (Holmberg 1996[1989]:190). The lineage, the heritage and the society is temporarily threatened in the breach of death.

Mortuary feasts and rituals recreate the elementary structure of the society of the living (ibid:194). Especially marriage relations are emphasized and reaffirmed in the death rituals and memorial feasts for both Brahmans (e.g. Raheja 1988:147ff) and Magars (e.g. Oppitz 1982:399ff). The death rituals are an integrated part of the society to the descendents of the ancestors.

The mutual relationship between the living, the dead and the spiritual world can be illustrated in the trilogy of death (Figure 7.1) (Arriaza 1995:26). The living participants may further be separated into two categories, the mourners and the opposites because their role in the ritual are radically different (Kas 1989:125). This implies that there are a lot of considerations to be made within a society regarding how the funeral rites are to be performed. The descendants’ performance of the funeral rite includes a concern for the spiritual world and the ancestors as well as the society in general. The death of a member of a society threatens the society (Hertz 1960:78). Thus death is something contra-social, and expressed beliefs in an afterlife may meet the threat that death makes to the social system (Goody 1962:26). The deceased’s resurrection is integrated in the society as well as the reallocation of the rights and duties of the dead man among the surviving members of the group. It is important to distinguish between the transmission of information and the possession and transmission of relatively exclusive rights.

The transmission of material heritage may be *post mortem* or *pre mortem*, but it occurs within the total context of intergenerational transmissions which in no way involves

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**Figure 7.1** The Trilogy of Death.
an alienation from the corporate unit, but which focuses on transmissions between rather than within the generations (ibid:273-280). The crucial point is the method of acquiring sexual rights and property by the process of inheritance; living persons gaining the possession of dead person’s property (ibid:311). Therefore social aspects may be emphasized in the funerals, not only the descendants’ relations or the deceased’s status, but the social order and the society in general. The funerals re-define social relationships and reaffirm certain relationships of exchange (Strathern 1981:206). Death is a dual process. The transformation of the soul from one sphere to another explains the parallels between the symbolism of funerals, initiation rites and marriage; each ritual transfers the individual to a new social status (Bloch and Parry 1987:4).

Funeral Practice Seen in Light of the Process of Sanskritization

Why is there such a variation in the funeral practices? Or is the variation really so great? I will argue that the funeral practice lies within the same religious, ideological and cultural framework, whereas the performances differ. The Brahmans have an almost homogeneous performance whereas the Magars show a greater variation. How is this possible? This has to be seen in light of the process of Sanskritization, or parts of the eastern processes of Indo-Europeanization.

How may changes in language be reflected in the archaeological material? The “Indo-Europeanization” is a process where change take place in a language through the accumulation of different particular changes in the elements that make up the language; that is various changes in the culture. The language shift is presumably connected with an ethnic shift (Ehret 1988:564-572). But the past realities and societies were dynamic. Changes in language, ethnicity and material culture are not linked together in a one to one relationship. Linguistic affiliation and ethnicity are not directly expressed in archaeological remains (Anthony 1991:195). Furthermore, language shift does not necessarily only occur with ethnic change or major and radical cultural transformations. Another problem is that linguistic comparison is intended to throw light on relationships between known languages, and that linguistic relationships preserve more information about recent events than ancient ones (Sherratt & Sherratt 1988:585). Linguistic distinctions are assumed to be expressed archaeologically as cultural boundaries separating two populations with distinct geographic origins and cultural and economic traditions (Anthony 1991:195). In Europe, the change of language was probably connected with the introduction of agriculture or changes in, or new, subsistence techniques and strategies. The beginning of farming is likely to have had a significant effect on the linguistic patterning as a more dense population would give rise to more circumscribed language groups than were previously prevalent (Sherratt & Sherratt 1988:585). Similarly, “The Secondary Products Revolution”, or other major social, technological and ideological changes in the society, could have been accompanied by a transmission of the language or new forms of language (e.g. Sherratt 1981, Zvelebil & Zvelebil 1988:581, Prescott & Walderhaug 1994, Prescott 1996).

Sanskritization, or parts of the eastern processes of Indo-Europeanization, must necessarily have taken other forms than the western Indo-Europeanization. David Holmberg discusses the process of Sanskritization of the Tibeto-Burman speaking groups of the midhills of Nepal in Order in Paradox (Holmberg 1996). The debate in Nepal has been concerned with whether or not, or to what extent, Nepal’s history is a movement towards a standardized Hinduization or Sanskritization and increasing acculturation to Brahmanical ideology. Holmberg (ibid:15) points out:

“Whether or not this Indocentric reconstruction of Nepal is accurate, it neglects the intriguing dynamics of the convergence of Brahmanical caste ideology with the social reality of Hill Nepal and unique configurations of caste generated in Nepal. Furthermore, it downplays the observation that caste societies, including the historically continuous ones of India, allow for significant social and ritual variation across caste boundaries and regions”

This quotation may be used as an argument that the process of Sanskritization has not taken place, on the contrary, I will argue that it explains why and how this process still happens today. The Indo-Europeanization hypothesis is an explanation that accounts for why approximately half of the earth’s population speaks in languages clearly related to another (Mallory 1994[1989]:22). It does not imply a cessation of cultural abundance through time into one homogeneous big “unit”. As a matter of fact, most of the Magars in my research villages have lost their language within the last two-three generations, thus they have become members of the Indo-European language family. Sanskritization as a process of change involves all parts of the society. I will argue that this process is still going on as different cultural transmissions, and that an examination of the burial customs may illuminate some of the principles of these cultural changes. And in archaeological terms, these changes happens extremely fast.

There are two problems: How is the language spread (together with other socio-economic and cultural features)? And more important in my case, even with the presence of new cultural features, why do the Magars adapt them and make them their own? The first problem deals with how new elements become present and available in a society, the second problem deals with why and how the new presence influences an old tradition. Migration theory as a social strategy explains the introduction of new elements, and it is vital to see language change as a social strategy and not as a mere epiphenomena of demographic processes (Anthony 1986, 1990, 1997). In my area according to the local lore, it is most likely that the Brahmans migrated into the area after the Magars. But migration in itself does not explain how the processes of cultural transmission and change happened as a consequence of human interaction and transaction.
Brahmanistic Ideology as Power

Brahmanistic ideology is an omnipresent power in the social body of the society. Knowledge is a condition of the possibilities of power relations, because power creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and bodies of information, and thus, power is not only negative, but also both positive and linked with the production of knowledge (Miller & Tilley 1984:6). Michael Foucault has challenged the negative conception of power. Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere, it is neither an institution nor a structure, it is a condition of possibility, produced in every relation from one point to another (Foucault 1990[1976]:93). Power in this definition is not a group of institutions or mechanisms as a general system of dominance exerted by one group over another, it is

"...not something that is acquired, seized, or shared (...) power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. (...) Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix. (...) Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective. If in fact they are intelligible, this is not because they are the effect of another instance that "explains" them, but rather because they are imbued, through and through, with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives” (ibid:94-95).

It is important to distinguish between power to and power over. Power over is mechanisms that enable an agent (individual or collective) to get another agent to do something he or she otherwise would not have done. However, I will stress the aspects of power to. Power subjects people, not to render them passive, but as active beings. As Miller & Tilley argue, power to is a component of all social interaction and a feature embedded in all social practices, and henceforth, power "conceived as a dialectical moment in interaction draws upon and creates resources and is present through its effects; on this basis it may be attributed to individuals, groups, institutions etc.” (Miller & Tilley 1984:7). The reason why I emphasize this point is that the process of Sanskritization has the power to change, but nevertheless, it is the Magars themselves by their actions and rituals who adopt these features. The Magars are in majority in the research villages, neither economically exploited nor politically controlled or dominated by the Brahmans. New elements and features are added to their culture, and after some time it becomes part of their own tradition perceived as different from that of the Brahmans. How does this happen?

Personal and Cultural Symbols

Obeyesekere distinguishes between personal and cultural symbols (Obeyesekere 1990:22). A symbol is both personal and cultural. Thus a symbol provides a basis for self-reflection (the personal dimension) as well as communication with others (the cultural dimension). Personal symbols are public symbols "that permit the expression of the unconscious thoughts of the individual; but since they make sense to others, they also permit communications with others in the language of everyday discourse” (ibid:22-23). Personal symbols are cultural symbols that are related to the individual motivation and make sense only in relation to the life history of the individual and the larger institutional context in which they are embedded (ibid:25). Thus the symbols are both enabling and constraining the possibility of cultural change. Subjective imagery is often protoculture, or culture in the making. However, even though all forms of subjective imagery are innovative, not all of them end up as culture. They have to be legitimated by the group in terms of the larger culture (Obeyesekere 1981:169).

When relating these perspectives to the funeral practice, the personal symbols operate on a family or descendants level (the mourners). The relatives perform the rituals according to their tradition and their ancestors. What is given to the god is not the god’s wish but the devotee’s own deep motivation (Obeyesekere 1990:4), and the objects are related both to the deceased’s life history and the society. The god will accept all kinds of gifts, but they have to be expressed and understood in terms of cultural symbols by others (the opposites). Otherwise the practice may be perceived as insulting and desecrating by other villagers, e.g. the Magars’s ancient practice of bull sacrifice is prohibited because the animal is sacred in Hinduism (Majupuria 1991:87). Thus the cultural dimension of symbols imposes limits on the expression of the personal dimension. But other villagers do not have to understand the meaning of the personal dimension, they only have to accept that it is within the framework of the cultural dimensions of the symbols. Henceforth there is an ambivalence between the knowledge of an individual performer, and the rest of the group or the village.

The previous described pragmatic-religious solutions to the performance of funeral rites (chapter 6), among them economic considerations, are from a Brahmanical point of view all acceptable within the institutional context in which they are embedded. It is not possible to distinguish “pragmatic” from "other-worldly" goals (Parry 1994:70). Moreover, I will emphasize that the pandits (the Brahman priests) themselves stress that in Hinduism, tradition is more important than what the religious texts prescribe, even though this may imply that the priests become redundant in some of the rituals, e.g. most of the Magar funerals. However, the Magars may use pandits in other rituals, for instance in the chaurasi. I will extend these personal and cultural dimensions of symbols to include corresponding dimensions in the performance of rituals, because “the symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (Turner 1991:19). The funeral rites are both personal and public rituals, the family mourns the dead and the villagers pay their respects to the deceased and the descendants by participation in the funeral procession.
The Magar practices deviating from the prescribed Brahmanical rules may at first sight seem astonishing and pronounced. But a closer look may render possible an interpretation that all the variations are within the sphere of an expected abundance of cultural symbols in funeral rites within a process of Sanskritization:

a) A great diversity of personal dimensions are expressed in two overall cultural dimensions of general syndromes of symbols in the funerals: aspects of fertility and purifying elements in order to remove sins, e.g. different grave goods, various performances of the rituals and choice of cemetery.

b) The presence or absence of grave goods depends upon pasne, i.e. the cultural and unifying dimension of the life cycle ritual expressed in funeral rites. What kind of foods, modes of preparation and use or absence of a container, belong to the personal dimension, i.e. the family’s tradition.

c) The treatment of the corpse (burial/cremation) shows a greater variation. The Brahmans may bury (mostly because of economic reasons) when the deceased ought to have been cremated, still, cremation is preferred as well as prescribed. These internal dynamics and ambiguities among the Brahmans which allow both practices, render impossible a more rigid regulation among the Magars. Thus the practice of inhumation of ground-ups lies within the cultural dimension of funeral rites, not preferred but still allowed. The significant difference in funeral practices is between cremation and burial. What kind of burial constructions; inhumation in the ground, in the riverbed, or small cairns in different sizes and variations, is without importance in terms of the cultural dimension: they are all within the same category of funerals.

d) The Magars generally observe fewer days of death pollution than the Brahmans. The Brahmans’s strict observing of the mourning obligations support their own notion of being the purest caste, and thus acts to maintain their apprehension of the caste system and the structure of the society in general. Thus the Brahmans need variation in order to maintain their religious and ethnic status in relation to all the other groups.

e) The gender relations are manifested in the expression of the widow’s change in status in her husband’s funeral. The marriage relations and thereby the social structure are emphasized, and this practice counteracts the traditional egalitarian notion of the Magars. The women become inferior to the men.

f) The direction in which the deceased is laid, either on the stretcher, on the pyre or in the grave, belongs to the realm of personal dimensions within the performance of the funeral rites. The references to inauspiciousness of directions are variations within the families and villages, and are not connected to particular ethnic groups or a special religion.

I will assume that the change of language is more noticeable than small adaptations of new elements in rituals. Moreover, it is easy to incorporate new elements into the tradition, and then it becomes their "culture". Brahmanism as an ideology has the power to change through the social practices and their effects, repeated again and again in rituals. The Brahmans have their religious texts as their major guideline in cultural and religious matters and henceforth they are more resistant to change, whereas the Magars use parts of this ideology as innovative and subjective imagery to protoculture. These ideas are legitimated by the larger culture, by the Brahmans of course, but also by the Magars themselves. This may explain why Magars in Hila VDC have started performing gupha basne, as well as uncertainties and ambiguities in the social and religious reasons for performing the chewar in several of the villages. Sherry B. Ortner argues that within Foucault's concept of power, everyone seeks legitimation, and the "small people" participate willingly and engaged in this enterprise and acting within the same legitimating schema as the big actors or actors in positions of power (Ortner 1989:150ff).

The intriguing dynamics of the convergence of Brahmanical caste ideology with the social reality of Hill Nepal which allow for significant social and ritual variation across caste boundaries and regions (Holmberg 1996:15) make a smoother process of Sanskritization possible than if the transformations had been more directly by power over mechanisms. Moreover, the Bahuns are mutually interdependent on this variation in so far as their purity, identity and ethnicity depend upon this ambivalent social setting as the contingent acts of multiplicity of human beings. Without differences in the practice, the Brahmans could not have become the purest caste because it necessitates "impure" action by the other groups, or in other word: variations. It also implies change and transformations of the Brahmans. The process seems "invisible", natural, slow and un-intended, the actors’ unintended consequences of action become unacknowledged conditions of action (Giddens 1982:30), and thus the culture change and the process of Sanskritization happens. The Magars themselves claim that the changes are “according to time and fashion” and that they are not forced by the Brahmans. It may be so, but the actual knowledge available in the society is to a great extent dependant upon the Brahmanistic ideology. However, the Magars know that their culture is changing, but their identity is not threatened; to quote Barth from his discussion of ethnicity: ”some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored” (Barth 1969:14). The changes are perceived as neither connected to their ethnicity nor forced by the Brahmans. Thus the changes may happen fast and peacefully.

On the other hand, in Baglung Bazaar some Magars have changed their religion to Buddhism as a political movement against the Brahmans, neglecting all the Hindu rituals and festivals. Although they have lost their language, the assimilation of the culture into a Hindu unit has stopped. The cultural process of Indo-Europeanization has been connected to ethnic identity, the power to mechanisms have lost their power and can only be succeeded or restored by power over mechanisms. However, this does not happen, and it has to be seen in light of the processes known in
Nepal as "tribalization". The Matwalis, or the Tibeto-Burman groups, have become aware of the effects of the process of Sanskritization and some strive towards preservation and restoration of their "original" tradition, ethnicity, values, religion, festivals and Tibeto-Burman language (e.g. Bista 1991:153ff, Gellner 1991).

Death as Transformation

At the level of within-cemetery patterning, the major mortuary remains are from cremation patches and burials. The corpse is a practical problem in so far as it will rot. Nevertheless, social, ideological and religious concepts transcendence the simple body-disposal problem. Cremation as a method of body-disposal is difficult and time consuming because it is very hard to burn something that consists mainly of water (Holck 1987:27-45, Barber 1990:379-380). But compared to other body-disposal methods, it is actually designed to dispose of two things, the body and the spirit (Barber 1990:386).

Cremation is generally perceived as the most auspicious funeral practice. Cremation is cosmogony, and the individual death is assimilated into the process of cosmic regeneration and the re-enactment of Vishnu’s austerities, and the cremations take place on his footsteps (Parry 1987:76, 1994:44ff). The body and the cosmos are governed by the same laws. Myths relate the genesis of the universe to both Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghats in Varanasi at the beginning of time, and they are the places where the corpse of creation will burn at the end of time (Figure 7.2) (Parry 1994:14, 24). The householder sacrifices himself on his funeral pyre in order not only to be reborn, but also to perpetuate the regeneration of time and of cosmos, a ritual by which the universe is recreated (Knipe 1975:132, Pandey 1969:241, Parry 1987:74ff, 1994:31). Thus the creation is continually repeated in Varanasi (Parry 1994:32). At death it is the men who give birth. The father pays his debts to the ancestors by giving the lineage a son, and the son repays his debts to his father by giving him a new birth (ibid:151-152). At the moment of the breaking of the skull and the releasing of "the vital breath", the death pollution begins. The deceased only dies when he is killed on the pyre, he is not dead before he is burnt, and it is only after the husband’s cremation a wife becomes a widow. Cremation is a human sacrifice; the son kills his father, the chief mourner commits homicide. Thus the death pollution starts at the moment of death, when the skull cracked. It is the repayment of the sin of burning the flesh. Both the father and the son are reborn through the sacrifice, the father at another plane and the son as his father’s replacement (ibid:181-184).

The five elements constitute both the body and the cosmos, everything that exists in one must also exist in another, and thus, all the gods and the cosmos are present within the body (ibid:76). In cremation, the elements are changed in another way than in inhumations, they are more actively transformed back to their nature. When a person dies, the water goes to the water, the earth to the earth, the air to the air, the sky to the sky and the light to the light. The

Figure 7.2 Cremation at Harishchandra Ghat in Benares/Varanasi.
cremation is painful and dangerous (Knipe 1975:130, Pandey 1969:240) because the fire digests the body. Therefore cool water is given to the corpse, either by bathing or immersion before the cremation, in order to try to control the ritual. Finally, the corpse is again returned to the river as ashes (Knipe 1975:135). The ashes are often referred to as “bones”. Bones are the product of the father’s semen and thus a source to the future fertility, and, the cremation destroys what one has to get rid of, sin and female flesh (Parry 1994:188).

Fundamental in cremation is fire as the mediator of and between the elements, it is the very embodiment of change and transformation. Agni is in Hindu mythology seen as “the cause of sexual union...When a man and a woman become heated, the seed flows, and birth takes place”; the heat of sexual desire (O’Flaherty 1981[1973]:90). As a personified deity, Agni is an unscrupulous seducer of women, and an erotic death is often associated with the motif of self-immolation (ibid:91). Fire is also an extremely common apotropaic because it wards off evil spirits (Barber 1990:385), Agni is the slayer of demons (Hubert & Mauss 1964:26). It has purificatory powers. Furthermore, Agni is entrusted with the task of handling over the offerings to the gods (ibid:41). Fire can be reduced to heat, and heat can be seen as the final property of life (like breath) (Knipe 1975:37). In some texts the deceased is referred to as a person who enters the smoke of the cremation pyre, becomes clothes and rain, then vegetables, and if eaten, sperm (O’Flaherty 1981:42). Death gives life.

But why then, are not everybody cremated? It depends upon karma. The state of karma caleko requires cremation. Holy persons, sadhus, are normally buried, but may be cremated. The ascetics are oriented towards a different goal than the Householder, but within the same complex of relationships between life and death. The sadhus’s goal is a permanent and unfettered state of Being, whereas cremation only promises a renewed impermanent existence (Parry 1987:74-75). The state of karma caleko is a vulnerable condition for pollution where the person is responsible for his or her own purity. The sadhus are more pure than ordinary people, in a different but still a similar way, persons without karma caleko are more pure, less vulnerable to pollution and do not have responsibility for their own ritual purity. Thus inhumation is an auspicious funeral practice. Moreover, the death of young children cannot be represented as an act of self-sacrifice (Parry 1994:186). But when a person is karma caleko, he or she becomes vulnerable to the pollution from the burial as well as in need of the advantages from cremation to the next rebirth.

At the level of within-grave patterning, the most important feature is the presence or absence of grave-goods. Why is food used as grave goods? “Man must eat to live at all; food is perhaps the one absolute and overriding need for man” (Childe 1971[1944]:12). But beyond this, food has meanings that transcend the nutritive role. The food always carries symbolic loads far heavier than those of simple nutrition, so, the symbolism too seems ready to spill over into even wider fields of meaning (Mintz 1996:29). Therefore it is necessary to distinguish food in terms of substance and symbol (Furst 1994:71-72). To incorporate food into the body, the food is made to become the self, it becomes parts of who we are (Lupton 1996:16-17), and in this context, how and who the dead becomes, i.e. the forthcoming incarnation. First of all, the bodily substance as well as the moral dispositions are created from food (Marriott 1976:111ff). But there is no code of conduct and no food that is moral or good for all persons, because everybody has a uniquely proportioned composite substance. Thus special substances are compatible with the individuals’ bodily substance. Moreover, this unique essence is constantly changing (Daniel 1984:70-72). Sin becomes a bio-moral phenomena which manifests itself to some extent in tangible and material ways (Parry 1994:127). To digest is to concentrate within oneself the active powers carried by the food. Like food nourishes like, the flesh of eaters of flesh becomes much more increased by meat than any other tissues of the body. The foodstuffs possess identical qualities in abundance, it makes identity (Zimmerman 1982:165-169).

Food practices are technological processes, thus, technology is a means to an end as well as an human activity. To posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity (Heidegger 1977a:4). Food is thereby understood as a means to some other end. That end is thought to define the practice (Curtin 1992:13). As a substance, food is as much mental and spiritual as it is physical (ibid:10). As a symbol, food has an immanent power to generate and create life. Feeding is viewed as the opposite of sex (Meiggs 1992:116); these are the two life-giving processes which maintain the lineage and society. They are connected and must be controlled. Furthermore, food calls into question the boundaries of the body (Oliver 1992:71), and in death these boundaries, both spiritually and physically, are disappearing and have to be recreated. Moreover, Agni is not burning the corpse, but cooking it. Cooking is regarded as the opposite of eating and raises the corpse to a higher state (to heaven) whereas eating reduces the dead body to a lower state (to animals). Thus Agni prepares the corpse for the gods by cooking it (O’Flaherty 1994:49); “Do not burn him entirely, Agni, or engulf him in your flames. Do not consume his skin or flesh. When you have cooked him perfectly, O knower of creatures, only then send him forth to the father” (Rig Veda 10.16.1). The souls become food of the gods (Brahma-Sutras 3.1.7).

Fasting is thought to give spiritual merit. It is the spiritual victory over the material needs, such as hunger, and the fasting usually involves abstaining from certain foods, like cooked rice (Caplan 1994:12). But why does the opposite happen in funerals? Fasting demands the existence of boundaries, a living person, whereas in death the body and mind need to re-establish the boundaries. Raw rice has this capacity and life-giving power. The soul is in a state of helplessness and needs this help. Moreover, this possibility of life-giving is transferred to the deceased before the funeral is completed, the immanent power of the food starts the process of rebirth in this “life” before the corpse is burnt or buried, to get the process “activated” in a favourable manner. The grain is alive and gives life to other grains, one becomes several, by digesting the grain it goes to the brain, and becomes new life. It is a birth and a
symbol of the forthcoming incarnation. The same happens when a person is born. The father has planted a seed (with the soul) in the mother’s womb and it becomes life. A child is the true product of the parents’ bodily substances, the flesh is from the uterine blood of the mother and the bones from the semen of the father. The “ashes” of the deceased are referred to as “bones”, that is semen, scattered into the river (Parry 1994:111, 188). Moreover, the raw condition is the purest state of food, and can be given to a high caste person by a low caste person without purification rituals and expectation of a return service, because it is an honourable act which gives diffuse spiritual merit to the donor (Marriott 1968:142). The raw condition of rice and the grave-goods in general probably prevents the corpse from being ritually polluted as far as it is possible, hence, the forthcoming incarnation gets better possibilities.

But why do some of the Magars use cooked food? The transformation from raw to cooked can not only be interpreted as a transition from "nature" to "culture", but through it and by means of it the human state can be defined (Levi-Strauss 1994[1964]:164). The fertility connection between eating and sexuality is of great significance in Hinduism. Cooking is an act of transformation that involves all parts of the society, from production, distribution, preparation, through cooking to the final phase of disposal (Goody 1994[1982]:44-48). Food changes condition when it is heated. These changes and transformations of food are irreversible, if meat and vegetables are heated, they cannot be converted back into raw meat and vegetables. The heat changes a substance from one state to another and once it has been changed it does not revert to its original state. "The concept of an irreversible transformation mediated by heat provides a cultural solution to the crossing of boundaries" (Collett 1993:505). The metaphor of irreversible heat-mediated transformations can be used to produce change in both the physical and social world. It is a part of a pervasive mode of thought or system of beliefs that allows humans to "control" nature (ibid:505-506). The transformation from death to life is symbolized with the transformation from raw to cooked, thus the food makes possible the crossing and recreation of boundaries. The irreversibility of food transformations has its parallel in the irreversibility of the crossing and the recreation of the boundaries: death becomes life again. Thus cooked food as a grave gift is another way of activating this life-giving process just before the dead is burnt or buried. Compared with raw rice, cooked food is a different means to the same end.

Why are the deceased’s life cycle rituals expressed in the funeral rites? And why are transformative elements used as means to an end? Life itself is a transformation, between different stages, through death, to other forms of life. All these transformations may be seen as samsara, the life cycle or "round of birth and death", and the aim is mukti, release or salvation from these transformations. As means to the final end, the most important features in this life are incorporated in the most dangerous change between these conditions; death. The next life requires that these transformation processes in the deceased’s life have taken place because of their importance for the person’s karma. Similarly, these transformations are expressed as distinctions between the life cycle rituals: pasne, bartamande and marriage. Pasne is the first vital life cycle ritual where the child is initiated into the world of rice, that is, food and further life. In bartamande and marriage the emphasis is laid on the regeneration of life in two ways. Firstly, with karma caleko the person enters samsara and becomes fully responsible for actions and ritual purity. Secondly, after these initiation rites, men and woman are allowed and obliged to have children. Hence life is continued both morally and carnally. Thus the life cycle rituals are concerned with Being in a broad sense, and the most important features in this existence are transformed into the regeneration of life, time and cosmos. Although this interpretation lies within a cosmological and religious framework, it is expressed in terms of the social structure in the present society, or in other words, the way cosmos is perceived today. This brings me back to the ontological quest of the human sciences: a broad concern about human beings and being human.
Commemoration of the Dead

In the archaeological literature, in my opinion, there is often, based on an implicit Christian mentality, an assumption and notion of death as the final end where the descendants are totally unable both to influence the deceased’s condition and possibilities as well as to have a mutual relationship across the line between the two states of “life” and “death”. The main emphasis in the archaeology of death is of course on the remains, or rather the artefacts, from the time when the dead was disposed of (e.g. Chapman, Kinnes & Randsborg 1981). But the funerals have to be understood in a broader sense, or to put it in another way, if we only focus on funeral remains we have to be aware of the limitations on the expected information possible to gain.

It is misleading to see the funeral as an isolated and the only event within the sphere and realm of death. Funerals and cemeteries are not the only occasions and places to study the death (e.g. Humphreys 1981:279). In the debate the focus is often a bit clouded; titles as “dialogues with the dead” are often used when the concern actually is a matter of different modes of disposal of the dead. The death rituals are in a way never ending; the funeral is the entrance to eternity. Death is not a non-existence; it is only a another existence, which renders possible different modes of disposal of the dead. The funeral is not the end. It is the beginning of and the entrance into the other world where the deceased probably becomes an ancestor, forefather, malevolent ghost, spirit, divinity or a god. One approach to this problem is to answer why some societies need material expressions to reach the spiritual world whereas others do not.

Ancestor worship may be performed in many ways. Collective commemorations are complex rituals where internal social distinctions are expressed and acted out. I will briefly use data from parts of the ancestor worship of the Magars in the Argal village. The ancestors have after the funeral travelled into a dimension or a sphere of divinities and gods, and it is difficult to separate between forefathers and other deities. The eschatological and cosmological concepts are diffuse. What happens to the individual soul after death is unclear, and when I asked, one informant just laughed and asked how could he know? But the soul exists.

Multiple concepts and vague ideas of what the World Beyond really is, do not influence the presence and the importance of this other-worldly dimension. The greatest and most important festivals and rituals in the village are the ancestor celebrations and commemorations. Each year several ancestor celebrations are performed at different shrines and alters at different places in the village of all the Magars together, regardless of clan or patrilineal group affiliation. Animals are sacrificed at various spots prescribed by their ancestors, and some of these rites involve a general fertility cult and legitimisation of land. Of special interest is an ancestor celebration performed every twelfth year. Only one patrilineal group or clan performs this festival in a year. The festival lasts for several days. The other clans among the Magars may participate as observers, but they are not allowed to perform rites and it is not “their” festival. Within this cycle of twelve years, each Magar clan holds this festival, but not in the same year as another clan. Moreover, these celebrations are not performed in the temples in the village, but held in the courtyard of the house of some of the descendants (Khattri 1999).

The funeral is a crucial rite involving three elements of transformation. It is partly cosmological as the deceased move from one location in the landscape to another; it is partly ontological as he is transformed into a different entity and state of being, and finally, it is partly social as he is returned to the ancestors (ibid:11). This is what ancestor worship is about. When death is interpreted as a transformation within the framework of rites de passage, the main problem is that most of the archaeological analyses end immediately after the soul is perceived to be transformed, i.e. when the funeral is finished. But the main point is that the funeral is not just a mere transformation of the corpse, there are reasons why the soul is transformed. The funeral is not the end. It is the beginning of and the entrance into the other world where the deceased probably becomes an ancestor, forefather, malevolent ghost, spirit, divinity or a god. One approach to this problem is to answer why some societies need material expressions to reach the spiritual world whereas others do not.

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From Remains to Rituals

Bourdieu distinguishes in *The Distinction* between "cultural capital" and "economic capital" (Bourdieu 1995b). In Hindu societies, and I will add studies of mortuary practice in general, Obeyesekere (1997) argues that we need to emphasize a kind of "spiritual capital" or capability independent of economy, because this is the most important identity. A Guru's knowledge is exchanged in value "down" relations because it enhances the rank of the giver. He establishes reciprocal relations with numerous disciples by giving knowledge and receiving lower forms of benefits, e.g. material needs and objects (Barth 1990:649). Persons with spiritual capabilities (e.g. the shaman in Bhakimly and the sadhus in Baranja) get the most elaborate and distinctive funerals.

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Bourdieu stresses the need to transcend the subjective categories of the native experience as well as the objective categories of the outside observer (Bourdieu 1995[1977]:1-2); the problem of moving from the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies. A theory of practice approach renders possible an investigation of the dialectical relations between the mode of knowledge and the structured dispositions within those structures that are actualised and which tend to reproduce them (ibid:3).

As I have shown from Nire Ghat and the cemetery in Beni, although most of the deceased should have been cremated, the majority are buried. In other words, even in cases where the social structure of the society is supposed and prescribed to be reflected in the funeral practice, the mortuary remains do not reflect these patterns in a one to one relationship. How is it possible to grasp this ambiguity in the material remains without giving up the scientific criteria? Even though social identities are manifested in the mortuary remains (as with life cycle rituals), the main problem is to unite these social identities into a contextual interpretation of the society. If the prescribed norm in a society is followed by its members and thus manifested in the funeral remains, it gives a golden opportunity to understand the social structure far beyond notions or simple labels as "tribe" or "chiefdom". The life-cycle rituals manifested in the mortuary remains will then be a material trace of the society’s own social distinctions. But what then if the prescribed practice is not followed, or, how is it possible to evaluate whether the norm or rule is followed or not? Where should we put the emphasis in the analyses?

A funeral is more than just a mere happening where the society expresses social inequalities. Rituals are normally perceived as either 1) actions or activities that express conceptual orientations inspired and promoted by beliefs, symbols and myths, and thus the rituals are routinized, habitual or obsessive actions, 2) mechanisms for integrating actions and thought, because beliefs can exist without rituals, but not the opposite, or 3) affirmation of communal unity in contrast to the society as presented by Turner. The rituals are thus creative “antistructures” distinguished from the maintenance of the social orders and hierarchies. In sum, rituals are a medium of integration or synthesis for opposing social as well as cultural forces (Bell 1992:19-21). The enactment of a rite is implicitly constructed as an affecting integration for participants between the supposed conceptual totality and the practical needs of a particular time and place or the dispositions within the ritual context (ibid:31).

Clifford Geertz argues that “in ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one’s sense of reality” (Geertz 1973:112). He points out further the relationship between the believer and the interaction with the detached observer (ibid:113). This relationship can be interpreted as the difference between personal and cultural dimensions of symbols and rituals. As long as we recognize or accept the ritual mechanism of meaningfulness for participants, it might be possible for the researcher to grasp the meaningfulness as a cultural phenomenon (Bell 1992:28), because the rituals are “portrayed as enactments exhibited to others for evaluation or appropriation in terms of their more purely theoretical knowledge” (ibid:31). Rituals secure cultural knowledge (ibid:54).

“But no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all of the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments” (Geertz 1973:119). Meanings are “stored” in symbols used in rituals as an expression of what the world is, thus sacred symbols are related to an ontology and as a cosmology where their power derives from the assumed ability to identify fact at the most fundamental level. The totality of sacred symbols woven together into some ordered whole makes up a religious system. This system mediates a supreme knowledge and thus essential conditions in the way life must be lived to those who are committed to it (ibid:127-129). Not all cultural performances are religious performances, so what do ritual activities do that other activities cannot or will not do? Ritualization or the production of ritualised acts is a “strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values” (Bell 1992:140).

Having this as a basis for the argument implies limitations on but also possibilities of knowledge available in funeral remains. Even if the practice deviates from the norm, a socio-ritual approach focusing on what is actually done in subsequent steps as different actions in the rites, where it happened and who could have participated and performed these rituals, renders possible new insights and an entrance to interpretations of funeral practices. Furthermore, it combines social and religious identities.

The Intermediary Period within Cremation Burials

Cremation is usually neither a final act nor sufficient in itself. The ashes are rarely just left at the patch. After an intermediary period a complementary rite or a second burial is performed (Hertz 1960:42-43). There are for practical reasons limits to the distance it is possible to carry a corpse on a stretcher in order to perform either a cremation or an
inhumation. The preferred funeral rite to Hindus is cremation in Benares, at the banks of Ganges, the holy river into which the ashes are scattered afterwards. If it is impossible to bring the corpse to Benares, an alternative is to cremate the body at another cemetery and thereafter send the ashes in a copper pot to the holy town. Thus the ashes are still scattered into Ganges (Pandey 1969:261, Parry 1994:69). It is not possible to distinguish “pragmatic” from “other-worldly” goals (Parry 1994:70), and this way of performing the funeral custom is practised as far as the means allow. Normally there are spatial limitations and cultural constrains in the choice of cremation grounds (Levy 1992[1990]:161-162). Whether the ashes are scattered in a holy river or buried in urns as they are found in most archaeological contexts, is of no importance in this case. The point is to get established the ritual bond between the generations of the living who offer and the deceased who receive the gifts (Knipe 1977:111-112). This relation changes through commemoration rites. Therefore the dead have to be returned to an auspicious place (cemetery), that is normally either back home or to a holy place.

There might be a close tie between the soul and the container of the bones as the spiritual substance of the charnel-house (Hertz 1960:60). This relation is supported by the use of copper pots as urns. Copper is perceived as a living substance and makes the water just as pure as the water in Ganges, and thus connected to cosmological beliefs of creation (Anfinset 1996:116, 119). The sacredness of copper is known from the ancient Indian civilization (Kuppuram 1989:3) and it is also perceived to have invulnerable powers (Gajurel & Vaidya 1994:15). In the RigVeda (7.89) “the house of clay” is used as metaphor for death; it is the urn which is used to store the ashes in after cremation or to store their bones in a burial, it is the earth, the house of the dead man, and it is the home of Varuna (O’Flaherty 1994:216). I will therefore refer to the cremation structures in Baranja and Bhakimly (Dole cemetery) as charnel house patches, a repository of the burnt bones. This is possible because of the eschatological concepts within the tradition that render possible an amalgamation of the time and space of the beginning and the end of the intermediary period. The time of the intermediary period, between the first and second burial, or the cremation and the place where the ashes are scattered into the river, depends upon distance. If the corpse is cremated at a ghat next to the river into which the ashes are scattered afterwards, the distance is short, and the intermediary period small, but still, there are two burials, although the use of an urn as a container of the collected bones is not necessary. But if the distance increases, the urn is a transportable container for the ashes and the bones:

*The three phases of cremation burials:*

Archaeologists in Norway, for instance, have for more than one century been aware of the fact that the cremation rites often were performed at a different place than where the urns were deposited in a barrow (Rygh 1877:166-168, Rygh 1906, Schetelig 1906, 1912, Sverdrup 1933, Bjorn 1935:7, Nissen Fett 1972, Helgen 1982). But the main issue in the archaeological debate has been when the “real” cremation burials occurred (e.g. Schetelig 1912:88, Møllerup 1950:44); the bones are supposed to be deposited at the cremation patch. As a result of this, Schetelig distinguishes between cremation burials with or without urns and with or without cists (Schetelig 1912:22). The separation of the bones from the ashes or the cleaning of the bones is interpreted as aspects of a secondary burial. In my opinion, the debate is a bit blurred because there lies an implicit assumption that cremation is sufficient in itself, whereas if we emphasise different ritual aspects within the same funeral practice, we may plunge deeper into the past. Cremation as a funeral consists always of aspects of a secondary burial. Thus the previously “real” cremation is just a special variable of a huge variation of cremation burials. I will distinguish the cremation burial as a funeral ritual into three parts:

1) the place were the body was burnt or cremated.

2) the intermediary period in time and space (where the bones are either cleaned or uncleaned and then often transported). This interval increases the room for manoeuvre in those aspects which are concerned with renewing, reorganising and re-legitimising relations between the living.

3) the place where the ashes or the bones were deposited or buried (which may be the same place where the body was cremated, but normally it is another place).

If we focus on the places, the performers and the performances of the respective rituals in each and all of these three phases we will be able to gain new insights of cremation burials as a funeral practice, and also to trace small changes and variations in the custom. With an emphasis on the intermediary period it is possible to gain new knowledge of the rituals and the societies in a broad sense. It is necessary to point out that the people in the past were probably aware of all the different possibilities of burials; coincidences may have caused the death but not decided the funeral practice.

Thus the urn represents the place where the deceased died, the cremated bones are from the first burial rite whereas the burial of the urn and the deposition of undamaged artefacts are from the second and the final burial rite where other rituals were added and performed by the descendants, relatives and others.

Differently and ambiguously defined concepts of death, ancestors, spirits, malevolent ghosts, reincarnation and heaven and hell exist side by side, and this relation is perceived unproblematic, although from an outsider’s point of view they might be seen as contradictory (Ishii pers. comm.). Eschatological ideas are mere thoughts, but not all religious ideas are expressed in the funeral rituals. Bloch and Parry argue that it is not "a matter of the fate of the soul determining the treatment of the corpse, but rather the nature of the society and the state of the collective conscience determining both the treatment of the corpse and the supposed condition of the soul" (Block and Parry 1987:4). Therefore reincarnation as an idea is probably more likely to be traced in the commemoration rituals.
Ethnicity and Religion

In the funeral remains, differences in mortuary constructions, various ways of disposing of the corpse (e.g. inhumation, cremation or water burial), the orientation and position of the deceased in the grave and the absence or presence of grave goods, are often used as indicators to distinguish either ethnic groups or different religious beliefs. In Western Nepal, these criteria are insufficient. I have already shown the variation in my research area and illuminated the differences further by the Michael Oppitz’ study of the Northern Magar of Dhaulagiri Zone. However, this complexity may even be elaborated further by a short presentation of some Buddhistic death rituals.

Michael Peissel (1968) studied the Tibetan-Buddhistic group Lobas in the Mustang district (the district north of the Myagdi district). It is the monks or the lamas who decide which form of funeral will be given to the deceased. They have five ways of disposing of the corpses. The preferred order is (Peissel 1968:197-200): (1) Cremation. The body is tied up in crouching position with a stick keeping up the head. Outside the house a large tripod is made of clay where the cremation takes place. During the funeral, the lamas sprinkle the fire nine times with eight different offerings; wheat, barley, rice, linseed, buckwheat, linseed oil, a specially rampant grass, and sesame seed. But the funeral is not completed. After an intermediary period of eleven or twelve days the fire is checked to see if there are still hot ashes. If not, the clay fireplace is broken and remains of the bones are collected and brought into the house to be blessed by the lama. The human bones are ground into powder and mixed with clay and made into small shortens or moulded to the shape of a divinity. These mortuary ceramics are distributed at the countryside according to what the lama prescribes. In this way the ancestors are transformed into artefacts. (2) Air-burial. The corpse is laid naked upon a large stone on the summit of a lonely hill. The deceased’s hair is burnt whereas eagles and vultures eat the flesh. After ten or eleven days the remaining bones and the skull are crushed into a paste with the brains of the deceased, so the birds can eat everything. Nothing will remain of body which is said to be “gone to the wind”. (3) Water-burial. This is considered to be a rather bad form of burial for the deceased as he is thrown into the river with stones fastened to the body. (4) Burial/inhumation. This is the most despised burial where the deceased is buried in the earth in a shallow hole in sitting position. (5) Burial in the wall. The deceased is placed in salt, wrapped in a blanket and buried inside a wall of the house. Except of the last funeral rite, Peissel does not discuss the internal criteria and social distinctions and personae that determine which form of burial will be given to the deceased by the lamas or the monks. If a man dies without a grandson or if his sons die before they have a male child, then they are buried inside a wall of the house, likewise small children are placed in the wall of their parents’ house and remain there until the death of their parents (ibid.).

In a liberal form of Hinduism, Buddhism is incorporated as a sect or branch (Bista 1991:30). This may explain why parts of the burial patterns are similar within Hinduism and Buddhism, but as mentioned earlier, the co-existence is not unproblematic. In Hinduism cremation and inhumation are both allowed practices, and in Varanasi Hindus who died “bad deaths” or “did not die their own death” are immersed in the Ganges. Small children, most of the ascetics and people who have died from certain diseases are given water-burials (Parry 1994:68, 162). The aim with the Tibetan air-burial is to give all the remains to the wind, thus the practice of burials inside the wall is probably the only visible difference between the Hindus and the Buddhist in the archaeological remains.

This problem is further illuminated at Nire Ghat. The Buddhists used the cemetery in the past, and since the Buddhists in Baglung Bazaar today do not have their own grave yard, they still use Nire Ghat. Moreover, Hindus (e.g. the Magar woman from the Resha village) are buried in Buddha position, as were Buddhists in the past. In other words, in the cemeteries I have visited, it has been impossible to separate ethnic groups and different religious beliefs in the mortuary material. Different religions may have similar mortuary remains, whereas within one religion and within the same cosmological and eschatological concepts an ethnic group may have different mortuary practices and remains.

Quantitative or Qualitative Data?

Gordon Childe argues that human beings do not adapt to the real world, but to the world as it is perceived and imagined to be (Childe 1957:106ff, 1979). This is the fundamental crux in a phenomenological approach: how do people experience and understand the world (Tilley 1994:11), the present as well as the past. Richard Bradley talks about monuments as ideas, but as he asks, whose ideas are they to be (Bradley 1993:71)? Perception is initiation into the world. Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history (Merleau-Ponty 1995:xix). “A thing has “characteristics” or “properties” which are stable, even if they do not entirely serve to define it, and we propose to approach the phenomenon of reality by studying perceptual constants. A thing has in the first place its size and its shape throughout variations of perspectives which are merely apparent” (ibid:299). But we perceive the world only provided that, before being facts of cognizance, that world and those perceptions are thoughts of our own (ibid:374).

How is it possible to strive towards an amalgamation of the archaeologist’s and the people of the past’s horizons of perception? This is partly a question of classification and how this works. Classifications are artificial, but they are not supposed to be arbitrary (Douglas 1992:248). The scientist selects the criteria he thinks are significant for the classification because these traits in the objects studied will be the most significant as clues to their nature (Haaland 1977:1). This has to be grounded in theoretically based frameworks. Otherwise one may accumulate irrelevant data and present them selectively just to support an a priori viewpoint (Gould 1987:292).
Non-intentional consequences of actions as well as deviated practices from the society’s prescribed norms and rules are manifested in the archaeological material, but how is it possible to include this in the interpretations and how should archaeologists respond to these problems? I will argue that we have to put the emphasize on qualitative data in classifications rather than on assumed quantitative data. I will stress that these considerations are based on funerary remains and thus are the implications meant to be in the sphere of death studies. Furthermore, there is one important distinction to be made: The quantitative strategy of the processual archaeology, to be scientific as an interpretative practice, was on the wrong track, whereas quantitative methods of collecting data in excavation situations are important. Fluctuations and variations in directions illuminate this point. For instance the cognitive directions of graves deviates up to 90° from the compass course in for instance Baranja. Thus it is in the analyses and the interpretative process we evaluate the value of the documented and assumed quantitative data.

Why does the counting matter? Counting is not undertaken for its own sake, but because we suspect significant connections between the groups counted and compared (Cohen & Nagel 1939:181). The problem of representativeness should be a good enough reason for analysing the data qualitatively. As the funerals are among the most emotionally and symbolically loaded rituals in a society, an economic or quantitative approach gives important but limited contributions to the study of death. The context of death is one of ritual action and communication as opposed to everyday practical communication (Pearson 1982:100). Of course, “rich” graves may indicate degrees of wealth possible to obtain in a society, but with this implicit economic approach “poor” graves represent societies in “crisis” or a time of depression.

On the other hand, by focusing on qualitative aspects it is probably possible to analyse the funeral data in categories more in correspondence with past perceptions, or the significant criteria for interpretations. I will illuminate some of the possibilities within a socio-ritual approach focusing on qualitative aspects. It is an interpretation that goes beyond the raw material of immediate observation in order to infer the missing categories of evidence. It is important to understand the relation between the personal and the cultural dimension of symbols.

As I previously have said, the cultural dimension of symbols puts limits on the expression of the personal dimension, but the other villagers do not have to understand the meaning of the personal dimension, they only have to accept that it is within the framework of the cultural dimensions of the symbols. It makes no sense to the others if the elite just drops down a lot of valuable things in the grave unless it is understood within the sphere of the cultural dimension. In this regard social distinctions expressed by social segments of the society sharing the same grave furniture or goods are defined by the content of the artefacts’ practical and symbolical functions as means to an end in the realm of death, eschatology and cosmology. In a society only a few social statuses and positions are allowed to be expressed and manifested in the funeral. Defined categories of items allowed deposited are connected to these few social status positions. The deposited grave goods among the Magars in Argal illuminate this point. Children without pasne do not receive food as grave goods. After pasne the deceased may receive the food in either a bamboo basket or a copper pot. A copper pot is of course more valuable than a bamboo basket, but this does not matter in terms of the deceased’s social position manifested in the funeral. They constitute the same means to an end and economic inequality is acted out as a personal dimension, but only with those items the sphere of cultural dimension allows to be used in funerals.

A high status person may thus be buried with “poor” grave-goods because the objects or combination of objects define the status regardless of the material they are made of. Thus we have to put the emphasis on the right categories in order to understand the social positions and statuses in the past. The basis in this argument is that economic inequality does not equal social positions and statuses, although people had unequal access to particular objects. The dead does not necessarily receive his own property, moreover, the ceremonies do not have to be performed by the relatives, e.g. the sadhus have broken all relations to their family.

A person has many different statuses with different social content and relations (Eriksen 1993c:50ff). However, it is not necessarily only the deceased’s status that is manifested in the funeral remains. Changes in social relations may also be manifested in the mortuary remains as the widow’s jewellery in her husband’s funeral among the Hindus. If there is no flesh, therefore no sex, there can still be gender (Barley 1995:87). Cultural ideas about gender do not directly reflect the social and economic position of women and men although they have originated within the context of those conditions. Gender stereotypes are used as strategies in various social contexts (Moore 1988:37). The stereotypes may continue to exist even if they become prohibited in the context in which they have originated and are originally embedded. The prohibition of widow burning is a very distinct expression in the funeral material of a change in gender relations. However, the stereotypes are continued even though the practice is forbidden; the women changed their status dramatically in one aspect, but they did not bettered their social position or status in relation to men within the daily activities of the society in a similar way.

To understand the funeral rites we have to extend our notion of death as a process in the society. Funerals are the entrance to eternity. Especially commemoration festivals emphasize the living aspects of the dead. If we disregard this aspect we have to be aware of the limits of cultural elaboration an analysis of funerals imply. Henceforth there should be some degree of correspondence between the questions asked and the answers justified empirically. “The end product is clear: the anthropologist [archaeologist] begins to understand the other culture when the previously alien life-forms become intelligible to him, even though they do not possess the immediate intelligibility of life-forms of his own society” (Obeyesekere 1990:229-230).
Appendix: Glossary

Nepali words used in the text have been written in italics. The translations from Nepali to English are mainly based on:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agni</td>
<td>The God of Fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astu</td>
<td>“A dead man’s skull bone” or a piece of human flesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arundhati</td>
<td>Wife of the Rishi Vasistha; the epitome of the chaste and faithful wife. The morning star. A model of conjugal excellence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahun</td>
<td>The name of Brahmans in Nepal, the first caste.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bara Magarant</td>
<td>“The twelve regions of the Magars”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartamande</td>
<td>Male initiation rite, initiation into caste and patriline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahma</td>
<td>The first god of the Hindu triad. The creator of the world. The supreme soul of the universe, self-existent, absolute, and eternal, from which all thing emanate, and to which all return.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmanism</td>
<td>The formalised practice of orthodox Hindu religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmans</td>
<td>The first of the four castes; the sacerdotal class, the members of which may be, but are not necessarily priests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chewar</td>
<td>Hair cutting ceremony (part of the bartamande initiation rite).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhetris</td>
<td>The name of Ksatriyas in Nepal, the second caste.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaurasi</td>
<td>Celebration of the thousandth fool moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daal</td>
<td>Lentil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dharma</td>
<td>Religious duty, caste duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dvijas</td>
<td>Twice born.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garuda Purana</td>
<td>A class of literature that deals with the legends of gods, sages and kings of ancient times. A popular encyclopaedia of ancient Hinduism in all its traits - religious, philosophical, historical, personal, social and political.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghee (ghui)</td>
<td>Clarified butter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghat</td>
<td>Cemetery. “Steps leading to water”, “crossing-point”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goraknath</td>
<td>A Hindu God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gotra</td>
<td>Clan, an exogamous agnatic unit whose members claim to be descendants of one of seven mythical sages or rishis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grihya Sutras</td>
<td>The rules of Vedic domestic ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gupha basne</td>
<td>Female initiation rite, called “staying in the cave”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirin</td>
<td>Food to the dead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janai</td>
<td>Sacred thread worn by the twice-born castes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>“Class or caste”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karma</td>
<td>The law of moral cause and effect, whereby people’s action are repaid through their own suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karma caleko</td>
<td>A state where the person has full responsibility for its ritual purity and its social and ethical actions, “activated karma”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kartik</td>
<td>Nepali month (mid-October to mid-November).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kham</td>
<td>A Tibeto-Burman dialect of the Western Bodic branch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaniya Ghat</td>
<td>Village outside Baglung Bazaar, “ghat” lit. means “steps leading to water”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirya basne</td>
<td>Thirteen days of death pollution immediately following a death - a time of austerity and social isolation for the bereaved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khola</td>
<td>River.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linigam</td>
<td>The male organ, a phallus, often made of stone. The symbol under which Shiva is universally worshipped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobas</td>
<td>Ethnic group in the Mustang district with Buddhistic religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ksatriyas</td>
<td>The second or regal warrior caste.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mala</td>
<td>Yellow flowers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mantra
A mystic formula of Sanskrit syllables, words or phrases; it is made effective by repetition and mediation.

Matwalis
Caste roughly comparable to Vaisya in the varna system, or “those who drink liquor” and eat buffalo meat.

Mas
Lentil, a type of grain.

Moksa
Release from rebirth. (Mukti).

Muki
Release or salvation.

Mulukin Ain
Civil code laid down originally by Jung Bahadur Rana in 1854, revised several times.

Nwaran
Initiation rite, the name-giving ceremony, performed on the morning on the eleventh day after the mother has observed birth pollution.

Pad
Patrilin eal and exogamous group.

Pandit
A learned Brahman man who is a teacher or scholar especially of Sanskrit, works often as priest.

Pasuwa
“Later comers”.

Pasne
Initiation rite where the child receives its first rice (i.e. the first solid meal). The rite take normally part after 5 month for girls and 6 month for boys.

Patiasavitrika
The loss of right being taught the Savitri.

Pinda
A ceremonial rice-ball used in offerings to the ancestors.

Pisacas
Malicious superhumans. Their chief activities being leading people out of their way, haunting cemeteries, eating human flesh and indulging in every kind of wickedness.

Pitr
Ancestor spirit.

Preta
Ghost, unsatisfied and potential harmful spirits of a deceased person who has not been able to reach the forefathers.

Raithane
“First comers”.

Sadhu
Yogi, an ascetic hermit; one practising religious meditation.

Samsara
The life cycle, “the round of birth and death”.

Samskara
Life cycle ritual.

Sano
The fourth caste (low caste) in Nepal, consisting both the Sudras and the Untouchable.

Sarki
Leather worker.

Sati
W idow-burning.

Savitri
The Holy verses of the Vedas.

Siva
The third god of the Hindu triad. The destructor and the re-creator. Destruction in Hindu belief implies reproduction. Under this character of restorer he is represented by his symbol the Linga or phallus. Under this form alone, or combined with the Yoni, or female organ, the representative of his Sakti, or female energy, that he is everywhere worshipped.

Shrekhanda
Sandal wood.

Sora
Ethnic group, aboriginal “tribe” in India.

Sudra
The fourth or servile caste.

Suttee
W idow-burning.

Tagadhari
“One who wears the sacred thread”: the “twice-born” castes at the top of the hierarchy.

Tapasya
Religious penance.

Thar
Clan or surname (see pad).

Tika
A mark of blessing placed on the forehead.

Tulasi
Vishnu’s sacred plant, among other things used in death rituals.

Raksi
Local made wine/spirituous.

Rupi
Local currency, 57Rs = 1$.

Upahayana
The ceremony in which a young man is invested with the sacred thread.

Vaisyas
The third or trading and agricultural caste.

Varna
“Class or caste”. The Chatur-varna, or four castes, as found established in the code of Manu, are: 1) Brahman, 2) Kshatriya, 3) Vaisya and 4) Sudra. The first three castes were called “twice born or regenerate” from their being entitled to investiture with the sacred thread which effect a second birth, the Brahmans maintain that their caste alone remains, and it is generally believed that there are no pure Kshatriyas or Vaisyas now existing. The numerous castes which have sprung up from the intercourse of people of different castes or from other causes are called Varna-sankara, “mixed castes”.

Varuna
God of Water.

Vishnu
The second god of the Hindu triad. The preserver and restorer of the world. The worshippers of Vishnu recognise in him the supreme being from whom all things emanate.

Vrsotsarga
Setting free a bull on the occasion of a funeral rite or a religious act generally.

Yama
The God of Death. The Lord of the Hells where the sinners are punished after their death.
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