

## From Death to Life – The Hydrological Circle of Cosmos and Copulation

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### Abstract

*When a person dies, how is the soul transferred from the dead body to an infant in a mother's womb? In Hinduism this process is understood and explained metaphorically by the hydrological circle and the interrelatedness of fire and water. The cosmological circle of reincarnation is a life-giving process which includes the life-giving waters; the essence of life. Based on mythology and the sacred scriptures, this process is investigated.*

**Key Words:** Hindu Mythology, eroticism, funeral practice, sexuality

### 1. Introduction

The main problem, which I will discuss here, is how the soul is transformed from one sphere or state to another in Hinduism, or how and by which processes the soul is transferred from the deceased on cemeteries to the womb of a birth giving mother. The empirical data are myths and metaphors in some of the Hindu sacred texts. A “spirit” is “neither soul, demon, nor god, but something indeterminate, material yet invisible, nonpersonal and yet somehow endowed with volition” (Weber, 1964:3). On the one hand, the soul clings to the corpse or stays close to it as long as there is something left of the dead body, and the soul continues to exert influence on the materiality of the person's former residence; the body. On the other hand, human life cannot be created without sexual intercourse between man and woman. The cosmic and regenerative forces in a macro-

perspective must in some way or another relate to the individual regenerative forces in a micro-perspective. Although macrocosmos and microcosmos are assumed to be identical, this does not explain how the actual process of transference of life happens. The soul is supposed to have the size of a thumb, with the fingerprint of the previous lives determining the future existences – but how does a soul reincarnate? How does the soul enter a new body? When born an infant inevitably has a soul and is reckoned a human being, but how are the cosmic forces part of the creation of new life? This is basically the intricate relation between fire and water.

### 2. The Process of Procreation

“A person who sets a fire, who activates fire, magnifies but also controls and regulates the forces of the world” (Bachelard, 1990:69). Fire is associated with males and water with females. Fire metaphorically represents the sun, and as such it is associated with male qualities, while water is the moon associated with female qualities. These qualities and associations change when fire is included in the earthly sphere, and it may have a feminine character (for instance fire in the earth is preserved in the womb). Moreover, if rain is viewed as the semen of heaven it is usually personified and attributed as male and it takes on a male character (Gurung, 2000). The quality and the experience of fluidity and pliability as a source of the creative unconsciousness cannot be emphasised enough (Bachelard, 1994:13). Common metaphors in Hinduism present earth as female, and ploughing has male sexual attributions by which the earth is injected and becomes fertile in the form of a successful harvest. Therefore, water as rain has an analogous connotation to semen (Gurung, 000).

Fundamental in cremation is fire as the mediator between the elements; it is the very embodiment of change and

transformation. The human body, as everything else, consists of the five elements. Before the soul has attained nirvana or enlightenment, and has been released from the round of birth and death, the material body is a necessary prison for improvement of the soul's condition. Without a materialised body the soul will be a wicked ghost and malignant spirit roaming around causing trouble; an incarnation worse than being born as an animal. When a person dies, each of the five elements goes back to its origin, regardless of the mode of deposition. This is the doctrine that a human corresponds to, and is even identical to, the universe. The body as a being is a microcosm and encompasses the world, the macrocosm, and the gods in particular ways (Goudriaan, 1979:57-58).

In Hinduism cremation is the most auspicious funeral practice, and the fire dissolves the elements so that the water in the body goes to the water, the air to the air, and so forth. *Agni*, or the God of fire, 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 1981a: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). In the *Satapatha Brahmana* (I.6.3.23; I.1.1.20) it is stated "Water is female and fire is male; life is born from their intercourse". Furthermore, "Agni lurks behind other images: he is, like the sun, the first-born child of Order or Truth and he is born of the waters. The interaction of the sun and the waters make sense of a number of obscure references to Vedic theory of the rain cycle: the rays of the sun (cows) drink up earthly waters with the lowest point of the ray (the foot) and then give back rain (milk) from their top (head) after they carry the moisture back up to the sun. The sun is thus clothed in the waters" (O'Flaherty, 1994:75).

Fire and water are linked as creative forces that have many metaphoric associations emphasising the relation between man and woman and the sexual intercourse. Emphasising the needs for a gyne-ecological framework for Asian feminism, Pieris stresses that the problem with many studies is the desacralisation of the cosmos and loss of the transcendent. The cosmic approach is sacramental, and a feminist approach is cosmic by nature, whereas a secular approach is reductive and instrumental. Cosmos is dialectic with both male and female forces, and a cosmic worldview is also human centred because it opens up for metacosmic and transcendental divinities (Pieris, 1996:59-62).

### 3. Creation of Life and Sexual Fluids

Cosmogonic, "He, desiring to produce beings of many kinds from his own body, first with a thought created the waters, and placed his seed in them" (Manu I, 8). "That (seed) became a golden egg, in brilliancy equal to the sun; in that (egg) he himself was born as Brahman, the progenitor of the whole world" (Manu I, 9). In the human realm, "Like a flame without smoke, the size of a thumb, is the soul; the Lord of the past and the future, the same both today and tomorrow" (The Upanishads, op. cit. Mascaró, 1965:63). The main question asked at the outset was how life is transferred practically. The soul is linked to the sexual fluids, and this is one of the reasons why sexual intercourse is considered impure. On the other hand, sexual fluids are most often linked to the processes of eating or divine processes in heaven. "Food is in truth the Lord of Creation. From food seed is produced and from this beings are born" (The Upanishads, op. cit. Mascaró 1965:68). Without food, or in more general terms fluids, by which water is the most important, a human will inevitably die. There are various attributions to the fluids which might be summed up in the following diagram (fig. 1) (O'Flaherty 1981b:18).

Fig. 1. Fluid attributions and metaphors

	Cosmic	Body: sex	Body: fluid/food	Ritual
Female	Waters, rivers	Menstrual blood Seed	Milk	Water Fire
Androgynous	Essence in plants, women and men	Blood	Blood Poison	Butter (ghee)
Male	Rain, ocean	Semen	Semen	Soma, fire

The most basic of all body fluids, and often the most basic of sexual fluids, is blood. Even though blood is essential to both men and women, it is rarely mentioned in the Rig-Veda. In the Upanishads blood is explicitly incorporated in bodily models because when water is a part of the body it is converted into urine, blood, and breath, and similarly, when a person dies and the elements of the body disperse, both the blood and the semen enter the water. Blood, especially menstrual blood, is a negative sexual fluid which is both poisonous and dangerous. Semen, the main male essence, is often used metaphorically symbolising fertile processes rather than being only a substance, including the fructifying rain from heaven as the “seeds of clouds”. Similarly, Agni is kindled by the seeds of heaven, and the Soma oblation into flames are regarded as seeds. Women also have seeds, and this substance is a liquid called “virile milk”. Women may give seeds and take milk-seed of men, but it may also be understood and presented as the women taking seed and that they are “milked” of children (O’Flaherty 1981b:20-21). Fluids are in general seen as having female attributes and are transferred by mothers, and solids are the products of the fathers, and henceforth, blood is given from the mother and

the bones from the father. Thus, menstrual blood is often seen and regarded as the female counterpart to semen (ibid:33). There are, however, many ambiguities regarding whether the female creative fluid in the womb is female semen or menstrual blood. If the female seed is menstrual blood, then sexual intercourse is forbidden because it pollutes, but if one interprets it as some kind of female semen, then intercourse is mandatory, and the latter understanding is in accordance with the Hindu doctrine by which the man has to impregnate a woman when she comes into season (ibid:35).

In the Post-Vedic period there are metaphorical associations between blood and milk; “The blood of women, in the breasts, causes the sperms to grow; for the semen of men, in the seed, grows by the union with women and is nourished by the blood of woman. At the time of the falling of the seed of the man, a portion of the soul grows in the pregnant womb, nourished by the blood” (O’Flaherty 1981b:40-41). It is milk, however, rather than uterine blood that is the female counterpart and equivalent to seed. In the Post-Vedic periods this is explicated directly; the creative fluid in the form of man’s semen equals woman’s milk. Regarding myths of creation, milk can be traced back to the Vedic metaphor where Soma was churned or milked from the ocean, and in Post-Vedic texts the cow or earth-cow is milked of all one desires (ibid:43). Seed and sperm also have metaphorical similarities. Seed is seen as food, and the drinking of semen metaphorically (in the vagina) is the basic description of the birth process; the soul of the man who is reborn goes to the moon, pours down onto earth as rain, enters plants, is eaten by man and transformed into semen that fertilise a woman. This model has several variants, but the overall theme is similar, and it is connected to those who fail on the path of the flames leading to the sun and ultimate liberation; the inferior creatures enter the moon (as identified with Soma) where they become food for the gods, then they rain down on

earth where they become food for men, eaten and transformed into semen and finally placed in women to become embryos (ibid:27). Women apparently play no significant role in this creation, and only later will they feed the men with their “milk”. This is also metaphorically symbolised by a seed substitute; a woman who wishes to have a son has to eat rice, which is itself a symbol of the seed, prepared with milk products (ghee or milk) or water. The more she eats of this milk substitute, the more semen substance she will produce in her womb, which will secure a male off-spring nurtured on seminal milk-based foods. There is no direct ingestion of seed but only ingestion of rain or milk, which eventually turns into seeds (ibid:28). Based on these metaphorical relations women are more “fields” where the seeds are sown than active partners on their own premises (ibid:29). The metaphors of agricultural fields relate to actual agricultural practices.

Raw rice is a symbol of fertility because the seed will germinate and give life to others, especially humans. Nepal is traditionally the land of rice. The God Lord *Gorakhnath* promised the Nepalese that their country was made of rice, and in this country they should never starve or suffer from hunger. *Gorakhnath* 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. Hence, the Nepalese are allegedly never beggars, but work hard and pray for rice and fertility, for the seed which will sprout, become many and give new life (Briggs 1938:179-181).

Raw rice is a symbol of the forthcoming life: the rebirth. This is evident in the presence or absence of grave goods. The overwhelmingly dominant and important grave goods, and normally the only one given to the deceased in cremations, is food. Raw rice is the major determinant regarding the

presence or absence of grave goods, and everything is structured around and depended upon rice as a life giver. Deceased without *pasne*, the rice feeding ceremony performed when the infant is at the age of 5 or 6 months, 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. Rice gives new life, and in funerals rice is often combined with lentils or other food items used in the daily meal. Participation in the *pasne* ritual determines whether the deceased will receive grave goods or not, and the importance is put on the life-giving qualities of rice.

Sperm and rice are necessary components in the creation of life. Copulation and cosmos are two parallel life-giving processes. Macrocosm is directly linked to microcosm in the actual act of copulation. When Shiva blesses the spirit, then the spirit waits until intercourse takes place, and after ejaculation it picks a sperm and actually drags it to meet the egg. After this fertilisation happens, and the spirit ensures that the zygote is safely implanted in the wall of the uterus. What happens then is a process of growing the *jiva* – the individual soul – and every sperm has *jiva* (Svoboda 1993a:190-191). In the *Susruta Samhita* (II.5.2) it is written regarding the sperm, “thus, being pushed by the Self under the guise of orgasm, the sperm, which has the potentiality of semen, is projected out of the male body and, through natural ways, enters the uterus and mixes itself to the blood” (op.cit Filippi 1996:44).

Man needs to copulate and the grains from rice “invest” the vital breath in the foetus. This happens during the fifth month of pregnancy whereby the “vital breath” enters the embryo through the suture at the top of the skull – the same place

where it is released during cremations. This rite is called *kapal kriya*, and throughout pregnancy the “vital breath” is sustained by the digestive fire, which resides in the mother’s belly (Parry,1994:179).

#### 4. Food and Semen – Eroticism and Sexuality

“Only procreation is possible if it is expelled from the body, ejaculated during the sexual act. If it is retained within the body, stored instead of being wasted; the real creation becomes possible through *ojas*. *Ojas* is the source of the body’s metabolic energy, the *Jathara Agni*. Loss of semen means loss of *ojas* and thus loss of digestive powers” (Svoboda 1993a:260). Ascetic ways of living is related to the quality of semen. In The Upanishads it is stated that a man’s soul is transmuted from food into semen, and in the Tamilnadu it is said that a man’s power, *shakti*, enters through food and is stored in semen, and therefore, “to increase and retain this *shakti*, males must retain their semen and hence lead an ascetic life. Females, while having greater *shakti* of their own, also acquire, in intercourse, the *shakti* stored in semen, thus further increasing their supply”, which creates life. Men are encouraged to asceticism, and women may increase their own individual *shakti* even faster by being chaste wives (O’Flaherty, 1981b:45). Asceticism and sexual castration are therefore interlinked. The erotic death by fire is often associated with the motif of self-immolation (O’Flaherty, 1981a:91). The very act of castration is both the cause and consequence of asceticism. Even creative asceticism is a personal castration because personal sexuality must be sacrificed for the sake of the fertility of the universe (ibid:131). This kind of castration is never the final act because the outcome is always further life and fertility at a higher cosmic level (ibid:135). In one myth it is written regarding the creation of the universe, “Siva is the seed of everything. During the primeval creation, the seed arising from his *linga* was placed in the womb of Visnu, and in the

course of that time golden seed became an egg and floated in the cosmic waters for a thousand celestial years. Then a wind split it into two, and the top half became the sky, the lower half the earth, and the yolk the golden mountain. Then, at sunset, The Lord of the Golden Womb was born, and from him all the ascetics appeared” (ibid:107).

The phallus or the erected penis (fig. 2) is in Hindu mythology as strongly linked to asceticism as it is to eroticism (O’Flaherty, 1981a:8). There are actually three images interconnected in the phallic cult; Shiva and Parvati, the *linga* and the *yoni*, and fire in water. Fertility and eroticism are not equivalents and they perform separate and opposite functions. Fecundity is secondary to the sacred value Hindus attribute to eroticism because the character of participation with the deities in sexual acts does not come from the procreative but from the voluptuous character. The insemination is artificial. The cult of *linga* is, on the other hand, procreative and fertile, but not erotic. The separation of eroticism and fertility is not just a by-product of yogic techniques, but essential to its philosophy. The conquest of the biological desires is to rise above animals driven by their instincts (ibid:266-267).

“Shiva, the god of eroticism, is also the master of the method by which the virile force may be sublimated and transformed into a mental force, an intellectual power. This method is called Yoga, and Shiva is the great yogi, the founder of Yoga...His erect phallus is swollen with all the potentialities of future creations” (ibid:10). The ascetic heat has an immanent creative force especially when it is placed in water, which is the starting point in many cosmological myths (ibid:41). Regarding the control and transformation of desire Shiva said, “the desire for desires is increased rather than assuaged by the enjoyment of them, just as the dark flame is increased by oblations poured upon it” (ibid:255). The

solution to Shiva's sexual desires was not to impose chastity upon him but to satisfy him because the desires must be controlled and not denied. There is also an analogous process between eating and asexual activity relating to the general belief in the interdependency between digestive and reproductive tracts, as Agrawala said; "Agni without food or fuel becomes finally extinguished and black ashes, but if it is supplied with its daily food or offering it is converted into the radiant flame of life. Food is called Soma and that represents the female or Mother principles whereas Agni represents the male or Father principle" (op.cit O'Flaherty 1981a:281).

The image of fire in water is the opposite in Indian philosophy to that in Western thought. In Western thought water poured on the fire usually extinguishes the fire, in Indian thought the relation between fire and water is a matter of the controlled and transformed unity of substances. The *linga* is resided upon the *yonis*, the male principle rests upon the female principle. When the universe came into being water was created first because "the waters are...the creation of the Supreme spirit" (Agni Purana I, 17.7, p. 40), and "the universe is permeated by fire and water. Vishnu in the form of water is the cause. The image of Lord Varuna (the presiding deity of waters) should be made of gold, silver and gems" (Agni Purana I, 64.2, p. 173). Ritually, the priest "should bathe and contemplate on Varuna, the creation known as the primordial egg. Having purified it with the principal letter of the fire, the ashes should be scattered over the earth. The entire world consists of water. Hence, the lord of waters is contemplated" (Agni Purana I, 64.32-33, p. 177). The Fire-God said regarding the greatness of Ganga that all countries through which the river flows are holy and excellent. "The (river) Ganges duly worshipped, succours the two lines of ancestors...The goddess (Ganga) destroys all sins and confers (access to) heavens. One continues to stay in

heavens as long as (his) bones remains in the (waters of the) Ganges" (Agni Purana II, 110.3-5, p. 328).

The pro-creative aspects of rivers are sometimes expressed through semen as a metaphor. The creation of the holy river Gandaki is the story of how the lord Narayana managed to deposit his semen in the vaginal passage of Tulasi, or how Vishnu indulged in sexual dalliance with another's divine wife. Returning from the battlefield, Vishnu was in disguise and had sexual intercourse with Tulasi, who realised that she had been fooled and wanted to curse him. Tulasi was very sad and cried at the time Shiva advised her to cast off her body and take up a divine body and indulge in dalliance with Vishnu forever (Siva-Purana II, 41, p. 973-978). "The body that you cast off shall become a river in Bharata. That will be a sacred river famous as Gandaki [which issues from the Himalayan foothill and is the source of saligram]. O' great lady, boon granted by me, Tulasi (holy basil) will be the most important constituent of the material worship of the gods some time. In heaven, earth, and the nether worlds you will become the Tulasi plant more excellent than flowers. As the presiding form you shall for ever sport in secret with Vishnu" (Siva-Purana II, 41.44-47, p. 977). As a result of the curse, Vishnu assumed the form of a rock on the banks of the river Gandaki (ibid). This is today found as *saligram*. Hence, the origin and development of rivers have many similarities to the inception of women. When fertile women are made pregnant by copulation, it is a similar process to the cosmic events when the gods created rivers. Thus, there is a connection and duality between rivers and bodies, food and fertility.

## 5. The Hydrological Cycle Uniting Macro and Microcosm

Cooking can be seen as microcosm whereby water is transformed by fire into smoke, which rises to the sky. This

process is also a life-giving event whereby un-cooked rice is turned into food. When a person dies the fire releases the soul, and it enters heaven. The karmic fingerprint is transferred back to humans and eventually into semen, which is the regenerative, procreative, and vital force. In the ascetic's sperm *shakti* is stored, but this is not enough. The primordial live-giving principles or powers are expressed in the Upanishads; "Life is the fire that burns and is the sun that gives light. Life is the wind and the rain and the thunder in the sky. Life is matter and is earth, what is and what is not, and what beyond is Eternity" (The Upanishads, op. cit. Mascaró, 1965:69). As indicated, there are many metaphorical relations between fire and water, and water is indeed created by fire in the process described in Rig-Veda through the fire-sacrifice. When fire from sacrifice goes to heaven, it becomes clouds, and from the clouds the earth receives its rain, which gives life to the grain and seed. When the harvest is collected and eaten, it becomes sperm, and when finally injected into the vagina it becomes new life. Sacrifices give new life in the form of rain from the clouds, which makes for a successful harvest. This link is most specifically expressed in funerals when the fire that dissolves the deceased creates clouds, which eventually will bring new life. Thus, the hydrological cycle produces the sperm that in metaphorical terms is "planted in the fields", eventually creating new humans. The whole hydrological cycle is symbolised by the process of cooking rice.

In the cooking vessel the rice and water remain separate. Water is above fire. The rice is above water. The wind slowly blows against the fire beneath the water. The fire kindled by the wind makes the water boil. The rice with hot-boiling water all around it becomes cooked. When cooked it becomes separated into sediment and juice. (More or less a similar process takes place in the body). The sediment in the body consists of twelve forms of waste matter. These are split and sent out of the body. The juice matter circulates in the body. Man gets nourished

through it. The ears, the eyes, the nose, the tongue, the teeth, the penis, the anus, and the nails are the receptacles of dirt secreted by them. The phlegm, the sweat, the faeces and the urine – these together make up the twelve (Siva-Purana III, 22.3-7, p. 1541).

The semen is secreted from the food eaten. From the semen, the birth of another body is made possible. When the semen unalloyed is deposited in the vaginal passage during the prescribed period of cohabitation after the monthly menses, then the semen blown by the vital wind mingles with the blood of the woman. At the time when the semen is discharged the individual soul with the causal body or unit of sense-organs etc. enters the vaginal passage fully covered and urged by its past actions. The semen and blood in the unified state become foetus in a day (Siva-Purana III, 22.14-16, p. 1542).

Parry has described this process by which the vital breath is passed on through the seeds as a characteristic of Kali Yuga. In Satya Yuga or the golden age a human's vital breath resided in the bones, he subsisted on air living 100,000 years and reproduced asexually. In the Treta period the vital breath lived for 10,000 years and it was situated in the bone marrow. In Dvarpar it was blood and the life was expected to last for 1,000 years. In the Kali Yuga, the vital breath resides in the grains humans eat, and the maximum age to live is 125 years (Parry 1994:167). This also explains the *pinda*, the ball of rice in ancestral rites, which emphasises the feeding aspects of the ancestors and the feeding of the unborn embryo (O'Flaherty 1981b:155). It contains the vital breath. Sperm and rice are necessary components in the creation of life. Copulation and cosmos are two parallel life-giving processes.

Combining the different layers of metaphors, the most explicit use of these symbolic powers in funerals is seen in the *dagbatti* rite – the lighting of the pyre. The deceased is given raw rice in the mouth as a grave-gift. The last breath of life left from the mouth, and the next incarnation will start

with a new “vital breath”. Thus, the funeral starts by lighting the rice in the mouth of the deceased (fig. 3). The raw rice is a symbol of fertility encompassing the pro-creative powers of semen. The hydrological cycle of the year, which includes rain and a successful harvest in the form of rice, has its parallel in the human cycle, which includes copulation and the creation of an offspring. These two cycles of metaphors work together and give each other strength and rationale, and in practice it is impossible to separate the two because they are parts of the cosmogonic process which links microcosm to macrocosm. Bodily carnality encompasses spiritual qualities and the hydrological cycle, and agricultural products and processes possess divine powers. Mind is embodied in matter, and they are inseparable. The process of reincarnation is not a simple matter of a sexual act, but a cosmogonic event. It is therefore logical that the pro-creative means are included from the very beginning, which eventually leads to a sexual intercourse. The latter act is, however, only a minor but necessary component in the process of recreating and re-incarnating a soul.

## 6. Mother’s Womb, Ghosts, and Barrenness

Being born from a womb is not a preferable birth, and the materiality of the body as a prison is best illustrated by the fetus in the mother’s womb, an allegory of the way we are living in the world today; in Maya – the illusion. The description of the life in the womb is very much the same as staying in Hell. The life in the womb is described like this: “Just as a person is cooked and boiled in an iron cauldron by means of fire, so also the child hurled into the pot womb is cooked by the gastric fire. For him staying inside the womb the misery is equal to, nay, more than the misery of a person incessantly pierced by means of redhot needles. There is nowhere a greater misery than staying within the womb. To all embodied souls it is full of misery, very terrible and grievous” (Siva-Purana III, 22.31-34, p. 1543).

The filthiness and the state of pollution in the womb are described further; “The whole body is smeared with dirty blood and flesh. It is the receptacle of faeces and urine. It is covered with hairs and nails. It is sickly and an abode of ailments...the body is sick due to thirst for pleasures. It is subservient to passion and hatred and utterly deluded...With very great pain and difficulty it has to come out of the vaginal passage. It is drenched with urine, blood and faeces. It comes out as from a sheath. It is a mass of skeleton” (Siva-Purana III, 22.39-43, p. 1544). From an eschatological perspective being born as a human is desirable, but only because it may enable liberation from the eternal cycle of birth and death. Being born is fortunate and preferable because the process of liberation may start, but the mother’s womb exemplifies the conditions humans actually live in. Consequently, one should strive towards liberation.

Those who commit sins will suffer in Hell, but those who perform righteous deeds render pleasure in the path of Yama. At the moment life leaves the dead, the ether, wind, and lustre go upwards from the body whereas the water and earth go downwards where they get merged with their respective elements. There are various forms of punishment in Hell,

“Having their faces resembling cats, owls, frogs and vultures etc., they throw the man in cauldrons of oil and then light the fire. Some (are put) in frying pans, some in copper vessels, some others in cauldrons and others among sparks of fire. Some are placed on the tip of pointed pikes. Some are pierced in the hell. Some are trashed with whips. Some are made to eat molten iron. The men are made to consume dust, excreta, blood, phlegm etc. and made to drink hot wine by the messengers of God of Death. The men are again pierced. They are tortured by mechanical devices and (the bodies are) eaten by crows etc. Hot oil is sprinkled over them and the head is pierced repeatedly” (Agni Purana IV, 371.24-28, p.1039).

Yama on cemeteries exemplifies the relation between Heaven and Hell. Both the uttermost good and the uttermost evil are together in the same place. Yama's hell is fierce and painful, and among some of descriptions the deceased's destiny will suffer the worst pains thinkable;

“The tips of the hands and the legs of some are cut off. The ears, noses, and lips of others are cut. The penis and the scrotum of some are cut. A few others have all their limbs and joints cut. Pushed, pierced and thrust by spears and arrows some run helplessly here and there shrieking and squealing. Hit and trashed by iron clubs and rods, bruised by terrible thorns of various sorts, luminous like fire and sun and pierced through by javelins, some men shed putrid blood or evacuate faeces infested with worms” (Siva-Purana III, 7.37-40, p. 1182-1483).

Yet Yama is also welcoming and guiding those who have performed the auspicious rites in this world whereby they ascend the celestial aerial chariot bound for heaven where they can enjoy celestial pleasures. Yama treats those men who have been virtuous as friends and they see his gentle face, but those who are guilty of cruelties see him in his terrible form (ibid:1483);

“Due to their sinful actions men are pierced through with sharp spears. They are put in oil extracting machines called Cakra and crushed like gingelly seeds and beaten into pulp. They are fried in iron cauldrons red hot in the blazing sunlight. They are fried in boiling oil in cauldrons again and again. Their tongues, chests, and feet are struck in many ways” (Siva-Purana III, 9.13-15, p. 1488-1489).

Ghosts are roaming around in the lower realms and hells. Malignant dead suffer the bad fortune of not being incarnated into another fleshly body due to their former bad lives or ritual failures conducted by the descendants. When a soul is lingering without a body it causes misfortune for the living. One such misfortune is the barrenness of women, which has lead to ritually dramatic actions based on the belief that

ghosts cause infertility. Thus, the absence of a fleshly body – the ghost – may cause infertility for women. In the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, hut-burning was a ritual practice in rural India performed by barrow women who hoped for offspring. According to common belief, if they succeeded in burning down seven houses they would bear a son, and fires in the villages were common due to this superstition. The idea of hut-burning appears in the *Atharvaveda* as a means for procuring female fertility. It was believed that the spirit of some burnt insect would enter the woman's womb and then be reborn as a child, or perhaps the spirit of one of the family's dead children would “re-womb” if she set fire to someone else's house. It was also believed that burying an infant under the eaves or threshold of the house would enable the child's spirit to re-enter the womb of the mother or someone else's womb in the family (Crooke, 1919).

Fleshly embodiment is not solely a private or family affair because the disembodiment of souls is a societal problem interconnecting seemingly incommensurable spheres of lives and may have severe consequences for villages. Furthermore, it is not only sexual copulations which produce humans; the total complex of fleshly beings and souls whose existence depend upon being reborn highlights the cosmogonic acts of both life and death, which in daily life includes sex and ancestral rites.

The hydrological cycle links the many creative and procreative acts. Sex is normally seen as a defiling and an impure activity, but the relation between sex and auspiciousness is explicitly made in the case of erotic couples depicted on the walls of temples (fig. 4). The sculptures please Indra who is the king of the gods and master of the rains. He sees through these images that the play (*lila*) of Vishnu is well advertised and thus he feels like preserving the temple and the city in which they are found, by sending good

rains since he is a devotee of Vishnu. The sexual activity brings rain, which in turn provides food (Singh 1997:138).

This takes numerous forms. The history of Jagannath is to a great extent the history of Orissa and his worship is based on the syncretism of different traditions such as Saivism, Tantricism, and Vaishnavism, and the earliest reference to the name Jagannath in an inscription seems to date back to the early twelfth century CE (Mukherjee, 1977:ix-xi). Divine prostitutes belonging to the Jagannatha sect performed rituals that allegedly created rain. “Although unchastity renders a woman impure, and thus unable to enter the inner sanctum or cook food, the sexuality of the courtesan is powerful for it combats the heart of asceticism. The sexuality of the courtesan insures good rains and thus the prosperity of the realm” (Singh 1997:149). The whole cosmos is engaged in both the creation and procreation of humans, both directly through sex, and indirectly through the creation and hence the consumption of food.

## 7. Conclusion

The procreative process which transforms death to life involves the hydrological circle and metaphors of water and fire. From a religious point of view, procreation is not merely copulation, but the main emphasis is on how the soul is transferred and reincarnated from a dead person or body to an embryo. When humans spin webs of significance (Geertz 1973) it is based on the world they live in. Water is good for imaginations because “Material imagination learns from the fundamental substances; profound and lasting ambivalences are bound up in them...[because] *a matter to which the imagination cannot give a dual existence cannot play this psychological role of fundamental matter*” (Bachelard 1994:11). Life and death are dependent upon water and have to be seen in relation to the hydrological cycle of river and rain. *Water is a substance of life and death.* Even though water is the substance of life, it is also the substance of death

for ambivalent reverie (Bachelard 1994:72). The link with water is not broken even with death. Water and fire is perhaps the most substantial contradiction, but in Hinduism they are actually complementary. Water and fire symbolism and metaphors in relation to death emphasizes the life-giving aspects and the continuity of life. These metaphors are good to think with and enable a complex relational understanding and expression of myths, society and religion. Death is perhaps the most sensitive and important event for expressing cultural and cosmological structures, which take place in the actual funeral where the corpse is burnt on the pyre and the ashes given to the river. Water and fire is a unity, but they express different aspects of the unity.

This article is a reworked chapter from my dissertation (Oestigaard 2004, 2005).

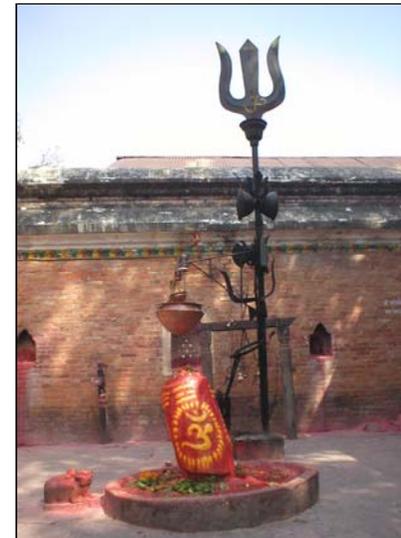


Fig. 2. Linga at Pashupatinath with trident, symbolising from left to right will, knowledge and power, and jalahari, a copper cup that hangs right above the Shiva Lingam from which water drips from this cup almost continuously.



Fig. 3. Dagbatti – the lighting of the pyre.

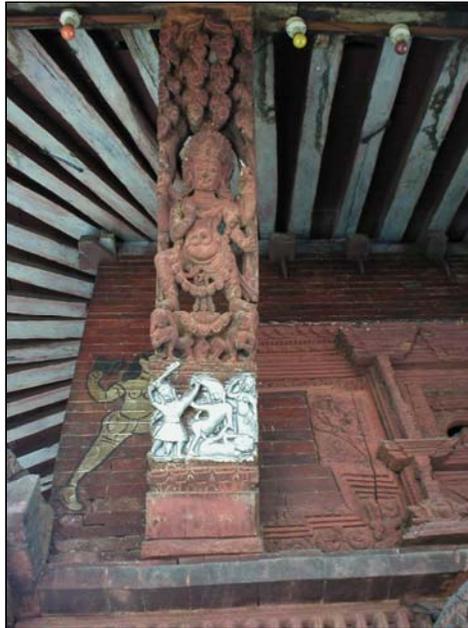


Fig. 4. Sexual engravings at the Bachhaleshwori temple, Pashupatinath.

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