

A History of Water

Volume 3: The World of Water

A History of Water

Volume 1: Water Control and River Biographies

Edited by T. Tvedt and E. Jakobsson

Volume 2: The Political Economy of Water

Edited by R. Coopey and T. Tvedt

Volume 3: The World of Water

Edited by T. Tvedt and T. Oestigaard

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T. Tvedt and T. Oestigaard

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INTRODUCTION

'Life is only another death. The birth of life, not its end, is death' (Friedrich Hebbel, quoted in Lauf, 1989, 15). 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. Funerals are also a part of a set of rituals by which the living deals 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. Van Gennep wrote that 'life itself means to separate and to unite, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn' (Gennep, 1960, 189).

Religion focuses on answering three main questions: (1) What becomes of us after death? (2) How should we lead a moral life? and (3) How and why were the universe, life and human beings created? (Davies, 1999). Death involves different spheres of interactions between humans and gods, and Robert Hertz (1960) distinguishes between (1) the soul and the dead, (2) the corpse and the burial, and (3) the living and the mourners (see Figure 1). Water is the most important life-giving element and process in all these spheres, but to various degrees and with different qualities, creative capacities and powers, and finally, water is always a transformative means to other ends, and these aims vary according to religion, economy and ecology. Thus, water as a life-giving process in Nepalese death rituals will be analysed from three different approaches: (1) water as an element in the cosmology, (2) the use of water in the rituals, and (3)

the importance of water in the society. And finally, the aim is to synthesise these approaches in order to illuminate some of the structuring principles for the various practices and uses of water. The analysis is mainly based on two case studies – Hindu death rituals performed at Nire cemetery outside Baglung Bazaar, and Buddhist death rituals performed at Tore cemetery in Manang village – but other places and practices will also be incorporated as comparative and additional data for the analysis.

THE CONTEXT: REGIONS AND RELIGIONS

The Himalayan mountain range in Nepal represents in certain areas a cultural, ritual and religious border dividing Hinduism and Buddhism, although in other places in Nepal the religions co-exist (Gellner, 1994). Muktinath is a holy pilgrimage site for both Hindus and Buddhists located at an elevation of 3,800m, and the place is 'near the extreme northern edge of Hindu influence in this part of the Himalayas and at the same time is near the extreme southern edge of Buddhist and Tibetan influence' (Messerschmidt, 1992, 30). This area is situated in the rain-shadow behind the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri peaks, with an annual rainfall between 200 and 400mm a year. Following Kaligandaki River, one of the few trails connecting India and Tibet, the track runs through the deepest and steepest river gorge in the world. On the westward side Dhaulagiri rises up to 8,167m and on the eastward side Annapurna I rises up to 8,091m. At the widest point of separation, the peak-to-peak distance is only 32km, with the river flowing at an elevation of between 2,500 and 2,000m.

In front of the mountains, next to Baglung Bazaar, the river is located at an elevation of 800m. Baglung Bazaar is only 20km west of the Lumle village on the map; a village located at an elevation of 1,610m receiving between 4,000 and 6,000mm of rain each year, and on the map the distance between Muktinath and Lumle is less than 60km. In summary, the Himalayan range separates the Tibetan and Buddhist regions in the north in an arid rain-desert virtually unaffected by the monsoon rain, whereas the Hindu regions south of the mountains are situated in a highly humid and fertile area, creating some of the world's steepest gradients regarding both elevation and precipitation (see Figure 2).

Based on one research site in each of these regions, the aim is to see to which extent, why and how changes in the natural environment effect the conceptualisation and qualities of water as a life-giving process in death rituals. Fredrik Barth argues that social

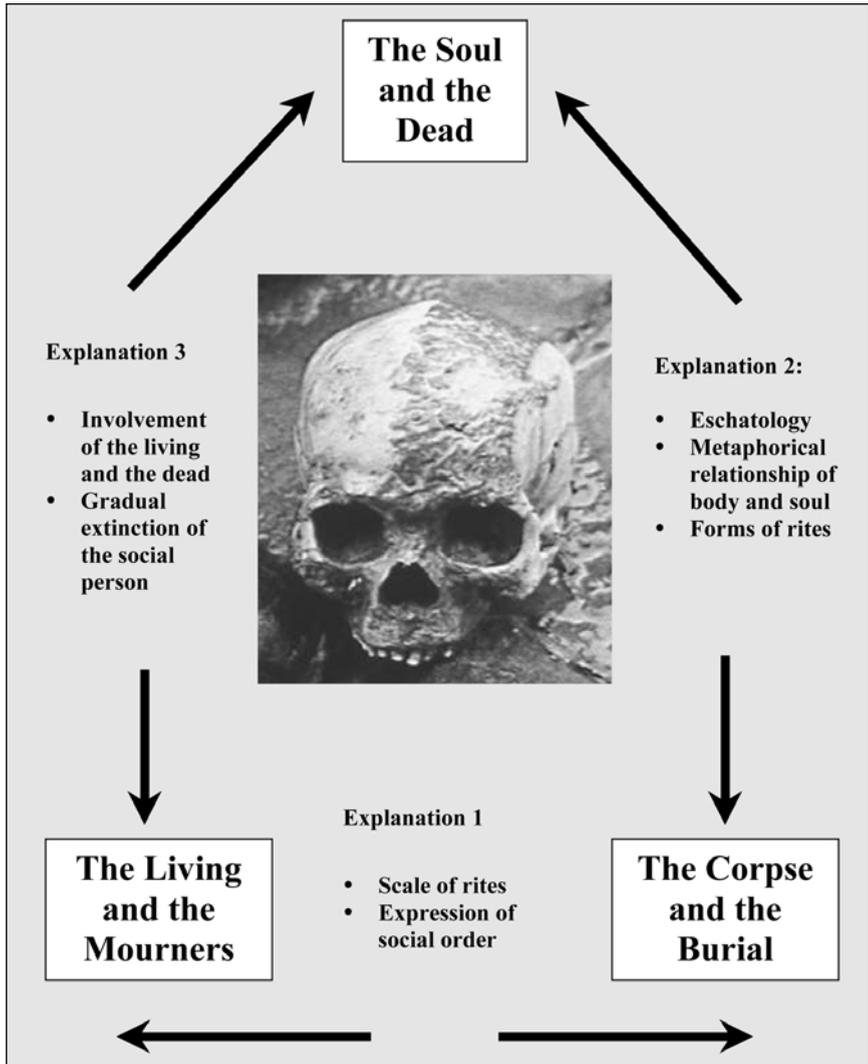


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of Hertz's arguments (modified from Metcalf and Huntington 1993: 83).

actions are 'intended' and not simply 'caused' (Barth, 1981, 3), avoiding an ecological determinism because functional interdependencies 'constitute necessary but not sufficient conditions for understanding the actual pattern of energy flow which emerge in man's interaction with the natural environment' (Haaland, 1991, 14).

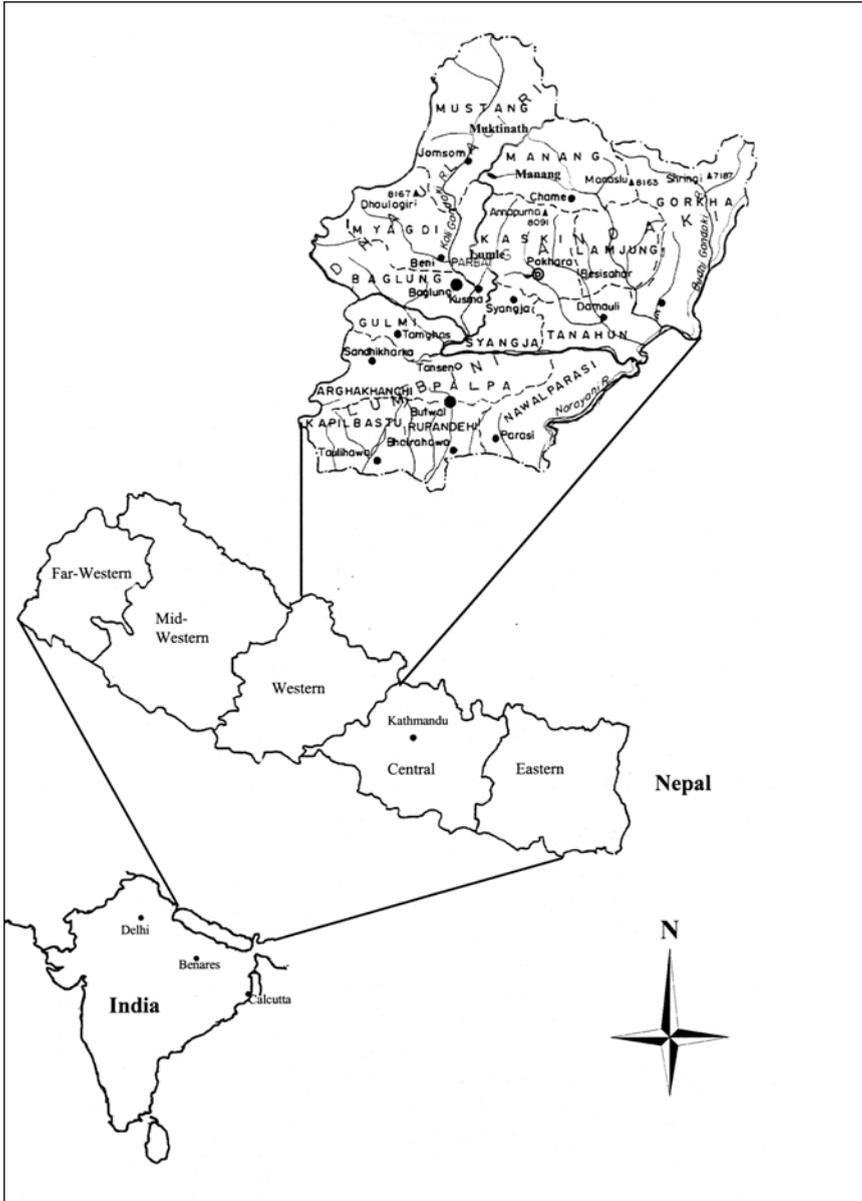


Figure 2. Western region of Nepal.

The peak-to-peak distance between Dhaulagiri (8167m) and Annapurna I (8091m) is only 32km, and the Kali Gandaki river is flowing at an elevation from 2,500–2,000m. The Himalayan range separates the Tibetan and Buddhist region in the north in the rain-desert and the Hindu regions south of the mountains in a humid and fertile area, creating some of the world's steepest gradients regarding elevation and precipitation.

Thus, it is necessary to develop a perspective combining macro-level ecosystem dynamics with micro-level analyses of the actor's intentions and perceptions (*ibid.*). Studies of death may incorporate these aspects since, on the one hand, funerals are performed by the relatives, and on the other hand, people's customary responses to death provide possibilities for probing into the nature of human life (Metcalf and Huntington, 1993, 25), and the funeral practices revitalise what is culturally conceived to be the most essential to the reproduction of the social order (Bloch and Parry, 1987, 7). The lineage, the heritage and the society are temporarily threatened in the breach of death. Mortuary feasts and rituals recreate the elementary structure of the society of the living (Holmberg, 1996, 194). Adaptation is not necessarily a maximising process (Rappaport, 1979, 71). Adaptive structures are structured sets of processes and regulatory hierarchies (*ibid.*, 151), and it may entail social stratification.

Baglung Bazaar is a town with approximately 25,000 inhabitants. The town is the headquarter in Baglung district, located at 948m in the Dhaulagiri zone, western Nepal. The climate is humid with an annual rainfall between 1500 and 2500mm a year. The cemetery Nire Ghat is located outside Baglung Bazaar by Kaligandaki River. There are 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 metres.

Manang village is a small mountain village with 391 inhabitants and 120 households (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1993, 83), located at an altitude of 3,550m in Manang district in Gandaki zone, western Nepal. The climate is arid with an annual precipitation of approximately 400mm. In front of the village lies the Gangapurna glacier. During the last 150 years the glacier has decreased and retreated approximately 1,800 metres, and due to the increase of melt-water Gangapurna Lake in front of the glacier is less than 40 years old. The cemetery in Manang, Tore, is located at the Gangapurna glacier's end-moraine. According to the local lore, the cemetery is at least 200 years old, and the end-moraine was deposited during the Little Ice Age, which in the Himalayan region ended around 1850 AD. Thus, the cemetery was made in front of the glacier's snout, and the funerals were performed directly in front of the enormous masses of cold ice.

The decreasing glacier enables a discussion of why and how micro-environmental changes such as increased amounts of melt-water may or may not be incorporated into symbols, rituals and cosmology, and at which level or scale ecological and environmen-

tal changes might be incorporated in the broader culture and religion. But the problem can also be addressed in another way: why should a religion which basically deals with eternal entities and answering questions beyond this world incorporate natural, cultural and non-eternal objects that are commonly described as *maya* – illusion.

WATER AND COSMOLOGY: THE FIVE ELEMENTS

The cosmos consists of five elements. The five elements in Hinduism and Buddhism are air, water, fire, earth and ether. The elements are life-givers and creative forces from which everything derives and will return back to, and then become transformed into other constellations and new forms of life, again and again. The five elements are also associated with different qualities; the quality of touch in air, flavour in water, light in fire, smell in earth and sound in ether. In Hinduism a god dwells in each element; Vishnu in air, Varuna in water, Agni in fire, Brahma in earth and Shiva in ether or sky (Oestigaard, 2000, 18). In Buddhism the elements are also associated with various divine qualities, but which gods or divine aspects they are associated with depend upon the particular context (Lauf, 1989).

The human body, as everything else, consists of the five elements. The western concept of an individual soul and 'I-personality' does not correspond with the Hindu or Buddhist concepts of a 'soul' (Lauf, 1989, 17), but I will nevertheless use the term 'soul' since it is commonly understood to signify this spiritual essence. In both Hinduism and Buddhism 'the round of birth and death', *samsara*, 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 release or salvation into transcendent reality. Before the soul has attained nirvana or enlightenment and 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 and causing troubles – an incarnation worse than being born as an animal.

In the *Garuda Purana* it is written, 'Just as men wear new clothes casting off old ones, so also the soul obtains another body leaving the old one' (*Garuda Purana*, n.d., II.II.10.96, 793). A Tibetan saying puts it this way: 'Don't wonder about your former lives, just look carefully at your present body! Don't wonder about your future lives; just look at your mind in the present!' (Thurman, 1994, 28). This is the essence of the karma theory. The soul is

eternal and imprisoned in many material forms, but only when it is captured in a human body is an 'I-personality' achieved which may enable even higher incarnations. While animals are governed by instincts without free will, humans are in the fortunate position of being able to escape 'the round of birth and death' and attain salvation. Thus, the human condition and constellations of the elements are unique in the sense that this is the first state where the soul can improve its own condition by free will, as the famous Buddhist yoga Milarepa says: 'I have understood that this material body, made of flesh and blood along with mental consciousness ... [and] this body is the blessed vessel for those fortunate beings who wish for freedom, but it also leads sinners into the lower realms' (Lhalungpa, 1979, 77).

The main element of the human body is water. Since this constellation of the elements is very auspicious for the soul, it necessitates special treatment when the body dies. This is reflected in the fact that humans only perform funerals for other humans and not for animals. The soul of an animal has to pass through numerous incarnations in the lower realms before achieving a human body, and humans cannot affect this destiny. Descendants may, on the contrary, effect the deceased's future incarnation, and indeed improve it. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a guide to the soul in the intermediate state or between two forms of existence aiming to secure the deceased the best incarnation possible. In Hindu funerals the performance of the rituals and ancestral rites serve the same functions, and even a human whose karma should lead to an improved incarnation may enter into the lower realms, becoming animals or wicked ghosts if the descendants fail in the performance of death rites.

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 even is identical with the universe. The body as a being is a microcosm and encompasses the world, the macrocosm and the gods in particular ways (Goudriaan, 1979, 57–8). Even though Hindus and Buddhists share the same concepts of the elements as the basis of cosmos, the meaning of their funeral practices differ. 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. Thus, cremation is a funeral practice encompassing all elements; this applies to inhumation too but in a less auspicious way. The way the deceased is disposed of in Buddhism depends upon the deceased's horoscope and the time of death. The lama will decide which funeral practice is the most auspicious for the deceased based on

the sacred books, depending upon which elements rule at the time of death; air, water, fire or earth, with its successive burial-types. Thus, Buddhists have one burial type for each element (except for ether). But the cosmology in itself cannot explain why there are different performances of rituals between Hindu and Buddhist funerals since they share many of the same cosmological and eschatological concepts and ideas.

THE HOLY RIVER AND DEATH RITUALS AT NIRE GHAT IN BAGLUNG

Kaligandaki River is the second holiest river in Nepal and has a special religious role in this region of Nepal. First, the river comes from the Himalayas, and it is therefore perceived as a god. In general, mountains are perceived as gods, but in this area Dhaulagiri has a special function. According to folk tales and folk belief Dhaulagiri is the giver of waters to the rivers. Kaligandaki River has its source in this holy mountain, and thus, the mountain is the everlasting source of water and thereby life. Secondly, a connecting river to Kaligandaki, Jhong Khola, passes by the pilgrimage place Muktinath in the Mustang district. Muktinath means the God of Salvation, and the Vishnu Mandir temple with its 108 water spouts is the second most sacred Hindu place in Nepal, and Muktinath is worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists. Thirdly, Kaligandaki River contains the ammonite fossils known to Hindus as *saligram*, which is perceived as an embodiment, a physical manifestation or visible incarnation of Vishnu. Finally, the river leads to Ganges and then to Varanasi, the holy pilgrimage site where a cremation will end 'the round of birth and death' and the deceased will attain salvation.

Cremation is generally perceived as the most auspicious funeral practice. When the funeral pyre is built, the bamboo stretcher the dead was carried on is placed with the deceased's feet into the river. Cemeteries are places where Yama, the King of Death, rules, and wicked souls and departed spirits are roaming around causing trouble and harm to other people. The deceased is in a vulnerable condition where such beings or ghosts may effect the forthcoming incarnation in a negative manner. But Varuna, the god of water overpowers Yama, so Yama or his companions cannot punish those who bathe in the water. Before the pyre is lit, again the relatives sprinkle holy water on the deceased.

The same laws govern the body and the cosmos. 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 (Parry, 1994, 31). 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.*, 151–2). At the moment of the breaking of the skull and the releasing of ‘the vital breath’, the death pollution begins. The cremation is painful and dangerous (Pandey, 1969, 240; Knipe, 1975, 130) 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, 1977, 135). The ashes are often referred to as ‘bones’. Bones are the product of the father’s semen and thus a source of future fertility, and the cremation destroys what one has to get rid of, sin and female flesh (Parry, 1994, 188). The ashes immersed into the river will float to Ganges and further on to Varanasi, where the deceased may eventually attain salvation, even though he was cremated in another place.

According to orthodox Hinduism and Brahmanism, cremation is the prescribed and preferred funeral practice. However, children, boys without the initiation rite into manhood (*bartamande*), unmarried women, holy men or persons who have died an unnatural death are not allowed to be cremated, and inhumations are the prescribed funeral practice for them. Nevertheless, the majority of the funerals should have been cremations, but the holiness of the Kaligandaki River has changed parts of the funeral practice at Nire Ghat. This cemetery has a central function for the people in Baglung district, and the deceased’s relatives may carry the dead up to 12 hours on the bamboo stretcher in order to perform an auspicious funeral. The funerals are located at the riverbed as close as possible to the river. In the rainy season during the summertime the river washes away the funeral material with the monsoon flood, and thus the mortuary remains found there are less than one year old. In February 1997 I counted 86 graves and 38 cremation patches, in November the same year after the monsoon the numbers were 74 graves and 13 cremation patches. In November 2000 the numbers were 46 graves and 19 cremation patches. So, even though most of the deceased should have been cremated, the majority are buried on the riverbed, a funeral practice that is, according to orthodox Hinduism and Brahmanism, inauspicious and will lead to incarnations in the lower realms.

The inhumations may be perceived as a combination of burials and water burials. Due to poverty and difficulties in getting firewood for the funeral pyre, inhumations are more common than the religion prescribes. But economic explanations are not enough without

eschatological concepts legitimising the practice. Some Brahman priests explain the inauspiciousness of inhumations with the destiny of the deceased after the funeral. 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 because they have been removed 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 that eat the corpses suffer.

However, ordinary people have other eschatological explanations, and according to the local lore 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 Vishnu. The holiness of Kaligandaki River compared to other rivers and streams has changed parts of the funeral practice in Baglung district. Even Brahman priests in the villages equal the fortunate effects of a burial at Nire Ghat with a cremation by a small river in a village. Thus, the location of the cemetery by the holy Kaligandaki River is actually more important than the funeral practice in itself.

RAINMAKING DEATH RITUALS AT TORE CEMETERY IN MANANG

Tibetan Buddhism has four main funeral practices: air burials, water burials, cremations and inhumations. In some places they may also bury the deceased inside the wall of a house (Peissel, 1969; Boeye and Marullo, 1995), but the last funeral custom has not been practised in Manang. Nowadays the common funeral practice in Manang is cremation, but even today poor people that cannot afford cremation may be given air or water burials, whereas inhumations are basically for persons who died of contagious diseases.

The deceased is cremated in a special crematorium, which is the foundation of a *chorten*. A *chorten* is a small *stupa*, and a *stupa* is a funerary mount or a Buddhist ancestral monument. Every *stupa* or *chorten* is symbolising the original *stupas* where the bone-relics and ashes of Buddha are buried. Three *chortens* in a row symbolise the Three Jewels in Buddhism, Buddha, *dharmā* and *sangha*. Buddha is the Enlightened one, *dharmā* is the essence of the religion or the teaching of how to achieve this state, and *sangha* is a community of worshippers or a monastic order of monks and nuns (Thurman, 1994, 14–15). The deceased is sitting in the crematorium in Buddha

position during the cremation. Some days later, the burnt human bones, together with ingredients like wheat, buckwheat, chilli, garlic, bark of juniper, ashes and rice, are ground into powder and mixed with clay by any of the deceased's relatives, and made into 108 figures called *chatafars*, which are symbolising small *chortens*.

After the cremation, the crematorium is completed and built as a *chorten*, which works as a family memorial. The majority of the *chatafars* are buried inside the *chorten* where the deceased was cremated. The Manangian people do not make a new *chorten* each time a person dies. If the family already have a *chorten* or family memorial, then they may use another crematorium structure (or a non-completed *chorten*) for the cremations of their relatives. Afterwards the bones are made into *chatafars* whereby the majority of those are placed within the original family *chorten*. The remaining *chatafars* are distributed at different spots in the village or in nature; behind the praying-wheels at *mani*-walls, in other *chortens* along the roadside or in caves at auspicious places. The Manangian people have been traders in South-East Asia for the last two centuries, and if any of them died abroad, in some cases a number of *chatafars* with the deceased's remains were carried back to Manang.

Only 20–25 years ago air burials were the most common practice. A lama appointed two persons outside the family to cut up the corpse. The deceased was chopped into small pieces and given either to the birds or to the river, and these two modes of depositions were equally praised. The deceased's skull could in some cases be saved and used by the lamas for *pujas* or worship, and even today a skull-bowl from an air-burial is used as a drinking cup for ritual purposes in the oldest *gompa* in Manang. One of the deceased's thighbones was often used for making a flute, and during rituals the lamas commonly use such flutes today. When the lamas used the thighbone flute during air-burial funerals, it was for calling upon the gods and let them make rain. The practice of air burials was a rainmaking ritual.

Two decades ago, there was a common belief among the lamas and the laymen that if the deceased was cremated the smoke from the funeral pyre would reach the sky and heaven. The gods would become angry and hot tempered because of the smell of the burnt human flesh and they would penalise the people by not giving them rain. During the wintertime, however, everyone was cremated because then the aim was to get the gods angry in order to avoid precipitation, which would come as snow. In short, air burials were performed during the spring, summer and autumn in order to create rain, whereas cremation was the proper funeral practice during

wintertime for avoiding snowfall. The relation between air burial and cremation was a matter of controlling the amount of precipitation. In other contexts, special lamas are often engaged and specialised in this enterprise (Woolf and Blanc, 1994).

RIVER AND RAIN: THE WATERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Water in the forms of river and rain when incorporated into death rituals highlights some general principles of life-giving processes, and why and how these creative forces are actively incorporated into further life. All human situations involve a highly significant interplay between biophysical and cultural processes (Boyden, 1993, 31). Thus, the human culture has influenced the biological processes on which we depend and of which we are a part (*ibid.*, 39). Even though water is one of the five elements and is worshipped as holy and as a life-giver, it is the outcome of this creative force and power that has social and cultural relevance for humans. As a cultural construct water is always a means to something else. The two dominant qualities of water as a life-giver are water for drinking and water for food, that is, fertile crops and a successful harvest. Water can appear in many forms, and I will discuss water as river, rain, glacier and glacier lake. Whether or not certain forms or qualities of water are incorporated into death rituals depends upon the degree of the necessity of this form of water for further life, or more precisely, will the absence of this type of water result in death? Thus, water may have the possibility to be integrated as a life-giving process in death rituals if it works according to the dichotomies presence/absence: life/death. It is a matter of how dependent humans are on the main or the exclusive source of water for further life. If the absence of one type of water is, whether it is as a river or rain, a collective death-giver in the society, then it is of the uttermost importance to control this water resource and to incorporate it into death rituals as a source for life and avoidance of death (see Figure 3).

From an ecological approach the different importance of river and rain can be seen from a southern perspective and a northern perspective. The names of some of the Himalayan Mountains illuminate the southern perspective and the importance of rivers. The Annapurna range with its five peaks rising from 7,000 to above 8,000 metres means 'Full of grain', Dhaulagiri, an 8,000m peak, means the 'White Mountain', and the 7,000m peak Gangapurna means 'The Ganges is full'. In short, when the mountains are full of snow, the rivers will be full of water and the harvest successful with a lot of grain. Thus, the water is a life giver and life sustainer. The majority

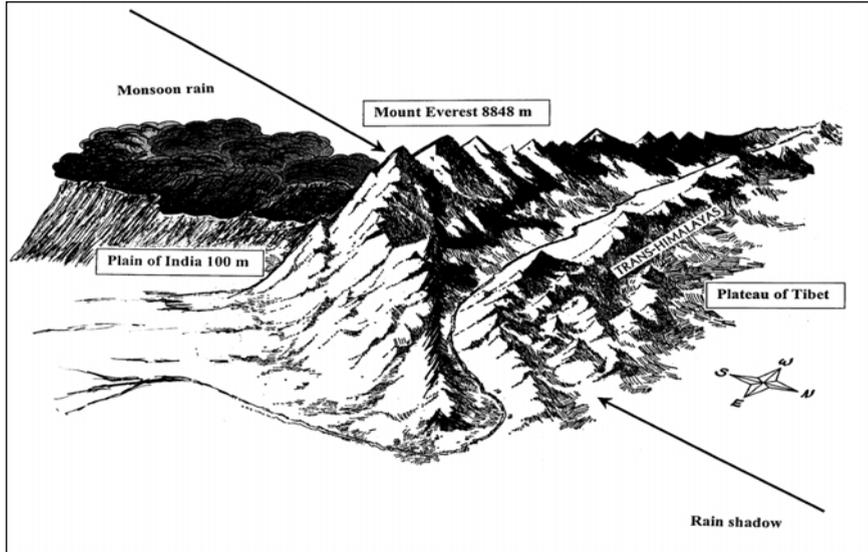


Figure 3. River and rain – the waters of life and death.

of the Hindu texts and scriptures are developed on the Indian continent rather than in Nepal itself, and thus emphasising the importance of rivers for successful harvest and further life. The names of the mountains illuminate the dependency on the annual precipitation in the mountains for the amount of water in the rivers.

Seen from the northern perspective and the Buddhists in the rain shadow, droughts due to absence of water in the rivers are hardly thinkable since the glaciers support the rivers continuously with water. However, these rivers are almost impossible to irrigate because of the steep valleys and they are therefore to some extent 'useless' from an agricultural point of view. Thus, life and death depend upon the amount of precipitation – as much rain as possible during the summertime may give life, but equally important, as little snow as possible during the wintertime because it may cause death. This may also explain why the increased melt-water from Gangapurna glacier and the recent Gangapurna lake have hardly influenced the ritual practices and why these types of waters have a minor role in death rituals: these waters give neither life nor death. Rain is the crucial water form because the absence of rain is a death giver, in the form of harvest failure that may lead to human death during summertime, and the presence of snow during wintertime may equally be a death giver.

THE DECEASED AS WATER, FOOD AND FERTILITY FOR THE LIVING

One key to answering why the qualities of the deceased and death are closely linked to water, food and fertility for the living may be found in the karma theory. Salvation is only available to humans living in the realm of *samsara*, or in other words, only humans that are subject to rebirth can be released from the round of birth and death and attain nirvana (Long, 1977, 78). Even though salvation or release from *samsara* is the ultimate aim, one may assume that the majority of the souls are still within the round of birth and death. Thus the favourable incarnation in this world is being born as a human.

This process of rebuilding a human body is incorporated as a part of the funerals. In the Hindu rituals this process is symbolised in the making of *pindas*, and in the Buddhist rituals in the making of *chatafars*. These rituals are designated for uniting the deceased with the world of ancestors, but the life as ancestors co-exists with further incarnations as humans, and therefore these rituals may serve this double function.

Food always carries symbolic loads far heavier than those of simple nutrition, and the symbolism often spills over into wider fields of meaning (Mintz, 1996, 29). Therefore it is necessary to distinguish food in terms of substance and symbol (Furst, 1994, 71–2). To incorporate food into the body, the food is made to become the self, it becomes part of who we are (Lupton, 1996, 16–17), and in this context, how and who the dead becomes, both as an ancestor and in the forthcoming incarnation. To digest is to concentrate within oneself the active powers carried by the food. Like food nourishes like, and the foodstuffs possess identical qualities in abundance, it makes identity (Zimmerman, 1982, 165–9).

The first day after a Hindu death, the *sapindikarana* rite starts which establishes the ritual bond between generations, and the deceased receives a symbolic meal of food in form of a rice-ball (Knipe, 1977, 111–12). The rice ball is an unformed and headless body, or an embryo, and the word *pinda* designates ‘the ball of flesh formed in the womb from sperm and blood, at the very beginning of pregnancy, when the embryo is a male’ (Kapani, op. cit.; Weinberger-Thomas, 1999, 84), and in other contexts the meaning is extended to apply to Shiva’s linga or phallus (ibid.). The rice ball represents the spirit of the sacrificer’s father (Knipe, 1977, 115), and for ten days one rice ball is sacrificed each day on an altar near a river. These sacrifices rebuild the deceased’s body, ‘the head being created the first day, then in succession the neck and shoulders, the

heart and torso, the back, the stomach, the thighs and bowels, the lower legs and skin, the knees and hair, the genitals, and, on the tenth day of the offerings, the preta receives digestive powers' so that the deceased can receive the continued offerings of *pindas* and water from the living (ibid.).

The Buddhist making of 108 *chatafars* is another way of giving the dead a materialised body. This may symbolise the state of enlightenment since the *chatafars* are small replicas of the *stupas* that Buddha's cremated remains were buried in, whereas the ingredients rebuild a new human body. The use of different food nourishes the deceased's soul. Each seventh day for 49 days food, which the deceased consume, is offered to the fire, and after 49 days the soul has been guided through the intermediate state and been incarnated again if the deceased has not achieved the state of enlightenment.

In death rituals food and water are 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 that 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), which are recreated by ancestral worship.

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, 90). In some Hindu texts, although not commonly used, the deceased is referred to as a person who enters the smoke of the cremation pyre, becomes clouds and rain, then vegetables, and if eaten, sperm (O'Flaherty, 1981, 42). Symbolic consumption of the dead and his qualities emphasise, on the one hand, the life-giving aspects of consumption, and on the other hand, processes transcending and overpowering death (Oestigaard, 1999, 2000). *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).

Whether the souls become food of the gods (*Brahma-Sutras*, 3.1.7) or the deceased's qualities are incorporated among humans as a part of ancestral worship by drinking from the dead person's skull-bowl, the emphasis is on consumption for further life. Seen from this

perspective it makes sense that water, as a life-giving means creating food in the form of successful harvest, is incorporated into the death rituals. The deceased will reap the fruits of this beneficial life-giving process in his next life as a human, and the rest of the society will also benefit from the harvest and further life. Food creates human bodies – the most favourable and positive material ‘prison’ in this world. Thus, by the use of water symbolism both the deceased and the society will prosper, which is a good action according to the karma theory, actions that eventually may lead each human to a higher reincarnation or liberation from *samsara*.

CONCLUSION

Death is life and life is death – this is the eternal round of birth and death. Eschatological and cosmological concepts of the life hereafter are embedded in the culture and religion, but these notions are not sufficient when explaining why people are performing their death rituals as they do. Humans live in and of the nature. The daily struggle for life and their coping with ecological realities and constraints are important elements incorporated in the performance of funerals. Although death is inevitable for all human beings, there are some factors that may increasingly accelerate the process towards death without any mercy. Hunger and starvation are such processes. Whether there is too little or too much water or the precipitation comes like snow during the wintertime, the outcome of not controlling and incorporating these live-giving waters into the sphere of death is actually death. The consequence of incorporating ecological constraints into the funerals is a religious security from an absence of these resources that will cause death for a smaller or greater part of the society. Ecological constraints can be necessary but not sufficient conditions for natural symbolism in death rituals. Small changes in the environment will not necessarily be incorporated in this symbolism because humans act intentionally and do not simply respond to nature. Moreover, such a symbolism necessitates also a coherent logic linking the different symbolic aspects of water together into a single aim and outcome of the rituals – further life for the deceased and the society. These aspects are incorporated in the Hindu and Buddhist religious practices because death emphasises both the temporal aspects of the human condition and the desires to end *samsara* and to reach an eternal and non-fettered state of being.

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