

# The Materiality of Death

Bodies, burials, beliefs

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## Chapter 4

# Excavating the Kings' Bones: The Materiality of Death in Practice and Ethics Today

*Anders Kaliff & Terje Oestigaard*

**ABSTRACT** Is it unethical to excavate recent graves and cremated remains, but ethical to excavate prehistoric funeral remains? Most archaeologists will probably answer yes to these questions, although this is not straightforward and obvious. Western archaeologists often have an implicit Christian and ethnocentric worldview with regards to ethical questions concerning death, which in turn may become a new form of academic colonialism. We will address these issues with the cremated kings in Nepal after the palace massacre in Kathmandu in 2001. Less than a year later we excavated the kings' bones from these cremations in the riverbed, and asked one of the cremation priests who cremated the royals about death and ethics.

The materiality of death is inevitably an intrinsic part of archaeological practices since much of our data stem from funerals. Archaeologists have a special relationship with the dead. Physically, we come closer to them than most other people do, but in our work there is also an inherent distance. Our study of the dead is rarely a reflection of ourselves and our own mortality. The dead are transformed into objects in an impersonal study – dead bodies with a qualitatively different meaning than ourselves. On one level, this is of course unavoidable and quite understandable. Archaeology is not primarily a subject of self-reflection, although this is an interwoven and necessary component. Graves are central to archaeologists, but also to general human beliefs. The grave as an archetypal symbol is always present in Western culture, not only as a reminder of death and transience, but also as a symbol for something hidden and unconscious within ourselves. Ask anyone to evoke the thought of the dead in their graves and he or she will hardly remain unaffected. Few phenomena have such an intrinsic value of sentiment and symbol as death and burials. These strong feelings are not unique in our culture, but rather deeply inherent in the very being of man. Important and enduring rituals and beliefs concerning the dead can be seen in any culture, but they often differ considerably from the practices we are accustomed to today in Western societies. Accordingly, the ethical questions we as archaeologists must ask before investigating graves and human remains also differ, depending on the cultural and religious contexts in the past and the present (Kaliff 2004: 251-253).

Nevertheless, the way we deal with the physicality of death – the human body itself or its remains – is seldom questioned, and the way we deal with death is often based on implicit Christian prejudices which we apply to non-Christian graves and funeral practices. Moreover, ethical considerations are more often taken into account

concerning excavations of recent or Christian graves than prehistoric or non-Christian graves. Prehistoric graves are often treated as merely being a source material of antiquarian and scientific interest. A question rises: At what point does a grave cease to be a holy site or a resting place for the remains of a dead human being and transformed into only a cultural historical remain, which can be displayed in museums? This was what we aimed to find out or at least emphasise by excavating the kings' bones of the recently deceased kings Birendra and Dipendra of Nepal.

On June 1<sup>st</sup> 2001 King Birendra was killed and his son Crown Princess Dipendra shot in the palace massacre in Kathmandu, Nepal. King Birendra was cremated the next day at Pashupatinath, and the ashes and bones were immersed into the Bagmati River. The Crown Prince, who was in coma, was crowned as the king on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, but died the next day and was cremated on June 4<sup>th</sup> at Pashupatinath. The kings were cremated at the uppermost cremation platform (upstream) in front of the holy river Bagmati, which is the platform where only royals are allowed to be cremated. This implies that the bones in front of this platform could only stem from the dead kings. In February 2002 we picked up some of the kings' cremated bones from the riverbed before we put them back into the river. We then asked one of the priests who cremated the kings what he thought if the kings' bones were removed from the holy river. The answers we received challenged our perceptions of death, ethics and our practice of excavating dead people. Today, Christian graves are sacred, but we excavate graves from prehistory irrespective of other peoples' conceptions of death, which raises the questions: What is death? How does death matter in society today and in the past, and how should we treat the material remains of the dead, which we exhibit in museums? Is our West-European (Christian or secular) ethical framework relevant at all when dealing

with dead people belonging to other cultural and religious contexts?

When studying other living cultures as well as the past of our own geographical area, it is important to discuss these fundamental questions. Our scientific approach and ethical conceptions, including post-colonial theory, are basically part of a Eurocentric world view, which is not necessarily relevant for other cultural and religious contexts. Graves constitute one of the most important source materials for archaeology, at the same time the examination of a grave is always a personal meeting with the dead. Thus, archaeologists have a special relationship with death and dead people (Kaliff 2004). Nevertheless, it may seem strange that personal reflections in this area are so rare. In the borderland between scientific documentation and our personal feelings regarding life and death, it is perhaps possible for us to express something that goes beyond the archaeological interpretation, which nevertheless includes a general and universal respect for death and the dead. In other words, is it possible to combine a universal ethics in particular contexts, or are research ethical judgements personal opinions which are hidden, camouflaged or legitimised in post-modernism's haven of relativism?

## The Dilemma

Which ethical problems do we encounter with regard to investigation of graves, and why? Sometimes it seems that archaeologists may have a harder time spotting the problems than laymen do. Among archaeologists, the most common or traditional viewpoint has often been that of the antiquarian or the "purely" scientific one: Only the cultural historical value is important. Any ethical problems, for instance regarding the sanctity of graves, are still often seen as a different problem which is not of archaeological concern. This lack of coherence may be one reason why the ethical discussions among Western archaeologists have increased during the last decades (e.g. Green (ed) 1984; Iregren & Werbart (eds) 1994; Vitelli (ed) 1996; Karlsson (ed) 2004). Nevertheless, symptomatic of this discourse in itself is that it is a reflection of Western thoughts and ethics. Even though they are often claimed to be "post-colonial", these theories and ethical guidelines and standards are most definitely defined and sanctioned by European or Anglo-American scholars and universities.

Scepticism and concern among Western scholars can often be based on a misguided guilty conscience about the mistakes of colonialism and the attempts in the past to use science to confirm what one wanted to see. Today's theories, however well-meaning and however different their perspective may be, unfortunately often contain the same kind of mistake in principal, based on today's kind of political correctness. What we in the West *want* to see today is often the counter to the image of colonialism. We would be wise to avoid making scholarly mistakes in the

opposite direction. The abuse of an interpretation in a particular period does not automatically mean that the interpretation itself must be wrong. Nor does it mean that what is politically correct in Western society today must be right, neither when it concerns the past, nor other contemporary cultures (cf. Kaliff 2007: 43-45). Thus, Europeans are not only the former colonialists, but also the dominant part in defining the post-colonial needs for the former colonised people in the world! Hence, perhaps post-colonial theory in reality is really nothing more than an intellectual new-colonialism in disguise of ethics and notions of universal rights and Western (Christian) values.

The question concerning research of graves in other cultural and religious contexts might then be problematic for at least two reasons. On one hand, it can represent a double standard regarding these issues where one falls into a colonial trap. On the other hand, one may ask the wrong questions and interpret the respective cultures not on their own premises, including their view of death and human remains, hence leading to biased conclusions and framed in a Eurocentric world view. And the question then arises: is this not also a colonial practice? Obviously, one can never free oneself from one's academic background and research horizons (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1987a, 1987b, 1989), but an awareness of these problems may enhance our knowledge and further research. So, which ethical problems do we encounter in connection with the investigation of human remains, and why? Being resting places for the dead, graves (or what Western people consider a grave) are connected with our modern beliefs of death and burial. This evokes thoughts and emotions of our own perceptions of death and our own losses, which are not necessarily relevant to any other cultural context. In our opinion, the most important basis for achieving an ethical relationship to archaeological investigations of graves is a reflection of the existing problems, as they are experienced in the original context. There is no manual for this, since the perspective of the different problems is likely to vary from individual to individual, and definitely also between cultural contexts. Direct communication with the people concerned is, if possible, at least a good starting point.

This was our premise in February 2002, when we dug up the kings' bones in the river Bagmati by the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, Nepal, a place where between 5000 and 6000 cremations are conducted annually.

## Cremation as Transformation

In Vedic practice (the ancient ritual system integrated into Hinduism), as in other Indo-European traditions, death is portrayed as a dismemberment of a whole, a fragmentation and decomposition. "If the process of aging is seen as a form of erosion whereby life and the body are gradually worn away, there is an inevitable end

to such a process. ... All life ends in death, just as all erosion ends in total collapse or pulverization” (Lincoln 1986: 119). Viewing ageing and death as a process like any other disintegration in the cosmos is therefore fundamental for an understanding of the outlook on death. This outlook guides the form of the rituals performed around a dead person. Death as a phenomenon is regarded as a dissolution of a complex composite whole; after a long process of decomposition, through the gradual decay of the body during life and finally through death and the rituals undertaken with the dead body. It should be stressed that the idea of death as a disintegration of the body does not require cremation, however this is a particularly clear way of marking the breakdown of the body into constituent parts connected to the elements. Other ways of fragmenting the body – defleshing, reburial, etc. – can also illustrate this disintegration. Even an inhumation can be perceived in the same way, as a slow return of the body to the elements (Lincoln 1986: 119-121).

The Hindu/Vedic cosmological myth is essential for the understanding of the cremation practice. The *Purusasūkta* (“The Hymn of Purusa”) in the *Rigveda* (10.90) tells how the world was created when the gods cut up a cosmic giant, *Purusa*. It is this narrative which is the archetype for the Vedic offering as well as for the cremation ritual. The homology found in the creation myths – the fact that different elements in the cosmos are identical with the body parts of the sacrificed primordial being, is a fundamental cosmological idea (Lincoln 1986: 5-7). It means that an entity is created from the matter of another, and they are alternative guises of each other. Meat and earth, for example, are believed to be of the same material substance and thus one can change into the other. In the same way, the bones, the hard part in the soft meat, are equated with the stones in the earth and with the mountains, while hair is associated with plants (Lincoln 1986: 5-7). Fundamental to the rituals that people performed on the basis of the creation myth is that, in the same way as creation proceeds from the original body, this process can also be reversed. Just as creation is assembled from the constituent elements according to the origin myth, the process can be repeated through reversal in the form of sacrifices or cremation, in order to restore the elements to creation. (ibid: 33-35).

The actual cremation can be regarded as a sacrificial ritual. In Vedic times in India, when the custom of sacrifice was increasing in scope, the cremation ritual was viewed as a person’s last sacrifice, in which his own body was offered to the flames. It was believed that the deceased would be reborn from the sacrifice to a new existence together with his ancestors. In Vedic texts this is called a person’s third birth. The cremation was therefore regarded as a transition from earthly existence to the world beyond (Olivelle 1987: 389). Through cremation the entire body is transformed by fire. The deceased is returned to the gods, in other words, the body is restored to its different elements, given back to creation

in a way that corresponds to the original cosmological sacrifice through which the world was created from the parts of the victim (Edsman 1987: 340ff). The earliest textual evidence of the belief in death being associated with the division of a person into the different elements is found in an important hymn in the *Rigveda* (10.16.3). It contains a careful identification of the constituent parts of the body with the different parts/elements of the cosmos, reflecting the body of the original sacrificial victim: blood/water, breath/wind, and hair/plants. The basic feature is that death and the disintegration of the body restore matter from the microcosm to the macrocosm; from the body to the surrounding world (Lincoln 1986: 122-124).

Cremation is generally perceived as the most auspicious of funeral practices (fig. 1). The body and the cosmos are governed by the same laws. The householder sacrifices himself on his funeral pyre in order to not only be reborn, but also to perpetuate the regeneration of time and of cosmos (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 (Parry 1994: 151-152). At the moment of the breaking of the skull and the releasing of “the vital breath”, the death pollution begins. It is the repayment of the sin of burning the flesh. 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 that a wife becomes a widow. Both the father and the son are reborn through the ritual, the father on another plane and the son as his father’s replacement (ibid:181-184). Cremation is a ritual by which time and cosmos are also regenerated; a ritual by which the universe is recreated (Pandey 1969: 241, Lincoln 1986; Parry 1987: 74ff, 1994: 31, cf. Oestigaard 2000, 2005, cf. Kaliff 2007).



**Fig. 1. Cremation at Pashupatinath, Nepal. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

Fundamental in the process of cremation is fire as the mediator of and between the elements; it is the very embodiment of change and transformation. *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. As a personified deity, *Agni* is an unscrupulous



**Fig. 2. Due to the extraordinary circumstances practical arrangements had to be made. King Birendra (to the right) is cremated at the royal cremation platform, Queen Aishwarya (in the middle) at a temporary platform and Prince Nirajan (to the left) at the cremation platform for the higher castes. Courtesy: Kantipur Publications Pvt. Ltd.**

seducer of women, and an erotic death is often associated with the motif of self-immolation (O’Flaherty 1981[1973]: 90 f). (ibid: 91). Fire is also an extremely common apotropaic because it wards off evil spirits. ). It has purificatory powers. *Agni* is the slayer of demons (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 26). Furthermore, *Agni* is entrusted with the task of handing over the offerings to the gods. Fire can be reduced to heat, and heat can be seen as the final property of life (like breath) (Knipe 1975: 37). Being a god himself, *Agni* is also the one who conveys the sacrificial gifts to the other gods. *Agni* is born, according to the Vedic account, from the pieces of wood in the fire drill used to light ritual fire. He is also found in the sky, in lightning and the sun, as well as in water in different forms such as rain, lakes and rivers. *Agni* is considered to belong to the domesticated sphere of life, with the home, the family, the kindred, and the tribe, and thus there is also a connection to the clearance of land for pasture and tillage (Staal 2001 [1983]: 73, 99; cf. Parmeshwaranand 2000: 40–48).

The cremation is painful and dangerous (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. The ashes are often referred to as “bones”. Bones are considered the product of the father’s semen and thus a source to the future fertility (Parry 1994: 188), and at the same time they constitute a part of the body that has returned to their original element – the stones in the ground (Kaliff 2007). Death is related to three types

of cycles; firstly, the cycle of the personal life such as birth, marriage, and rebirth; secondly, the cycle of the year, especially in regard of the seasons and harvests, and thirdly, the cosmological cycles. Water is the most important life-giving element and in Hindu death rituals, which emphasises the ongoing re-creation of life and vital forces (Oestigaard 2005). Cosmogony is the re-creation of the world (Eliade 1987: 105). Cosmos is an ongoing process where “transformative sacrificial acts destroy in order to create, but they also cause life-giving powers to flow” (Read 1998: 145). In societies where religion holds “that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world tend to dramatize the cosmogony by reproducing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos” and there is “a tendency for kingdoms, capitals, temples, shrines, and so forth, to be constructed as replicas of the cosmos” (Wheatley 1971: 417). The rites create divine legitimacy because when rituals are the principal medium by which power relationships are constructed, the power or the material embodiment of the political order is usually perceived as coming from divine sources (Bell 1997: 129). Cremations are creations of both man and cosmos, and consequently microcosm, mesocosm and macrocosm are integrated in the procreative funerals.

Therefore, the funerals of royals have a particular meaning and importance in cosmos – they are to a certain extent the most important rituals in society – and consequently, one may therefore argue that the way the kings’ bodies were handled with regard to both the flesh and the bones represent if not the utmost norm, an

idealised form of cosmic principles, and at least not a desecrating practice.

### The Scene and the Setting

Year 2001 was a tragic year for Nepal and the royal family. Ten royal members died at the Narayanhity Palace massacre on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2001. What actually happened is difficult to say and the truth may or may not have been revealed. According to the official story, the Late King Birendra invited his family to the traditional Friday evening gathering at the Royal Palace. The marriage of the Crown Prince Dipendra to his beloved was sanctioned by his mother Queen Aishwarya. Heavily intoxicated on a mixture of alcohol and cocaine, the Prince started shooting with rifles and machineguns, killing his family before eventually shooting himself. The royalty were rushed to the military hospital where the doctors tried to save their lives.

King Birendra died that evening, whereas the Crown Prince was kept alive on a respirator. Due to the death of King Birendra, Crown Prince Dipendra was declared the new monarch on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. Prince Gyanendra was appointed as the regent of the kingdom at the same time since King Dipendra lay unconscious at the hospital surviving only by the aid of a ventilator. King Dipendra died the next day and Gyanendra was crowned and became the new king; Nepal experienced three different kings in three days. The late King Birendra and the royals

were given state funerals on June 2<sup>nd</sup> (fig. 2). King Dipendra, who had only been king while he was in a coma, was cremated on June 4<sup>th</sup> at Pashupatinath. This was in accordance with the Hindu tradition prescribing that the deceased should be cremated within twenty-four hours after death.

At Pashupatinath there are three distinctive areas where cremations are undertaken (fig. 3). It could also be divided into two different areas, one for the higher castes – the Arya Ghat – and one for the common people – the Ram Ghat. At Arya Ghat there are two cremation platforms. The one closest to the temple and the linga is for royal cremations only. The second platform is for those who today are called wealthy people, but traditionally this has been the ghat for Brahmans. The six cremation platforms at Ram Ghat are basically for the common people or the third caste. The king's platform is located to the north, upstream from the other platforms. The cremation platform of the Brahmans is the northernmost of the platforms for non-royal people, and successively, the further south the more impure the castes, coming finally the sudras at the very south who have no platforms at all. The ritual space at Pashupatinath is hierarchically structured around the temple, with its famous Shiva-linga, and lined along the Bagmati River. Especially important for our study is that the cremation platform for the royals is the one upstream, which means that the bones in the riverbed just below this platform can only stem from the kings, and not the 5000-6000 others who are cremated here annually.



Fig. 3. The different cremation areas at Pashupatinath, with the royal platform at Arya Ghat upstream. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

As with all cremations in Hinduism, the ashes are immersed in the river and there are no relics kept or funeral monuments erected of the deceased. All the physical parts of the body are returned to their original shape, that is, the different elements connected with the body of the primordial being. The flesh is returned to the soil, the blood to the water, the hair to the plants, etc. The burnt bones from the fragmented body are passed into the riverbed, where they merge with gravel and stones. The deceased is, if not reincarnated again with the elements integrating into a new organism, believed to be released from the eternal round of birth and death.

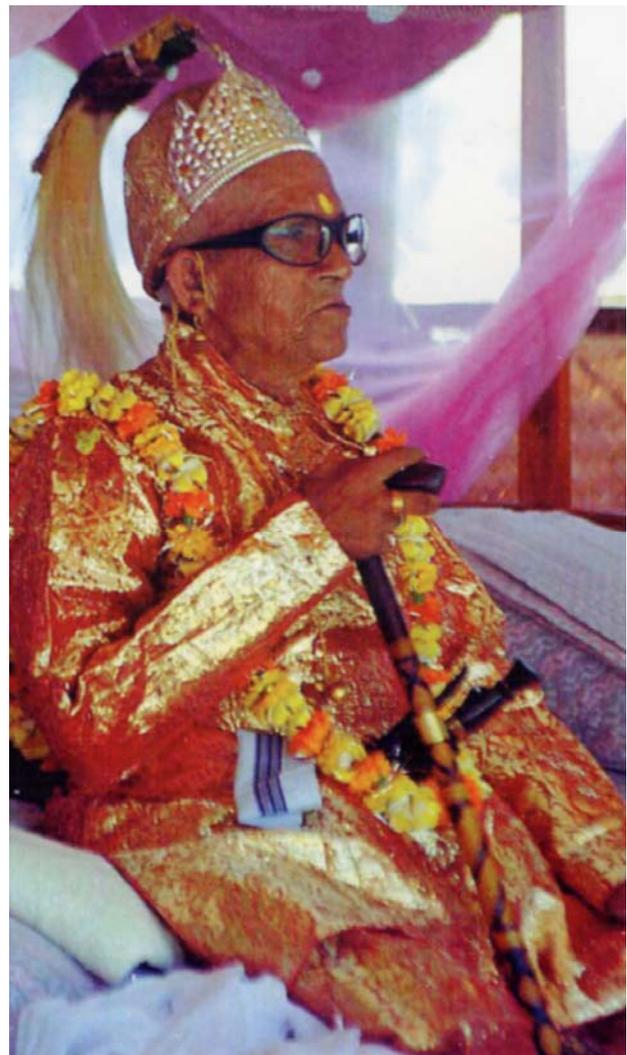
The King is, however, in a special situation. He is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu when he is alive during his reign of the kingdom. He is then a living god on earth. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day after death he is believed to return to the heavenly abode of Vishnu.

### The Importance of Rituals: *Katto* and the Funeral Priest

Based on the empirical data as presented below, one may argue that in this context the most important thing was that the rituals *were performed, not how or what was left*, but merely that they were carried out in accordance with what the participants believed was necessary and mandatory. Apart from monuments, the materiality of death includes two main categories with regard to the body: the flesh and the bones. Before proceeding to the bones, which we excavated parts of, it is of interest to see what happened to the flesh. The deceased kings were cremated, but as a part of the royal funerals there was an extraordinary ritual, which is only conducted for the kings, which has special emphasis on the flesh and the reconstitution of society and cosmos as well as enabling the king to become Vishnu in his heavenly abode.

The Funeral Priests are a special group of Brahmans – *Mahabrahmans* (“*Great Brahmans*”). The specialist who conducts the ritual is not only in service to the deceased’s soul and family, the funeral priest himself becomes the *pret* or *pitr* – the deceased’s soul – and he is worshipped as the deceased. Even before the chief mourner shaves his head, the Mahabraham should be shaved as if he was the *pret* himself. The Funeral Priest is also consubstantial with the deceased. The Nepali royal and aristocratic funerals are the most explicit rituals in this regard (Parry 1980), particularly the *katto*-ritual, whereby a Brahman priest eats parts of the king’s body. “*Katto*” means literally “something not worth eating” (Shrestha 2001: 131). Traditionally it is a part of the dead body, and in particular the brain, which is eaten. The *katto* priest is seen as a “sin eater”. By eating the “uneatable” the priest becomes declared as an outcaste, and he is banned and chased out of Kathmandu valley. The ceremony ensures the salvation of the king’s soul, and the deceased’s body takes spiritual form on this day.

The role of the Mahabraham is crucial because he enables the soul to cross into the other world. The gifts to the Funeral Priest are in fact a symbolic representation of the gifts to the deceased, or more correctly, they are identical because the idea is that the departed receives the gifts in the next world. The ideal gifts are all standard requirements for daily life for one year – everything from food, clothes, furniture and money and so on. This has its rationale in the idea that the Funeral Priest *is* the deceased at the moment he receives and accepts the gift. The power to bless and curse the deceased enables the priest to negotiate and take advantage of size of the offering, emphasising that the gift will be received by the *pret*, and thus, the family has to offer a lot (Parry 1980:95-96).



**Fig. 4. King Birendra’s *katto*-priest Durga Prasad Sapkota. Courtesy: Kantipur Publications Pvt. Ltd.**

The 75 year old Brahman priest Durga Prasad Sapkota ate the *katto* of the late King Birendra on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of mourning Monday June 11<sup>th</sup> at Kalmochan Ghat. The elephant was decorated traditionally, and the Brahman was dressed as the king wearing a gold-embroidered

Nepali dress. The priest wore a replica of the crown, and he used clothes, shoes and other ornaments that belonged to the deceased king. He was sitting in a tented room which was furnished with offerings from the Royal Palace, such as sofa, bed, and study table, together with more personal belongings of the king, including his briefcase and walking stick. Thursday June 14<sup>th</sup>, the *katto* ceremony of king Dipendra was held at Kalmochan Ghat. Kalmochan Ghat is located by the Bagmati River where it is the border between the former kingdoms of Kathmandu and Patan, and when the *katto*-Brahman crosses the river, according to the tradition, the priest is not allowed to return again, and he is so highly polluted that the people would not even “see his face” again. When there were only petty kingdoms in Nepal, Kalmochan Ghat and Bagmati River represented the kingdom’s border, and the *katto*-priest was expelled from the kingdom by the symbolic crossing of the river. Nowadays the priest is expelled from the Kathmandu valley (Oestigaard 2005).

Durga Prasad Sapkota felt that he was forced to do the *katto*-ritual, and afterwards he felt cheated. He demanded a house and he was promised values worth 10,000 dollars, but he received only some 300 dollars, and he aimed to sell the king’s clothes and personal belongings he received for 10,000 dollars. He was living in his old house at Pashupatinath because he had no other options. According to him, the king’s flesh in the *katto* ritual was a relict myth from the past. He cooked the meal himself which consisted only of rice, vegetables and goat meat. Some people living in the vicinity of Pashupatinath believed, however, that the *katto*-priest ate the king’s flesh, and in particular the part of the brain where the “third” eye is located. The priests who cremated King Birendra said that some security guards collected small parts of the ashes from the king which were put into the *katto*-priest’s meals without Sapkota’s knowledge. It was only symbolic, they believed, but it was a part of the meal, because only goat meat would not have affected and polluted the priest in such a negative way. Sapkota could not walk openly in the streets anymore, and especially not at the Pashupatinath area. People treated him as being excluded from the community, and he was in essence sitting in the backyard of his house for a couple of years, feeling guilty and impure after the *katto* ritual. The other temple and funeral priests referred to Durga Prasad Sapkota as “the priest who became a *pode*”, meaning a “toilet-cleaner” or low-caste. Everyone, except himself and his wife, saw the *katto*-priest as the most polluted man in the nation. Sapkota, however, emphasised that he was still a Brahman, although he acknowledged that he was impure and a *katto*-Brahman. His wife also stressed that both of them were Brahmans, and they categorically refused to hear anything about low-caste status (Oestigaard 2005).

King Dipendra’s *katto*-priest was also deceived. Devi Prasad Acharya – a 65-year old Hindu priest – was promised that he would become wealthy if he performed the ritual. When he realised that he was cheated, he

stopped the ritual and demanded more money, bargaining with the Prime Minister. The priest wanted a house in addition to the king’s belongings he was offered, and Prime Minister Koirala promised him the house. The ceremony continued, and the priest ate the *katto*-meal. However, he received also only some 270 dollars, not a house, and afterwards he regretted that he performed the *katto*-ceremony for Dipendra (Oestigaard 2005).

An intriguing aspect regarding the meaning of rituals – including the ethics involved in the ritual obligations and participants’ commitments – is that both the *katto*-priests were deceived and cheated, even by the Prime Minister of Nepal. The importance was the completion of the rituals, not the way it was done. A *katto*-priest was mandatory for the rituals; keeping the promises regarding payments were not. Although this illuminates the flexibility of ritual praxis and logic, one cannot use this example to legitimise other insights into death rituals for two reasons; first, this was within the Nepali context executed by top politicians and religious experts and second, other practices may in the eyes of the devotees, descendants and members of the community be perceived as more desecrating and indeed as destroying the religious outcome of the rituals. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the proclaimed and alleged cosmological importance and benefit of the *katto*-ritual and the actual performance of the rites illuminates not only parts of a ritual logic and religious flexibility (bearing in mind that this was the kings’ cremations and not ordinary cremations of commoners), but also ethics involved in religious practice. Although one may easily condemn the way the *katto*-priests were deceived, the rituals were, one may assume, religiously functional and consequently a success, and hence in this case, the aims may legitimise the means.

## Excavating the Kings’ Bones

In February 2002, eight months after the funerals, there was little water in Bagmati River. At that point it was nothing more than a little stream, and most of the riverbed was openly exposed. Hence, we knew that if there were any remains from the cremations, we could find them in the sand just below the cremation platform of the royals. Since this platform is the uppermost and upstream at Pashupatinath, there could not have been any transportation of cremated remains from other cremations at this spot since all the other cremations were conducted further downstream.

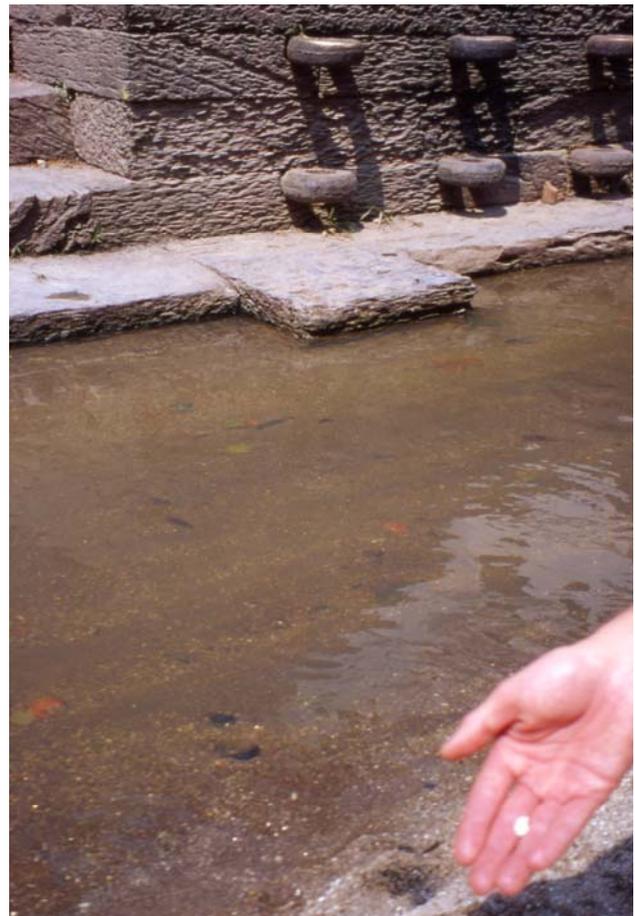
As archaeologists we felt a fascination at the prospect of going into the river in search of the kings’ bones where they had been deposited after the cremations. Was it actually possible to trace the remains of these particular cremations, would the bones still be there, or had they been carried away by the water?



Based on the amount of scattered bones further downstream, not at all representative for the vast amount of cremations carried out on the Pashupatinath through the centuries (hundreds of thousands!), most of the bones actually disintegrate or are washed away by the river. At the same time the question arose: Was this ethically right?

Not only were these remains of people who died tragically only the year before, they were also kings. Not only that: from a Hindu perspective they were gods, incarnations of Vishnu. And since they now live in the abode of Vishnu as a part of Vishnu, the question was not only to dig up the kings' bones, but the divinities' bones at the most holy place in Nepal. In theory it is equal to if we had located the tomb of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, and now wanted to excavate his bones (notwithstanding the problem concerning finding such a tomb, if you believe in a bodily resurrection). Here we had a major difference: the religious and cultural context. Although Pashupatinath is a pilgrimage site and the holiest place in Nepal, the place where the ashes of the kings were immersed into the river was not a pilgrimage site regarding the kings' bones as *relics*. Bagmati River is holiest at this spot, but not because of the royal cremations, and not because of the human remains which were integrated in the riverbed.

After a couple of days' discussions, we eventually decided to search for the bones. While cremations were conducted only some few metres away further downstream, we began to dig carefully in the riverbed with our hands. Within a few seconds we found cremated remains which only could stem from the kings (figs. 5-6).



**Fig. 5. The royal cremation platform is to the right and the ghat for high castes downstream. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

**Fig. 6. Cremated bones found in front of the royal platform. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.**

We documented the finds and our work next to Hindu worshippers who did not take any offence, and did not even react to our presence. After that we put the remains back into the sand in the riverbed, and we left the bones as we found them in the river without taking any pieces with us. The fact that cremations were conducted by cremation priests just some few metres away from us indicated that we did not violate any taboos, and later that day we asked one of the cremation priests who had cremated the kings if it would have been wrong if someone collected the physical remains of the kings from the river. The priest did not understand the question, or more precisely, the question did not make sense to him. He could not see the use or reason in such an action. After the cremation was completed, the bones in themselves had no value – they were more or less equivalent to the sand and the stones in the riverbed. They were of the same element, and not particularly related to the deceased king anymore. The kings were in heaven as Vishnu, while the physical remains of the dead body had returned to its elements. The fact that there is no relic industry of this kind in Nepal, where the bones would have been sold, indicates that the bones are unimportant. This is contrary to the importance of relics of the saints in Christianity, not to mention all the forests which have been cut and where each little piece allegedly represents the original cross on which Jesus was crucified.

The cremated bones from the kings' bodies were now nothing more than the stones in the riverbed, in keeping with the old Vedic beliefs. The homology of the Vedic/Hindu creation myths is, as we have shown above, a basic cosmological idea. Flesh and earth, bone and stone, may be viewed as alternative forms in a continuous process, whereby one form is constantly being transmuted into another (Kaliff 2007). An example of this principle is shown at the Kaligandaki River, where almost all *saligram* in Nepal is found. From a geological point of view, *saligram* is an ammonite fossil and the remains of an aquatic animal that is preserved in rock. In the Hindu religion, on the other hand, *saligram* is an embodiment, a physical manifestation or visible incarnation of Vishnu. A burial at Nire Ghat – the largest cemetery along Kaligandaki River – is praised even though cremation is the most preferable. After some years, according to the local belief, the water will transform the deceased's bones into *saligram*. Thus, they have become an incarnation of Vishnu. The *saligram* stones are collected and sold throughout the country even though the local lore says that they are transformed from human bones (Oestigaard 2000).

Returning to Pashupatinath, the kings' bones were not holy themselves because then they would have been used for some sacred purpose. However, after thinking for some while the cremation priest we interviewed concluded that the bones should preferably stay in the river, if there were any remains left, since this marked that the cremations were completed. The elements of the

body should return to their original form – fire to fire, water to water, earth to earth. Nevertheless, remains from the pyres, clothes and flowers given to the deceased are collected regularly from the riverbed at Pashupatinath in order to avoid contamination of the river, not because they should not have been left in the river if possible, but because it will clutter up the stream. It is in this light the statement that the human remains had to be in the river should be understood. Nevertheless, shamans may, for instance, collect bones in the river for various purposes which are accepted within the Nepalese cultural context.

## Whose Ethics?

The terms “emic” and “etic” were introduced by Marvin Harris (1964, 1979) to designate the difference between the native's and the anthropologist's point of view, and the question is: whose ethics are we going to use? If we use our ethics in other cultures, this may represent a new form of colonialism, or is it possible to find a kind of universal approach to this problem?

In our opinion, the most important basis for achieving an ethical relationship to archaeological investigations of graves and human remains is a matter of self-reflection, combined with a respectful approach towards the local culture. There is no manual for this, since the perspectives and judgements are likely to vary between cultural contexts, and from individual to individual. We think that one point of departure is the individual view of death and the dead people that we ourselves once knew, mourned and respected. We could also reflect on our own views – how would we like to be buried, and how permanent such a burial would be, for instance until some archaeologists turn up some centuries later.

Beliefs connected with death rituals and the handlings of bodily remains vary between different cultures. Our own culture, feelings and thoughts, as well as individual variations on this, are unavoidably mixed with our archaeological – or scientific – definitions and interpretations. It is impossible to deal with burial rituals or deposits of human remains, or even use the word grave or burial, without in some way associating to the definition of these terms in our own context. To a varying degree, this is also valid for many other archaeological terms, but the fact becomes especially clear when we use words that retain strong emotional connotations even today. In the archaeological object that we call grave, our whole repertoire of sentiments of death – anxiety, hopes, grief or even indifference – collide with the wish to perform a scientific description and analysis. The difference between two languages, our own sentiments and the will to describe objectively, is always present in scientific work, but with death and burial rituals it perhaps becomes even more apparent (Kaliff 2004, 2007).

To have an ethical approach involves listening to other peoples concerns, and not only your own (or your colleagues) preconceived ideas, which often seem to have priority in ethical debates. Exporting our own Western ethical thoughts is not the same as having a respectful attitude towards people of other cultures, but might be a new kind of colonialism disguised as post-colonialism; particularly in these cases since it implies different religious and eschatological consequences. In our actual case, we put the bones back into the river – but if we had kept them would it have been ethically wrong? Most Western researchers will probably say yes, but that is not an obvious standpoint and may represent an *etic* and not an *emic* perspective.

When we asked the cremation priest about it, the question in itself did not make sense, which indicates that we did not violate any taboos, or at least that it was not a big issue. We were extra careful to discuss this issue thoroughly with him. After all, the bones were symbolically transformed into stones, which may have various degrees of holiness, but not necessarily defined in the same way as from a Western, scholarly perspective. If Western colleagues and Western people in general would find our behaviour disturbing, this is another question. The most important, by far, as we see it, must be what the Hindu people using the Pashupatinath sacred area think about it. This must also be contextualised by the numerous prehistoric chieftains and kings who are collected, stored and displayed in showcases in Western museums. Is the question in reality just a matter of time? Current is unethical, prehistoric is ethical?

We will therefore follow Hammersley & Atkinson when they say that it is our view “that the most effective strategies for pursuing research should be adopted unless there is clear evidence that these are ethically unacceptable. In other words, indeterminacy and uncertainty should for the most part be resolved by ethnographers in favour of the interest of research, since

that is their primary task” (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 285).

## Conclusion

An important question concerning archaeology and this case: Is your reaction concerning this, dear colleagues, ethically relevant at all? And the most important question, not with regards to contemporary cultures but prehistoric ones: whose ethics are we going to use? Are we back to our Western and Christian world view, which then turns from post-colonialism to colonialism? In practice, it often seems that excavating other (earlier) cultures’ remains of their dead is a good scientific practice, but we ourselves protect our/Christian graves. Or is this just because we know the Christian culture and ethics, but not the prehistoric ones? Bones from Christian burials are seldom prehistoric ones? Bones from Christian burials are seldom viewed as archaeological material. They are still seen as human remains and reburial discussions are frequent in the West among archaeologists as well as laymen. However, such a perspective is nearly always absent when it comes to prehistoric graves. The principles for treatment of (possible) ancestors who died before Christianisation are not covered by the same ethical rules as for those who died later. This is probably because we have not given the pre-Christian perceptions behind the burials the same type of ethical value as we do the Christian beliefs. There can be no sound ethical arguments for this reasoning, and it should rather be seen as an unconscious behaviour. Still, there are no living persons who could take on the ethical problems concerning pre-Christian Western graves, except for instance today’s Christian (or post-Christian Secular) Westerners themselves, or Muslims, Hindus, etc. Hence we have an ethical problem in our own backyard to deal with before making new colonial evaluations (in the disguise of self-righteous post-colonialism) regarding what is sacred and/or ethical in other contemporary cultures.

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