

## Chapter 2

# Death and Ambivalent Materiality – Human Flesh as Culture and Cosmology

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### Introduction – The Problem of Human Flesh

Death is the moment when society and descendants have to solve a dual problem. On the one hand, a person degenerates from being a living, social person to an objectified and polluted thing: a decaying corpse. On the other hand, the deceased and his qualities are incorporated in the resurrection and re-structuring of a society as an ancestor. This dualism where the dead is both a spiritual being incorporated among the living members of a society and at the same time a polluted and decaying cadaver, highlights the flesh as a transformative borderline between man and nature in cultural and cosmological constructions. The flesh defines the body. The flesh of the corpse is a spiritual matter, but not in a normal sense. A focus on the flesh of corpses may dissolve the distinction between “culture” and “nature”. To put it another way, human flesh is more a fluid medium than materialised physicality. This anthropomorphic character of the deceased human flesh, where one inevitably ascribes human form or attributes to a being or thing not human, because it has been a human until recently, may illuminate the borderline which separates mind and matter, humans and things, culture and material culture. A corpse has certain human attributes, but it lacks the most vital characteristic – life.

The artefact is traditionally what defines various approaches to archaeology, but defining what an artefact is, appears to be more difficult. One factor that distinguishes the artefact from the natural object is the fact that it is a product of human labour (Miller 1987:112). This factor is important when we approach meaning and significance in cultural construction. “The importance of this physicality of the artefact derives from its ability thereby to act as a bridge, not only between the mental and the physical worlds, but also, more unexpectedly, between consciousness and unconscious. Objects, however, by the virtue of their concrete nature, can never possess that entirely arbitrary and abstract capability” (Miller 1987:99). The flesh is not a “thing”, yet it is materialised, physical and “thing-like”. It is not living but still organic. It does not have the physical properties that characterise stable man-made artefacts or natural objects and yet it is not inorganic. It is not a human being, but still, it is among us in a human form. It is neither culture nor nature, in a normal sense, but still, it

is both, because it defines both culture and nature. An analysis of Hindu and Buddhist death rituals, the manner in which a family and society deals with the flesh of its own members, forms the basis of an understanding of the distinction between mind and matter, culture and nature, and how ritual consumption of corpses creates cultural and cosmological constructions.

### Ritual Consumption of Corpses

Consumption as a phenomenon, highlights the structuring role of practice and emphasises that people are not so much constituted in the act of production, but rather construct themselves and are constructed by others through relations with cultural forms in the sphere of consumption (Miller 1998:11). Consumption is thus a matter of practices, where the social world is created and constituted as the outcome of human activities. Human use of objects is more important than what they produce and this emphasis focuses on the practices of the actors. Once we question which things matter, to whom and why, we are inevitably part of an endless proliferation of the criteria of mattering (ibid:15). Social relations are made by the use of objects, artefacts and construction, or in other words, by consumption of materiality.

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). Through the performance of rituals, people learn to believe in the cultural experience in which they can be apprehended (Valeri 1985:x). Thus, ritual is an action for the expression of cultural ideas that serves to orient but not necessarily prescribe other forms of social behaviour. Rituals enable people to modify their social order as well as reinforce the basic categories of it (Bell 1997). Combining Eliade’s and Geertz’s approaches to ritual, on the one hand, a ritual is a re-creation of a cosmogenetic event or story manifested in myth (Eliade 1987:99–100). On the other hand, “in a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined...turns out to be the same world, producing...idiosyncratic transformation in one’s sense of reality” (Geertz 1973:112).

The soft parts of the corpse are in most societies looked upon as merely perishable and impure. Various death rituals have different transformations of the corpse, but in

general, they all include the destruction of the flesh and the reduction of the body's immutable elements (Hertz 1960:43). Further, the bones are not necessarily destroyed totally. With the exception of mummification, which is a special treatment of the flesh, most funeral practices aim to do away with the flesh. Mummification is, however, a special solution to the problem of decaying corpses. Rather than destroying the flesh, mummification aims to preserve it. Funerals may include many representations, but at least the problem of the flesh has to be solved in one way or another. The choice of funeral practice is a cultural, ritual and religious practice and the prescribed decision determines the duration of decomposition of the flesh. Cremation shortens this period considerably with destruction by means of fire, as opposed to, for instance the slow and progressive process of nature.

The differences in this time interval have social implications for the creation and construction of culture. Cremation and mummification are both extreme solutions to the problem of the flesh. The former aims to destroy it as fast as possible, whereas the latter aims to preserve it for eternity. However, it is possible to combine these two approaches whereby the corpse is first mummified in order to restore the body, but is subsequently cremated. This is the case with royal funerals as referred to in the Vedic scriptures. Thus, a minimalist and tentative definition of "funeral" as a practice, is "at least a ritual preparation of the flesh of the deceased", whether this preparation is consumption by fire or preservation of the flesh. The differences in methods of body preparation are invested with cosmological meaning, which combines microcosm and macrocosm. As will be shown, elaborate rituals may combine both these extremes in one ritual and they may necessitate each other.

## The Phenomenology of Human Flesh

The notion of a succession of generations constitutes an "intermediary structure between physical externality and psychic internality of time" (Ricoeur 1990:111). The body separates and defines the *ego* of a person. Thus a body with consciousness is a human; a body without consciousness is a corpse. According to Merleau-Ponty, the world and our existence are always structured around the body and perception of spatiality and temporality is anchored in the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962:138). The body, or more correctly the flesh, is what Descartes called the "third substance", a medium which bridges the gap between space and thought. Put another way, Merleau-Ponty argues that the flesh defies the dichotomy of the physical and the psychic, or cosmic exteriority and reflective interiority. "The flesh...is the coherent ensemble of my powers and non-powers. Around this system of carnal possibilities the world unfolds itself as a set of rebellious or docile potential utensils, a set of permissions and obstacles" (Ricoeur 1990:230–231). A consequence of the succession of two generations, "death is so intended, in the sense that the replacement of

generations is the euphemism by which we signify that the living take the place of the dead" (ibid:115).

When analysing the meaning of flesh, meaning has another ontological reality than in linguistic theories developed by for instance, Saussure (1960) and Barthes (1973). The diacritical linguistic sign consists of a union of two facets or components, the "signifier" and the "signified". Within the conception of a sign, there exists no direct relationship with reality because the relationship between the signifier and the signified is entirely arbitrary, a matter of convention. The linguistic turn in post-processual archaeology whereby material culture is seen as analogous to text, or can be read as text, cannot be used when analysing the qualities and the meaning of flesh. Turning to Christianity, the relation between words and meaning was expressed this way in John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1 & 14). God *is* flesh and he *is* word. Meaning and flesh are inseparable.

The bodies of babies and dead persons may reveal some similarities regarding the relation between the flesh and the individual ego. The boundaries of the body are not as obvious as one might perceive. They are in part, culturally constructed but are inevitably connected to the flesh. This is seen in an infant's emotional ties to its mother. Prior to any object relation or concept of sexual difference, a baby is a part of the mother in her womb and this fleshly connection is still pertinent even after birth because the infant expresses identity through an object relation. Quoting Freud, "The breast is a part of me, I am the breast". It is only at a later stage that an individual and separate ego is developed (Sadoff 1998:13). For dead people, the ego again transcends the body. The soul lingers in the flesh but still roams around before the funeral. It may cling to its household if the deceased died in his household. This is the reason why dying people are supposed to die outside of their houses in Hinduism and preferably by a holy river. Consequently, the soul is both *within* the flesh and *above* and *outside* the body. This has importance in funerals.

Lakoff and Johnson have argued a philosophy of the flesh because reason is not disembodied as the Cartesian tradition has argued. The mind is embodied and shaped by the body. Consequently, there is no Cartesian dualistic person, therefore mind and matter are distinctive and separate entities. The mind is inherently embodied and reason is shaped by the body (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Their emphasis is on the embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought, but I will turn to the question surrounding the emphasis on the flesh in lieu of the mind. What are the consequences for the flesh of the embodied mind in funerals? A corpse is not only a decaying cadaver, but a kind of intellectual and moral substance. If the mind is embodied, then the funeral is a process by which the mind is released from the flesh. Even though the soul is only partly imprisoned by the dead body, it

cannot be released before the flesh has undergone some ritual treatment.

Matter and materiality disguise the mind and mentality. It is human essence, as a part of the divinities, liberation and enlightenment. The essence is the same but the materiality that encompasses the mind differs. Being an animal is just a less fortunate material prison for the soul. In Western philosophy, humans have had a special position because ever since Descartes, animals were denied having mind. Thus, according to him, what distinguishes humans from animals is their possession of an immortal soul (Singer 1993:285).

The body of the dead – the corpse – is in some sense only an organism. It is still alive and capable of feeling. “Death signifies a change of state and decomposition, a mutation of form into a sensuous mobility of matter. Worms are but the projections of man, of his inside shape, and the fine, shiny caterpillars may have something human about them and appear anthropomorphic” (Camporesi 1988:88). The “self” is identified through the body and according to Merleau-Ponty, perception is the ongoing reciprocal process between the body and the entities that surround it (Abram 1996:52). “The notion of a succession of generations provides an answer to this antinomy by designating the chain of historical agents as living people who come to take the place of the dead people. It is this replacement of the dead by the living that constitutes the third-time characteristic of the notion of a succession of generations” (Ricoeur 1990:109).

A body without consciousness is a dead body and reincarnation is the transference of the soul from one materiality, sphere or condition, to another. In this world, this transition is a death ritual performed by the descendants. The main problem is how to release the soul from the flesh. When a person dies, the soul changes condition wandering around in a state of unhappy restlessness and it is not allowed to mix with the other dead. It is through subsequent rites and especially after the destruction of the flesh, that the deceased can finally reach the destiny as an ancestor (Oestigaard 2000a:26).

In this transition, the fluid materiality of the deceased’s flesh is the most dangerous and polluted materiality that exists. This implies that there are only a few people in the successor generation that can take care of this polluted flesh and it is normally one of the sons. Rituals separate death from life and the dead must be transferred from this social life to another sphere. This is normally done by the separation of the flesh from the bones, where the bones can be used to transfer the deceased back to the society as an ancestor. The period between the moment of death and the performance of the funeral rites is the most dangerous time for the deceased because “they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 1991:96). What is unclear in a society is unclear and transitional persons are particularly polluting. The transition is controlled by

concepts of pollution and taboo (Douglas 1994:97). “Purity” may indicate “completeness” and “impurity”, the “lack of completeness” (Valeri 1985:33).

His Divine Grace A. C. Bhakivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1996:27) says that “it is our nature, because we are permanent, to want permanent residence. We don’t wish to die because in actuality we are permanent. Nor do we want to grow old or be diseased because these are all external or non-permanent states...The fourfold miseries are like a fever, and they are all due to the material body. If somehow we can get out of the material body, we can escape the miseries that are integral with it”. Time is eternal, but it is apprehended through its strange and incomprehensible contamination by space (Bergson 1910:99–109). The soul is also eternal and it is related to time. In this world, time changes materiality and for humans, this implies the body, which is a material prison for the soul. “I am not this body but am spirit soul”. Similarly, 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”.

If sin were solely manifested in the soul, one would expect some kind of destruction of spiritual matter in the process when the corpse is burnt into purity by the fire. If sin is, on the other hand, manifested *in* the flesh, it is possible to purge it away in the process of releasing the soul from the body by fire. The more sinful a person is, the more “tightly” the flesh is stuck to the soul, and the more difficult it is to release it. The aim of cremation is to destroy the flesh, not the soul. Thus it makes sense that the more sinful a person is, the longer the sinner needs to be in the fire. Moreover, feeling pain is a process connected to the flesh or human bodily substances. Without a body it would be difficult if not impossible to feel pain. Pain is manifested bodily and therefore the soul must linger in the flesh. Without flesh, there is no pain (Oestigaard 2003).

Cremation is a transformation and a medium to change and to transmute. Cremation burials can be analysed as three different, but interdependent processes: as technological transformations, as social transformations and as ritual transformations (Oestigaard 1999, 2000b). The time it takes to burn a corpse on the pyre depends upon the deceased’s sins. The more sinful a person has been, the longer the cremation rite must take. This is also perceived as a painstaking and horrifying experience for the deceased. Sin is manifested in the flesh, but not solely. It is perhaps inevitable and necessary that the flesh is a bio-moral substance. It is the soul that will finally be released and reach the divine sphere. The soul has to be pure when entering Heaven. The soul is a mental substance and cannot feel the pain of fire in the same manner as when it is connected to the flesh. The idea behind purging is purification, not destruction, thus

consequently, purging is connected to the flesh (Oestigaard 2003).

Decaying corpses are extremely susceptible to both the transference of pollution and the influence of pollution. Both incidents will affect the society and the deceased. Ritual consumption of corpses may, in the extreme form, imply cannibalism, but normally the destruction of the flesh takes other forms. Consumption and purging by fire are similar processes by which the corpse is digested. Marshall Sahlins writes in "Raw Women, Cooked Men, and Other "Great Things" of the Fiji Islands" that "traditional Fijian myths about the origin of cannibalism are rarely found. Perhaps the story, once told, tells all. The origin of cannibalism is the origin of culture" (Sahlins 1983:72). The implications of the ritual destruction of flesh have, in varying degrees, social significance in the re-construction of cultural and religious principles and structures. This is most easily seen if anything goes wrong during this extremely liminal and vulnerable phase of a death ritual.

## The Flesh as Transformations of the Five Elements

According to Brahmanism, the importance of having a son to perform the death rituals is expressed explicitly in the *Garuda Puranas*: "There is no salvation for a man without a son. He can never attain heaven without a son" (Garuda Purana II, II.13.18 & III, II.29.4). The father pays his debts to his ancestors by giving his lineage a son and the son repays his debts to his father by giving him a new birth (Parry 1994:151–152). The act of destroying flesh is so polluting and dangerous that only the sons are allowed and obliged to do it. They have to obtain death pollution and mourn for 11–13 days to become pure after this ritual consumption of human flesh.

According to Hinduism, if the son fails to perform the rituals, he commits a double sin: his father will suffer as an ancestor and the son will achieve a subordinate reincarnation in his next life. Furthermore, cremation is a ritual by which the creation is recreated (Parry 1987:74ff, 1994:31). If the ancestors suffer, they will return to the descendants as malignant ghosts roaming around, haunting and causing disasters and trouble among the living. Thus, cultural practices are created and constructed by various degrees of successful performance of funeral rites. The ascending order of the principles of hierarchies is not a given, once and for all. Society is a continual struggle over the hierarchy of hierarchies (Bourdieu 1995). Contested ideologies are a part of people's use and perception of materiality. Negotiations between culture and nature, mind and matter, and the sacred and the profane, are a part of death rituals. Rituals construct power. In the re-structuring of society, there are intergenerational transmissions of rights, duties and properties (Goody 1962:273–280). When a living person gains the possession of the deceased's property

(ibid:311), there is a transaction that structures society and furthers social relations. Therefore, social aspects may be emphasised in funerals, not only in respect to the descendants' relations or the deceased's status, but also to the social order and the society in general. Thus, a funeral can be seen as a means for actors to get divine legitimacy for the current social order. Seen from this approach, the ritual functions as a guarantee for the social order, derived naturally from the way the world is organised (Bell 1997:6).

Cremation is generally perceived as the most auspicious funeral practice. In the Hindu philosophy there are five elements, i.e. sky, air, light, water and earth. A god dwells in each of the five elements. *Shiva* dwells in the sky (or ether), *Visnu* in the air, *Agni* in the light, *Varuna* in the water and *Brahma* in the earth. The five elements constitute both the body and the cosmos. Everything that exists in one must also exist in another and thus, all the gods and the cosmos are present within the body (Parry 1994:76). In cremation, the elements are changed in another way than in inhumations when they are more actively transformed back to their nature. When a person dies, the water goes to the water, the earth to the earth, the air to the air, the sky to the sky and the light to the light. Cremation is painful and dangerous (Knipe 1975:130, Pandey 1969:240) because the fire digests the body. In cremations, *Agni* prepares the corpse for the gods by cooking it (O'Flaherty 1994:49): "Do not burn him entirely, Agni, or engulf him in your flames. Do not consume his skin or flesh. When you have cooked him perfectly, O knower of creatures, only then send him forth to the father" (Rig-Veda 10.16.1). The dead becomes food for the gods. This is the doctrine that the body corresponds to: it is identical with the universe. The body, as a being, is a microcosm and thus encompasses the world, the macrocosm and the gods in particular ways (Goudriaan 1979:57–58).

Cremation is cosmogony. The individual death is assimilated into the process of cosmic regeneration and the re-enactment of Vishnu's austerities. Cremations take place in his footsteps (Parry 1987:76, 1994:44ff). The same laws govern the body and the cosmos. At the moment of the breaking of the skull and the releasing of "the vital breath", the death pollution begins. Thus, the death pollution starts at the moment when the skull is cracked. It is repayment for the sin of burning the flesh (Parry 1994:181–184). The universe is, then, represented in the flesh and the bones, whereby the flesh has metaphorical qualities, incorporated in cultural and cosmological re-constructions.

From which part of the corpse the soul leaves the body has significance for the path on which the soul will continue after the funeral and the forthcoming incarnation. The most preferable way is to leave the skull, or more precisely the forehead, which will lead to a better incarnation. In the *Agni Purana*, there are descriptions of various hells and the paths leading to Yama, or the world

of the God of Death, by Agni – The Fire God. “(The lives) of doers of bad deeds (escape) through the anus and the organs of generation in the lower (region). The lives of yogins get out (by) breaking the head by own will” (Agni Purana IV, 371.5, p. 1038). Thus, the process by which the soul is released and from which bodily part this takes place, indicates the future existence of the deceased. A pure soul leaves the head by its own will, whereas an impure soul leaves the body through the anus and becomes even more defiled and polluted. The flesh of the body determines the next life of the deceased.

Nietzsche philosophied that “perhaps the body is the only factor in all spiritual development” where consciousness testifies to the “formation of a superior body” (Deleuze 1983:39). Foucault defined “spirituality” as “a subject acceding to certain mode of being and to the transformations which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being” (Carrette 1999:1). Foucault emphasised that religion is a central part of culture, or the cultural conditions of knowledge. He has challenged the separation between culture and religion focusing on the ethics of the self (ibid:33). In my argument, the unity of culture and religion relates to the underlying core, namely, that Cartesian dualism is difficult to maintain if we are to analyse funerals.

“Whereas form without quality cannot be thought, the qualified form can be abstracted from all other material determinations by imaginative variation” (Ricoeur 1995:42). Flesh and bones represent different qualities associated with both culture and cosmology. The ashes after a cremation are often referred to as “bones”. Bones are the product of paternal semen, and thus, a source of future fertility. Cremation destroys what one has to get rid of, that is, sin and female flesh (Parry 1994:188). According to Hindu beliefs, the time it takes to burn the body depends upon the deceased’s sins. The more sinful a person has been, the longer the cremation rite takes.

In Varanasi, I was told that the pyre of a sinner could burn for at least six hours (Oestigaard 2000a:30), whereas a normal cremation takes between 1–2 hours. Similarly, when the Chief Minister of Bihar in India was cremated in Varanasi in 1983, the corpse burnt only with the greatest difficulty, despite the size of the pyre. The reason was supposed to be the enormous burden of sins accumulated from his corrupt earnings (Parry 1994:127).

Finally, these notions are reflected in the actual cremation rite when the sons break the half-burnt, charred corpse into pieces with bamboo-sticks in order to perform a total burning of the body (fig. 1). If there is flesh clinging to the bones after the cremation, this is highly inauspicious in Hindu thought and it is believed that the departed will probably suffer, get a bad reincarnation and return as a malignant spirit (fig. 2).

## Cremation and mummification

Cremation and mummification are opposites with regard to the preparation of the flesh. These modes of solving the problem of the flesh may not necessarily contradict each other. In fact, they may be complementary. The importance is that these methods are different ways of expressing cosmological meaning. The “Satapatha Brahmana”, an early Indian commentary on Vedic rituals, refers to various former funeral practices, among them the relation between mummification and cremation in India. The building of the Fire Altar was an elaborate ceremony carried out to obtain immortality for the king, royalties and other important persons (Levin 1930a:29). In this funeral ritual, the body is treated in different manners. Firstly, the intestines are removed and the internal cavity is washed. Secondly, the body is anointed with ghee and gold chips are placed over the eyes, ears, mouth and nostrils. Finally, the body is cremated. The process of embalming reveals a close similarity to mummification, but why prepare the corpse so extensively only to burn it afterwards? Embalming the body is a preliminary for burning it (ibid:30).

Mummification and cremation as practices are then complementary to one another. Mummification can restore the body but cannot bring back life. Cremation necessitated that the body be mummified or sacrificially pure by the removal of all “foul matter” before life was restored to it. The mummified corpse was a fit body for the flames. Both processes aimed to restore the lost life and both of these practices were equally necessary to receive the full measure of life. Fire is the earthly representative of the sun and may give life through burning. Sacrificial food baked by the fire is especially immortal and becomes the food of the gods. Thus, the fire is the link between the earthly and the heavenly worlds by which Agni is the mediating messenger between them. Agni is also the guide of the dead (Levin 1930b:45). Mummification restores the body whereas cremation revitalises it (Levin 1930c:65). One method does not necessarily exclude another. They may fulfil the same function and even be necessary to increase a desired state or condition of life in another sphere. Death is the third birth in a person’s life span. It is the funeral ceremony that may eventually unite a person with his divine form (Levin 1930c:64). In the “Satapatha Brahmana” (S.B., XI, 2, 1, 1.), it is said that a man is born thrice:

*“Verily, a man is born thrice, namely in this way: first, he is born from his mother and father; and when he to whom the sacrifice inclines performs offerings he is born a second time; and when he dies, and they place him on the fire, and when he thereupon comes into existence again, he is born a third time”.*



**Fig. 1. Cremation at Pashupatinath, Kathmandu.**



**Fig. 2. Corpse decaying at Nire Ghat, Baglung Bazar, Nepal.**

In Buddhist funerals in Burma, monks were embalmed after death. This entailed the removal of the entrails and the filling of the cavity with honey and spices, whereby the incision was again sewn up. The body was coated with wax, wrapped in a white coat and covered with leaves of gold. A sarcophagus was prepared and a special building was erected for the monk in this state. The cremation pyre was a lofty canopy often sixty to seventy feet high, which was lit underneath. The burnt bones were collected and buried close to a temple, although sometimes the ashes of monks were pounded into fine powder and mixed with a paste to then be modelled into Buddha images (Levin 1930a:32). One of the most special historical burials is that of Buddha, himself. He belonged to a royal family and when he felt that he was near his life's end, he informed his disciples and followers. One of them was concerned about the funeral of the king of kings and Buddha described to him his own funeral and method of body disposal:

*“They wrap the body of a king of kings, Ānanda, in a new cloth. When that is done they wrap it in carded cotton wool. When that is done they wrap it in a new cloth – and so until they have wrapped the body in five hundred successive layers of both kinds. Then they place the body in an oil vessel of iron, and cover that up close with another oil vessel of iron. Then they build a funeral pile of all kinds of perfumes and burn the body of the king of kings. And then at the four cross roads they erect a dâgaba (a mound or barrow) to the king of kings” (Levin 1930a:31).*

This practice corresponds essentially to the practice described in the “Satapatha Brahmana”, but there are some differences because some features were omitted in the latter. The first of these aspects is the emphasis placed on the meticulous bandaging of the deceased's body.

Secondly, the practice of embalming by soaking in oil and finally, the building of a funeral pyre of perfumed woods (ibid). According to the Buddhist scriptures, Buddha's ashes or charred bones were put into different urns and buried in different parts of the country (Datta 1936:290). It is customary to bury the bone relics of lamas and erect mounds called *stupas* over them (ibid).

## Conclusion

The ambivalent character of the human flesh defines both what a human is and is not. The flesh of dead persons is highly potent and polluted and if the descendants fail to prepare and do away with the flesh in the correct manner, both the deceased, the descendants and the society will suffer. Thus, the immanent powers of the flesh have the possibility to change and structure the culture because it consists of the same elements that constitute cosmos. During funerals where mind and matter are separated, or when the soul is released from the corpse, this transformation is a matter of a successful destruction of the flesh. The corpse can be regarded as a “thing” which dissolves the traditional dichotomy between culture and nature, because it consists of both.

Microcosm and macrocosm are united in the corpse and until the descendants have solved the problem with the flesh, the deceased is in a liminal state, highly polluted and polluting. Whether the dead is cremated, mummified, or prepared by a process which includes both methods of body preparations, the rationale is still the same. The flesh of the deceased is a spiritual matter and the success of the soul in future lives is a matter of how the flesh is decomposed or preserved.

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