STATUS AND DEATH: MORTUARY RITES AND ATTITUDES TO THE BODY IN A TIBETAN VILLAGE.1

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Michael Vinding, in his paper on Thakali death-rituals in this same volume, makes the point that the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in a village situation is likely to differ considerably from the precepts of the Great Tradition as they are represented in a more sophisticated environment. In the present article I shall be concerned with different kinds of funeral ceremonies in a Bhotia (ethnically Tibetan) village, as they express a blend of elements from the Great and Little Traditions.2 From the data presented, I hope to show how the funeral practices that I shall describe, as well as beliefs relating to the corpse, correspond to universal modes of behaviour in the context of death.

The phrase 'universal modes of behaviour' suggests a scope which is by no means intended even if it were possible, and I certainly do not wish to attempt an answer to the vexed question of conceptual universals. For the purposes of the present study, however, I shall assume that there are certain cross-culturally consistent patterns in man's attitude to death and the disintegration of the body. Following the principles presented in Robert Hertz's 'Contribution to the study of

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2 Since there is no generally agreed definition for the terms Great and Little Tradition, I can do no more than to indicate, without an attempt at justification, the sense in which they are used in the present context. By the Great Tradition I mean the religion, either Buddhism or (reformed) Bon as it is represented in the texts. The Little Tradition I take to be all aspects of religion which are not so prescribed in the literature, as well as any local variations in the performance of rituals belonging to the Great Tradition. Broadly, the distinction is the same as that expressed in Tibetan between kha-chos, divine religion, and mig-chos, the religion of men. But this distinction cannot be too finely drawn since the Tibetan Great Tradition itself contains many features of the indigenous religion which were incorporated when Buddhism was introduced from India.
the collective representation of death; I hope to support his assertion, which may sound like a truism, that one cannot ‘see in death a merely physical event. ... Death does not confine itself to ending the visible bodily life of an individual; it also destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual’ (pp 76–77). Hertz adds that the importance of the social aspect is vindicated by ‘the fact that in one and the same society the emotion aroused by death varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased, and may even in some cases be entirely lacking’ (p76). I shall not attempt to gauge the level of emotional intensity occasioned by the death of people of greater or lesser social importance, but I hope to demonstrate that a clear hierarchy of importance does exist, and is affirmed by the kind of funeral accorded to individuals depending on their status.

This essay falls into two sections: in the first, I shall begin by describing in some detail the procedure following the death of the average adult, after which the funeral ceremonies for individuals of different status will be outlined. The criteria which I shall use to define status are age, sex, wealth and spiritual achievement, since these are the main categories that are distinguished in practice. The villages in the Muktínath area represent a range of ‘ranks’ (rgyud-pa, a term which is more usually applied to lineage or clan), such as Nobles (stag-po) and Labourers (tshug-pa), but the criterion of rank distinction does not apply within the village which is the focus of this study, since it is comprised exclusively of the rank known as Bla-mchod (distinct from the ceremony of that name) or mchod-gnas, Priests. Likewise there is no distinction of political status, since no village offices are permanent, but in most cases rotate annually or biannually. There will be little detail about the textual aspect, and orthodox and popular beliefs concerning the fate of the individual after death will not be discussed. Consequently, a certain emphasis will be placed on describing ‘local’ features of the ceremonies. In the second part I shall be concerned with the principles, as proposed by Hertz, which are represented in the relationship between the status of the individual in life, the attitude of the living to his body after death, and the kind of funeral he receives. Themes related to pollution and to the products of the body will also be introduced, and in conclusion some comparisons will be drawn between the representation of death in the Great and Little Traditions.

The data are taken from the village of Luba (Klu-brag), a small settlement in a valley to the east of the Kali Gandaki between Jomsom and Kagbeni. The village is situated in the predominantly Tibetan Muktinath area of South Mustang, but it must be emphasised that the data are not generalisable to this region as a

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3 In R. Hertz 1960. *Death and the Right Hand*. Aberdeen (Tr. R. and C. Needham.) All further references to Hertz are from this source.
whole, much less to the vast area of Tibetan culture, though of course there is a great deal of common ground and frequent references will be made. The people of Lubra are followers of Bon, but for the purposes of this article this is not relevant, except insofar as Bon—"White" Bon (bon-dkar) as opposed to "Black" (bon-nag), which is equated with the craft of the jhākri and associated blood sacrifice—represent the quasi-Buddhist influence of the Tibetan Great Tradition.

Ceremonies following the death of an adult

Immediately a person dies the body is taken into the house’s shrineroom (chos-khang), or is set outside it near the door, and is bound into a sitting position with the feet together and the knees drawn up. The arms are secured around the thighs with the hand tied between the legs, and the back is broken by pulling the head up and jerking it forward. The head is then pushed down between the knees and the corpse is left to stiffen in that position. It is believed that breaking the back prevents the dreadful possibility of a ro-long ("rising corpse"), which I discuss later. All the village lamas are summoned to the house to read the text entitled Klong-rgyas, which takes about one full day, and they are fed by the family of the deceased. One of the lamas then makes an astrological computation to determine when the funeral should take place, usually within a three-day period, and to discover which of a number of possible supernatural beings is responsible for having withdrawn the deceased’s soul (strog) from his body. Generally it is a bdud (demon), klu (serpent-god; Sanskrit nāga), btsan (fierce aerial demon), a rgyal-po (in this case a category of god), a gshin-dre (or shi’-dre: ghost), or a gsom-dre (goblin). I was informed that there is no particular course of action, such as requesting the return of the soul, if it is discovered to be one or another of these, and that the divination is performed “just so that it is known”.

For every funeral there is one man who acts as a kind of general factotum, the rtogs-ldan-po, but the manner in which he is selected or appointed varies from village to village. In Lubra, a man simply volunteers to perform this duty, whereas

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4 The term lama is used here in a colloquial sense to mean any village ritual specialist. This is a hereditary position in Lubra and does not require celibacy. The transliterated form bla-ma I shall use later to designate a monk of high status who is generally a recognised incarnation.

Familiar Tibetan words I shall render in an anglicised form while others will be given in transliteration. Words in the local dialect for which I have not been able to find a definite Tibetan spelling will be presented roughly phonetically and in inverted commas.
in other villages in Mustang it is an office which rotates annually, and the *rtogsl-dan-pa* is responsible for any funerals that take place during his term of office. In Central Tibet, the *rtogsl-dan-pa* comprised a class whose occupation was the dismemberment and disposal of bodies, the so-called "corpse-cutters". The term *rtogsl-dan-pa* "those with superior understanding", suggests that such unusual qualities were attributed to members of this class.

On the appointed day, a bier (*ro-bcug sa*) is constructed out of four crossed birch poles and the corpse is set in the centre. A framework of four short upright poles is erected around the corpse, with a fifth bound horizontally across the shoulders to represent the arms, and this is covered in clothing appropriate to the deceased's sex as an effigy (*sob*, a term usually applied to stuffed animals) of that person. The head is formed from a large ball of wool and it is covered with a white scarf (*kha-btangs*) or any piece of white cloth. The face is represented by a sheet of paper on which features are roughly sketched in black ink. Apart from the usual, and generally the deceased's most opulent, clothing, the *sob* is further adorned with headwear indicative of the sex. In the case of a man, the crown-like ritual headdress consisting of five painted wooden leaves (*rigs-lnga*⁵) is worn, while a woman is distinguished by the 'shule', a strip of thick cloth set with turquoises, coral and gold attached at the centre of the hairline and worn over the head and down the back. The photograph here shows the *sob* that would be constructed for a dead noblewoman (*srae-me*), who would not wear the 'shule' of the commoner (*phal-pa*) but the *rgyan-cha* as illustrated.⁶ Such a *sob* would therefore never be built in the exclusively *phal-pa* village of Lubra. The *sob* of a woman may also wear the *rigs-lnga*, but this is rarely practised.

Everyone present in the house is purified by a lama by being sparged with sacred water (*khrue*) administered with a sprig of juniper. The water's purifying property derives from the fact that it contains needles of juniper (*shug-pa*) and the petals of any saffron-coloured flower (*gur-gum*). This purification is performed following the death of a person of any status, and is used in all situations where pollution of any sort is likely to have occurred. The bier is then carried by eight pall-bearers in procession with the lamas. In some villages in the Mustang region, four pall-bearers carry the bier, and if the deceased was a prominent member of the community the bearers will be replaced every few yards by four others from

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⁵ *Rigs-lnga* : "the five Buddha families". Each leaf depicts one of the so-called "Dhyāni Buddhas".

⁶ *rgyan-cha* is a general term for jewellery, especially in Central Tibet, but in the local dialect refers specifically to this headdress.
amongst the men who follow the bier, as an expression of their respect. Amongst many Tibetans only those who are fit, in astrological terms, to carry the bier, may do so, but this restriction does not apply in Muktinath or Mustang.

The direction in which the corpse faces depends on the *bum-stong*, or "empty vessel", an astrological term referring to the region in which inauspicious forces are concentrated at any particular time. This may be determined simply by consulting the calendar (*zla-tho*). For example, to the sixth Tibetan month (*Hor-zla drug-pa*; July-August) of the Male Water Dog year (*chu pho khyi lo*; 1982), the relevant line reads, "... until the eighth of the Western month, the empty vessel is the north". Accordingly, for a funeral held during this period the corpse is turned to face south. The funeral procession is led by a lama carrying a censer of juniper incense (*bsang*). The three lamas following him play a conch (*dung-dkar*), a shawm (*rgya-gling*) and a pole-drum (*rnga*) respectively. After them, and immediately preceding the bier, is a lama who holds an hour-glass drum *damaru* in his right hand and in his left, draped over his little finger, a long white scarf of silk which he draws along the ground after him. This scarf may be over six feet long, and is intended to indicate to the deceased the route to the site of dismemberment (*dur-khrod*). For this reason it is called a *lam ston*, "that which shows the way."

When the procession reaches the *dur-khrod*, which is above the village and to the east, the corpse is removed from the inside the *sub* and laid out on a large flat rock, on its back if it is of a man, face down if of a woman. I have not been able to obtain an explanation for the reversed positions, but it is interesting that they should be the opposite of those in which the bodies of men and women are laid on the funeral pyre in certain Hindu communities. According to Parry, in the Bengali community in Benares 'the corpse of a man should be laid face down on the pyre and the corpse of a woman face up, for this is the position in which the two sexes enter the world'. Bennett, on the other hand, notes that in the Brahman-Chetri village near Kathmandu where she worked this practice was generally unknown but was advocated by one 'old and respected pandit' on the grounds that, "this is

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8 *Phyis zla 'i thres brgyad bra bum stong byang*. Quoted from *Blo-ma bSod rnam brug rgyas lo tho*, p 57.


Quoted with the author's permission.
the position in which they have sex”\textsuperscript{10}. I am not competent to discuss the Hindu example; but if indeed there is no single authoritative explanation, and in the absence of such an explanation for the Tibetan practice, it is possible that in both cases the positional reversal is simply a means of further distinguishing the funeral ceremonies for men and women.

The rtogs-ladan-pa, who may or may not have an assistant, proceeds to dismember the body with a khukuri, chopping it into pieces small enough to be eaten without difficulty by the vultures, for, as Manning quaintly puts it, when protesting against their close game laws; “They eat no birds, but, on the contrary, let the birds eat them”.\textsuperscript{11} The big bones of the arms and legs sometimes present a problem for the birds, so they are pounded down and mixed with the brain into small balls. When the dismemberment is complete conches are blown to summon the vultures, and all the men remain to watch that the corpse is completely consumed. The idea that the remains of their relatives are lying unattended and unrespected is abhorrent to the people; ‘senu-pa tsig-gi,’ they say—“it burns our hearts (with grief)”. Sooner or later the vultures, Himalayan griffons (bya-rgod) and lammergeiers (‘jomo kolog’\textsuperscript{12}), descend to consume the body. Sometimes the vultures arrive while the dismemberment is in progress, and in this case the rtogs-ladan-pa is assisted by four or five “protectors” (srugs-mkhan) who beat the vultures back with sticks to prevent them from inflicting severe wounds on him. In the unlikely event that the vultures do not come, the remains are still not simply left to disappear, as of course they would through the agency of jackals and perhaps village dogs, but are carried down to the valley and thrown into the river to be eaten, it is said, by fishes. In northern Mustang, however, if the vultures do not appear following the blowing of the conches, the rtogs-ladan-pa must eat a small piece of flesh from the corpse’s heart, to set a precedent for the birds, as it were.

The group returns to the village along precisely the route by which it left, since any deviation from this course will result in bad luck for the whole community. A small piece of bone from the body is kept by the rtogs-ladan-pa, who conceals it under a rock by the side of the path for use later in the subsequent series of funeral rites. Before the men reenter their houses they must be sprinkled with khrus by a

\textsuperscript{10} L. Bennett. (To be published 1982). Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters, Chicago Ch. 3 Quoted with the author’s permission.


\textsuperscript{12} The name means ‘tonsured nun’, and is apparently derived from the white head and black face of the lammergeier.
member of the family, and must pass through the smoke from a fire of juniper branches which will have been kindled by the door. In this way they are completely freed from death-pollution and even those who have carried the bier or performed the actual dismemberment are not considered to be particularly tainted, and require no additional purification. The clothing of the sob is carried back in a bundle by the rtags-ladan-pa and is purified by washing in the river, a task usually performed by women, although the rtags-ladan-pa himself may do it. The bier, however, is irredeemably polluted and is thrown away.

Three days after the death of the person the lamas congregate in the village gompa (dgon-pa) for the ceremony known as zhag gsun-pa ("the third day") when one of a number of texts, including Kloong-rgyas, may be read. The effigy of the deceased is reassembled and set between the two rows of lamas, facing the altar. In front of it is a low table on which stand five cups containing water, chang, a-rag (Nepali rakṣī), sweet tea and salt tea respectively, from left to right of the sob. Milk may be added to this list and one of the other drinks duplicated to give seven cups, and the same may be done with two others until the maximum of nine is reached; an odd number must be maintained. Following the zhag gsun-pa ceremony, the six beverages are poured around a fire of juniper branches that has been lit outside the gompa and the sob is again dismantled. The essence (bcud) of the liquids is believed to have been extracted by the deceased.

The third day is also the first of the deceased’s forty-nine-day sojourn on the bar-do, the "intermediate stage" which precedes rebirth, and provision is made both for his guidance and also for his enjoyment. A large earthenware jar is coated with white clay or lime (bsaṅ dkar-po) and is suspended from a roof-beam against an inside wall of the deceased's house, generally over the place where the corpse was kept before its disposal. If the deceased was a man, a rigs-lung, such as that which adorned the head of the sob, is fastened around the mouth of the jar, and a string of ornaments appropriate to men, such as gzi-stones (onyx), small turquoise and perhaps coral beads, is hung around the neck. In the case of a woman, noble or commoner, a rgyan-cha is hung around the neck of the jar together with a string of large turquoise and corals. Every morning and evening, embers from the hearth are put into this jar and juniper incense is sprinkled onto them. A mixture of parched barley-flour (dkar-phyes; Central Tibetan rtseam-pa) and butter is added to the fire and a number of different drinks such as tea, milk and beer are mixed together in a cup and poured onto a patch of wall near the jar. The soul of the deceased (rin-ma-she'13) is drawn to this banquet and feasts on the smells (dri-ma) or essence (bcud) of the

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13 I have loosely translated both srog and rin-ma-she' as 'soul'. In fact srog is the life-principle which does not exist independently of the physical body, and when it
foodstuffs and the juniper, and takes up residence in the jar, which thenceforth becomes known as the "spirit place" (thugs-sa). This ceremony is called gsur, and takes its name from the roasted mixture of rtsam-pa and butter. Each time it is performed, a pair of small, high-pitched cymbals (ting-shag) is struck to provide pleasant music for the rnam shes. It used to be the case that, immediately preceding the offering of gsur, one of the household women (irrespective of the sex of the deceased) would go onto the roof and wail, calling the name of her dead kinsman and beseeching him to return to the jar if he has wandered away from it. This custom, though still in evidence, is less common than it used to be.

Seven days later, the first of seven ceremonies known as bdun-tshigs is conducted in the house by a lama, ideally the rtags-lgas-pa himself if he is literate. This, briefly, consists in reading from a text for the guidance of the rnam-shes, the so-called "Tibetan Book of the Dead" (Bar-do thos-grol), following which consecrated bread, grain and lumps of rtsam-pa dough (tshogs) are distributed to all the villagers. The bdun-tshigs is performed every seventh day following this up to and including the forty-ninth.

After three or four weeks, on a day that is found to be astrologically appropriate the merit-making ceremony (dge-ba) for the deceased is held. This is organised and paid for by his or her relatives, specifically by his heirs if he was a householder. All the lamas assemble in the village gompa to read one of a number of appropriate texts, and they and everyone else in the village are provided with food and chang which will have been brewed for the occasion about a fortnight earlier. Until now, the lamas have been paid for their services in food and drink only, but now a pecuniary offering (bul-ba) of Rs. 7-10 is made to each. As in the zhiag gsum-pa, the sob is reconstructed and set between the two rows of lamas and the procedure with the five drinks is repeated. On the same day, a block-print of a human figure representing the deceased is made on a sheet of paper, and the name and sex of the person is written on it. The rnam-shes is thereby transferred from the thugs-sa into the print which is known as a "purification picture" (sbyang-par). The latter is set on the altar with a butter-or oil-lamp (chos-me) burning in front of it, so that it and the sob face each other. The jar itself is taken outside the village and thrown away. I was told that the sob represents only the body, since the consciousness, the rnam-shes is at all times in the sbyang-par, except when it leaves to consume the essence of the beverages.

Before a dge-ba held in a neighbouring village one informant recommended

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is withdrawn death results. Rnam-shes is the principle of consciousness which survives on the bar-do as a sensible entity.

14 This may be translated roughly as the ‘weekly link’.
that I should come to watch it, since the women would be “singing songs” which I could record. This was, in fact, a good-humouredly sarcastic reference to the obligatory and somewhat stylised wailing of all the village women at the end of the dge ba, when close relatives of the deceased embrace the sob in a final gesture of valediction. The rtogs-Idan-pa carries the sob out of the village, where the clothes are removed and bundled up to be washed later, and the wooden frame and paper face thrown away. The duties of the rtogs-Idan-pa are now complete, unless he is responsible for performing the bdun-tshigs ceremonies, and the family of the deceased reward him with a gift of their late relative’s clothing, from which either he or his wife will benefit. A generous family will contribute a substantial wardrobe, whereas a more miserly one will give only a few items.

The final bdun-tshigs, known as the skyang-par after the term for the print embodying the rnam-shes, is held on the forty-ninth day. During the ceremony it is necessary for the deceased to perform prostrations at certain intervals, and this is done on his behalf by one of his relatives, who places the skyang-par between the nape of his neck and his shirt-collar before prostrating himself. However, only certain categories of kin may represent a dead person in this manner. An older man is replaced by his son, and a woman by her daughter. A young man, whether or not he is married, is represented by a sibling of either sex, just as a young woman’s brother or sister performs prostrations in her stead. A boy or girl who has only just entered the second twelve year life-cycle (skag), particularly in the absence of older siblings, will be represented by his or her mother’s brother (a-jiang). In all cases the surrogates are the deceased’s cognates, never his affines, but there is no consistent requirement that they should be either uterine or agnatic kin, or even of the same sex.

The end of the skyang-par ceremony is marked by the expiry of the rnam-shes’s term on the bar-do. The officiating lama takes the print between his hands and, holding it in the flame of the butter lamp, pronounces that the sins of the deceased are annulled as the fire consumes the paper. It is this expiration that gives the print its name of skyang-par, or purification picture. The rnam-shes departs from its burning receptacle in the form of an (invisible) white letter A (a-dkar), on its way to immediate rebirth, to heaven, or to buddhahood. The piece of bone which was buried by the path between the cemetery and the village on the day of the body’s dismemberment is retrieved and ground into powder which is mixed with the ashes of the skyang-par. The lamas and the family of the deceased then mix this with black clay to make a number of tsha-tsha, small models moulded in the form of a cone or a deity. These tsha-tsha are taken from the village and set in various “clean places” (sa-cha tshang-ma), such as caves, grassy verges, streams and the branches of trees. Unlike ordinary tsha-tsha, which contain no ash or bone, these are never used to consecrate sacred monuments in the village.
One year later, a merit-making ceremony similar to the dge-ba, known as ‘durin’, is held in the gompa. This corresponds to the Tibetan Jo-mchod. There is no sob, and the women do not wail, but the lamas and the other villagers are feasted as before, and the former are also paid for their services. Again, a variety of texts may be read, but in Lubra this is most commonly dMar-khrid.

The above outline represents the minimum that may be done following the death of a man or woman over the age of thirteen. Now there are two possible additions to the funeral ceremonies which are optional, according to whether the family of the deceased is rich enough to afford them. The first is known as kha-tog (actually a colloquial word for “snackra” in Central Tibetan), which takes place on the day of the dge-ba. In addition to the food and drink, one ‘drudra’ (slightly less than a mana) of uncooked grain is presented to every single member of the village. In fact Lubra has a long-standing reciprocal arrangement with two other villages, Kagbeni and Tiri, whereby a kha-tog held in one of them will include all the inhabitants of the other two. Children or low-caste artisans are usually sent by each household to collect the gift. The kha-tog itself has several minor variations, also based on the wealth of the donor. For example, wheat may be given instead of rice, or there may be a compromise whereby everyone receives wheat and the inhabitants of Lubra receive rice in addition. It should be noted that the kha-tog is not specific to funerals but is often included in other merit-making ceremonies, and the same is true of many of the texts, such as dMar-khrid.

The second possible addition involves a ceremony held one year after the ‘durin’, that is, two years after the dge-ba which follows the actual death. This is known as ‘yarin’, and is almost identical to the ‘durin’. The same text is generally read, everyone is again given food and drink and the lamas receive payment in cash. Following the reading, the person (or people, if they were joint heirs) who sponsored the event is presented with a ceremonial white scarf (kha-btags) by one of the lamas on behalf of the village, and expressions of congratulation (“You have done your duty well”, etc.) are made from all around.

I have said that both of these ceremonies are optional, but whereas the kha-tog is often not performed, only the very poorest families would omit the ‘yarin’. No congratulatory kha-btags is presented to a sponsor following the ‘durin’ even if it is known that there will be no further demonstrations of filial or familial piety.

I have not been able to discover the etymology of either ‘durin’ or ‘yarin’. It is conceivable that they may be colloquial pronunciations of dud-ran, ‘appropriate homage’, and yang-ran, ‘further appropriate homage’, the latter perhaps being a contraction of yang dud (-pa) ran (-pa). Alternatively, the second syllable may be rin, referring to the expenditure necessary on these occasions.
Children's funerals

A person ceases to be a child at the age of thirteen (twelve by western reckoning, since a child is held to be one year old at birth in the Tibetan scheme). This marks the first skag, the critical period which occurs every twelve years in one's life. At the end of the first cycle, various social restrictions and requirements which do not apply in childhood come into operation. For example, rules of pollution begin to be observed, and a man may not drink from a girl's cup, even if she is his daughter, once she has reached this age. But the term child itself covers a range of meanings, and I shall begin at the lower end of the social spectrum with the stillborn infant.

(a) Neonates

Hertz remarks that 'the death of a new-born child is, at most, an infra-social event; since society has not yet given anything of itself to the child, it is not affected by its disappearance and remains indifferent' (p 84). This notion of giving nothing to the child is quite literally applied in Lubra, where a stillborn infant is defined as one which has not received milk from its mother. The body is wrapped in a cloth and taken into the chos-khang. The following day, a single lama is asked to the house to perform the rites, which involve little more than the reading of a text. He does this in the chos-khang and is paid in kind with a meal and some chang or s-ray. Hardly any ceremony surrounds the actual disposal. One man carries the small bundle out of the house in his arms, preceded by another bearing a censer of juniper incense and a vessel of sparge (khrus). The men are members of the household, but in their absence any neighbour may perform this role. The body is then taken a short distance outside the village—in no particular direction, but generally near the river—and buried in a shallow grave. Both the grave and the baby are first sprinkled with khrus, and later the clothing in which it was wrapped is purified by being washed in the river.

The religious content of this funeral is sparse by any standard, but it is particularly so in the context of a society where even the adjustment of a hearth demands more ceremony. Even this meagre ritual content is not considered to be obligatory, and in the majority of cases the body is disposed of (the term used is dbyug, to throw away) without even the reading. In fact, the text used is gNam-sa snang-brgyad, which is read as a blessing on a multitude of other occasions, such as the building of a house or ploughing the fields in spring. The death of a new-born child is indeed an infra-social event.
(b) Older children

If the child does drink its mother's milk, however shortly thereafter it dies, the procedure is different from that for neonates. The body is laid in the chos-khang and one person from each household, generally a woman, will take a small quantity of oil to the bereaved mother to light a lamp (chosme), and will give her four or five rupees by way of condolence. A lama is asked to consult the calendar or the appropriate text to determine the most auspicious direction, as in the case of an adult. The following day the body is carried in the arms of the father (or another man, if he is absent) actually in that direction to a point outside the village. The method of disposal is for the parents to choose. The body is usually dismembered and fed to the birds or thrown into the river, though it may also be cremated. Burial is never practised in this case. Two or three days later the merit-making ceremony (dge-ba) takes place. Four lamas assemble by the river and conduct a ritual during which gtor-ma and milk are thrown into the water; they are given a meal and a drink, but no cash payment. The feast for the dge-ba is held not in the gompa but in the house of the dead child's parents. It is called a 'yorten' (probably lgyos-rten), and the only participants are children of the village who are less than thirteen years old. This 'yorten' marks the end of the funeral ceremonies for the deceased.

(c) First-born sons

In none of the death-rituals described above is any difference of status between the sexes implied, since the reversal of positions on the rock slab prior to dismemberment cannot be seen to represent the superiority of one sex over the other. To my knowledge, there is only one situation in which the distinction is made. As in most of the Tibetan world, inheritance in Lubra is patrilineal and the traditional form of marriage is fraternal polyandry. This is effectively a form of primogeniture, since the younger brothers are seen merely to share in the eldest brother's marriage and inheritance. For this reason, considerable importance is attached to the first-born son, who in local lineage histories is referred to as the gdung-'dzin, the "holder of the bone", where the term "bone" is the well-known Tibetan metonym for the patrilineage itself. When the first son that is born to a couple dies, even if he is stillborn, the body is not disposed of immediately. On the day when the funeral would normally take place, the infant is placed in a wooden box full of salt which is then sealed and kept in the chos-khang. The rites which usually accompany the death (such as the 'yorten' or the reading of gNam-sa snang-brgyad) proceed as if the body had been disposed of in the ordinary way.

Although it still occurs, it is my guess that this practice of infant-mummification is dying out. Thakali monks whom I have approached on this subject referred
to it with some disapproval as an “archaic custom” of their Bhotia neighbours, and I know of a number of people in Lubra who chose not to preserve the bodies of their first-born sons. I am in some doubt as to the length of time the body should be kept in the house. I was told that it is not removed until the mother has borne another son, since the whole object of this practice is to prevent the potential for bearing sons from being lost, but in the single example I have witnessed the mummy was disposed of six months after death on an astrologically appropriate day. I shall take up this point again later in the paper. In any case, when the time for disposal comes, the body is taken out of the village in the auspicious direction (unless the child was stillborn, in which case this is not a consideration) and cremated. Air-burial is not practised, since the process of desiccation renders the flesh too hard to be dealt with by the birds. Beyond a few prayers, no religious rites attend the cremation, and the ashes are not kept. Because of the difficulty and expense of preserving a large body, this form of mummification is never done with children more than a few months old, nor is it ever done if the parents already have a living son.

Funeral rites for saints and “true” bla-ma

So far, I have dealt with types of funeral relating to factors of wealth, age and sex. I shall now concentrate on the ceremonies surrounding the death of a person renowned for his spiritual achievements. This usually applies to any .prul-sk or ‘bla-ma ngo-thog” (a “true” bla-ma as opposed to a village lama), but in fact it may be extended to anyone covered by the term rigdzin, an expression which literally means “knowledge holder”. “Rig-dzin” (Sanskrit vidyadhara) may be loosely applied to any particularly intelligent individual, but is used here in a technical sense more or less consistent with Das’s definition as “a kind of spirit to whom a high degree of wisdom is attributed by the Tantras”. Laymen are occasionally honoured with such funeral rites, but only if they have led lives dedicated to religious endeavour and are believed to have attained a certain degree of spiritual achievement. As may be expected in a lay community such as Lubra, such funerals are a rarity, but there are fortunately both written and oral accounts through which I hope to present some of the salient features.

The first account concerns a monk of the last century by the name of bsTan’dzin nyl-ma, who belonged to the Lo-bo chos-tsang clan. The clan, which is presently one of the two largest in Lubra, had its origins in Mustang (gLo-bo or “Lo”).

16 But the Thakalis themselves practised temporary mummification until comparatively recently. Rich families sometimes preserved the bodies of adults who died when the sweet buckwheat was in flower, a time when cremation was forbidden. (See Michel Vinding’s article in this volume.)

where it used to provide client priests (*mchod gnas*) for the king. bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma went to Eastern Tibet around 1859 and spent many years there with his teacher, Grub-pa'i dbang phyug, before returning to Lubra where he ended his days. His death is referred to in a few lines from the 'Prayer to bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma, the protector of living beings':

After winding up his worldly affairs, he performed concentrated meditation;

He generated the Fire-God, and the essence of his body disappeared.18

Oral history provides a more detailed version. bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma entered the chapel room of his family's bla-brang,19 where he died while meditating. He remained in the post-mortem contemplative state known as thugs-dam before a red issue from one nostril and a white one from the other heralded that his meditation was over.

Rig-'dzin are never given an air-burial but are almost always cremated. The back is not broken, since it seems to be accepted that the body of a bla-ma will not become a re-lang. However, when I pressed one informant about the possibility, he admitted that it was conceivable but added with resignation that "if the corpse rises, it rises, and that's that". Furthermore, the body is bound into a cross-legged, meditative posture instead of the hunched position of the ordinary individual. No sob is constructed, and the body is carried exposed but dressed in fine clothing, to the pyre. This consists of a circle of rocks a few feet high, with a raised stone floor beneath which the ashes will collect. Firewood is heaped onto this floor and the body is placed on top, sitting within the circle. For seven days after the cremation two lamas visit the site and sprinkle it with consecrated water (*khrus*). On the eighth day, the ashes are collected up and taken to the river to be washed, and while most are carried away by the stream, the residual fragments of bone are kept.

However, when the body of bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma was set on the pyre, a bright blue flame appeared from the region of the chest, and a sharp noise was heard as his soul (*rnam-shes*) released itself from the body’s head. (There is actually an inconsistency in this account, since this mystical release, ‘pho-bo, is the event which is

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18 *Zang zing bro t nas bsam mgon thugs dam mdzad/ine lha skyed nas rang spur rtsi boud yal.* From ‘Gro mgon bstan ’dzin nyi ma’i geol ‘debs . . . (Note: this and other quotations from unpublished texts are unedited.)

19 *Bla-brang*: literally, “bla-ma’s house”; in Tibet this was the residence attached to a reincarnate *bla-ma*’s estate and was often extended to mean the land itself. In Lubra it refers to the private house or temple of a clan, separate from the main household, and having its own land attached to comprise a single landholding unit (*grong*). There used to be two in Lubra until one was dissolved a few years ago.
generally believed to terminate the contemplation.) In any event, the body was consumed in its own fire, an occurrence which is attributed in the lines quoted above to his successful meditation on the Fire-God.20

The remains of bsTan-‘dzin nyi-ma were enshrined in a stupa built specifically for that purpose (sku-gdung or sku-rten, both abbreviations of sku-gdung mchod-rten) near his pha-brang. The senior man of the lineage in Lubra still has several relics of bsTan-‘dzin nyi-ma, such as the clothing which he wore during his thugs-dam as well as various other possessions. He also has several ring-b-rel, fragments of bone (generally, as in this case, the skull) which were not destroyed during the cremation. These remains, which are set into a small piece of wood shaped like a stupa, are treated with the utmost reverence, and are never taken out of the brass box in which they are kept without appropriate prayers being said and incense being lit. The receptacle bears a label which reads ‘klu-brag bla-ma bsTan-‘dzin nyi-ma’, ‘phel-gdung; “the relics of Lama bsTan-‘dzin nyi-ma of Lubra”.

Miraculous or extraordinary circumstances often seem to surround the deaths and funerals of bla-ma and saints. Another clan which flourished in the village for several centuries before finally dying out five generations ago is the Yang-ngal lineage, one of whom, Yang-ston bkra-shis rgyal-mtshan, was the Twelfth Century founder of Lubra.21 The Yang-ngal lineage history22 describes the circumstances surrounding the deaths of numerous illustrious members of the clan. One of these was Yang-ston Blo-gros rgyal mtshan, who led a life of religious dedication until

Finally, at the age of sixty-six, on the tenth day of the third month in a horse year, a rainbow tent appeared and a rain of flowers fell, amongst many other wonders, and his spirit passed into the Bon heaven. His

20 Me-tha (Sanskrit : agnideva) does not actually refer to any one god in particular but is “a general names for gods or deities; gods are supposed to eat the sacrificia l offerings through the help of fire which is called the mouth of the gods” (Das, op. cit., p 972)—hence the Sanskrit synonym of agnimukha, or fire-mouth.


22 Kun kyis nang nas dbang po’i ‘dangs ma mig ltar sngon du ‘byung ba gshen yang ngal bka’ rgyud kyis gling rabs un chen trange po’i sgra dbyangs zhes bya ba bshugs so. Contained herein is the voice, so-called, of Brahçma, the lineage history of the gShen Yang-ngal clan which is like sight, the foremost of all the senses’. This text, of which a translation is currently being prepared, is kept in Lubra. All following quotations relating to the Yang-ngal clan are taken from this work. They are given in their unedited form with provisional English renderings; I wish to acknowledge the considerable help given me by Lobsang Phuntshog in making the translation.
body took fire by itself, and on his bones there appeared the six syllables and innumerable images of deities and so on, and he became a great lamp of the doctrine.23

However, that the sanctity of saints' bones is not inviolable is illustrated by the case of one of Yang-ston Bi-gros rgyal-mtshan's descendants, an ascetic by the name of Yang-ston Mi'gyur rgyal-mtshan:

Because of an unfortunate accident, his life did not end naturally. On the seventeenth day of the third month in a wood horse year, when he was thirty-one, his spirit departed to the Bon heaven. Although many things such as the six syllables, images of deities and tokens of his achievement appeared on his body, as a result of contamination some of these flew away and some disappeared.24

I am told that in the Bon monastery of Samling in Dolpo, which, according to the same document (where it is called bSam-bstan, [i.e. gtan] gling) was founded by the great-grandson of bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, there are the skeletal remains of one of the Yang-ngeg lineage. Lubragpas who have visited the monastery tell me that the bones bear the marks of sacred syllables and the forms of various deities such as those which once adorned the skeleton of Bio-gros rgyal-mtshan.

But it is not always merely the bones that are subject to reverence. In the case of exceptionally high-ranking spiritual leaders (such as the Dalai Lamas) mumification was sometimes practised, and the preserved body was encased in silver or gold as an object of worship. I know of only one example connected with Lubra. This concerns one Yang-ston 'Bum-rje, the elder brother of Yang-ston bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan himself. Shortly before his death,

23 mThar dgung lo drug cu re drug nas shing rta zla gsun pa'i tshes bzu la gsha' 'od gur khang me tog gi char pa la sogs ngo mthar du ma dang bzas sie dgon pa bon nyid kyi dbysings su gshegs so'zsku spar la zhung me rang bzhes dang gzung ras la yig drug tha sku la sogs gong rgi mi theb pa dpag du med par byung zhing bstan pa'i sgron me chen po gyur legs so (fol. 51 bar-ma).

24 Bar chad kyi dbang gi sku the mthar ma phyo bar dgung lo sum cu so geig nas shing rta zla gsun pa'i tshes cu bdun la dgon pa bon nyid dbying su gshegs bo'zsku gzung la yig drug tha sku sha ri ram la sogs du mar 'byung kyang gsku grib kyi dbang gi la las 'phur badang/ la las yar ba la sogs 'byung (fol. 51 'o'—g-ma a—b).

In this passage I have translated sha-ri-ram as 'tokens of achievement' and in the following as 'sacred relics'. It is clearly a Tibetan rendering of the Sanskrit term for body (sartra), which may also mean bones (cf. M. Monier-Williams. 1963. A Sanskrit English Dictionary. Delhi, p 1057), and hence 'sacred relics'. But this is certainly not the intended meaning in the next extract; the meaning of gding sha-ri-ram has been explained to me as 'a fruition sign of the cosmic body (dharmakaya) made manifest chos kyi sku mgon du byas pa'i 'bras riags)