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## Sky Burials: Ecological Necessity or Religious Custom?

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## Sky Burials: Ecological Necessity or Religious Custom?

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*“The body (its image, its bearing, and representation) is the effect of innumerable practices, behaviors, and discourses which construct and produce the body as a culturally recognizable feature of social relations”*<sup>1</sup> — Bryan S. Turner

### Introduction

Have you ever considered what might happen to your body after you die or, for that matter, what you would like to have happen? Traditionally, cultures have developed distinctive ways for dealing with the bodies of the deceased. The death rituals I have witnessed in the West have involved cremation, with the ashes dispersed over a cliff or into the ocean. Recently, I encountered an open casket funeral for the first time. I was intrigued by the stark differences between an open casket funeral and cremation, which led me to question why people desire certain burial rites over others. Additionally, I find that there is value in learning about varying cultures since currently there is a great cultural divide that often prevents individuals from accepting customs that are different than their own. While I understand death and religion are intimately intertwined, I was curious how different cultures handle the remains of their dead and how religion can influence these practices.

Death is certain and happens to all living beings. Despite death being a commonality between all people, different cultures understand and perceive death in radically different ways. Regardless of a culture’s specific beliefs, death can be broken into four distinct sections: what precedes an individual’s death or the cause of death; the act of dying itself; the treatment of the body; and lastly, what is believed to follow death.

I have chosen to study the beliefs and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, a religion that considers death to be the most significant life event.<sup>2</sup> I researched the Tibetan custom of sky burials, which is a method of disposing of a corpse through its consumption by vultures, as a case study to examine how different religions understand and practice death rituals. In conducting this research, I asked the following question: How are sky burials executed in Tibetan Buddhism, and what

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<sup>1</sup>Bryan Turner, “The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and its Perspectives,” in *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>2</sup>Uwe P. Gielen, “A Death on the roof of the world: the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism,” in *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*, ed. Colin M. Parkes, Pittu Laungani, and Bill Young (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 79; Margaret Gouin, “Tibetan Death Rituals,” *Asia Dialogue*, last modified May 4, 2016, <http://theasiadialogue.com/2016/05/04/tibetan-death-rituals/>.

does this death rite reveal about the religion's beliefs concerning the role of the human body and the cosmos?

Western audiences have sometimes misunderstood Tibetan sky burials as a custom that is practiced due to the environmental restrictions of the region. In reality however, the disposal of the body through exposure, or sky burial, holds much greater significance. The practice demonstrates fundamental values and beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism such as reincarnation, impermanence, compassion, and non-attachment. In this paper, I will argue how Western preference for rationality over religious thought is apparent in the Western belief that sky burials are exclusively practiced for an environmentally utilitarian purpose instead of performed in accordance with religious beliefs. To comprehend the Western misinterpretation of this practice, the Tibetan Buddhist perception of death must first be understood.

### Death in Tibetan Buddhism

For Tibetan Buddhists, death is understood in the context of *samsara*, which is the suffering present in the continual cycle of death and rebirth of an individual's consciousness, or *nam shes*.<sup>3</sup> Reincarnation is a fundamental doctrine in Tibetan Buddhism that expresses their religious beliefs concerning the cosmos, while also revealing their perspective on the human body. *Samsara*, also known as the endless wheel of suffering, continues until an individual achieves enlightenment, or Buddhahood. In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Evan-Wentz describes the process of exiting the cycle through awakening: "...thus revolves the Wheel of Life, until the one who is bound on it breaks his own bonds through Enlightenment, and there comes, as the Buddha proclaims, the Ending of Sorrow."<sup>4</sup>

Escaping *samsara* is highly desirable; however, exiting the cycle and extinguishing all suffering through *nirvana*<sup>5</sup> is greatly challenging to accomplish. Most beings, therefore, remain in the repetitive cycle of death and rebirth. Uwe Gielen, the author of "A death on the roof of the world: The perspective of Tibetan Buddhism," explains that *nam shes* caught in the cycle of *samsara* search "for final release and freedom, a freedom they can gain only through hard spiritual practice and the compassion and wisdom that must be won through a long procession of lifetimes."<sup>6</sup> Achieving *nirvana* requires an individual to live a

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<sup>3</sup> Gielen, 80, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 17.

<sup>5</sup> In Tibetan Buddhism *nirvana* is considered the highest state of enlightenment an individual can attain.

<sup>6</sup> Gielen, 88.

virtuous life and acquire good karmic energy<sup>7</sup> to escape the cycle of reincarnation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Tibetan Buddhists anticipating reincarnation, individuals may still be apprehensive about their imminent death or the death of a loved one. According to Goss and Klass, the authors of “Tibetan Buddhism and the Resolution of Grief: the Bardo-Thodol for the Dying and the Grieving,” a common Western misconception is that Tibetans do not fear death.<sup>9</sup> While there are clear ideas about what happens after an individual dies, uncertainty remains about the individual’s next incarnation, and it is unknown what an individual may experience in the bardo.<sup>10</sup> The bardo stage, which means “in between,”<sup>11</sup> occurs for 49 days after death<sup>12</sup> and can be a confusing and dangerous time for the *nam shes* passing from one existence to the next.<sup>13</sup>

There are different methods to guide the consciousness or spirit through the bardo to ensure a desirable rebirth—explained in detail below—which is greatly valued in Tibetan Buddhism. Immediately following a person’s death, they are covered in a white cloth leaving the crown of the head exposed for the *nam shes* to escape.<sup>14</sup> The body is not touched, so as to not interfere with the complete separation of the consciousness from the body.<sup>15</sup> Since Tibetan Buddhists believe the consciousness of the deceased remains connected to the physical body for a short period of time after death, roughly three days,<sup>16</sup> any disturbances can hinder the transference of consciousness. This is why the body must remain untouched during this time and be kept in a peaceful and calm environment.

While it normally takes the consciousness and spirit three to four days to detach from the physical body, there are ways to assist and make the process go more quickly. The primary method is for a *hpho-bo*, “the extractor of the consciousness principle,”<sup>17</sup> or a *lama*,<sup>18</sup> to lead the consciousness away from the

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<sup>7</sup> Karma in the tradition simply means “action” or “doing” and is believed to assist individuals on their path to enlightenment.

<sup>8</sup> Gielen, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Goss and Dennis Klass, “Tibetan Buddhism and the Resolution of Grief: the Bardo-Thodol for the Dying and the Grieving,” *Death Studies* 21, no. 4 (1997): 379.

<sup>10</sup> Gielen, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Goss and Klass, 380.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>13</sup> Gielen, 80-81.

<sup>14</sup> Goss and Klass, 381; Pamela Logan, “Witness to a Tibetan Sky-Burial: A Field Report for the China Exploration and Research Society,” *University of Minnesota*, last modified September 26, 1997, <http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/tbaci/studproj/is3099/skyburial/skyburial.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Evans-Wentz, 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Goss and Klass, 382.

body and into the bardo. When the *hpho-bo* arrives, they sit positioned at the head of the deceased and ensure the environment around the corpse is silent and peaceful. This may include removing lamenting relatives or securing the room to preserve silence.<sup>19</sup> Evan-Wentz explains that the goal of the *hpho-bo* is to ensure the spirit has left the body. To do so, the *hpho-bo* performs “mystic chants containing directions for the spirit of the deceased to...escape—if *karma* permits—the undesirable Intermediate State.”<sup>20</sup> The *hpho-bo* encourages the deceased to release any remaining attachment to this life, loved ones, and material goods. These accessories to life do not possess value in the bardo nor assist the *nam shes* in its transference,<sup>21</sup> and according to Goss and Klass these attachments can increase the risk of an undesirable rebirth.<sup>22</sup>

To ensure the *hpho-bo* service has successfully separated the mind from the body, the *hpho-bo* examines the crown of the head, which is not covered by the white cloth. Inspecting “where two parietal bones articulate called the ‘Aperature of Breahma’...to determine if the spirit has departed,”<sup>23</sup> the *lama* searches for a physical sign that the spirit has exited the body.<sup>24</sup> Evan-Wentz explains that if there is not a corpse present for the *hpho-bo* to chant over and inspect, the *hpho-bo* visualizes the body and conducts the ceremony as if the corpse were present.<sup>25</sup> If uncertainty exists about whether the spirit has fully left the body, disposal of the body is postponed an additional three to four days.<sup>26</sup> This practice indicates the importance and value placed on the spirit’s transference from the body to the bardo so the process of rebirth can begin.<sup>27</sup> This pre-burial ceremony articulates the Tibetan Buddhist belief that the body is merely a vessel to be inhabited by a spirit and that the process of death is deeply religious within this tradition.

An important aspect of Tibetan Buddhism is acquiring merit, since that, along with being liberated from personal attachments, is the process through which individuals ensure a desirable rebirth. There are various methods of earning merit to assist the deceased as they venture through the bardo. For instance, relatives can earn merit for their deceased loved ones by feeding the monks and lamas who are guiding the deceased’s consciousness and offering food

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<sup>19</sup> Evans-Wentz, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Goss and Klass, 383; Gielen, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Evans-Wentz, 8; Goss and Klass, 383.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Evans-Wentz, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>27</sup> Gielen, 90.

or drinks to the deceased.<sup>28</sup> The relatives can then choose to donate the merit they have earned to the person who has died,<sup>29</sup> which will help the deceased endure the challenging transition in the bardo.

After the *nam shes* has departed the body, the method of disposal is determined. There are numerous techniques used to dispose of bodies in Tibet, so a “*tsi-pa* or astrologer-*lama*,” is consulted to create a death-horoscope.<sup>30</sup> The horoscope, based on the time of death, determines the proper method of disposing of the body; who can interact with the corpse; when the funeral is to occur; and what ceremonial rites will be performed.<sup>31</sup> Evan-Wentz suggests that the *tsi-pa* “declares what kind of evil spirit caused the death, for in popular belief...no death is natural, but is always owing to inference by one of the innumerable death-demons.”<sup>32</sup>

There is no standard funeral in Tibet, rather there are unique techniques of disposal that embody one of the four tantric elements: earth, water, fire, and air.<sup>33</sup> Due to the importance of these elements in Tibetan Buddhism, each death rite emphasizes the importance of returning the body to the tantric elements, the foundation of all life. The four elements developed out of Hinduism, and according to philosopher David Macauley “are considered fundamental components” of the religion and serve “as the basis for the Four Noble Truths of the philosophy.”<sup>34</sup> When the deceased donates their body to an element, they nurture other life sources and acquire merit by doing so.<sup>35</sup> For instance, burial or disposal in earth feeds the worms;<sup>36</sup> immersion or disposal in water feeds the fish;<sup>37</sup> sky burial or disposal in air feeds vultures and other scavengers;<sup>38</sup> and cremation or disposal in fire nourishes supernatural beings through the scent of burning flesh.<sup>39</sup> While there are various death rites in Tibetan Buddhism, sky

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<sup>28</sup> Margaret Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist funerary practices* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Evans-Wentz, 19

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; Goss and Klass, 384; Gielen, 81; Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Evans-Wentz, 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*; Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 46.

<sup>34</sup> David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water As Environmental Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 78.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Ramble, “Status and Death: Mortuary Rites and Attitudes to the Body in a Tibetan Village,” accessed November 1, 2018, 357, [https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/227236/kailash\\_09\\_04\\_03.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y](https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/227236/kailash_09_04_03.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y); Evans-Wentz, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 46.

<sup>37</sup> Seth Faison, “Lirong Journal; Tibetans, and Vultures, Keep Ancient Burial Rite,” *The New York Times*, last modified July 3, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/03/world/lirong-journal-tibetans-and-vultures-keep-ancient-burial-rite.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 60

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

burials receive the most attention from outside audiences due to the controversial nature of the practice.

Regardless of the method chosen by the *tsi-pato* to dispose of the body, there are certain preliminary practices that are applicable to all disposal techniques. The corpse is put into a curled position, which has both religious significance and a practical function. Evans-Wentz argues the body is placed in a fetal position to symbolize being “reborn out of this life into the life beyond death.”<sup>40</sup> Margaret Gouin, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, explains that, in addition to the religious significance of the body being put in this position, it makes transporting the body easier. In some cases, she explains, the back is broken to allow it to be conformed into the curled posture.<sup>41</sup> Another less popular explanation for putting the body in this position is to ensure that the body does not become a *rolang*, which is a zombie-like figure in Tibetan culture.<sup>42</sup> For sky burials and the other methods of disposal, the body is often placed on a stretcher so it can be easily carried to the burial site, since they are often in remote locations.<sup>43</sup> As shown in the documentary “Sky Burial,” the stretcher is placed on the back of the corpse-bearer, or transporter, and then carried to the funeral.<sup>44</sup> Due to beliefs in demonic influences, preparing the body for disposal is an important part of the process of preparing a body for burial in Tibetan Buddhism.

Purification rituals are an essential aspect of preparing the corpse for the death rites and the successful transference of consciousness. These rituals are practiced for all disposal techniques and clearly demonstrate the religious nature of Tibetan Buddhist funeral rites. Before the body is removed from the house, or wherever it has been since the individual died, relatives and participants in the funeral procession must be purified to ensure no evil spirits can contaminate the *nam shes* during the burial. According to Gouin, relatives are “sprinkled with blessed water by a lama.”<sup>45</sup> Immediately after the corpse-bearers exit the home carrying the bier<sup>46</sup>, they circle burning incense three times clockwise and three times counter-clockwise.<sup>47</sup> These purification rituals show the effort taken to prevent demonic influence from being present at the disposal. After these

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<sup>40</sup> Evans-Wentz, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Sky Burial*, directed by E. Bruno (2005; Harriman, NY: Bruno Films), DVD.

<sup>45</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Bier, a frame used to carry the corpse to the burial site.

<sup>47</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 42.

purification rituals are complete, the funeral procession then accompanies the body to its final destination.

### What is a Sky Burial?

There are differing reports on the specific process and sequence of events during the exposure of the body in sky burials. There is disagreement between scholars regarding certain aspects of the death rite such as the order of events; nevertheless, the general themes of the practice remain the same. Once the body is carried to the funeral site, the white cloth is removed and the corpse-cutters, or *stobs ldans*, begin their work.<sup>48</sup> The film *Sky Burial* depicts a circle of monks chanting quietly and greeting the corpses as the corpse-bearers carry the bodies to the monastery.<sup>49</sup> According to both Pamela Logan and Veronika Ronge, who both provide witness reports of observing sky burials in 1997 and 1989 respectively, once the corpse-cutters begin peeling back the skin with a long vertical incision from the base of the neck down the spine, the vultures descend from their high perches.<sup>50</sup> Logan states that as the vultures begin to swarm the site, three men protect the body and the corpse-cutters by waving the vultures away with long sticks.<sup>51</sup> Alternatively, both Seth Faison, a journalist for *The New York Times*, and Ronge, state that the vultures are summoned once the body is prepared for consumption and are not noted as being present at the beginning of the ceremony.<sup>52</sup> This may simply be a result of different monasteries and burial sites using unique practices.

The process of cutting the corpse, like the presence of vultures at the burial site, is varied. Some sources report the limbs being cut off, and the deceased being cut into pieces,<sup>53</sup> while other sources do not explicitly state that the limbs are removed, and rather describe the body being picked clean by the birds of prey.<sup>54</sup> While most scholars agree about treatment of the bones, there is disagreement regarding the order of events. Some scholars, such as Goss and Klass, and Logan, argue that after the flesh has been consumed and the bones are left bare, the skeleton is ground into a paste with barley flour and fed to the birds.<sup>55</sup> Ronge and Faison, however, state that the crushing of bones occurs before

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<sup>48</sup> Veronika Ronge, "The Corpse Cutters of Sera," *Tibet Journal* 29, no. 2 (2004): 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Sky Burial*, 00:01:53.

<sup>50</sup> Logan; Ronge, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Logan.

<sup>52</sup> Ronge, 5; Faison.

<sup>53</sup> Ronge, 4; Ramble, 338.

<sup>54</sup> Logan.

<sup>55</sup> Goss and Klass, 385; Logan.



the first feeding.<sup>56</sup> Treatment of the head also differs between scholars. Faison states that the skull receives special handling so it can be made into skull cups,<sup>57</sup> while other scholars do not mention the skull receiving unique treatment. A primary commonality between all descriptions of sky burials is the importance of the body being completely consumed by the vultures to ensure it is not reanimated by a demonic presence.<sup>58</sup>

Sky burials act as the final separation of the *nam shes* from the body. Goss and Klass explain that the moment of disposal and the return to the designated tantric element, air in the case of sky burials, is a critical time for the individual's consciousness since it is released from the confines of a physical body and officially enters the bardo.<sup>59</sup> This counters what Evans-Wentz argues when he states that the separation of the spirit has already occurred by the time of disposal. Goss and Klass state that the moment of separation occurs during disposal, allowing the relatives to release their attachment to the physical form of the deceased.<sup>60</sup> Every element of the sky burial contributes to the religious significance of the practice, starting with the rituals to extract the individual's consciousness from the body and lasting through to the end of the ceremony when every part of the body has been consumed, further demonstrating the Buddhist value of ultimate compassion for other living beings.

Why are sky burials practiced?

The reasons for sky burials range from religious to rational depending on who is considering the practice. Despite the clear religious elements to the practice, some Western scholars make the claim that sky burials are performed as a result of the environment in Tibet. I argue the rationale that sky burials are practiced due to environmental necessity is a reasonable interpretation from a science-based culture; however, I believe it is an incorrect assertion. While there may be environmental benefits to the practice of sky burials, this is not the reason they are performed in Tibetan Buddhism.

The most common ecological argument made for sky burials is the shortage of trees on the Tibetan plateau. Dan Martin, who traveled and studied near Lhasa, Tibet in 1993, describes his experience witnessing a sky burial in his article "On the Cultural Ecology of Sky Burial on the Himalayan Plateau." While Martin discusses the religiosity of the practice, he asserts the purpose of sky

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<sup>56</sup> Ronge, 4; Faison.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 70.

<sup>59</sup> Goss and Klass, 385.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

burials is to accommodate the harsh environment of Tibet. Intending to present the practice as less strange and ‘primitive,’ Martin rationalizes the custom scientifically, undermining the religious nature of the practice.<sup>61</sup> Martin argues the shortage of wood in Tibet for fueling fires made cremation an uncommon disposal method.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Faison and Logan each argue for the practicality of sky burials given the lack of trees in the area.<sup>63</sup> This argument, however, can be quickly disproven.

Two of the most important sky burial sites, the Sera and Drigung, are both surrounded by wooded areas, undermining the idea that sky burials are practiced due to a shortage of resources required for alternative burial rites, such as cremations.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, this argument fails to recognize that not all cremations require a wooden funeral pyre and that often cremations can be completed in non-wooden cremation ovens.<sup>65</sup>

A second argument for sky burials being practiced out of environmental necessity is the shortage of arable land for ground burials. Martin and Logan each suggest that the land is often too hard to dig in Tibet, therefore burying corpses is not a viable option.<sup>66</sup> According to Martin, the fertile land is reserved for agriculture, and the rest of the land is either too rocky or frozen for the majority of the year.<sup>67</sup> Martin also claims the increase of population in Tibet “produced shortages in the already very limited amounts of arable land and fuel resources.”<sup>68</sup> While these may be true statements regarding the land of the Tibetan plateau, arguing that they are the reason that sky burials are practiced invalidates the religious nature of the Tibetan Buddhist custom.

Gouin provides three possible (though not mutually exclusive) rationalizations that sky burials are practiced in Tibet. The first is based on the belief that humans are created by the four tantric elements – earth, water, fire, and air — and in the case of sky burials, when an individual dies they are returned to the element of air.<sup>69</sup> The second explanation she provides is that sky burials, like the other disposal methods, serve as a final act of compassion and charity since the deceased is donating their body to nourish another living creature.<sup>70</sup> The third

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<sup>61</sup> Dan Martin, "On the Cultural Ecology of Sky Burial on the Himalayan Plateau," *East and West* 46, no. 3/4 (1996): 367.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>63</sup> Faison; Logan.

<sup>64</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>66</sup> Martin, 364; Logan.

<sup>67</sup> Martin, 364.

<sup>68</sup> Martin, 363.

<sup>69</sup> Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 68.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

possible explanation Gouin provides is the ecological argument for sky burials based on the environmental limitations present in Tibet.<sup>71</sup>

Gouin argues sky burials are not practiced due to environmental concerns or restrictions and instead hold religious significance. She claims, “The widespread use of exposure [sky burials] may be dictated by concerns having nothing to do with natural resources.”<sup>72</sup> She proposes that sky burials originated from the pre-Buddhist idea that when the body returns to a tantric element, it can accumulate “a large amount of merit to the benefit of the deceased.”<sup>73</sup> I agree with Gouin that the method of sky burial, similar to other methods of disposal, is not practiced with environmental consideration, rather sky burials are performed due to their spiritual meaning and significance within Tibetan Buddhism.

While the specific elements of the practice illuminate the religious nature of sky burials, there are also broad religious themes present in the rituals. Sky burials represent the fundamental teachings of the religion: impermanence, compassion, *an-atman* (meaning no-self), non-attachment, and interdependence.<sup>74</sup> The Tibetan Buddhist belief that “grief teaches one about compassion and can provide the motivation to engage in spiritual practice” furthers the claim that their entire interpretation of death is religious, discrediting the argument that sky burials are practiced solely out of physical necessity.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

Considering another culture’s religion requires an outsider to put aside their own beliefs about the cosmos to understand the other culture’s belief system. There is a Western tendency to exoticize other dissimilar cultures and see them as ‘other’ instead of attempting to comprehend their views. Sky burials are often misinterpreted, predominately by Western scholars, as being performed due to the environmental barriers present in the Tibetan plateau rather than for their religious foundation. I argue the misinterpretation of sky burials in the West is a result of our inability to understand cultures with radically different beliefs than our own and our use of science to either validate or invalidate religious experiences. In this instance, the Western prioritization of science has rationalized an inherently religious practice in Tibetan Buddhism—justifying the practice as ecologically sound rather than substantiating another culture’s tenet about death, the afterlife, and the cosmos.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Goss and Klass, 385.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 388.

Anthropologists Mary Douglas and Victor Turner argue that the human body is a means of representing a culture's beliefs about the cosmos. Turner states, "the human body is a microcosm of the universe," claiming the body can represent beliefs about the cosmos.<sup>76</sup> Sky burials in Tibetan Buddhism serve as a clear example of how the treatment of the body can express cultural beliefs about the world. As illustrated throughout this case study, there are many components to sky burials that make this death ritual deeply religious. For instance, the use of horoscopes to determine the method of disposal and the pre-burial ceremony demonstrate the religiosity of the practice. Additionally, this death rite serves as a final act of compassion since the body nourishes other life forms and helps the individual gain merit that can assist their consciousness during transference. Each component of the practice demonstrates the inherent religiosity of this death ritual and therefore challenges the belief that sky burials are practiced out of ecological necessity.

While it can be difficult to see perspectives other than our own, it is crucial we learn to value the beliefs of other cultures. I believe this is especially important during a time when cultures are divided, and we rarely consider different practices and ways of understanding the cosmos. When studying other cultures, we must attempt to understand their customs from the perspective of that culture, instead of viewing the traditions ethnocentrically. The intention of this paper is to demonstrate how some Western scholars have failed to study the practice of sky burials through the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism and how this led to their inaccurate interpretation of the practice. This further shows the importance of understanding the beliefs of a particular culture, before attempting to conceptualize their customs. Without possessing fundamental knowledge about a culture, interpreting their practices will necessarily be skewed towards one's own perspective and therefore inherently incomplete.

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<sup>76</sup> Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 107.

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