

Cremation and Cosmogony – Karma and Soteriology

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1. Introduction

A common thread linking micro- and macro cosmos is karma. Karma and death are intricately interwoven, since the preparation of the corpse during the funeral is the exit from this world and the entry to the next. It has been generally accepted that the corpse is highly polluting, but I will argue that *the funeral is a purifying process*, which prepares and presents the dead to the gods. If the descendants do not purify the deceased's flesh during the funeral, the dead will not attain a rebirth in accordance to his *own* karma, and the relatives' performances of the obsequies may diminish or limit his future incarnations. Hence, I will stress the actual funerals, the flesh as a bio-moral substance, and why it is necessary to have a son to mourn the deceased. Karma is not only a personal residue or quality, but an inter-generational relation, which links and constitutes society and cosmos. The outcome of, and reason for, this relation, it will be argued, is soteriology for society in the form of life-giving water for all. Thus, my aim is to explore how and why cremation and karma constitute society and cosmos, and enable soteriology both for the deceased and descendants.

2. Cremation and cosmogony

Cosmogony is the re-creation of the world. "The sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world" (Eliade 1987:30). Rites are reproductions of the original creation but on a microcosmic scale. The creation of this world has the creation of the universe as its paradigmatic model (ibid:30-31). Holy sites are perceived as the

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centres of the world and temples as links between earth and heaven, but also connecting the lower realms to this world (ibid:39).

In the Hindu world Varanasi is the holiest place for Hindus to die and to become cremated. At Manikarnika Ghat the funeral pyres burn without interruption throughout the day and night, and the creation is continually replayed, and "it is death and cremation that keep the city at the navel of the universe yet outside space and time...the scene of cosmogony is also the site of unceasing cremation...corpses should be burnt on that very spot where Vishnu sat for 50,000 years alight with the fire of the austerities by which he created the world" (Parry 1994:32). Approximately 30,000 dead bodies are cremated each year at Kashi's two ghats, Manikarnika and Harishchandra, of which Manikarnika covers ca. 2/3 of the funerals (ibid:56). In Nepal, the Pashupatinath temple is the holiest place in Nepal for Shiva devotees, and according to some Hindus, in the whole world because Shiva's head was born at this spot, and he is still present in the linga in the main temple. In year 2000 there were 4575 people cremated at Pashupatinath, in 2001 there were 4909 people cremated at these *ghats*, and in 2002 there were 6185 bodies burnt along Bagmati River in front of the temple (fig. 1).

Cremation is cosmogony because all elements are dissolved and transferred back to their origin from which they are re-distributed again. Fire is the prime agent in the transformation. The Indian fire is not primarily for cooking or food preparation, but for *sacrifices* (Frazer 1974), of which cremation is the most important. Therefore, the funeral pyre is not only a means of disposing of the body, but a cremation is a sensitive interaction with gods by which the deceased is given to the divinities. Man is a replica of cosmos and is constituted by the five elements.

3. Karma and ethicised rebirth

Gananath Obeyesekere has in *Imagining Karma* (2002) developed a new theory on the rise of rebirth eschatology in India (fig. 2). He argues that one has to distinguish between karma and rebirth although these concepts are interrelated and often confused. Karma is the law of ethical recompense that governs existence, or *samsara*; and hence closely related to rebirth. However, rebirth eschatologies can exist

without karma, and rebirth is not simply a by-product of karma as many Indologists argue (Obeyesekere 2002:2). In rebirth theory the dead returns back to the world he or she left whether or not there has been an intermediate sojourn in another existence or afterworld. The dead has only temporarily left the mortal body, and although the world of deceased ancestors can exist without rebirth, most often they are strongly associated with them (ibid:15). Thus, "if the soul of a dead ancestor is brought back after death into the world of human association and this process is continued, one has a rebirth eschatology" (ibid:19). This is not karma, however, because karma is dependent upon ethicisation, which is a process by which "a morally right or wrong action becomes a religiously right or wrong action that in turn affects a person's destiny after death" (ibid:75). Ethicisation is the conversion of a moral code into a religious code. What characterises karmic eschatology, as opposed to rebirth eschatology, is a special kind of rewards or punishments; "ethicisation deals with a thoroughgoing religious evaluation of morality that entails delayed punishments and rewards quite unlike the immediate or this-worldly compensations meted out by deities or ancestors" (ibid).

When ethicisation is systematically introduced into rebirth eschatology, it will logically transform itself into a karmic eschatology. This happens in two processes. When the otherworld is transformed into a world of retribution and reward, there cannot be a single place for those who have done good or bad. Consequently, the otherworld must split, at least into a world of retribution ("hell") and a world of reward ("heaven"). A kind of heaven and hell has to be invented in an ethicised eschatology, which Obeyesekere calls "ethicisation step 1". Thus, it is possible to have a system of punishments and rewards in an otherworld and leave it like that, as in Christianity. But in a rebirth eschatology the soul's stay in an otherworldly existence is per definition temporary or it might be completely bypassed. Hence, the critical "ethicisation step 2" requires that the next rebirth is also systematically ethically conditioned. This conditioning must include the person's actions in a preceding life. The principle of reward and punishment cannot only include the otherworld, but the forthcoming rebirth as well (ibid:78-80). "If ethicisation is carried out to embrace the whole eschatological sphere constituting the otherworld (or – worlds), as well as the human world into which one is reborn, and if this is followed through into finite and

infinite rebirth cycles, then one will have created a theory like that of karma" (ibid:82).

A rebirth eschatology does not concern itself with "salvation". In theory, it is possible to have a karma theory without salvation. Consequently, nirvana is sought outside samsara or the cycle of rebirths: it must result in the cessation of rebirth. There is no way to achieve nirvana without transcending or abolishing samsara (Obeyesekere 2002:127-128). Another problem is when and where the punishments take place. In every society people are punished on earth for their bad deeds. In a society with ethicisation step 1 they continue to be punished or rewarded in some heaven or hell. But if they have been punished and rewarded, then there should be no reason for them to suffer in another reincarnation (ethicisation step 2) (ibid:236). The solutions to this dilemma are at least twofold. Firstly, I cannot be punished for the wrong I do now at the very same existence without turning a karmic eschatology back into a rebirth eschatology. Hence, "an impersonal ethical law that punishes or rewards me straight away for what I have done empties heavens and hells and good and bad rebirths of any ethical significance" (ibid:82), and therefore, immediate punishments are rare in Indian religions. Secondly, any rewards or punishments are not completed or totally fulfilled in the first or forthcoming reincarnation. There will always be some karmic "rests", and introducing aporias solves this problem. Therefore, an emphasis on the deceased's flesh enables further inquiries into the topic.

4. Purifying cosmos by cremations of corpses

Cosmogonically speaking, death is a purifying process, not a polluting process. The deceased – the sacrificial item – is "distilled" and has become pure when he enters the divine sphere; he is somehow "invested" with purity through the death rituals. The outcome of the funeral is a corpse or body that is pure and perfect as a sacrificial item for the gods. Sins can be purified through penances performed by other people, and this is crucial when performing death rituals. The outcome of a funeral is more "purity" than what the body itself represented when the person was alive, and as such, there is transference of sins. Each person has a "vessel"-function, including priests who incorporate other people's sins into their own bodies. The

deceased as a sacrificial item contains more vital energy than initially embodied by the deceased as a living being.

According to some holy books, the Brahmins observe 11 days mourning for their deceased, the Ksatriyas 13 days, the Vaishyas 15 days, and the Sudras and the schedule castes 30 days. There is no mourning for holy men. The amount of sins accumulated in the bodies is incorporated into the purifying process and death rituals. The relatives have to observe the penances in accordance with their own pollution, meaning the varna "pollution". When the Brahmins have to observe, in theory, only 11 days death pollution and the Sudras 30 days, this is a result of two factors. Firstly, the Brahmins are perceived as being purer than the Sudras by birth, and therefore, the Brahmin's relatives have to obtain a shorter mourning period than the Sudra's relatives. Secondly, the Brahmins are thought to have, according to themselves, a more advanced and a higher spiritual capacity than all other caste groups. Thus, by their rites they have the possibility to transform impurity into purity faster and more successfully than the others. In sum and as a consequence, Brahmins have to obtain less days of purification after death than other groups (in reality they often obtain more days of death pollution than the other groups). Low castes are more polluted, according to the Brahmanical theory, and by their inefficiency or incapability of performing rites, they are invested with impurity for a longer period of time. Sadhus are, on the other hand, pure and prepared for their gods by their own penances, and there is no pollution or mourning periods for them.

The final result is the same, and might be seen in light of van Gennep's theory of separation, liminality and incorporation (1909). In the incorporation phase – when the divinities accept the soul – the deceased and all corpses are equally pure. There is no difference in death when the dead is "handed over" to the gods. What differs is the preparation during the liminality phase, or more precisely, the ritual debt the mourners have to pay back to the gods after the deceased is cremated. Since the dead body is cremated immediately, logically, it has to be pure at the moment when it is sent forward to the gods. This means basically that the deceased is "guaranteed" its purity "in advance" and the descendants have to perform the purification rituals subsequently after a person's death. The mourning phase is therefore a

kind of spiritual “mortgage” for a purity, which already has been fulfilled, and the death rituals are in this way a never-ending process and “repayment”. It is a part of the Householder’s *dharma* to mourn his father and perform obsequies, and this stresses the importance of having a son to perform the rites. *Since purity is guaranteed and “taken out” in advance when the deceased is cremated and handed over to the gods after death, the deceased is punished if the sons are not paying back their ritual debt to the gods in terms of penances and purification rituals.*

5. Ethicisation and pure flesh as vital energy

Returning to Obeyesekere’s distinction between ethicisation step 1 and step 2, one may gain some more insights into this process through the way the life-giving waters are procured and distributed by the gods. Ethicisation step 1 was the process whereby one is judged and rewarded in heaven or punished in hell in accordance with the deeds performed on earth. Ethicisation step 2 was the process whereby one becomes incarnated back onto this earth in either good or bad reincarnations. As Obeyesekere pointed out regarding Buddhism, there is an inherent contradiction in this moral-philosophical system, which cannot give an account for how and why a person should be incarnated on earth in accordance with good or bad deeds if he or she already has been rewarded or punished in heaven and hell (Obeyesekere 2002:236). *The flesh as life-giving waters* might be the key to this problem and why the transformation between ethicisation step 1 and step 2 takes place. The soteriology of society is a matter of the good waters – or the vital energy in more general terms. In karmic traditions the individual death is not solely a matter for the deceased himself or the lineage, but it includes society as well. Thus, *when the dead becomes both a means for the welfare of society and an individual who must take care of his own salvation, then it seems that the karmic ideology is developed.* In societies with reincarnation, ethicisation step 2 takes places when it is not only the deceased’s future but also the welfare of society and cosmos that are at stake when a member of society dies. This is the consequence of the unity of micro- and macro cosmos.

The *sati* ideology may, at a soteriological level, give clues to the process. The premise is that the soul and body – mind and matter – are

identical. Traditionally, the sati escapes any further incarnations and attains a place in heaven. The gloriousness of sati is described in, among other places, the Garuda Puranas: "A woman who enters the fire after the death of her husband prospers in the heaven like Arundhati. Until and unless the woman burns herself after her husband's death she is never released from the bond of her sex. A woman who follows her husband purifies the three families on her mother's side, the three families on her father's side and the three families on her husband's side" (Garunda Purana II, 4.95-97).

The most "famous" widow-burning or murder in the name of sati in recent times was the one of the eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in India, September 4th, 1987. The Shankaracharya of Puri argued, "ever since this anti-sati law was enacted, nature has been revolting. Today, when we should be feeling the heat of summer, it is cold. The monsoons bring no rain. And untimely rainfall has destroyed crops ready for harvest. All because sati has been insulted" (Narasimhan 1998:144). The sacrifices of widows were interpreted into the world of waters as a procreative force, which became a death-giver unless *satis* committed suicide on their husbands' pyres. And the good rains that appeared in 1988, after long droughts, were interpreted by the pro-sati fraction as a consequence of the widow-burning (ibid). Death is ethicised through the life-giving waters. On the one hand, karma is nothing but a principle governing death and the different entrances and exits. On the other hand, water is the good gift from the gods and it is actively incorporated into all spheres of human interaction. Water is therefore the ultimate means by which the gods transfer prosperity back to humans on a collective level. As argued earlier, the soul attains an incarnation in accordance with his or her karma, but as I also have emphasised, the mourning period is in accordance with the purity/impurity of the flesh. *If death is a purifying process rather than a polluting process, then the sons mourn and cleanse the body for the pollution in accordance with their varna belonging.* The descendants prepare the flesh and present it to the gods through the funeral pyre. Caste differences are abolished after death, and therefore, it is irrespective whether the deceased was a Sudra or Brahman when alive. The descendants prepare the flesh of the dead in accordance with the impurity, but when the funeral is completed then all fleshs are equally pure.

In other words, the gods allow only an individual soul to become incarnated in accordance with his or her own karmic deeds if the descendants fulfil their *dharma*, which is to observe the death rituals in the prescribed manner, and prepare the flesh of the corpse for the gods. If the relatives fail in this mission, then immediately the deceased and later the descendants will suffer. This seems logical, plausible, and in accordance with the informants' understanding of the necessity of having a son to conduct the funeral. Thus, the body – or the water in cosmological terms – is the ultimate means by which micro- and macro cosmos are combined through sacrifice and cosmogony (fig. 3).

The individual rebirth in accordance with karma is straightforward. The problem is to explain why the deceased might be punished if the relatives fail to conduct the proper funeral. This seems somehow unfair from the father's vantage: why is the emphasis in funeral not on the individual's karma, but on the sons' obsequies? If one isolates the father's karma in a strict sense, then all the rituals and the death pollution observed by the sons seem to be "unnecessary" regarding his forthcoming incarnation. Still, it is all these "extra" rituals that are mandatory for a prosperous incarnation. Therefore, it seems that the strict law of karma is secondary to the sons' preparation of the corpse and presentation of it to the gods (i.e. the cremation). Both the flesh and the soul as "entities" are presented to the gods. The fate of the soul depends upon the purity of the flesh. On the one hand, the soul contains the merits and demerits from previous life and, on the other hand, the quality of the flesh is a result of the descendant's preparation of the dead on the pyre, and the subsequent obsequies. If the flesh is pure, then the gods keep this vital life-giving energy, and send the soul back on earth to become reincarnated in accordance to his or her good or bad deeds (ethicisation step 2). *Since the flesh is accepted and redistributed by the gods, the deceased may become incarnated again as a human because the flesh becomes rain, which turns into fields and rice, and if eaten sperm, and so on.* This is soteriology on a societal level, which means to create as much common goods for everybody with limited means.

Thus, it seems that in karmic traditions the process of ethicisation step 1 involves a soteriological feedback on society, which is a prerequisite for the individual to reach the next level, ethicisation step 2, whereby

he or she is judged in accordance with his or her good or bad deeds. If the descendants fail in the funeral, then hell is activated as a punishment for the failure of not providing the gods with vital energy, which they can redistribute as rain. Therefore, *pure flesh offered to the gods in cremations is not a part of the deceased's incarnation in itself, but a premise for it to take place*. However, if the flesh is not pure and proper, then the deceased will be punished doubled. Thus, there is a karmic feedback mechanism involved, but only if the deceased or the descendants have not fulfilled their *dharma*. In Obeyesekere's terms, in this case the deceased will be punished both in hell (ethicisation step 1) and on earth (ethicisation step 2).

If the gods can use the flesh – the vital energy – to make life-giving rain, then the deceased will attain a prosperous reincarnation. The “degree of soteriology” or common welfare for society has impact on the deceased destiny. The most extreme cases are the satis, who attain heaven, if we are to believe the scriptures, since, as seen with Roop Kanvar, the sacrifice allegedly produced the life-giving rains for society. By separating between the soul and the flesh, but at the same time acknowledging that both of these entities are interwoven in Yama's judgement, one may explain why the forthcoming incarnation is not solely a product of the individual deeds, but also the sons' role in the funeral. A negative spiral of reincarnations is propelled by improper performances of funerals. A proper funeral conducted by the sons may give a positive feedback on the deceased's karmic record. If the flesh is properly prepared and provided to the gods, then they are satisfied and credit the deceased. If, on the other hand, the sons are sloppy, the gods punish the deceased doubled, and the sons will suffer when their time is coming.

The life-giving rains are on a general level the most prosperous that a body can become. On a divine scale, however, there are even more precious outcomes. Holy men and sadhus in general conduct their own death rituals when they are alive, and hence, they are not cremated, there is no mourning period, and they attain heaven. The funeral of Milarepa, the renowned Buddhist yogi, was particularly spectacular, and he was cremated. The funeral pyre was transformed into a celestial mansion, “The flame at the base took the form of an eight-petaled lotus blossom, and the curling tips of the fire unfolded into the eight auspicious emblems and the seven royal insignia. Even the sparks

took the form of goddesses bearing many offerings. The chants of worship and the crackling of the dazzling fire sounded like the melodious tones of various musical instruments, such as violins, flutes, and tambourines. The smoke permeated everything with the fragrance of perfume and, in the sky above the funeral pyre, young gods and goddesses poured a stream of nectar from the vases they held, and offered abundant delights for the five senses" (Lhalungpa 1979:182-183, my emphasis). The cremation was completely transparent. Spiritual awakening and fragrance, perfume and nectar poured by gods and goddess – this is heaven – in the normal world the life-giving waters are the most precious a human body can be transformed into.

6. Conclusion

The preparation of the flesh of the body is the essence in the funeral rite because of the dual function of death; the individual's destiny and the future of society. It involves soteriology at two levels. Without ethicisation of death and the flesh for further life, the process of ethicisation step 1 would not have turned into ethicisation step 2. A karma ideology necessitates more than just individual punishments and rewards since humans are miniature replicas of the gods. Therefore, the divine will and cosmic battles in Kali yuga have to be incorporated into this system, and the transformation of flesh into life-giving waters or energies is the most important part in death rituals. Providing society with the life-giving water is the primordial task for the gods. It is the best soteriology possible on earth; the perfect and eternal salvation is in heaven.



Fig. 1. Cremation at Pashupatinath

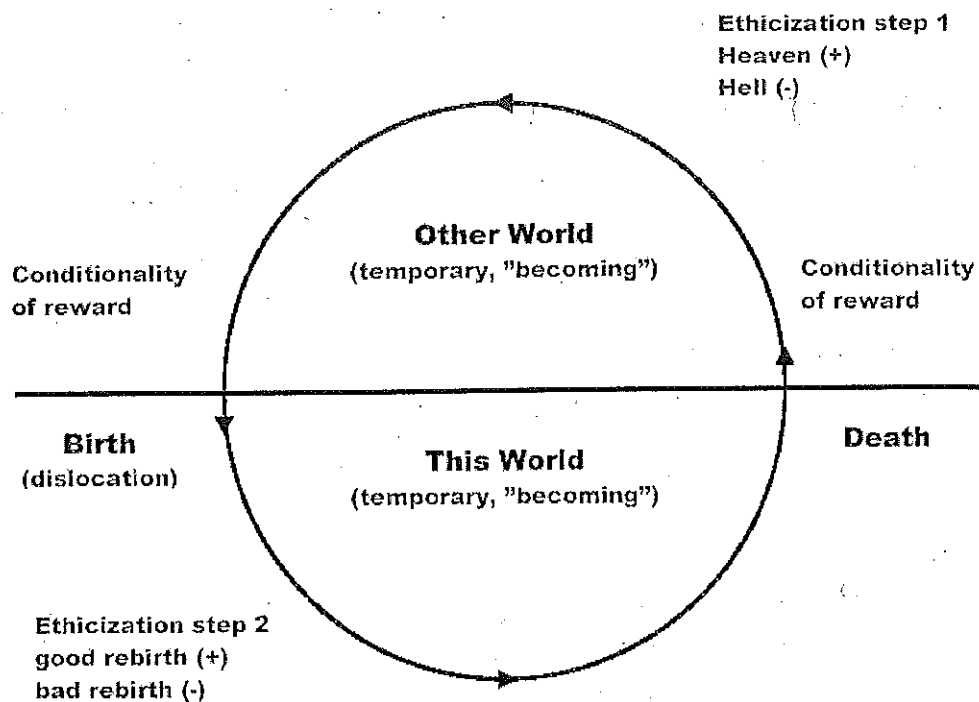


Fig. 2. Karmic eschatology.

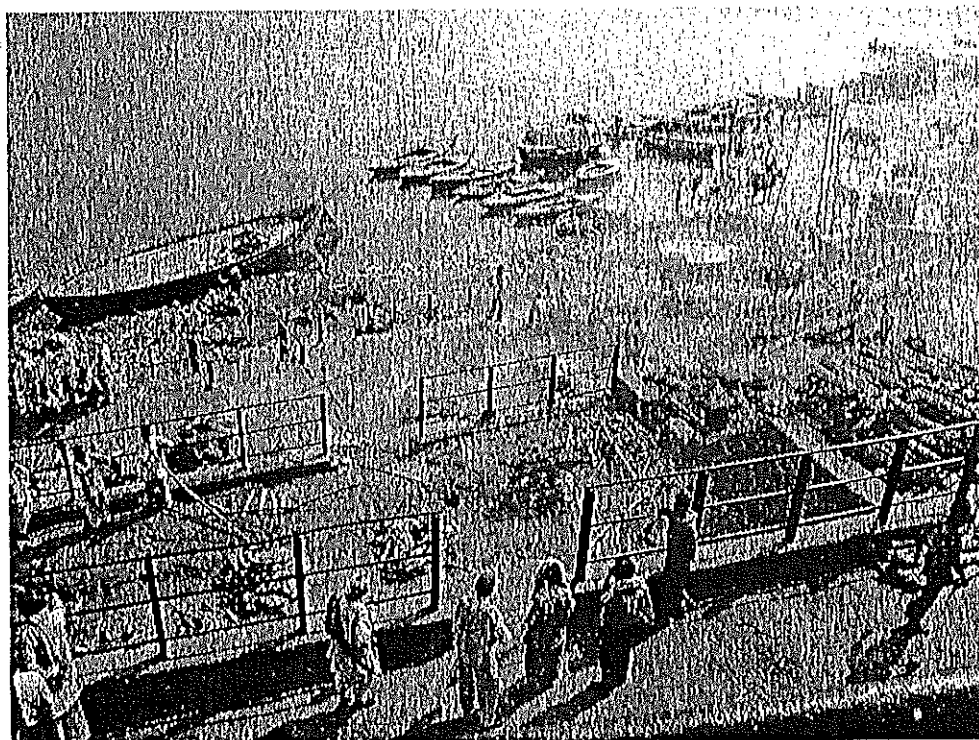


Fig. 3. Manikarnika Ghat, Varanasi

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