



Tibetan Sky Burial

Student Witnesses Reincarnation

by Rachel Laribee '05

Drigung Monastery; Central Tibet
July 2, 2004

We were all sitting in the back of this run-down old red truck. The feel of rusted red paint was under my finger tips. The smell of Yak was in air, but I didn't mind. I was the only Westerner among twenty monks, all riding together on this bumpy, torn up, dirt road in Tibet.

It was only a few days before this trip when I first met my "Tibetan Father." Having arrived in Lhasa alone, I was hungry for companionship and I found it in this lovely monk outside the holy temple in Lhasa. We had only been talking a few hours before he invited me to dinner, and we had been friends for a several days before he invited me to travel with him and other monks to a monastery outside of Lhasa. He was fatherly toward me, and I could tell he wanted to show me something. He called me his "little Western daughter" and I called him "my Tibetan Father." The more time we spent together, the more meaningful these names truly became.

It took several hours to get to the small village, where we got out and hiked up a small hill to the Drigung Monastery. After we ate, I was ready to go to bed. But before I left, Father Monk asked me if I wanted to join him in the morning to watch the Tibetan Sky Burial. Knowing that this was a chance in a lifetime, I was quick to accept yet another generous offer.

The next morning, we exited the monastery to the east and hiked about half a mile up a hill to a rock cluster. Along with around twenty monks and a dozen Tibetan family members, I sat in a large half-circle of stones, all gathered around this large, flat boulder where the ceremony would take place. I decided to wait until everyone else sat before taking my seat. Unfortunately, the only seat left was at the bottom left part of this semicircle. On my immediate left lay an even larger boulder than the one in front of us. In that spot stood a single monk with his hand in the air, holding back 100 to 150 vultures, all about two meters in size, all squawking while watching and waiting.

Two men carried something large, wrapped in cloth, and placed it on the boulder in front of us. Then one of these men removed the cloth, revealing the dead, naked body of an old Tibetan man. By the awful smell and the greenish tint of the body, it was immediately apparent to me that this man had been dead for several days, and without any preservation. In fact, the Tibetan rites call for the body to remain untouched for three days, allowing for the offering of prayers and chanting.



Photo by Rachel Laribee '05

The Tibetan monks pictured above were the author's tour guides (introduced to her by her "father monk") during her stay in Lhasa, and two of them (second from left and far right) accompanied her to the sky burial. She comments, "They didn't speak English or much Chinese, and since I didn't speak Tibetan, we spoke broken Chinese and just made do."

Two men carried something large, wrapped in cloth, and placed it on the boulder in front of us. Then one of these men removed the cloth, revealing the dead, naked body of an old Tibetan man.

Then a man dressed in long white aprons came, holding a large ax. Kneeling over the body, he scalped its head, removing the hair, and broke and removed the teeth. He then began to dismember the body, cutting the arms, legs, and chest into smaller pieces. The organs were removed for later disposal. When he was finished, the man stepped back about twenty feet. To the right of the vultures was another monk holding his arm out in front of the vultures. When the body was ready, he lowered his arm. At that moment, and only then, the vultures swarmed around the body and began eating its flesh. Squawking and shoving each other, it took only fifteen minutes for the vultures to completely consume everything from the body, except for its skeleton.

The vultures immediately returned to their boulder and again waited. The man in white came back to the body, this time carrying a sledge hammer, and proceeded to shatter the skeleton of the body into pieces. When he finished, he again stepped back while the other man

signaled the vultures a second time. The vultures swarmed around the shattered skeleton, this time leaving nothing.

It took about one hour from the time the body was placed to the completion of the sky burial. After the body was completely eaten, the vultures went back to their boulder. The whole process was repeated two more times, with two more dead bodies and two more feasts for the vultures. After the third body was consumed, the vultures flew off into the beautiful Tibetan sky. The term "sky burial" was coined because it is thought that when the vultures fly off, they spread the body to all the corners of Tibet by casting their droppings on the high mountain peaks.

Even though I am very familiar with the Tibetan culture and their practices, I must confess that at first, I was still dismayed that this culture that I had grown to love would treat their dead as if they were nothing more than lunch meat. But as I watched this ritual take place,

I looked at the faces of the family of the deceased Tibetan man. There were no signs of horror on their faces, nor any hint of tears. The Tibetans believe that the soul and spirit of each person just borrows the body, and therefore death is just another phase in the circle of reincarnation. The sky burial is not full of mourning, for the tears and mourning are completed earlier during the three days of prayers and chants after one dies. The function of the sky burial is simply the disposal of the body.

The cycle of reincarnation begins when the droppings enter the earth. The idea of reincarnation as a method of religious succession has been a religious belief in Tibet from the 12th century. The idea derives from the Buddhist belief that all humans are trapped in an endless sequence of birth, death, and rebirth until they achieve nirvana (enlightenment). Because the soul is reincarnated into another body, the soul never dies; it remains in the cycle until it reaches nirvana. Therefore, death for a Tibetan is not the end, merely the beginning for a new stage in a soul's existence.

Though Tibetans practice several forms of burial rites, the sky burial is the most common method. The harsh Tibetan terrain makes the ground often too hard to dig into, and with fuel and timber scarce, the sky burial is often the best option.

As I walked back to the monastery with my "father monk," he explained to me the reasons of the sky burial. Now, not only do I understand why the Tibetans use this form of burial, but now I realize how important this ritual is for the Tibetan culture—and for that reason, this ritual has become important to me. After we reached the monastery, I thanked my father monk and bid my entire family of monks goodbye. I then began my long ride back to Lhasa, sitting in the back of yet another old, run-down truck.

Note:

*Out of respect and at the request from the family members, no pictures were taken.

Rachel Laribee '05 traveled to China in the spring of 2004 with the College's program of study at Fudan University, after which she stayed on to travel more in China and travel to Tibet. She will graduate with a double major in Chinese language and Chinese history and culture. She is interested in service and has already worked with AmeriCorps. Following graduation, she wants either to enter the Peace Corps or work in Chinese Intelligence and then later, attend graduate school. Her hobbies are travel, playing guitar and violin, and sailing.