Death and the regeneration of life

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JONATHAN PARRY

My aim in this paper is to outline two opposing ways in which the problems of temporality and man’s mortality are handled within Hinduism. The first section focuses on the case of the householder. For him, I argue, the ‘good’ death is a sacrificial act which results not only in a re-creation of the deceased, but also in a regeneration of time and of the cosmos. In the second section I turn to a group of ascetics who are intimately associated with death, corpses and the cremation ground. By contrast with the householder, the somewhat macabre practice of the Aghori ascetic is directed at a suspension – rather than a renewal – of time, and is thus an attempt to escape from the recurrence of death implied by the endless cycle of rebirths. The singularity of his means to this end lies (as Eliade (1969:296) perceived) in a peculiarly material and literal play on the common Hindu theme of the combination of opposites; but both the end itself and its theological justification are – we shall find – expressed in thoroughly conventional language.

Although the life of the householder and the life of the ascetic are oriented towards two different goals, both share in the same complex of interconnected assumptions about the relationship between life and death. As Shulman (1980:90) puts it:

The Hindu universe is a closed circuit: nothing new can be produced except by destroying or transforming something else. To attain more life – such as a son, or the ‘rebirth’ of the sacrificial patron himself – the life of the victim must be extinguished. Life and death are two facets of a single never-ending cycle . . .

Consistent with this, we shall encounter an image of life as a limited good: thus a barren woman may conceive by causing the child of another to withdraw away and die. Death regenerates life: the householder sacrifices himself on his funeral pyre in order than he may be reborn; while the power derived from his intimacy with death and decay enables the Aghori ascetic to confer fertility on the householder (and this despite his own disparagement of the ordinary mortal condition). What is more, the power to convert death into life is seen as intimately connected with the performance of ascetic austerities – not just in the obvious case of Aghori, but also in the case of the austerities performed by the corpse of the householder on his cremation pyre, and by the chief mourner during his regime of mourning. The cremation rituals of the householder – with their insistence on the complete elimination of the remains of the deceased – recall, moreover, the ascetic’s denigration of the ‘gross’ physical body (a point which has been developed in more detail in the Introduction to this volume, pp. 36–8). Seen from this point of view the opposition between ascetic and householder would not appear radical. But from another perspective the difference is fundamental, for while the renouncer’s goal is a permanent state of being unfettered by any material form, the cremation rituals of the householder hold out only the promise of a renewed existence which is itself imperfect, and in which the immortal soul is unbearably chained to a particular transient form.

At the outset I should acknowledge that – for reasons which will become obvious – there are many gaps in my data relating to the Aghoris, and should explicitly state that I have not personally witnessed many of the secret performances with which they are most closely associated. What needs to be kept firmly in mind then is that at various points the account relates, not so much to what these ascetics actually do, as to what they say they do and what other people believe them to do.

My ethnography is from the city of Benares, one of the most important centres of Hindu pilgrimage in India. Benares is sacred to Siva, the Great Ascetic, the Lord of the Cremation Ground and the Conqueror of Death; and the cornerstone of its religious identity is its association with death and its transcendence. All who die here automatically attain ‘liberation’ or ‘salvation’ (mukti, moksha) – an inducement which attracts many elderly and terminally-sick people to move to the city. Each year thousands of corpses of those who have been unfortunate or undeserving enough to expire elsewhere are brought to Benares for cremation on one of the two principal burning ghats; while vast numbers of pious pilgrims come to immerse the ashes of a deceased relative in the Ganges or to make offerings to the ancestors. Death in Benares is big business, which – as I have outlined elsewhere (Parry, 1980) – involves an elaborate division of labour between a number of different kinds of caste specialists variously associated with the disposal of the corpse, the fate of the soul and the purification of the mourners.
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Manikarnika ghāt is the best patronised of the city's two cremation grounds. It was here that at the beginning of the time Lord Visnu sat for 50000 years performing the austerities by which he created the world, and here that the corpse of the cosmos will burn at the end of time. But these events occur not only at the start and finish of each cosmic cycle. They also belong to an eternal present which is continually reactualised on the ghāt in the uninterrupted sequence of cremations performed there.8

A recurrent theme in Hindu religious thought is the homology which is held to exist between body and cosmos. Both are governed by the same laws, are constituted out of the same five elements and everything that exists in the one must also exist in the other (cf. Goudriaan, 1979:57). Hence all the gods and the whole of space are present within the human body - a notion which is explicitly elaborated in the Garuda Purana (part 15), an eschatological text to which the Benares sacred specialists continually refer. The homology is also one of the basic principles underlying the architectural theory of the Hindu temple, which is constructed on the plan of a cosmic man (Beck, 1976); while many forms of worship involve a 'cosmification' of the body of the worshipper (Gupta, 1979). A case in point is provided by the rituals described in the Kalika Purana. The worshipper begins by symbolically effecting his own death which is identified with the death of the world; and in subsequently re-creating his body he reconstitutes the universe. It is of some significance for what follows that the sacred space within which all this occurs represents a styled cremation ground (Kinsley, 1977:102).

Body and cosmos are thus equated; and this - combined with our last example - would seem to imply a further equivalence between cremation which destroys the microcosm of the physical body and the general conflagration which destroys the macrocosm at pralaya, the time of cosmic dissolution. (Indeed certain of the texts classify an individual death as nityapralaya - a regularly-enacted doomsday (Biardeau, 1971:18, 76).) But just as the world's annihilation by fire and flood is a necessary prelude to its re-creation, so the deceased is cremated and his ashes immersed in water in order that he may be restored to life. Since the body is the cosmos the last rites become the symbolic equivalent of the destruction and rejuvenation of the universe. Cremation is cosmogony; and an individual death is assimilated to the process of cosmic regeneration. Popular thought certainly presupposes some intrinsic association between cremation and the scene of original creation, for one of the reasons given for the bitter opposition to a Municipal plan to relocate the burning ghāt away from the centre of the city was that it is not possible to sever its connection with the place of the prolonged austerities (tapas) by which Visnu engendered the world.8

Now such austerities generate heat, which is in many contexts represented as the source of life and fertility. Thus Agni (the god of fire) is represented as the 'cause of sexual union' (O'Flaherty, 1973:90). Through the heat of his austerities the ascetic acquires a superabundant sexual potency, and a creative power by which he may rival or even terrorise the gods; through the cremation pyre the seven storm-gods are born (O'Flaherty, 1973:109); and through bathing in the tank of Lolark Kund in Benares, fecundity is conferred on barren women - the tank being sacred to the sun, the source of heat. Consistent with this, Visnu is described as burning with the fire of the tapas by which he created the cosmos at Manikarnika ghāt. By entering the pyre here the deceased - as it were - refuels the fires of creation at the very spot where creation began. Indeed I have heard cremation described as a kind of tapas, and certain of the texts clearly represent it as such (Knipe, 1975:132; cf. Kaelber, 1976, who puts it in terms of Agni imparting tapas to the corpse).

Another way of developing the same argument would be to note that cremation is a sacrifice,9 and that the essence of the textual conception of the sacrifice is that it is a cosmogonic act. Thus - to invoke a different account of the origins of the universe - every produced by the sacrifice by the sacrificial dismemberment of his own body.10

As Heesterman (1959:245–6) puts it: 'The sacrifice may be described as a periodical quickening ritual by which the universe is recreated . . . . The pivotal place is taken up by the sacrificer; like his prototype Prajapati he incorporates the universe and performs the cosmic drama of disintegration and reintegration.' Any sacrifice then is, as Eliead (1965:11) affirms, a 'repetition of the act of creation' and maintains or repairs the cosmic order (Zaechner, 1962:245–6; Malamoud, 1975; Biardeau, 1976:22; Herrenschmidt, 1978 and 1979). It therefore represents a renewal of time.

What, then, is the evidence that cremation is a sacrifice (and hence an act of cosmic regeneration)? Here we might start by observing that the term for cremation in Sanskrit and in the Sanskritised Hindi of my more literate informants is antyesti, 'last sacrifice'; and that one of the manuals of ritual practice regularly used as a guide to the mortuary rites (the Śraddha Parijat) explicitly equates cremation with a fire
sacrifice. Or, to cite a different authority (though not one which my informants ever invoked), the Satapatha Brahmana represents the sacrificial fire altar ritual as symbolic re-enactment of the story of Prajapati, and then goes on to lay down precisely the same rules for handling the corpse of a deceased sacrificer as for treating the sacrificial altar which represents the body of the god (Levin, 1930).

The parallels between cremation and the sacrificial procedure are, as Das points out, almost precise.

Thus the site of cremation is prepared in exactly the same way as in fire-sacrifice, i.e. the prescriptive use of ritually pure wood, the purification of the site, its consecration with holy water, and the establishment of Agni with the proper use of mantras ... The dead body is prepared in the same manner as the victim of a sacrifice and is attributed with divinity. Just as the victim of a sacrifice is exhorted not to take any revenge for the pains which the sacrifice has inflicted on him (Hubert & Mauss, 1964) so the mourners pray to the preta to spare them from his anger at the burns he has suffered in the fire (Garuda Purana). (Das, 1977:122–3)

The corpse is given water to drink, is lustrated, anointed with ghee and enclosed in sacred space by being circumambulated with fire – which is precisely what Hubert & Mauss (1964:31) describe as happening to the sacrificial victim. Further, the same set of ten substances (known as dasang) which are offered in the pyre are also used for the fire sacrifice (havan); while according to the standard manual of mortuary practice – the Prajapati Manjari (p.4) – the wood used for the pyre should be that which pertains to a sacrifice (yajgyik).

All this poses a puzzle. On the face of it there would seem to be a flat contradiction between our received wisdom that the corpse is pre-emminently polluting and dangerous, and the notion that it is a fit sacrificial offering to the gods. The situation is complex and the evidence is hard to interpret and often appears contradictory. Much of my data would certainly support the view that the corpse is contaminating (and indeed the enormous symbolic power of the association between corpses and the Aghori ascetic rests on this fact). But this is far from the whole story, for in certain respects the dead body appears to be treated as an object of great purity, even as a deity. It is said to be Siva, is greeted with salutations appropriate to Siva (cries of 'Har, Har, Mahadev'), and continual play is made on the phonetic similarity between Siva and sava ('corpse'). It must be guarded against pollution, may not be touched by the impure, is wrapped in freshly-launched cloth, is circumambulated with the auspicious right hand towards it and the pyre is ignited by the chief mourner only after he has passed through an elaborate series of purifications (cf. Stevenson, 1920:144–8). He offers the fire with his right hand; and at this time his sacred thread hangs over his left shoulder towards the right-hand side of his body, as is the rule when offerings are made to the gods (whereas it hangs from right to left when the offering is to the ancestors or to an unincorporated ghost). Or again, in the custom of certain regional communities represented in Benares, the corpse of a woman who has died in childbirth or during her monthly course must undergo special purificatory rites before she is fit for the pyre, as if only those in a state of purity are eligible for cremation (cf. Stevenson, 1920:151; Kane, 1953:231; Pandey, 1969:270–1).

I cannot confidently claim to be able to provide a definitive explanation for this apparent contradiction. I believe, however, that the most revealing place to start is with the definition of death as the instant at which the pran, or vital breath leaves the body. Now according to the theological dogma expounded by many of my informants, this occurs – not at the cessation of physiological functioning – but at the rite of kapāl kriyā, which is performed mid-way through the cremation, and at which the chief mourner releases the 'vital breath' from the charred corpse of the deceased by cracking open his skull with a stave.11 Before this stage it is commonly said to be completely inappropriate to use the term preta meaning 'a disembodied ghost'.

The corollary which is often derived from this is that it is precisely at the moment of breaking the skull that death pollution begins.12 Accordingly, the śrāddha ceremonies which mark the end of the year of mourning are celebrated on the anniversary of the cremation rather than on the anniversary of the actual death. That on this view impurity does not emanate from the corpse itself is neatly illustrated by the case of those who have died a 'bad' death and whose corpses are not burnt but immersed in the Ganges. In such an instance, it is often claimed, no death pollution is incurred until after the putal viśāḥ ritual at which the deceased's body is re-created in the form of an effigy, into which his soul is invoked, and which is then cremated. Since this rite may be delayed until several months after the disposal of the actual body, and since there is no impurity in the interval, it is clear that death pollution springs from the act of cremation rather than from the corpse or its physiological demise. It is, in the Benares idiom, a consequence of 'the sin of burning the body hairs of the deceased'. Hence as Pullu Maharaj explained, the chief mourner remains in a state of great purity before igniting the pyre, 'because he is performing a mahāyajna – a great sacrifice. It is we who pollute him by our touch and not he us.' After cremation, however, he is defiled 'for he has burnt the flesh'.
What this definition of the point of death implies is that before the cremation the corpse is not a corpse but an animate oblation to the fire. As another informant spontaneously put it: 'he does not die but is killed. He dies on the pyre.' Cremation, he went on, is violence (hatyā) and death pollution (sūtaka) the consequence of that violence.13 On such a theory cremation becomes a sacrifice in the real sense of the term: it is a ritual slaughter which makes of the chief mourner a homicide, parricide or even slayer of the gods. It is hardly to be wondered at, then, that his subsequent purifications – like that of any sacrificer – resemble the expiation of a criminal (Hubert & Mauss, 1964:33). It should not be thought, however, that the victim is a reluctant one, for – as we shall see – a crucial aspect of the 'good' death is that it is a voluntary offering of the self of the gods. The corpse is thus not only alive but also a willing victim, and hence a being of extraordinary sacredness.14

I hasten to emphasise that all this refers only to a somewhat esoteric level of theological discourse, and that at another level it is of course universally acknowledged that a man is dead once the physical manifestations of life are extinguished. Reasoning from this starting point, other informants held that death pollution begins at the moment of physiological arrest, and that the corpse itself is a source of severe impurity. Those best versed in the texts, however, tended to steer a middle course between these two theories by distinguishing the case of the Agnihotri (by whom sacrificial fires are continuously maintained) from that of the ordinary householder. While for the former there is no death pollution before cremation, for the latter it begins when respiration ceases (cf. Abbott, 1932:177, 192, 505; Pandey, 1969:269).

What is common to both theories, then, is the view that death pollution starts when the body ceases to be animated by its 'vital breath'. The disparity arises over the point at which this happens. On the view that it occurs during the cremation, the deceased's body represents a pure oblation to the gods; while on the view that the 'vital breath' departs at physiological arrest it is merely an impure carcass.15

Given that the good death is a sacrifice and sacrifice is an act of regeneration, it is only to be expected that the beliefs and practices associated with cremation are pervaded by the symbolism of embryology. According to one well-known text which deals with sacrifice (the Satapatha Brahmana), there are three kinds of birth: that which is had from one's parents, from sacrifice and from cremation (Levi, 1898:106–7; Levin, 1930). Indeed the ritual techniques involved in both of the latter might be seen as a branch of obstetrics. Having dispersed his own body in the sacrifice, the sacrificer reverts to an embryonic state and is then reborn (cf. Heesterman, 1959; Kaelber, 1978); while at death – as I have often been told – the body is to be taken to the cremation ground head first because that is the way a baby is born; while the corpse of a man should be laid face down on the pyre and the corpse of a woman face up,16 for this is the position in which the two sexes enter the world. During the fifth month of pregnancy the vital breath enters the embryo through the suture at the top of the skull and it is from here that it is released during cremation. Throughout pregnancy the baby is sustained by the digestive fire which resides in its mother's belly,17 and at death it returns to the fire from which it came and is thus reborn (cf. Knipe, 1975:1). At both parturitions an untouchable specialist acts the indispensable role of midwife – cutting the umbilical cord at birth and providing the sacred fire and super-presiding the pyre at death.

At other points the symbolism of the maternity ward is replaced by that of the bridal chamber. The funeral procession of an old person is described as a second marriage party and is accompanied by erotic dancing; while a husband and wife who die within a few hours of each other are placed on a single pyre in what is explicitly represented as a position of copulation. In some texts the corpse is described as rising as smoke from the pyre, turning into clouds, rain and then vegetables, which when eaten are transformed into semen (O'Flaherty, 1973:41–2; 1976:28). The destruction of the corpse is thus converted into the source of future life.

The connection between death and sexuality is a theme which is constantly reiterated in both textual and popular traditions. In myth, for example, death enters the world as a result of sexual increase (O'Flaherty, 1976:28, 212) and childbirth is given to women as a consequence of the god Indra's brahmancide; in folk dream-analysis a naked woman or a bride is a presentiment of impending death; and in ethno-medicine the loss of semen results in disease, old age and death, while its retention confers vitality and even immortality (cf. Briggs, 1938:324; Carstairs, 1957:84–5, 195–6; Eliade, 1969:248–9). If death regenerates life, it is equally clear that in turn the regeneration of life causes death.

It is this endless cycle which the ascetic seeks to evade. As a consequence he is not cremated. The bodies of small children, and of victims of certain diseases like leprosy and smallpox, are also immersed in the Ganges rather than burnt. Except in the case of the ascetic, however, an effigy of the deceased should later be burnt; and this also applies to one who has died a violent or accidental death.
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(whose body will normally have been cremated). Unless this substitute corpse is offered to the fire the deceased will indefinitely remain as a marginal ghost (preta). In all cases, then, a real or surrogate cremation is a prerequisite for the proper re-creation of the departed.

While piecemeal explanations of each individual category have often been suggested, the crucial point about the list of exceptional cases given in the previous paragraph is – as Das (1977:123) has pointed out – that it constitutes a single set. It consists of those who are not fit sacrificial objects (e.g. the leper), those who have already been offered to the gods (e.g. the renouncer who has performed his own mortuary rituals at the time of his initiation and who subsequently exists on earth as a marginal ghost), and those whose death cannot be represented as an act of self-sacrifice (e.g. children and victims of sudden or violent death).

This last case ties in with the notion that the ‘good’ death is one to which the individual voluntarily submits his- or herself: one of the prime exemplars of such a death being the sati-strī, or ‘true wife’ who mounts her husband’s funeral pyre. In the ideal case the dying man – like the sacrificer before the sacrifice (Kaelber, 1978) – forgoes all food for some days before death, and consumes only Ganges water and charan-amrit (the mixture in which the image of a deity has been bathed), in order to weaken his body so that the ‘vital breath’ may leave it more easily; and in order – as I would see it – to make himself a worthy sacrificial object free of foul faecal matter. (A similar interpretation may be placed on the bathing and occasional tonsuring of the corpse prior to cremation.) Having previously predicted the time of his going and set all his affairs in order, he gathers his sons about him* and – by an effort of concentrated will – abandons life. He is not said to die, but to relinquish his body.

In the case of a man of great spiritual force a kind of spontaneous combustion cracks open his skull to release the vital breath; while the vital breath of one who dies a bad death emerges through his anus in the form of excrement, through his mouth as vomit, or through one of his other orifices. Such an evacuation is a sure sign of damnation to come, a notion which is perhaps not unconnected with the idea that it is best to die on an empty stomach. An image of the way in which the soul might ideally emerge was provided by the case of an old householders, whose extraordinary spiritual development had gained him a circle of devoted disciples, and whose subsequent mortuary rituals I attended. His copybook death was said to have been consummated on his funeral pyre when his burning corpse successively manifested itself to a privileged few in the forms of the celebrated religious leaders Sai Baba, Mehar Baba and Rama Krishna Parmhansa, as the terrifying god Bhairava (Lord Siva’s kota or ‘police-chief’ in Benares) and finally as Siva himself. A rounded protruberance was seen to move up the spine of the corpse, burst through the skull, soar into the air and split into three parts. One fell in Benares, another went north to the abode of Siva in the Himalayas and nobody knows what happened to the third.

The best death occurs in Benares, or failing that in another place of pilgrimage. But in any event death should occur on purified ground and in the open air rather than in a bed and under or on a roof. One would hope to die to the sound of chanting of the names of god, for one’s dying thoughts are often said to determine one’s subsequent fate, even to the extent of redeeming the most abject of sinners. There are not only places but also times to die well – ‘the fortnight of the ancestors’ (pitri-paksha) for example, or during the period of uttarāyana (the six months of the year that start with the winter solstice); while five of the twenty seven lunar mansions (nakṣatras) of the Hindu almanac are from this point of view auspicious and require special rituals of expiation.* But such inconvenience is unlikely to affect the paragon, whose spiritual force gives him a degree of mastery over the time of his own death.

By contrast with ‘good’ death, the ‘bad’ death is one for which the deceased cannot be said to have prepared himself. It is said that ‘he did not die his own death’. The paradigmatic case is death by violence or as a result of some sudden accident; the underlying notion being that the victim has been forced to relinquish life prematurely with the result that his embittered ghost is liable to return to afflict the survivors unless the appropriate propitiatory rituals are scrupulously observed. Whether these have been successful can only be judged by their results, for the ghost that is yet to be satisfied will return to haunt the dreams of the mourners or to vent his malevolence in other more destructive ways. As a consequence, bad death in the family tends to be cumulative, the victim of one causing another.

The most common expression for what I have called ‘bad death’ is akl mrityu, literally ‘untimely death’ (though some of the resonance of this expression might be better captured by glossing it as ‘uncontrolled death’ – by contrast with the controlled release of life which is the ideal). Strictly speaking, it is not the age of the victim but the manner of dying that is diagnostic of an akl mrityu, and the death of an old person may be ‘untimely’ if it was caused by leprosy, violence or a sudden accident. The expression apl mrityu (meaning ‘death in youth’) is however often used as a synonym for akl mrityu – such a death being
almost *ipso facto* bad. The good death occurs after a full and complete life – the lifespan appropriate to our degenerate age being one hundred and twenty-five, and this a mere fraction of that of former epochs. The fact that few attain even this modest target is a consequence of the sins of this and former lives; and the greater the burden of sin, the greater the shortfall. Those who die before the age of forty are certainly destined for hell; while the stillborn infant is probably some reprobate expiating his crimes by a succession of seven such births. There is also, however, the notion that the sins of the father may be visited on the son, and that the attenuation of this life may be a consequence of the wickedness of those with whom the individual is most closely associated. The quality of life thus determines its duration. But it also determines the quality of death. A group of Funeral Priests who – with some rancour – were regaling me with the story of the seizure of their hereditary rights by one of their rich and powerful colleagues, clinched their evidence of his iniquity with the gleeful recollection that he had died vomiting excrement. As for his son, their present employer, ‘he will reap, leprosy is coming out on him. He will rot as no one in our caste has ever rotted before.’

Although I cannot deal here with the extremely elaborate sequence of post-cremation rituals, there are two aspects of these rituals on which I would like to comment briefly. At death (dehānt, ‘the end of the body’) the soul becomes a disembodied ghost or *preta*, a marginal state dangerous both to itself and to the survivors. The purpose of the rituals of the first ten days is to reconstruct a physical form for this ethereal spirit – though this new form is of a less ‘gross’ kind than the one the deceased had formerly inhabited (see the Introduction to this volume, pp. 36–7). Each day a *piṇḍa* – a ball of rice or flour – is offered in the name of the deceased, each of which reconstitutes a specific limb of his body. By the tenth day the body is complete, and on the eleventh life is breathed into it and it is fed. On the next day a ritual is performed which enables the deceased to rejoin his ancestors. The wandering ghost (*preta*) becomes an incorporated ancestor (*piṭṭr*). A ball of rice representing the departed is cut into three by the chief mourner and is merged with three other rice balls which represent the deceased’s father, father’s father and father’s father’s father. The soul then sets out on its journey to ‘the abode of the ancestors’ (*piṭṭr lok*) where it arrives on the anniversary of its death, having endured many torments on the way – torments which the mourners seek to mitigate by thee ritualuals they perform on its behalf. In order to cross over into ‘the kingdom of the dead’ (*yāmlok*) at the end of its journey, the soul must negotiate the terrifying Vaitarni river which is invariably repre-

tented as flowing with blood, excrement and other foul substances.

The first point that I want to make is that in a number of ways the symbolism of this whole phase of the mortuary rituals continues the theme of death as a parturition. The *piṇḍa* is used not only for the rice or flour balls out of which the deceased’s body is reconstructed, but also for an actual embryo (cf. O’Flaherty, 1980); and the body is completed in a ten-day period paralleling the ten (lunar) month period of gestation (cf. Knipe, 1977). What’s more, there is a striking correspondence between the image of crossing the Vaitarni river and the birth passage of the child out of the womb, the latter also being explicitly represented as negotiating a river of blood and pollution. What we seem to have here is a case of ritual over-kill; the deceased is reborn out of the fire and then born all over again in the subsequent rituals.

It is perhaps also worth noting that, in relation to the twelfth-day rituals, both the textual commentaries and the more knowledgeable ritual specialists in Benares make a rather different kind of link between death and regeneration. If the chief mourner’s wife is barren, then in order to conceive a son, she should consume the rice ball used in the ritual to represent her husband’s father’s father (cf. Kane, 1953:346–7, 480). The *piṇḍa* identified with the ancestor thus has the quality of semen and may beget a new *piṇḍa*-embryo (cf. O’Flaherty, 1980). Though the notion is clearly inconsistent with the theory of reincarnation postulated by the doctrine of karma, the idea is that the great-grandfather comes back as his own great-grandson; and I would add that even those who deny the efficacy of any such procedure often assert an identity of character between the two.

My second point relates to the regime of mourning and its striking similarity to the code of the ascetic. The chief mourner must not shave, use soap or oil his hair, wear shoes or a shirt; throughout the mourning he must wear a single garment, must sleep on the ground, avoid ‘hot’ food and abstain from sex – all of which recalls the conduct prescribed for the renouncer. Each year tens of thousands of pilgrim-mourners go to the holy city of Gaya in order to make offerings there which will ensure the final salvation of their deceased parents. Many of them wear the ochre-coloured garments of the ascetic and it was several times explained to me that this is a symbol of their temporary assumption of the renouncer’s role. Dumont (1971) and Das (1977:126) have both remarked on this parallel, and Das interprets it in terms of the linellarity of both statues. Her point is unexceptionable but, I believe, insufficient; for what she fails to note – but what some of my informants explicitly said – is that it is by taking on the role of the
ascetic and performing austerities (tapasya) that the chief mourner acquires the power to re-create a body for the deceased.

I have thus returned to my starting point: the creative power of asceticism, by means of which Visnu engendered the cosmos. Austerities produce heat, the source of life - the corpse being subjected to the heat of the pyre that the departed might be reborn. Cremation is thus an act of creation, even a cosmic renewal. The paradox is that such austerities have the odour of an opportunism repudiated by the 'true' renouncer, in that they are oriented towards a regeneration of life. For the latter the value of such a goal is dubious, since the world is suffering and the corollary of rebirth is the relentless recurrence of death. The real aim of renunciation is rather an escape from this endless cycle, and it is this - I will suggest - that makes sense of the baroque excess with which the Aghori is associated.

The necrophagous ascetic and the transcendence of time

Before the creation was a void. According to the myth of Visnu's cosmogony recorded in the best-known eulogy of Benares' sanctity, the Kāśi Khandā (Chapter 26), all that originally existed was Brahma, which cannot be apprehended by the mind or described by the speech, and which is without form, name, colour or any physical attribute. Creation proceeded by differentiation from this primal essence, duality emerging from non-duality. Much of the endeavour of the world-renouncer may be seen as an attempt to recapture the original state of non-differentiation and to re-establish the unity of opposites which existed before the world began.

The discipline of yoga is - as Eliade (1969; 1976) has shown - directed at precisely this goal. By his physical postures the yogi subjugates his body and renders it immobile; by concentrating on a single object he frees his mind from the flux of events and arrests mental process; and by slowing down and eventually stopping his breath 'he stops the activities of the senses and severs the connection between the mind and external sensory objects' (Gupta, 1979:168). Sexual intercourse may be converted into a discipline in which the semen is immobilised by the practice of coitus reservatus, or its normal direction of flow reversed by reabsorbing it into the penis after ejaculation. By thus controlling his body he acquires magical powers (siddhis) by which he may defy nature and control the world. But above all, the yogi's immobilisation of mind, body, breath and semen represents an attempt to return to what Eliade describes as a 'primordial motionless Unity', and to attain sāmādhi, a timeless state of non-duality in which there is neither birth nor death nor any experience of differentiation.

This suspension of time and conquest of death is also, the aim of Aghori asceticism. The theological premise on which their practice is founded would appear to be a classical monism. Every soul is identical with the Absolute Being; all category distinctions are a product of illusion (māyā), and behind all polarities there is an ultimate unity. But what is peculiar to the Aghoris is a very literal working-out of this monistic doctrine through a discipline which insists on a concrete experience of the identity of opposites, and on a material realisation of the unity between them. It is a matter of a kind of externalised fulfilment of what is more orthodoxy interpreted as a purely internal quest.

Although there are many similarities of practice, and perhaps also a direct historical connection, between the Aghoris and the skull-carrying Kapalikas of certain late Sanskrit texts, they themselves trace the foundation of their order to an ascetic called Kina ('rancour') Ram, whom they claim as an incarnation (āvatār) of Siva, and who is supposed to have died (or rather 'taken samādhi') in the second half of the eighteenth century when he was nearly one hundred and fifty years old. The āśrama (or 'monastic refuge') Kina Ram founded in Benares (which is also the site of his tomb) is one of the most important centres of the sect - though only one or two ascetics actually live there. Each of the succeeding mahants ('abbots') of this āśrama is supposed to be an āvatār of (Siva's āvatār) Kina Ram; the present incumbent being reckoned as the twelfth in the line. There are probably no more than fifteen Aghori ascetics permanently or semi-permanently resident in Benares and its immediate environs, but others from elsewhere congregate at Kina Ram's āśrama during the festivals of Lolārkh Chhat and Guru-Parnima. The evidence suggests that at the end of the last century their numbers were several times greater - (Barrow, 1893:215, gives an estimate of between one and two hundred) - though it is very unlikely that they were ever a numerically significant element in the ascetic population of the city. Their hold on the popular imagination is, however, out of all proportion to their numbers, and some Aghoris acquire a substantial following of lay devotees. Recruitment to the sect is theoretically open to both sexes and to all castes. In practice, however, all the ascetics I knew, or knew of, were male and of clean caste origin (though some of their devotees were female).

The Aghoris, wrote Sherrington (1872:269), are 'a flagrantly indecent and abominable set of beggars who have rendered themselves notorious for the disgusting wileness of their habits'. Indeed the
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‘left-hand’ discipline (vāṃ panthī sādhana) they embrace was hardly likely to commend itself to the English missionary. The Aghori performs austerities at, and probably lives on, the cremation ground – in some cases in a rough shack, into the mud-walls of which are set human skulls (Morinis, 1979:258). He may go naked or clothe himself in a shroud taken from a corpse, wear a necklace of bones around his neck and his hair in matted locks. His eyes are conventionally described as burning-red, like live coals; his whole demeanour is awesome, and in speech he is brusque, churlish and foul-mouthed.

Rumour persistently associates the Aghoris with human sacrifice, and there is said to have been a notorious case in the recent past just across the river from Benares. What is certain, however, is that during the British raj more than one Aghori was executed for the crime (Barrow, 1893:208); and only recently the Guardian newspaper (Thursday, 6 March 1980) reported the death in police custody of an old ascetic who was living on a south Indian cremation ground and who was suspected of the sacrifice of five children whose blood he collected in bottles for the performance of rituals by which he sought to attain immortality. The article goes on to cite a recent (unspecified) survey which claimed that there are still probably a hundred human sacrifices offered each year in India in order to avert epidemics, ensure the fertility of crops or women, or confer supernatural powers on the sacrificer.

As part of his discipline the Aghori may perform the rite of sāva-sādhana, in which he seats himself on the torso of a corpse to worship. By means of this worship he is able to gain an absolute control over the deceased’s spirit, through which he communicates with other ghostly beings. The Aghori sleeps over a model bier (made from the remnants of a real one); smears his body with ash from the pyres, cooks his food on wood pilfered from them and consumes it out of the human skull which is his constant companion and alms-bowl, and which he is supposed to have acquired by some crude surgery on a putrid and bloated corpse fished out of the river. My informant Fakkar (meaning ‘indigent’/‘carefree’) Baba, however, shamefacedly admits to having obtained his from a hospital morgue, though he claims to have taken precautions to ensure that it was a skull of the right type (see below). It belonged, he says, to a young Srivastava (Trader) who died of snake-bite. The provenance of Lal Baba’s skull is reputedly more immaculate. Several of my friends at Manikarnika ghūṭi recall the day when they waded out into the river to retrieve the corpse to which it belonged, and one of them claims to have unwittingly lent him the knife with which he performed the operation. Before eating I have seen Lal Baba offer the food it contains to a dog, thus converting it into the ‘polluted leavings’ (jāthā) of the most debased of animals, and one which is also – like the ideal Aghori – a scavenger living off the carrion of the cremation ground. The ‘true’ Aghori is entirely indifferent to what he consumes, drinks not only liquor but urine, and eats not only meat but excrement, vomit and the putrid flesh of corpses.

While I myself have been present when an Aghori drank what was said to be the urine of a dog, and swallowed what was undoubtedly ash from a cremation pyre, I cannot personally testify to their necrophagy. All I can say with complete assurance is that they readily own to the practice; that as far as my lay informants are concerned the matter is not in question, and that several of them claim to have seen an Aghori eating corpse flesh. One highly revered ascetic has hung a large portrait of himself in the lopeshy hospital which he founded, in which he is shown sitting cross-legged on a corpse, a bottle of liquor in one hand while in the other is a morsel of flesh which he is raising to his lips. Apart from its very existence, the interesting thing about the painting is that the corpse which he is devouring appears to be his own (which would conform with the theology of monism I describe below). What is also relevant here is that another of my ascetic informants insisted that the crucial point about the corpse on which the Aghori sits to worship is that it is identical to his own.

Starting with the Dabistan, a seventeenth-century Persian source (cited by Barrow, 1893 and Crooke, 1928), the historical records treat necrophagy as an indisputable fact and provide several supposedly eye-witness accounts of the practice – though some of these are far from credible. The narrator of The revelations of an orderly (a semi-fictional work published in Benares in 1848) claims, for example, that: ‘I once saw a wretch from this station eating the head of a putrid corpse, and as I passed he howled and pointed to me; and then scooped out the eyes and ate them before me’. Another nineteenth-century British account claims that ‘near Benares they are not unusually seen floating down the river on a corpse, and feeding upon its flesh’ (Moor quoted in Oman, 1903:166); while according to a third, the drunken Aghori ‘will seize hold of corpses that drift to the banks of the river and bite off bits of its flesh . . .’ (Barrow, 1893:206). Or again, Tod (1839:84) reports that ‘one of the Deora chiefs told me that . . . when conveying the body of his brother to be burnt, one of these monsters crossed the path of the funeral procession, and begged to have the corpse, saying that it “would make excellent “chutni”, or condiment”’.

While such reports would certainly do little to allay the doubts expressed by Arens (1979) about the nature of our existing evidence for

Sacrificial death and the necrophagous ascetic
anthropophagy, what is perhaps more serious witness to its occurrence is provided by the series of prosecutions which followed the special legislation passed by the British to ban – as Crooke (1928) phrased it – ‘the habit of cannibalism’. One Aghori, for example, who was tried in Ghazipur in 1862 was found carrying the remains of a putrid corpse along a road. He was throwing the brains from the skull on to the ground and the stench of the corpse greatly disturbed the people. Here and there he placed the corpse on shop boards and on the ground. Separating pieces of flesh from the bones he ate them and insisted on begging. (Barrow, 1893)

The defendant later admitted that ‘he ate corpses whenever he found them’ (Barrow, 1893:209). Convictions were also obtained in subsequent prosecutions brought before the courts in Rohtak in 1882, and in Dehra Dun and Berhampore in 1884. In one of these cases the accused testified that ‘he frequently ate human flesh when hungry’ (Barrow, 1893:210); while the newspaper report of a further incident asserts that it forms ‘the staple of their food’ (The Tribune (Lahore), 29th November 1898, cited in Oman, 1903:165).

Despite the impression which such accounts may create, I am convinced that if necrophagy is indeed practised by any of the Aghoris I encountered, it has nothing whatever to do with the requirements of a balanced diet (as Harris 1977, has somewhat implausibly claimed for the Aztecs); but is an irregular – perhaps even a one-off – affair, performed in a ritualised manner at night during certain phases of the moon (associated with Siva). (In view of Arens’ caution, it is perhaps as well to retain an open mind on whether necrophagy ever really occurred in any but freak instances. In this context it may be worth pointing out that even the admissions of the ascetics themselves are not beyond suspicion, for – quite apart from the possibility of police duress – the hallmark of an ideal Aghori is that he consumes the flesh of corpses, and any acknowledged failure to do so is a confession of inadequacy. On balance, however, I think that the probability must remain that at least some Aghoris have always taken this aspect of their discipline seriously.) Details of the precise ritual procedure surrounding such an event are supposed to be secret; and there is a considerable discrepancy between the accounts I was given. Some said that the consumption of flesh should ideally be preceded by an act of intercourse on the cremation ground; others that having eaten of the flesh the ascetic should cremate the remains of the corpse and smear his body with the ashes. But almost everybody agrees that after eating the real Aghori will use his powers to restore the deceased to life (cf. Barrow, 1893:221; Balfour, 1897:345–6), and that the flesh he consumes should be that of a person who has died a bad death.

This association recurs in the notion that the skull which the Aghori carries should have belonged to the victim of an ‘untimely death’, as should the corpse on which he sits to meditate (cf. Morinis, 1979:258–9). The preference is not just a question of the practical consideration that, since such corpses are immersed, their remains are the ones most likely to be available. It is also a matter of the power that resides in such skulls, which is said to render even the most virulent of poisons innocuous. That of a Teli (oil-presser) and of a Mahajan (Trader) who has died a bad death is especially prized. Oil-pressers, it is explained, are a proverbially stupid caste and their skulls are therefore easy to control; while Traders tend to be sharp and cunning and their skulls are particularly powerful. With the proper mantras (sacred formulae) an Aghori can get his skull to fetch and carry for him, or cause it to fight with another. It is as if life resides in the skull itself, only waiting to be activated by one who knows the proper incantations. It is because the vital breath of a person who has died a bad death has not been released from his cranium on the cremation pyre that his skull remains a repository of potential power.

Like other sects with a close affinity to Tantrism, the Aghoris perform (or at least claim to perform) the secret rite of cakra-puja involving the ritual use of the so-called ‘five Ms’ (pancamānakāras) – māns (meat), māchhī (fish), madya (liquor) mūrṇa (in this context parched grain or kidney beans) and maithuna (sexual intercourse). A group of male adepts, accompanied by one or more female partners, sit in a circle. The woman is worshipped as a manifestation of the goddess and is offered the food and drink which is subsequently consumed by the males who feed each other. The first four Ms all possess aphrodisiac qualities and thus lead towards the fifth – in which the adept and his partner incarnate Siva and his consort unite in coitus reservatus. As far as my subsequent argument is concerned, the crucial point here is that the female partner should ideally be a prostitute or a woman of one of the lowest castes; and she should also be menstruating at the time and thus doubly polluted. But what is also significant is that the sexual intercourse which is supposed to occur is a calculated repudiation of procreation. (By contrast the duty to sire offspring was frequently represented by my high-caste householder informants as the only legitimate pretext for coitus.) Not only is the semen withheld, but the act takes place at a time when the female partner is infertile. Moreover, she is preferably a prostitute: the one class of women who have a professional hostility to fertility and who provide the perfect symbol
of barren eroticism' (Shulman's, 1980:261–2, apt phraseology; my emphasis). Consistent with the discussion of Aghori aims which follows, the act of ritual copulation thus reveals a certain disdain for the regeneration of life, and identifies the male adept with Siva locked in a union with his opposed aspect which is both without end and without issue. It is a sexual pairing rid of its normal consequences – progeny and death (the latter being commonly used in popular speech as a metaphor for ejaculation, and being caused – as we have seen – by a failure to retain the semen).

This liaison between the Aghori and the prostitute recurs in several other contexts. The prostitutes of the city not only visit the burning ghats to worship Siva there in his form of Lord of the Cremation Ground (Smašan-Nāth) but each year on the festival of Lolārk Chhath they used to come to sing and dance at the tomb of Kina Ram (though the practice was abandoned in the late 'fifties after a serious disturbance among the university students). Moreover, it is said that the bed of a prostitute is equivalent to a cremation ground in that it is an equally proper place for an Aghori to perform his sādhana (ritual practice).

By his various observances the Aghori acquires siddhis, or supernatural powers, which give him mastery over the phenomenal world and the ability to read thoughts. If he is sufficiently accomplished he can cure the sick, raise the dead and control malevolent ghosts. He can expand or contract his body to any size or weight, fly through the air, appear in two places at once, conjure up the dead and leave his body and enter into another. All this, of course, is exactly what one might predict from the Aghori’s dealings with corpses and bodily emissions, for – as Douglas (1966) points out – that which is anomalous and marginal is not only the focus of pollution and danger, but also the source of extraordinary power.

While siddhis may, of course, be won by ascetics who follow quite different kinds of regime, it is widely believed that they are acquired more quickly and more fully by those who pursue the path of the Aghori. This path, however, is more difficult and dangerous than that which is followed by other orders; and one whose discipline is inadequate, who is overtaken by fear during his austerities, or who fails to retain his semen during ožra-pūja, pays the penalty of madness and death (cf. Carstairs, 1957:232). He then becomes an Aghnar-masān, the most recalcitrant and difficult to exorcise of malevolent ghosts.

The association between madness and the Aghori is not, however, an entirely straightforward one. The genuine Aghori, it is acknowledged, is – almost by definition – likely to seem demented to ordinary mortals, and is apt to talk in a way which they cannot comprehend. But this is merely evidence of his divine nature and of the fact that he has succeeded in homologising himself with Siva, who is himself somewhat touched, and with Lord Bhairava – one of whose manifestations in Benares is as Ummat (‘mad’) Bhairava. Moreover complete lucidity is not the best policy for one who shuns the world and does not wish to be endlessly importuned for spiritual guidance. But while there may be an element of both divine and calculated madness in an authentic ascetic, it is also recognised that some Aghoris are simply insane in the medical sense. Their affliction, however, is generally attributed to a failure of nerve or an insufficiently fastidious attention to ritual detail during the performance of such dangerously powerful rites, rather than to any notion that their attraction to these practices suggests that they were unbalanced already.

By virtue of his magical powers, the Aghori who has – in the local idiom – ‘arrived’ (pahuncha hue), is likely to attract a large lay following who bring their pragmatic problems to him for solution. Baba Bhagvan Ram, for instance, has an extensive circle of committed devotees. Most of them are of high caste, and many are members of the professional middle-class. (Amongst the inner circle of disciples are, for example, a retired Collector and a retired Police Inspector, a post-doctoral research fellow and an administrator from the university, a College Lecturer, a student now studying in North America, two lawyers, an engineer, a Customs and Excise officer, a factory manager, a public works contractor, and a well-to-do shopkeeper.) Two other Aghoris I knew also had a significant middle-class following. Even in the presence of an ascetic other than their acknowledged guru, the humility of such devotees – who would in other contexts brook no trifling with their dignity – is really remarkable. When Pagila (‘mad’) Baba wilfully defaecated on the string-cot on which he was reclining, a Rajput police officer and a Brahman businessman undertook the cleaning up.

Although motives are hard to be confident about, for what it is worth I record my strong impression that what attracts many of these people to the Aghori’s following are the siddhis which he is believed to have obtained and which he may be induced to use on their behalf in an insecure and competitive world. To my knowledge several of them joined Bhagvan Ram’s entourage at times of grave personal crisis – the Police Inspector when he was under investigation for corruption, the contractor when his business started to fail, the Customs and Excise Officer when the prospect of providing a suitable dowry for his daughters became an immediate problem. Not of course that this is an aspect of the matter to which they themselves would publicly call
produce heirs, and has been forced to perpetuate itself by adoption; while the curse also stipulated that any Aghori who henceforth accepted food from the palace would be afflicted by a fistula in the anus (bhagandar). When the late mahant of Kina Ram’s āśrama was at last induced to revoke the curse and eat from the royal kitchen, the Maharani immediately conceived a son – but the mahant himself succumbed to the foretold disorder.

For the development of my theme the story is particularly instructive in two ways. The first is that it draws our attention to the fact that the curse of an Aghori, and – as we shall see – his blessing too, is as often as not concerned with reproduction and fertility. But what is also significant is that the exclusion of the ascetic from the Maharaja’s yajña appears to be merely a transposition of the well-known mythological incident in which Siva is excluded from the sacrifice of his father-in-law, Daksa, on the pretext that he is a naked, skull-carrying Kapalika (O’Flaherty, 1976:278) – the sectarian precursor of the Aghori. But Siva is essential to the sacrifice if the evil it unleashes is to be mastered (Biardeau, 1976:96). Denied of his share, he spoils the whole event and precipitates a disaster of cosmic proportions. Though the scale of our story is admittedly more modest, it is not difficult to see that the Aghori is merely playing the role which was written for Siva – as well he might, for we shall find that he aspires to be Siva.

The blessing of an Aghori is as beneficent as his curse is awesome. By it he may confer inordinate riches, restore the mad, cure the incurable or bestow fertility on the barren. In order to conceive a child, both Hindu and Muslim couples go in large numbers to Kina Ram’s āśrama, where they visit his tomb, bathe in the tank of Krimi Kund (‘the tank of worms’) and take ash from the sacred fire which is fuelled by wood brought from the cremation pyres and which is a form of the goddess Hinglaj Devi. The tank is the one beside which Kina Ram performed his austerities – thus again making a direct link between tapas and the powers of creation. The same procedure should ideally be repeated on five consecutive Sundays or five consecutive Tuesdays – days of the week which are special not only to Kina Ram but also to the god Bhairava. An identical procedure will cure children of the wasting disease of sukhandī rog which is caused by a barren woman touching or casting her shadow on the child immediately after she has bathed at the end of her period. She will then conceive, but the child will start to ‘dry up’ (sukhā) and wither away.

An Aghori’s blessing is characteristically given by violently man-handling and abusing its recipient. Bhim Baba, for example, used to live on the verandah of the City Post Office, stark naked, morosely
silent, and generally surrounded by a crowd of onlookers and devotees. Every so often, as if infuriated, he would lumber to his feet (for he was massively fat) seize a small earthenware pot and hurl it with a roar into the crowd. The fortunate target of his missile could leave assured that his problem was about to be solved or his aspirations met (cf. Mortinus, 1979: 244; Barrow, 1893:226). It is said that on festival occasions Kina Ram would throw his urine on the crowds by way of blessing. Indeed the bodily emissions of an Aghori are charged with a special potency and have miraculous medicinal qualities. The sister of one of Bhagvan Ram’s university-educated devotees, for example, was said to have been cured of a grave illness after her brother had obtained for her a phial of his guru’s urine. A lay follower may be initiated by the guru by placing a drop of his semen on the disciple’s tongue; while at the initiation of an ascetic the preceptor fills a skull with his urine which is then used to moisten the novitiate’s head before it is tonsured (Barrow, 1893:241).

Now my informants continually stress that as a result of his sādhanā an Aghori does not die. He realises the state of non-duality I referred to earlier; he ‘takes samādhi’, and enters into a perpetual cataleptic condition of suspended animation of deep meditation. His body is arranged (if necessary by breaking the spine) in a meditational posture (known as padmāsan), sitting cross-legged with his upturned palms resting on his knees. He is then placed in a box which – in Benares – is buried in the grounds of Kina Ram’s āśrama (and which is everywhere oriented towards the north). Unlike the householder or ascetics of most other orders his skull is not smashed in order to release the ‘vital breath’. A small shrine containing the phallic emblem of Siva is erected over the site of the grave, the emblem transmitting to the worshipper the power emanating from the ascetic’s subterranean meditation.

By entering samādhi (the term refers to his tomb as well as to his condition within it) – which he is represented as doing by conscious desire at a time of his choosing – the ascetic unequivocally escapes the normal consequences of death: the severance of the connection between body and soul, the corruption of the body and the transmigration of the soul. Provided that he has ‘taken’ samādhi while still alive (jīvīt-samādhi), rather than being ‘given’ it after death, his body is immune to putrescence and decay although it remains entombed for thousands of years. It is still the occasional habitation of his soul, which wanders the three lokas (of heaven, earth and the netherworld) assuming any bodily form it chooses and changing from one to another at will. The real ideological stress is here, rather than on the incorruption of the particular body he inhabited before he took

samādhi. Endless stories nevertheless testify to a conviction that the body of the model ascetic is perfectly and perpetually preserved in its tomb; and it is widely believed that this body is at times animated by his peripatetic soul which may be brought back to its former shell in an instant by the fervent prayers of the devotee.

A samādhi (in the sense of tomb) which is reanimated by the presence of the soul is described as a jīvīt-samādhi (‘awakened samādhi’). Baba Bhagvan Ram’s disciples credit him with thus ‘awakening’ the occupants of every one of the fifty samādhis within the precincts of Kina Ram’s āśrama since he took over its effective management; and this makes it possible to induce them to take a more direct hand in the affairs of men. As for himself, Bhagvan Ram denies the appeal of heaven, where – as he wryly informed me – ‘all the celestial nymphs (apsaras) are now old ladies’. His intention is rather to spend eternity ‘watching and waiting’ here on earth where he is within easy reach of ordinary mortals. It is out of compassion for the sufferings of humanity that such an ascetic denies himself the final bliss of complete dissolution into Brahma, for once he is finally liberated ‘who will give the sermons?’

What sense, then, can we make of the ethnography I have provided? One preliminary observation here is that Aghori ideology, if not always their practice, insists that members of the order do not solicit alms. This relates to the familiar South Asian contradiction that, while the ascetic is enjoined to remain completely independent of the material and social order, he must necessarily depend on the gifts of the householder in order to support himself, and can therefore never entirely escape from the lay world. Aghori practice may be seen as one radical solution to this dilemma. His loincloth is a shroud, his fuel the charred wood of the pyres, his food human refuse. By scavenging from the dead (who have no further use for what he takes), the Aghori escapes the clutches of the living, and in theory at least realises the ascetic ideal of complete autonomy.

We may also note that the Aghori’s vigil on the cremation ground may be represented as an unblinking meditation on the classic Hindu themes of the transience of existence and the inevitability of mortal suffering. ‘Surrounded by death in the place of death, those aspects of reality that end in the fires of the cremation ground become dispassionate . . . attachment to the world and the ego is cut and union with Siva, the conqueror of death, is sought’ (Kinsley, 1977:100). Like ascetics of other orders, the Aghori aspires to die to the phenomenal world, to undergo the ‘Death that conquers death’ (Kinsley, 1977), and to exist
on earth as an exemplar of the living dead. But what makes him different from others is that he pushes this symbolism to its logical limits.

The theological line which the Aghoris themselves most forcefully stress, however, is the notion that everything in creation partakes of paramātma, the Supreme Being, and that therefore all category distinctions belong merely to the world of superficial appearances, and there is no essential difference between the divine and the human, or between the pure and the polluted. As Lal Baba represented his own spiritual quest to me, it is to become like that ideal Aghori, the sun, whose rays illuminate everything indiscriminately and yet remain unfulfilled by the excrement they touch.

The doctrine that the essence of all things is the same may clearly be taken to imply a radical devaluation of the caste hierarchy, since from this point of view there is no fundamental difference between the Untouchable and the Brahman. What is less obvious, however, is whether this teaching is one which relates only— as Dumont’s model (1960, 1970) would suggest—to the ascetic (caste is irrelevant for him but not for the world at large), or whether the Aghori’s devaluation of the social order is to be interpreted as a message for all men. My Aghori informants themselves were not altogether unequivocal on the matter—sometimes denying to caste any relevance whatsoever, while at others presenting equality as a matter of the ultimate religious truth of the enlightened rather than as the appropriate goal of social policy. This lack of clarity is perhaps only to be expected, since for them the central concern is with dissolving the barrier between god and man (or more precisely between Siva and the individual ascetic himself), rather than with tearing down that which divides men from each other.

It is, however, clear that the social implications of the Aghori doctrine are far from absent from the teachings of Baba Bhagvan Ram, their most illustrious representative in Benares, who has derived from its religious truth athis-worldly ethic of equality and community service—though I concede the possibility that this may be a modern reworking of the renouncer’s message. The aśrama Bhagvan Ram founded just across the river from Benares includes a hospice for lepers, a primary school, dispensary, post office and printing press. Amongst his circle of followers inter-caste marriage is positively encouraged. But what might also be said is that within the egalitarian order which he would have his disciples realise, a position of unquestioned privilege is nonetheless preserved for the guru. He drives about in a jeep, and while he sleeps over a grave, he does so in a well-appointed room under an electric fan. Even his teaching is not without its streak of ambivalence. While caste may be dismissed as a conspiracy of the powerful, the vow by which his male devotees should offer their daughters in marriage leaves considerable doubt about the equality of the sexes within marriage, and the doctrine of karma is not in question. Lepers are paying the price of past wickedness. (I regret that I neglected to ask whether the same might not also be held to apply to the Untouchables.) What is at issue, he told me, is rather the right of others to use this fact as justification for their exclusion from society.

If, however obliquely, Aghori doctrine poses questions about the ultimate legitimacy of the social order, there is a rather different way in which their practice reinforces this message of doubt. In orthodox caste society, polluting contacts between castes must be eliminated in order to preserve the boundaries of the group, for which—as Douglas (1966) argues—the boundaries of the body often serve as a metaphor. The Aghori’s inversion of the same symbols of body margins implies exactly the opposite message. With the destruction of boundaries entailed by the consumption of flesh, excrement and so on, goes an affirmation of the irrelevance of caste boundaries. Coming at the issue in a more general way suggested by Turner (1969), we might also note the relationship which exists between liminal states, the suspension of the hierarchical structure of everyday life, and a stress on a vision of an unhierarchised and undifferentiated humanity. By contrast with that of the initiate in tribal society, the Aghori’s liminality is permanent—and it is also of a somewhat extreme character. It is hardly surprising, then, that he should represent something of the equality which is generally associated with those liminal to the routinely ordered structure.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the data, however, is the remarkable similarity between the character assumed by the Aghori and the person of Siva. Indeed the description of Siva given by his disapproving father-in-law perfectly fits the stereotype of the Aghori: He roams about in dreadful cemeteries, attended by hosts of goblins and spirits, like a mad man, naked, with dishevelled hair, laughing, weeping, bathed in ashes of funeral piles, wearing a garland of skulls and ornaments of human bones, insane, beloved of the insane, the lord of beings whose nature is essentially darkness. (Briggs, 1938:153)

The epithet aughar, by which the Aghori is widely known and which implies an uncouth carefreeness, is one of the names of the god. Like Siva, who ingested the poison that emerged from the Churning of the Oceans and thereby allowed creation to proceed, the Aghori is a swallowing of poison who liberates the blocked-up fertility of women. Like his prototype he is addicted to narcotics, is master of evil spirits,
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is touched with madness and his most salient characteristic is his moodiness. He is *arshangi*—one who follows his whims with truculent intrusiveness. He adorns his body with the ornaments of Siva, plays Siva's part as spoiler of the sacrifice when denied admission to it, is greeted in a way appropriate to the god with cries of *Bom, Bom or Har Har Mahādev*, and indeed claims and is acknowledged to be Siva. So, for example, the *mahants* of the Kina Ram *āśrama* are explicitly said to be his *avatars*. In the rite of *aśrama-pāja*, the Aghori becomes the Lord of Forgetfulness wrapped in a deathless embrace with his consort; while his necrophagy on the cremation ground may be seen as an act of communion in which he ingests Siva (represented by the corpse), and thus re-creates his consubstantiality with him. The skull he carries associates him with Siva's manifestation as the terrifying god Bhairava who— to atone for the sin of chopping off Brahma's fifth head— was condemned to wander the earth 'as an Aghori' with a skull stuck fast to his hand. Dogs, which like the Aghori scavenge off the cremation ground, are his familiars—as they are of Bhairava in whose temples they wander freely. The special days for visiting these temples are the same as those for visiting Kina Ram's *āśrama*; the god too blesses his worshippers in the form of a (token) beating delivered by his priests, and in ritual intercourse the Aghori's female partner is often identified as his consort, Bhairavi. In short, as Lorenzen (1972:80) has noted, the ascetic homologises himself with the god and acquires some of his divine powers and attributes. Above all, like Siva—the Great Ascetic and Destroyer of the Universe whose emblem is the erect phallus and whose sexual transports shake the cosmos—he transends duality by uniting opposites within his own person, and thereby acquires Siva’s role as *Mahāmeru*, the ‘Conqueror of Death’, who amongst the gods is the only one who survives the dissolution of the cosmos and who is truly indestructible (*avināśī*).

This, it seems to me, is the crux of the matter. The theme of inversion and the coincidence of opposites runs throughout the material I have presented. The ascetic becomes the consort of the prostitute, the menstruating prostitute becomes the goddess, beating a blessing, the cremation ground a place of worship, a skull the food-bowl and excrement and putrid flesh food, and pollution becomes indistinguishable from purity. Duality is abolished, polarities are recombined, and the Aghori thus recaptures the primordial state of non-differentiation. He passes out of the world of creation and destruction and into an existence which is beyond time. He attains that state of unity with Brahma which characterised the atemporal and undifferentiated void which existed before the world began. So while I have argued in the first section of this paper that the mortuary rites of the householder represent a re-creation of the deceased, a renewal of time and a regeneration of the cosmos, I am arguing here that by embracing death and pollution, by systematically combining opposites, the Aghori aims to suspend time, to get off the roundabout and to enter an eternal state of *samādhi* in which death has no menace.

NOTES

1 I gratefully acknowledge helpful comments on an earlier draft from Maurice Bloch, Richard Burghart, Chris Fuller, Audrey Hayley, Jean La Fontaine, Edmund Leach and Penny Logan.
2 Although I try here to make some sense of the path of Aghori asceticism by contrasting it with that of the householder, it is of course clear that much of their practice might also be usefully seen in opposition to the discipline of other ascetic orders. Such an analysis is, however, beyond the scope of the present paper.
3 Cf. Bharati's observation (1976:17) that the unique contribution of Tantrism lies not so much in any philosophical novelty as in its ritual methods.
4 Fieldwork in Benares was carried out between September 1976 and November 1977 (supported by the Social Science Research Council) and in August 1978 (supported by the London School of Economics and Political Science). I am deeply obliged to Virendra Singh for his language instruction, and to him and Om Prakash Sharma for their research assistance.
5 There is however a wide variation in the meanings which different informants attach to these terms (Parry 1981).
6 This and the following paragraphs dealing with death as a cosmogonic sacrifice are borrowed with various modifications, from my paper 'Death and Cosmogony in Kashi' (1981).
7 Although I arrived at this conclusion quite independently, I now find that it is not an entirely original one. In a slightly different form it is anticipated by Biardeau's authoritative and impressive analysis of Puranic cosmogonies, and in particular by her discussion of *pralaya* as a gigantic cosmic funeral (Biardeau, 1971; also 1976:116).
8 I need hardly add that very considerable material interests are also at stake here.
9 On the conception of death as a sacrifice see Biardeau (1971:76 and 1976:38); Das (1976 and 1977:120–6); Levin (1930); Malamoud (1975); Pandey (1969:241, 253) and Knipe (1975:132–4).
10 The difference between this account of creation and the one involving Visnu's austerities at Manikarnika *ghat* is perhaps only superficial. Visnu is—as Biardeau (1976:91, 96) shows—identified with the original sacrificial being (*the Purusa*) of the Rg-vedic hymn; while his cosmogonic austerities may be read as an act of self-sacrifice. What we appear to have, then, are not two completely different accounts of the beginnings of the world, but two versions of the same account couched in slightly different language.
11 For the overwhelming majority of my informants the prāṇ (or 'vital breath') is synonymous with the āṭmā (or 'soul'), and kapāl kriyā thus marks the separation of the soul from the body. But although most people deny that there is any distinction between them, in ordinary speech they commonly refer to the prāṇ of an individual in the plural, while the āṭmā is invariably singular. The more learned of the sacred specialists will sometimes say that the body contains five or ten prāṇ, and claim that it is only the last of these—known as dhananjaya—that is released on the cremation pyre. But there is absolutely no question of there being more than one āṭmā. Even so, it was only a single informant—a man of formidable learning and considerable scholarly reputation—who insisted on a fundamental distinction between these concepts. The prāṇ, he explained, are multiple; are located in specific parts of the body and may cause pain in their vicinity when they do not function properly, and are forms of 'air' (śāyu) which will merge with the air at death. As opposed to the prāṇ which is located and 'active' (kriyā-tūn), the āṭmā is 'all-pervasive' (sarvāvyāptī) and passive.

12 Even those who assert this theory must forcefully were, however, distinctly uncomfortable with my inference that the closest mourners might legitimately enter a temple in the period between physiological death and cremation.

13 I should note, however, that while the breaking of the skull is generally seen as a release of life from the body, most of my informants shied away from the explicit conclusion that it therefore amounts to an act of violence against the deceased.

14 In this sense, then, the deceased is himself the sacrificer; which would seem to contradict the implication that, by taking upon himself 'the sin of burning the body hairs', the chief mourner assumes this role. In fact, however, there is no incompatibility between the two, for in the Indian theory of sacrifice as in many others—the sacrificer's offering is his own body homologised with that of the victim. Or, to put it more simply, the chief mourner is symbolically equated with the deceased. In line with this we find that throughout the mortuary rituals they are repeatedly identified, such that—for example—the chief mourner is clothed throughout in a piece of cloth torn from the shroud in which the corpse is wrapped, and is said to eat for the departed ghost during the period of mourning. But if the chief mourner is homologised with the corpse, so also is the corpse homologised with a deity, for it is a manifestation of Siva. This series of identifications between sacrificer, victim and god is characteristic not only of Indian sacrifice (as illustrated in Coomaraswamy, 1941; Long, 1977:75; Malamoud, 1976:193; Kaelber, 1978; Herrensichmidt, 1979, and Shulman, 1980:92), but also of sacrifice in many other societies (for example, Leach, 1976:88—9; Turner, 1977, and Sahlin, 1978).

15 The notion that the sacrificer is the real victim of the sacrifice (see note 14) perhaps suggests another way at the ambiguity surrounding the ritual of the corpse (i.e. whether it is pure or polluted). According to the classical theory, the sacrificer has acquired—through the initiatory rite of dikṣā—a sacrificial body sufficiently august to be offered to the gods in sacrifice while his profane body remains behind in the safe-keeping of the presiding priests (Malamoud, 1976:161, 193). The problem with cremation, however, is that it is impossible to disguise the fact that it is not only this sacred entity which is dispatched by the fire, but also the sacrificer's profane and mortal being. My tentative suggestion, then, is that it might be possible to see the ambiguity over the condition of deceased as a reflection of the difficulty of retaining, in this instance, a clear conceptual distinction between the two bodies of the sacrificer. As representative of his sacrificial body, the victim is pure; but as his patently profane and incipiently putrescent corpse it is also impure.

16 Although the theory is fairly general, the practice of differentiating between the sexes in this way is—in my experience—largely confined to the Bengali community (which is quite substantial in Benares).

17 Cf. Malamoud's (1975) fascinating discussion of both cremation and gestation as a process of cooking.

18 The ideal is for a man to survive to see his son's son's son. Great importance is attached to having visited the deceased during his last hours, and deep chagrin at an unavoidable absence is a constant refrain.

19 During pīti-pākṣa the gates of heaven are said to stand open. Uttarāṣṭra is the day-time of the gods. Since the departed arrives, as it were, during office hours he is less likely to be kept waiting about. As calculated by Indian almanacs, the winter solstice which begins the 30th/4th rolls on Makarasankranti on the 14th January, and not on 21st December. The five lunar mansions during which it is particularly auspicious to die form a consecutive block known as panchaka.

20 Penny Logan tells me that her Tamil informants gave one hundred and twenty years as the ideal lifespan, and justified this number by the claim that this is the period it takes for all the planets to complete their round—thus again associating the life of the individual with the cosmic cycle.

21 Were it not for the quite explicit parturition symbolism of the pyre and the funeral procession (described above), it would be tempting to interpret cremation as a mere insemination, leading to the ten-day gestation period of the subsequent rites. In this context it is interesting to note that the Satapatha Brahmana refers to the fire as the womb of the sacrifice, into which the initiand at dikṣā offers his being as semen (Malamoud, 1975).

22 The Kāsi Khandā is a portion of the Skanda Purāṇa. A short summary of this myth is given in Parry (1981).

23 Siddhartha Gautam Ram was installed in February 1978, at the age of nine. He does not himself yet live in the āṣrama, but stays with his guru—Baba Bhagvan Ram—in the compound of the refuge for lepers which the latter founded. He was given to Baba Bhagvan Ram to raise after Bhagvan Ram had fructified the formerly infertile union of the boy's parents. As mahānt of the Kina Ram āṣrama he is clearly the puppet of Bhagvan Ram, who now effectively controls the āṣrama (having been at loggerheads with the previous mahānt, who was his own guru). It is said that while the young mahānt is an incarnation of Kina Ram, and hence of Siva himself, Bhagvan Ram is an incarnation of the god’s sakti (his active female aspect), and more particularly of the goddess Sarveshvarī (the consort of Siva as the Lord of All). The much-quoted aphorism that 'without sakti Siva is a sava (corpse)' seems particularly apposite to the present case.

24 I personally encountered twelve, but with only eight of them did I have any but the most fleeting contact. Although some Aghoris spend a significant amount of time on pilgrimage (in particular to Prayag, Pusapatinath in Nepal
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Sacrificial death and the necrophagous ascetic restraint which completes his mastery over the deceased’s spirit. The ojñā, who is a specialist in the control over the malevolent dead, is also said to perform sava-sādhanā for similar ends. But while the Aghori sits on the corpse’s chest, the ojñā sits on the stomach.  

29 In theory Kina Ram’s āśrama has the right to claim five unburnt logs and five paīna for every pyre lit at the nearby cremation ground at Harish Chandra gūḍā. It is alleged that in practice the Dom funeral attendants appropriate this perquisite, though every day somebody goes from the āśrama to collect charred wood from the pyres. This is not only used for cooking but also for maintaining the sacred fire which is the embodiment of the goddess Hinglaj Devi (a manifestation of Agni) who came to dwell with Kina Ram in Benares after he had visited her shrine in Baluchistan.  

30 Dogs are also the attendants (gaṇ) of Siva in his form as the terrifying Lord Bhairava (see below).  

31 In the ritual language of the Aghori, liquor is known as dāru or more commonly as dudhiṭā, urine as amarin pān, and excrement as bejī. Dāru means medicine or simply liquor; dudhiṭā would seem to relate to the standard Hindi dudh, ‘milk’; and amarin pān to amrit, ‘nectar of immortality’. I do not know what, if anything, bejī means outside this context and the word is not given in the standard dictionaries I have consulted. I speculate that it is derived from the Sanskrit bāj, which is the weapon of Vishnu (and Indra), but which also has the connotation of ‘hard’ or ‘strengthening’.  

32 Although the account is written in fictional form, it was clearly intended to be – and was – read as an expose of the reality confronting an impotent and corrupt local administration. The selection from, and commentary on, the other revelations which was published in the Calcutta Review (1849, II, 318–96) claims that ‘the whole is essentially true, the form only is that of a work of fiction’.  

33 The night most closely associated with such practices is chaturasāsī, which is also known as Mahākālī rātri – the night of Siva as the destructive Lord of Time. Chaturasāsī is the penultimate (lunar) day of the dark fortnight of Hindu month, and is an auspicious time during which Vedic study is proscribed (cf. Kane, 1941:1395). It immediately precedes the even more auspicious new-moon day of Amuktasāgā when ghosts are abroad and easy to contact (cf. Stanley, 1977). The chaturasāsī which falls in the month of Phalguna (February–March) is the day of the festival of Svarātri, which celebrates Siva’s marriage and is one of the most important days for visiting his temples.  

34 My evidence thus contradicts Crooke’s (1928) implication that the Aghori is indifferent about the kind of skull he uses.  

35 Other informants had a completely contradictory notion of the Oilpressers, claiming that they are particularly intelligent. But whichever view they favour, everybody is agreed that there is something special about their intellects which creates a special demand for their skins.  

36 The magnetism of the Aghori ascetic for many high-caste householders was reported as early as the first half of the nineteenth century. ‘In the holy city (of Benares), many Brahmans, Kshatriis, and high Sudras, take instruction from this sage (the mahant of Kina Ram āśrama); but do not venture to imitate his manners’ (Martin, 1838:II:492). The same source notes that ‘the
Rajas and their chief relations have a strong hankering after their doctrine. If he should fail them, however, they are likely to go elsewhere. Until his son died, the Raja of one of the small states in the region was a devotee of Baba Bhagvan Ram. He subsequently transferred his allegiance to Ram Lochan Baba, another Benares Aghori.

One or two frankly acknowledged that membership of his following provided them with a ready-made network of social contacts with other like-minded professional people, not only in Benares, but throughout northern India.

More damning still is the accusation that he uses his siddhis for material gain. Whether the magical powers in question are those of the Aghori, or those of the old woman who knows a charm for curing piles, in the long term they are completely incompatible with the accumulation of profit, which leads to their inexorable decline.

Some informants claim that Krimi Kund is a bastardisation of the correct name Karim Kund. Karim is the ‘seed’ mantra of the goddess Kali.

Sukhanda rog is also cured by visiting Aughar Nath ka Takhiai, which is in another part of the city and which contains the tombs of several Aghoris.

A photograph of Bhim Baba (who died before my fieldwork started) and a light-hearted account of a brief encounter with him and another Aghori are given in Newby (1966:228–34). A special edition of the popular Hindi magazine Nātan Kahaniyār (Allahabad, June 1977) was devoted to stories of miraculous encounters with Aghoris. One of the articles is a profile of Bhim Baba and provides a vivid description of his method of blessing (which was also retained by several of my own informants). This source also contains an account of Bhim Baba’s origins which has extremely wide currency in the city. According to this account he was a judge who renounced the world and became an Aghori after having to deal with a case in which he was obliged to administer a manifestly unjust law. On a brief visit to Kathmandu I was able to track down Bhim Baba’s younger brother (an architect with a poultry business on the side). The family are Maharashtrian Karade Brahmins who settled in Nepal when their father obtained an appointment at the Pasupatinath temple through the good offices of the raj-parihāri. Bhim Baba was apparently in continual conflict with his somewhat disciplinarian father, refused to study, and finally left home (completely naked) after a quarrel in which his father reproached him with ingratitude for years of parental support. He was never employed, far less a judge.

On Baba Bhagvan Ram’s control of the āśrama see note 23 above.

‘Oh Shiva this daughter in the form of energy, I am offering to you to be used for the satisfaction of your holy desires and for the benefit of society—that is for breeding to such a progeny (sic) as may be useful for humanity, without any restriction of caste, creed or nationality’ (cited in a pamphlet entitled An introduction to Shri Sarvekshvari Sambhav, published by the Awadhoot Bhagwan Ram Kust Sewa Ashram).

I encountered a very similar ambivalence in the case of another Aghori whose public pronouncements continually stress the brotherhood of all men and the meaningless character of the social hierarchy. It was clear that he regarded himself as a member of a small spiritual elite karmically qualified for the attainment of sāmādi.

What is also striking is that both of these ascetics not only repudiate caste but also the divisions between Hindus and others; and both are prepared to appropriate Christian symbols to make this point. Bhagvan Ram’s leprosy hospice is surmounted by a Christian Cross; while Sadhak Basudeb showed me a pictorial autobiography he had made for the instruction of his devotees which contains a drawing in which he is receiving the stigmata from Christ who appeared to him during his wanderings in the Himalayas. This element of religious syncretism is also apparent at the shrine of Aughar Nath ka Takhiai, which contains several Aghori sāmādi and which is said to belong equally to Hindus and Muslims. The influence of a devotional bhakti ideology is also particularly clear in much of the Aghoris’ discourse.

The Aghoris’ identification with Siva does not, of course, make them unique. The same might, I think, be said of many other Saiva ascetics and even of Saiva priests. What is again unusual about the present case is the means rather than the end, and perhaps also the aspect of Siva with which they choose to identify.

One obvious symbol of this merging of opposites is the androgynous; and it is perhaps significant that Baba Bhagvan Ram – despite his unambiguously masculine physique – has assumed a somewhat androgynous character. He is said to be an incarnation of a female deity (see note 23 above); is represented as a swollen-breasted goddess in a picture kept in a shrine within the āśrama he founded, and is said to appear occasionally among his followers in such form.

In a number of respects all this invites parallels with the annual pilgrimage of the Huichol Indians to the Wirikuta desert, where all the separations of profane life are obliterated and everything is done backwards in order to effect a return to the time of creation (Myerhoff, 1978). One crucial difference, of course, is that the Aghori’s reversal is a life-long commitment rather than a temporary phase in the annual round. Unlike Rigsby’s (1968) Gogo rituals of purification, his inversions are not merely aimed at going back to the beginning of things so that time may start again, but rather at arresting time altogether.

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Sacrificial death and the necrophagous ascetic


(Sri) Kāśi Khandā (n.d.) (Compiled and rendered into Hindi by Baikunthnath Upadhyay.) Varanasi: Shri Bhragav Prakashan.


4 Witchcraft, greed, cannibalism and death: some related themes from the New Guinea Highlands

ANDREW STRATHERN

Introduction

New Guinea Highlands and Fringe Highlands societies show a range of variation in terms of ideas about witchcraft, on the one hand, and cannibalism on the other. Can we make a sense of this variation? In what follows, I propose to discuss this problem by drawing attention to further patterns of ideas which run across several of the Highlands societies.

At the outset, I must make it clear that in concentrating on ideas I do not mean to suggest that these are in themselves determinant. To the contrary, if we look at the Highlands area in geographical terms, it is evident that the practice of cannibalism is (according to reports) associated most clearly with sparsely-populated fringe regions where large herds of domestic pigs are absent. Although we cannot argue from this that protein-hungry people become anthropophagous, there is obviously a material correlation of some interest here. The reasons why the argument cannot be made in a simple manner are that, first, the fringe peoples have alternative sources of protein in wild game, including feral pigs themselves, so that they are not necessarily or universally protein-hungry at all; and second, cannibalism as an approved practice has been reported from the Gimi and Fore Areas of the Eastern Highlands, where herds of domestic pigs are certainly kept. Overall, however, there is sufficient evidence to enable us to speculate that in the areas where agricultural intensification has proceeded to its greatest lengths, cannibalism is absent, and a classic complex of symbolic associations between witchcraft, greed, incest and cannibalism emerges.

It is with this complex of associations that I am mostly concerned here. I begin with some data on a rumour of cannibalism which developed, with apparent suddenness, in the Melpa area of the Western Highlands Province during 1977. By mid-1979 it had died down and was still quiescent in 1980 and April 1981. As an event, the
6 Of flesh and bones: the management of death pollution in Cantonese society

JAMES L. WATSON

The ritual repertoire associated with death in Chinese society is so complex that it confounds those who would attempt to 'make sense of it all' as a uniform set of symbolic representations. This very challenge, no doubt, is precisely the reason why the subject has preoccupied three generations of sinological anthropologists. One of the most puzzling aspects of Chinese mortuary ritual is the extreme ambivalence shown toward the physical remains of the deceased. This seems to be particularly true for the rural Cantonese. Few who have witnessed a funeral among the Cantonese can fail to be impressed by the fear and apprehension that pervade the ritual. The general aversion to death, and anything associated with the corpse, is so overpowering that ordinary villagers hesitate to become involved, and yet the bones of the ancestors must be preserved at all costs as they are essential to the wellbeing of the descendants. The living gain some control over the natural environment by planting, as it were, the bones of their predecessors in auspicious locations. The bones then transmit the good geomantic influences of the cosmos to the living by means of a pig sacrifice ritual. These geomantic forces, known as 'wind and water' (feng shui in Chinese), can thus be harnessed for the benefit of descendants, provided the bones are located properly and preserved from decay.

For many centuries the Cantonese have followed a system of double burial whereby the corpse is first buried in a coffin and left for approximately seven years. The bones are then exhumed and stored in a ceramic urn. Finally, when an auspicious location has been acquired, the urn is reburied in an elaborate, horseshoe-shaped tomb. The final stage may not occur until decades or even generations after death, depending on family circumstances. The bones begin to function for the benefit of descendants only after the final stage in the burial sequence has been completed. Space does not permit a full discussion of the Chinese double burial system in this paper; it is a vastly complex topic (see for example Wilson, 1961; Freedman, 1966:118–54; Potter, 1970; Ahern, 1973; Pasternak, 1973).