

Tibetan sky burial in China

Rotem Eldar
April 20th 2005

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Rotem Eldar

Hi again to all of you friends and readers,

The story today is about the most intense experience I had in this trip, and I find it hard to believe that anything will conquer that title from it. It's very hard to digest and comprehend, and even after a few days I find it hard to believe that I have actually witnessed such a thing. I will tell the whole story, but I won't show all the pictures, because they are very hard to watch. The

story itself might be hard to read, and even though these are the easiest photos, they might be hard for some of you.

While we were walking around the streets of Litang we were approached by a local guy who speaks English. This is not too rare, because if they do know English they really want to practice it. He was a nice Tibetan who went to study in India for a while, and he showed us around and walked with us. He was practicing his English pointing at things and saying them in English - "this is a shoe store, this is a bag shop, this is a horse..."

We weren't interested in the town itself, since we saw it the previous day, and we asked him about other things to do in the area. We specifically asked him if

he knows anything about the sky burial that we heard still takes place in Litang. Sky burial, for those of you who don't know, is a Tibetan tradition in which you leave the dead people for the vultures to be eaten.

He said he doesn't know about it, but we went together to the monastery to ask the monks. They told him where it takes place (about 10 minutes walking out side of the town, on a hill), and they also said that somebody died and is being buried that same day!!!

We actually just thought that we will see the place, see some vultures there, and that it, and all of a sudden we discover that we might be witnessing a real burial.

In all the books it says that if there is a real burial you shouldn't come near, and you shouldn't take pictures. We were standing on the opposite hill looking from a distance and taking pictures of the vultures, when our local friend told us to come with him...

He approached the burial itself, and the family members there invited us to sit next



Vultures and flags

to them, and even told us we could take pictures! I really couldn't believe it.

When we arrived the dead body was tied to a pole that was stuck in the ground. The vultures were half way through the body, and it looked already like a human skeleton with some flesh on it. More and more vultures were arriving from all around, and when they flew over me it sounded like a loud and scary "whooooooooooosh". It was hard watching all these big birds fighting over every piece of flesh, with the loud whistling and squeaking voices they made.

I can't imagine the beginning of it - a whole body being served to the vultures, and the big birds tearing it apart, eating it's face and all. It's a good thing we missed it, because I think it might have been too hard to watch.

The family members were watching the whole thing, looking at their loved one disappearing. You could see on their faces that they were sad.



Vultures



Joining the feast

When it was over and there was only a skeleton left, we thought it was all over. But then we saw that there is a second part to the burial.



Fighting over the body

A monk arrived, looking more like a butcher, and in his hand there was a big and heavy axe. He sat next to the skeleton and started to crush the bones one after the other. He was working there in the sun for almost an hour, crushing the skeleton to pieces. He even crushed the skull, took out the brain, and added it to the big pile. The sound of the axe hitting the bones and the rock will never leave me till my last day.

When he finished - he added flour, sugar, and butter, and mixed the whole thing together. After that he swept the whole area to make sure that no pieces were lost... During that entire time the vultures were just sitting there watching him and waiting for him to finish. Just a hand reach away from us.

When his work was done - he stepped back, and the vultures bashed in. Once again they were fighting over every available piece, and in a few minutes it was all over. We went away from there, only to the next hill, where we sat down and tried to relax

from what we have just seen.

It looked so brutal and barbaric, and yet this is their tradition, their

religion... They haven't killed this poor dead body, they just buried it in a way that is very hard to comprehend.

Our local friend was as shocked as we were. It was the first time he saw it, and he became physically sick. He didn't show up for dinner later that day...

Well, I don't want to add anything more this time,

R.



Family members watching

Crushing the bones



Adding flour



Collecting all the pieces



Vultures waiting



Fighting over it again



Eating little pieces



Shocked? Amazed?



01:05:50 May 1st 2005 - **Ali**: A few thoughts...

I'd read about sky burials in a fiction book based in Tibet - which I've forgotten the title of. I had no idea that they are practiced today. Every culture has it's own way of burying their dead, - burning, rotting, mummyifying, donated to medical science - and all will seem strange to another culture. Thank you for sharing this, and a thanks to the family concerned - who let you experience a very intimate part of their culture.

01:05:22 May 2nd 2005 - : **Wow**

even though it is quite weird to us, travel teaches us that there are many diferent cultures and practices around the world, but that is a once in a lifetime experience. Try telling that to your friends back home without the photo's. Keep us informed of your travels! :) - T.J

01:08:45 August 24th 2005 - anonymous: **Amazing Pictures**

My stomach turned upside down. Yet I stayed magnetized to the photos for several minutes. Send email to this address with the photos, I bet they will want to make an article out of it (marechet@masa.co.il)

Do you have your South America photos online as well?

00:08:33 August 25th 2005 - Author Reply: **R Eldar**: Funny you are asking...

My South America photos are not online just yet. When I get back from this trip I am planning on publishing my photos from all of my trips around the world, along with the stories. For some reason nobody responded when I sent links of this to magazines. I guess they are not interested. If anybody can pull any strings... R.

00:08:16 August 28th 2005 - anonymous: **I tried**

I talked to them,

They said they will check if the subject was already published once (that might have been the reason), if not, they will contact you.

Good luck, enjoy the rest of your trip

00:08:18 August 30th 2005 - Author Reply: **R Eldar**: May I ask who is my helper?

Hi. Thanks for the help! May I ask who it is? If you want to stay anonymous on the site - please email me or use the private messages option here on the site. Thanks again, R.

00:03:55 March 15th 2006 - Ern Marshall: **Facinating**

You should feel very honoured indeed. What they were doing in their belief was giving ongoing life. The body is of no use to anyone or anything if Buried or cremated. This is giving life to the birds.

I would not mind this happening to me when the time comes

01:03:24 March 15th 2006 - Kimball O'Hara:

This is a fucking disgrace & you sir are an utter cunt for publishing this. I will explain in language that even a moron can understand.

This is a religious ceremony that is currently being banned by the Chinese government primarily because it is a draw for a certain kind of ghoulish tourist. The same Chinese government incidentally who have been in illegal occupation of Tibet for the last 50 years. Notwithstanding any ethical considerations about filming. If you were privileged enough to witness a sky burial it is not something that you should have taken pictures of and certainly not for publication on a website.

No sir you are due a flogging for this devilish piece of impudence. That is if the oedema doesn't get you first, puffy boy.

01:03:50 March 15th 2006 - jeff mertz: **be careful!**

yes, my name is jeff mertz and i first passed through the litang area of china in 2000, as a student of mandarin, chinese and tibetan culture i was shocked to stumble across swedish backpackers filming this most sacred of tibetan ceremonies. Yes, it is true the tibetans are not ashamed of such practices and are very happy to share their culture with travelers. But as a traveler, and especially an amateur photographer, you should be careful about the ways you use the images of your subjects, for example, this family you claim to have "joined", do you even know their names?; do you know the name of the soul that was set free; i highly doubt it and yes you should be ashamed for such foolish presentation of things you obviously dont understand. Sorry to burst your bubble buddy, but the sky burial tourism that you so ignorantly found yourself a part of has been occuring in the Litang area for at least six years and many have been "joined" that ceremony (that is of course for the one time entance fee to the park where the sky burial sight is located; do you remember paying that?) Luckily most of them have the good karmic sense to keep those images for close and personal reasons and not attempt to make a name for themselves by posting their images on personal travel sites. I hope the attention you have recieved from this has been worth the negative karma you are accumulating, what is it you want to hear anyway, "wow rotem, you are such an accomplished traveler". Well, i will say that if you would please take this monstrosity of a blog of the web imidiately!

Jeff Mertz

Geographer/ East-West Center Fellow

jmertz@hawaii.edu

02:03:57 March 15th 2006 - Author Reply: **R Eldar**: Just to make clear

Hi. No, there was no entrance fee, and this is not a national park. This was not done for tourists, but was a real ceremony. At first, as I wrote, we looked at it from far away, but then the family invited us to join them. I find this amazing, and have a lot of respect to the religion and the ceremonies of other people. I think it is their right to do as they believe with their dead, and there is no reason to hide it. R.

02:03:05 March 15th 2006 - Mic:

Amazing photos - thanks. It is quite a shocking way to farewell one's loved ones but it makes sense in Tibet for geographical reasons - the ground is frozen for much of the year.

02:03:29 March 16th 2006 - tess:

I am quite shocked and amazed but we have to be culturally-sensitive about it. Nice pictures!

00:03:12 March 17th 2006 - R Appel: **Useless**

with only photos, it looks like voyeurism. If you are really interested in this form of burials, go there, feel the atmosphere and the serenity of the family. Take part in the practises around before. As to thinking that the family agreed, I don't think they allowed you to put these photos on the internet but just for your own meditation since you were there !

01:03:19 March 17th 2006 - sittinlimbo: **delicacy**

i agree with many of the things said and would not limit the exposure, allowing for one to be mislead, as a sort of propoganda to warp one's understanding of the peace, compassion and beauty of the tibetan land and culture. cut the blog. it isn't hard to cut. nfa.

01:03:14 March 17th 2006 - Rumanu: **Controversy over the Pictures**

Hi, I was very very amazed to learn and see the photos of Sky Burial. I completely disagree with the people who are against of those photograhped published in a website. Because there are hundreds of people who would be interested to learn about this ritual and without any visuals, the knowledge would be incomplete.

I thank a million to the author and please keep us posted any other interesting facts you will come across during your visits in other counitres. Because we do need these information.

There are lots of people who might not even get a chance to go to these places to observe these things personally. Keep up the good work.....

00:03:26 March 27th 2006 - IO: **Mixed feelings about this story...**

I found the pictures quite distasteful to be honest. I think it is one thing to witness - especially since invited - and tell the story (which I did find quite mesmerizing) and another thing to take photos and publish so openly on the web.

With that said, I'd like to emphasis that I do agree with R Eldar's saying that the Tibetans have the "right to do as they believe with their dead, and there is no reason to hide it".

I just don't feel very comfortable with the "need" of capturing such sensitive, private, sacred moment on film.

00:03:21 March 29th 2006 - Emerald waters: **thanks it helped**

i am in year 10 and currently writing up a presentation on sky burials (as we have been studying the text "sky burial" in english) just wanted to let u know your site was probably the most useful i could find , and with your permission may i use some of the photos? (i will of course state where i found the pics ect ect)

00:03:40 March 30th 2006 - Meagan: **This is Great**

Hey, I was initially browsing for information on a sky burial, when I came across your incredible site.

I am writing to ask for further pictures that can be sent to me at lux_lisbon1@hotmail.com.

I think I can stomach them.

Keep up the great work.

02:03:28 March 31st 2006 - Rob, US: **breathtaking, magnificent, and frightening**

When I first saw the pictures and read your comments I was taken back a little by the thought at first but after a few moments I saw beauty in the ritual. I wish you had been able to inform us more of how this burial fits into the culture of Tibet. I understand their is a language barrier and such, but I can see how some took this negatively. I think they were wrong to criticize you for not understanding the religious rites of the ceremony. This was a case of ignorance more than of distaste. This way of disposing of a human corpse is not, as some

people think, a ritual to honour the birds of prey. The majority of Tibetans are Buddhists. Buddhism teaches rebirth. It teaches that the soul and spirit of each person just borrows the body, and they have no problem with birds of prey eating a corpse, as the soul does not really reside in it beyond death. Therefore the function of the sky burial is simply the disposal of the corpse. They do not bury the dead because the harsh Tibetan terrain makes the ground too hard to dig into, and with fuel and timber scarce, the sky burial is more practical. I understand this is a ritual that was adopted from ancient Iranians who migrated during the times of the Huns. I had heard of the ritual before, but did not know if was still practised and you should feel honored the family allowed you to partake. As for posting the pictures, I thank you for doing so. I will not judge you without any understanding of your intentions to do so. I see the educational merits in publishing these pictures and to be honest I see nothing distasteful in the pictures. I think people are afraid of what they do not understand. The peoples of Tibet believe in a sort of circle of life. There are no traditional western burials in Tibet. There are three common burials - cremation, sky, and water. Cremations are reserved for those with stature because wood is scarce and the poor can not afford the wood. Water burials are similar to sky burials in that the bodies are cut up, but are fed to fish in a river or lake. There is nothing distasteful in these rituals, just a little frightening.

Thank you for presenting this article and for teaching us all a little more about what we do not comprehend. We must all be more willing to accept what we don't understand.

00:04:50 April 4th 2006 - B: By the way

Thank you for sharing the sky burial. I think it is a great way of returning to the earth. IN the west, we are so afraid of returning to the earth that now in the US it is law to fill corpses with formaldehyde before burying them.

By the way, Tibet is NOT China.

01:04:08 April 5th 2006 - Author Reply: **R Eldar: This is not in Tibet**

I am not going to argue about whether Tibet is a part of China or not. Either way, this event took place in Sichuan province of China, and not in Tibet itself. You can look at other entries I published later from Tibet itself, and I described the Chinese/Tibetan problem. I always referred to Tibet as Tibet and never as China, but I can tell you that every conflict has two sides, and both of them should be listened to, and it is really hard to judge without knowing the entire history of the area, which is always hard because each side tells it from its own point of view. Usually we tend to favor the weak which were occupied by the strong, and I can't tell you that I don't feel the same most of the time. But I am not going to judge either side because I just don't know enough about the conflict there.

00:04:54 April 10th 2006 - Eric Blair: Tibet

I feel compelled to add that Tibet is no less part of China as Puerto Rico is for the US, Northern Ireland is for Great Britain, Basque is for Spain. Where are all the non-Westerners wearing Free Basque T-shirts, Free Northern Ireland T-shirts, Free Puerto Rico T-shirts? There are none, I dare say, maybe because non-Westerners are less presumptuous. One wonders if the animus towards China over its territorial rights over Tibet is just another remnant of Cold War political propaganda, and old fashioned Western Cultural snobbery disguised as liberal angst.

By the way, I find the Sky-Burial photos tastefully done.

02:04:26 April 16th 2006 - anonymous:

I had the honor of witnessing a full sky burial which included several bodies. I was a student at the time and was with a group of other students. We were all invited to witness this incredible ceremony. I was one of the only people who stayed for the whole experience. It has changed my life. It was very difficult coming home and trying to explain what I had seen to my family. I just had to give up because they could not understand that the whole ceremony was there to insure that the person returned to life in human form in their next life and what an honor it really was to be buried this way. It is good to hear that others have witnessed this experience as well at have taken it to heart instead of disgust.

fellow learning traveler

LF

00:04:11 April 24th 2006 - **josworld: "Seven Years in Tibet"**

The first time I've seen Sky Burial was when I watched "Seven Years in Tibet". A very good film ! I was shocked too but then I understand the spiritual meaning behind the practice. I think it's far more spiritual & meaningful than a dead body being cut up in the name of science.

00:05:04 May 18th 2006 - Ann Marie: great work

I loved your photos. When Westerners say something is gross or shocking imagine what Tibetans think when they find out that we pay 6 grand for a casket and shoot embalming fluid into the body. They practice the circle of life and it is beautiful. As far as others who have commented to the photographer about invading their privacy well that is just cultural arrogance as well. To study and know another culture and to witness it opens the mind for peoples all over the world. Thank you for sharing so that I have a better understanding of and a greater appreciation for burial practices of those other than my Catholic upbringing. After all, it is from dust to dust that we all come and go.

00:06:18 June 24th 2006 - André: Sky Burial Location

Hi,

I have read your article, and found it quite interesting and informative. In late 2004 I visited the sky burial site outside of Langsmusi, right on the border between Gansu and Sichuan, and it was certainly a very special and fascinating place. Personally, I did not find it morbid at all, although I didn't actually witness the event of a sky burial - instead I saw the remains of many people who had been 'buried' there.

I will be going to Litang at the beginning of August 2006 for the horse racing festival, and I would very much like to visit the sky burial site that you have written about. If you have any more information about how to get there, I would be most grateful.

You can write to me at the following address: andre.holdrinet@gmail.com

Cheers,

André

01:07:53 July 5th 2006 - My Name: to Kimball O'Hara

This man is not an anthropologist he was simply an observer. He wanted to document something strange and wonderful. This was done with full knowledge and approval by the family and the priests. The story is also written in a manner that respects these people and their ritual. So you Kimball O'Hara are the one who can piss off. 3 words: Freedom Of Expression

00:07:29 July 13th 2006 - Dorje: Sky Burial

I am a tibetan living in toronto, Canada. I have also read & heard about the sky burial. But I have never seen one. We, tibetans believe that everything is Impermanence and even during ones death; if one could be of some help to any other living being, it would add good karma. Lord Buddha once saw a hungry tigeress with few of her cubs and he cut his own flesh & offered it to them. There is a place in Nepal where it happened. It's a pilgrimage site. I have been there few times. Hope this explains a bit on our culture and tradition. Best regards...Dorje

01:07:59 July 24th 2006 - Olver West: Why?

Why must people do what they are asked not to do/ If photos are not to be taken then why do people take them? Written accounts should serve to provide a record.

01:09:39 September 4th 2006 - Catherine: giving back to nature

I am not sure if you understand the reason for what they did but if you believe in reincarnation then it should be easy for your mind to understand the why behind what they did We come into this life and borrow from nature the cells we need to live in this body and we must give them back at the end of this experience so that they are there to use the next time around Burying and decomposition is the same thing the difference is it takes longer and the bugs and parasites do what the vultures did only it takes much longer This way the cells needed to come back are put back into nature faster so you can return faster Not complicated or gross just a fact

00:10:05 October 11th 2006 - James Bard: Why not?

These people let him take photographs after inviting him to watch. No money changed hands, and he treated them with respect (and admittedly some shock and curiosity). The ceremony sounds strange and profound to me, a welcome change from the far more disrespectful pageantry of western funerals. Maybe I'll do a sky-burial when I go...and if my family lets someone take pictures I'll roll my eyes at some sod bitching about it afterwards.

01:10:48 October 16th 2006 - qiong: give it all back

also, when you've taken so much during your life, it's righteous to give your most valued possession back to the nature, right?

01:10:47 October 31st 2006 - tinlay: Sky burrial

Good job by all 4 creating awareness and knowledge but all must move on from the dead body to more facts about lives and future about Tibet. Lithang is a tibetan name and by including

into a chinese province doesn't become chinese. If u agree with me, go to youtube and search for Tibet, u get complete story of Tibet and in videos. lly watch the series of THE CRY OF SNOW LION. reply tinlay@rediffmail.com

01:11:35 November 9th 2006 - anonymous:

you shouldn't have taken pictures of this. i am an anthropologist who studies sky burials, and your disrespect for the privacy and sanctity of this amazing ritual is infuriating. most sky burial sites explicitly check to make sure that tourists are not taking photos. you must have either been doing this secretly or simply took advantage of a site that was not monitoring your use of a camera. for you to sensationalize this practice on the worldwideweb only contributes to the fog of stigma and misunderstanding regarding the practice of sky burials that many westerners have. i'm really unhappy to have come upon this site, and hope that you ultimately take down these pictures and have a little respect for the culture that you invaded.

00:11:34 November 21st 2006 - Author Reply: **R Eldar**: I would love to hear your thoughts

The sites that are monitored for cameras are "touristic" sites. It is monitored mainly by the Chinese government, and not by the Tibetans themselves. If you read my text you could see that the people agreed to photos. I think that hiding this amazing thing IS the source of the fog and the stigma. If you know more about this ritual I would appreciate if you post it here, rather than just saying that we don't know enough about it. Thanks, R.

00:11:31 November 24th 2006 - Shines: Thanks

I have mixed emotions concerning the photos. From perspective of a Native Rights activist, my first reaction was to be repulsed by the idea of having someone's body and funeral being published online. All too often I have to write a letter or sign a petition asking for someone's bones or belongings back from a private collector or a museum. It is a matter of honoring the deceased- our ancestors, and their wishes. I know I don't want my ass dug up and displayed, especially without my family's consent. However, from an Anthropology student's view, the family did allow the photos to be taken. Whether or not they knew they'd be displayed for all to see, is another matter. But I must thank the photographer, I was able to use this page in a term paper for my anthropology class concerning death and burials. I must urge everyone, however, to use their best judgment when sharing people's ways and beliefs. Sometimes it isn't yours to share. I'm not in the position to say this instance is wrong or right, but I will ask everyone to keep it in mind. Peace, Shines through the Clouds

00:11:47 November 30th 2006 - Norman K.: Every culture's ritual should be respected

Every culture has a different and unique way of taking care of their diseased. I do not think this is brutal or barbaric. If you come to think about it, people from Tibet are living in some of the harshest environment in our planet. From a religious standpoint, they believe the soul will leave the body after 3 days, and therefore sky burial is actually one of the most environmentally friendly way of disposing the dead body once the 3-day ritual is observed by the family. (With no chopping down of trees to make coffin, no wasteful occupation of land to bury the carcass, remember, farmable land is extremely precious on the roof of the world). Indeed, from their cultural perspective, this is done with the utmost respect by offering it back to mother nature. One other side note, the immediate family members are not supposed to observe the ritual, only close relatives of the family. For all those people who are ignorant about many aspects of the Tibetan culture, let's stop labelling their deeds as brutal or uncivilized !

02:01:19 January 12th 2007 - Paul: nothing wrong here

Photos are fine. If you guys don't like them, close your browser. Geez.

00:01:00 January 20th 2007 - anonymous: Thank you

I feel that you told the story respectfully, and that the photos were not "over the top" in any way. If people hear about some type of tradition or ceremony, and it is shrouded in secrecy and spoken of in whispers, and shielded from view....that is what creates misunderstandings and stigma...you've helped us to understand this ritual... we will probably never have the opportunity to travel and see these things; it's great that there are people willing to share... especially since you were invited to join the family and were allowed to take photos.... may this person rest in peace. I was moved by this story....thank you.

00:01:26 January 31st 2007 - anonymous:

Can you show us some photographs of your dead mother, please?

00:02:43 February 2nd 2007 - Greg: Not really so wierd

If you put this into a cultural and religious context this custom is really not so strange after all. Buddhists believe that all life is connected, and death is just another step on the circular wheel of life. I see this as a beautiful and symbolic practice. It seems much more in tune with nature and "reality" than some of our Western funeral customs.

00:02:19 February 21st 2007 - Silk: Great Resource

I'm a Sociology student at a small American university, and I've been researching burial practices for a few years now. This page and your photographs are a treasure trove of primary research, you really should write up your experiences and publish what you saw for the benefit of the academic community. I've had a very difficult time in the past finding legitimate research materials on Sky Burial specifically, and exarnation in general. Sources like your experience are invaluable to social research. Thanks for sharing.

00:03:27 March 16th 2007 - Iottae: ahhhhh

wowo coollll

00:04:35 April 26th 2007 - Anna: Show some respect

Hi! I have no problem with the things you witnessed, I have heard a lot about sky burials before. I don't even have a problem with your descriptions, after all there are many people who are interested to learn.... BUT to put photographs on the internet?! Even just to take pictures. Did the family actually speak enough English to say you could take photos and explain why they were happy with it, or did they just nod when you pointed to your camera. Did they have any idea the images would be put on the internet for everyone to see? You have no right to intrude on people's private grief in such a way. Even if they gave you permission to be there you should have more respect for the deceased than to take photos of the corpse. Have you never had anyone close to you die... would you have liked tourists at their funeral? How would you feel if you came across photographs of a dead relatives body on the internet? As for the last photo.... you're sick! That's not a tourist attraction behind you! That is a private religious ceremony and you're posing as if you've found yet another historic monument! And as for taking photographs of the grieving relatives.... well I hope next time you're at a funeral there's someone there snapping a flash at you. You should be ashamed of yourself.

00:05:45 May 13th 2007 - Andy: Thumbs up

Thank you for your powerful writing in this the pictures. I was there in 2006 and took some photos. I had to donate some money to the family and the monk for that.

andy_imo@yahoo.com.au I would liketo swap photos if you would Thanks

00:06:39 June 8th 2007 - **Snowflake**: have some fucking respect

I know you've had a lot of comments, and I never write comments in blogs but I feel the need to tell you how ashamed I am in some so-called travellers like you. Most of my resentment of this blog has been expressed by others. I especially agree with Anna, who asked if you have had a family member die. Imagine if at your cousin's/father's/ sister's funeral some "accomplished traveler" comes by, asks someone besides you if they could take pictures (and they say yes because they are feeling vulnerable), and then proceeds to pose in front of your deceased family member. And the fact that you were LOOKING for this, it seems that you didn't want to learn about it, but just take pictures so you can boast in your blog how cultured you are! I'd like to learn about funerals too. Let me know when your aunt dies, I'd like to post it on my blog along with pictures...

01:06:58 June 18th 2007 - Muzna: Fortunate

You are very fortunate indeed to have witnessed such a ritual. Thank you for sharing your thoughts/feelings and photos.

00:07:40 July 19th 2007 - Kirra Tara: my thoughts

Tashi delek!! a few days ago 3 Jokhang Monks took me to witness a sky burial at Drigung Monastery.... As Buddhists give everything, a sky burial is a last offering of ones self, giving their body for food. I think it is similar to donating your organs/body parts to save lives... Tibetans believe you remain in the body for 3 days after death, and then you are completely gone.. Similar to us humans sitting around a big plate of meat really... think about it.. thanks for sharing your story and pics

00:09:54 September 1st 2007 - Jess: I'd like to be "buried" this way

I think this is really a great, eco-sensitive way of getting "back to the Earth". I'd much rather be taken care of this way than to have my remains rot in a box or be burned to a cinder.

01:09:44 September 5th 2007 - kt: FREE TIBET

As the Tibetans have suffered under chinese rule and invasion, would you consider changing the title to "Tibetan sky burial in TIBET" and change the flag to the TIBETAN FLAG? - it is off topic, but do you know that Tibetans are imprisoned and often tortured if caught with a photo of the His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

01:09:42 September 14th 2007 - Author Reply: **R Eldar**: To Kirra

I know all about the suffering in Tibet, and if you read some of my other blogs from Tibet you will see that I did tag them under Tibet and not under China, and I also mentioned the suffering and the harsh history of the place. This specific event, though, took place in mainland China and not in Tibet. It was practiced by Tibetans that live in China.

00:09:09 September 17th 2007 - MaryC: Read 'Sky Burial' by Xinran

I've just finished reading the non-fiction novel 'Sky Burial' by Xinran and would recommend it to anyone who has found this discussion on sky burials interesting (or infuriating, or whatever). Xinran introduces the reader to Tibetan culture in a very personal and accessible way, and sky burial is central to the story she shares. I got the book from Amazon.

01:09:15 September 26th 2007 - **Travel Bug10**: There are others too

Sky burial is also done in India by the Zorastrians(followers of the fire God). They too leave their dead for the Vultures to eat.....Their reasoning is that - even if a person is dead he should be able to help another creature - in this case by satisfying the vultures hunger... <http://tessy-george.blogspot.com/>

01:10:08 October 10th 2007 - K Petersen: Thanks

Thanks for posting these. I've read several written accounts of sky burials and have been very curious to see some images. These are the only series I have been able to find, and they are great!

01:10:41 October 19th 2007 - Forest Spryte: Get over yourselves

To those who are outraged, get over yourselves. He's not making any money off this and is in fact exposing people like us to knowledge not everyone has access to, and what better than photos to do so? A picture's worth 1000 words, but aside from that, he didn't even show anything grisly. When the first live human birth was shown in pictures, people were offended (though people will ALWAYS find SOMETHING to be offended about) but now it's practically accepted as a beautiful, natural thing. If the family didn't care, no harm done. And if you don't like it, close your browser and quit trying to police the Internet with your obviously superior wisdom about what's acceptable and what's not.

00:10:38 October 22nd 2007 - Helen: Legal issues?

Hi. I want to thank you for a very interesting blog with beautiful pictures! I find your account of the sky burial very interesting. There is just one question that I have regarding your decisions to publish these pictures. One person made a comment that seemed to lose its impact because it was so angry, but it did have one point: apparently, sky burials are illegal in China. Considering this, wouldn't it have been a good idea to cover the face of the man in your picture? Have you considered how to protect the identity of the rest of the family, in case you find a place to publish the rest of your photos? Completely aside from the question of whether or not it is respectful to take/publish these pictures, I think it is probably unlikely that the family who invited you considered all the implications it might have for them if some Chinese official decided to follow up on the story. Since you were invited, you might want to regard it as your duty to protect them from that, by not revealing their identities. Thank you again for a very interesting blog! Helen

02:11:17 November 28th 2007 - Pam: Actually...

I don't see this as any more disgusting than sticking a body in the ground so that it can slowly decompose to become worm food. Sea burials also provide food to the ocean's residents. Why is offering carrion to the vultures such a shocking thing? I think it's rather poignant, to be honest. I'd like to die knowing that my death gave something back to the planet (as fertilizer, as a food source to animals, whatever). Feed me to the birds when I go... that's totally cool with me. I suppose what people find horrifying is the bone crushing -- but I imagine that if they witnessed the full embalming process, they'd be equally appalled.

00:12:21 December 5th 2007 - lhamo:

I think the big problem and misunderstanding here is that Western attitudes toward death are vastly different from Eastern, especially Tibetan. Most Tibetans are Buddhist, which has a strong focus on the teachings of impermanence, especially of the body. Tibetans understand that death is a natural and normal thing, inevitable for all of us. In Western society however, we keep our elderly and dying on life support, respirators, all manner of medications, just to stave off death for a little longer, instead of understanding that it is natural and a part of being a human on this planet. We will do anything to avoid death, and even after death, we pump the bodies formerly occupied by our loved ones full of chemicals in order to mimic the appearance of life. Death to a Westerner is something evil, horrible, and ultimately terribly unpleasant- we live in a culture that does everything it can to deny human mortality. To Tibetans, death is very much the opposite, just as natural as birth, and not something to treat as the end of the world. Of course there is grief and sadness involved, but many Tibetans understand the real meaning of death in a way we Westerners can never hope to. When asked what was the meaning of life, the eminent lama Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche replied "to prepare to die," an attitude which many Tibetans share. So, to those people making the comparison between these photos and photos of a Western style funeral, it's really apples to oranges- a different culture, different people, and very different attitude towards the entire concept.

02:01:40 January 5th 2008 - J.L.:

I have been studying Chinese for two years now after I went on a nine month trip through Asia. The issue of Tibet has always been interesting to me as my city, Santa Fe, has a sizable Tibetan population, and after a visit to Dharamsala, I gained a deep respect for the people and practices of Tibet. I had heard about sky burials from many sources, non of which were from an individual that had ever witnessed one. They all said that pictures were not permitted and outsiders were rarely allowed to observe. That being said, I think this blog is valuable for many reasons. I think it unveils a little about a culture that is popularized but rarely understood. The discussion that resulted provides much of the information and argument that was not present in the blog itself. Thanks for not editing the comments like many of the readers wanted the blog to be edited.

00:01:12 January 22nd 2008 - M: amazing

i dont find anything disturbing about these pictures and i found the article and pictures very informative. if you had the families permission to take photos i dont see a problem with on the surface it is no different then taking photos of a western funeral its just alittle more eye opening and graphic to us.

01:01:57 January 23rd 2008 - wendy Teasdill: way to go

Thankyou for an interesting set of pictures. Criticisms are based on your naivity but the pictures wouldn't have got here without some sense of going where angels fear to tread. All the comments are raw and instructive, like the sky burial itself. Vultures are sacred birds and don't kill to eat: they need these sky burials, so if the pictures and all the comments together heighten both awareness and respect then that in itself is 'Jha-tor'.

01:01:36 January 26th 2008 - Topgyal: Lithang and Tibet and China

I find your argument that Lithang is part of Sichuan historically ignorant. Lithang is part of what the Tibetans refer to as the Kham province of traditional Tibet, most of which was colonised by the Chinese in and after the 18th Century. Is India part of UK? America of UK? Are all the European colonies part of their colonial masters? The only difference between TAR and other Tibetan regions and these decolonised nation-states is that the Chinese still control them! I hope in the future, if you have to travel to Tibet and write/comment about it, that you would be more sensitive to and free from the history written and current reality portrayed by victorious imperialists!

01:02:08 February 11th 2008 - Zedex Mohammed: re: legal issues

i just wanted to say that i have read that sky burials were banned in the 1960s by the communist government but was legalised again in the 1980s so the above comment made by helen can be disregarded [no offence]. i think my opinion of sky burials has already been written by many of the above commentators, lets just say i think of it in a positive way.

00:02:21 February 23rd 2008 - shane: well done

i dont normally comment on blogs but i am impressed by the way you have created this site and impressed by the way you have addressed comments - well done. I have been to Litang myself and I have witnessed several sky burials and have photos as a result of being invited to take them, however in other cases i was asked not to take photos and of course did not. your photos are very tasteful and i would be interested in seeing the full collection. again well done.

01:02:22 February 26th 2008 - Author Reply: **R Eldar**: No need to be so offensive

If you read the rest of my blog you can see that I have been to Tibet and I understand the suffering and the history of the region. I am not making any arguments about how this region should be called, but it is important to me as a travelblogger that people can use my information for their trips, and since most guidebooks refer to this area as Sichuan I do so too.

00:03:29 March 14th 2008 - Taty: The meaning

It is common to be critical of traditions one does not understand. The reason for the sky burial is to help the essence of the person and the family detach from the material form of the corpse since it is no longer the person. It seems strange from a western perspective, but having a corpse of a loved one stuck in box being eaten alive by worms and rotting with bacteria doesn't seem that much better. The body returning to nature is only shocking to those who are afraid of death in a deeper way.

00:03:59 March 15th 2008 - Tsering: Tibet land - Chinese claims

The fact that you claim this burial happened in mainland China and not in Tibet is misleading. Did you know that more than half of ethnic Tibetan territories have been Sino- sized and incorporated into mainland China? Just because the Chinese changed all the Tibetan area names into Chinese does not legalize the occupation. Did you know that the famous "Chinese Panda" bears are ethnically part of traditional Tibetan territory?

01:03:34 March 16th 2008 - G Collis: tibet and china

Having been to China on a cultural visit I am become quite interested in anything to do with China. Before hand I believe I was a victim of western propoganda and have since been trying to find a blog that gives the view of the Chinese people. I found this site very interesting and am quite amazed at how offensive some people can be especially when they have not read your post properly. Maybe this is the problem with people who have such firm opinions. All I know is that China is about as different to the west as life on Mars would be and I think we should all find out more about it. Well done for educating me. PS. Correct me if I am wrong and without being offensive please but I thought Tibet had been part of China since Kublai Khan.

00:03:24 March 17th 2008 - Martin, : unblieveable

I can't believe such a in humane action against other human body , human body must be respected though died . It is barbaric act

00:03:24 March 18th 2008 - mystykmike: Awesome

I love it. Where do I sign up?

01:03:24 March 28th 2008 - Dane: contravrsary

What a contrary? if you believe in whatever Good is,you then believe that good gives you live and he also takes it from you. inconsequently you have no right over any parts of your body or soul to control. it is all belong to God. He judges and he decides.

02:03:14 March 31st 2008 - Heinrich: Reply to Tsering

I guess most of the Han-Chinese do not mind the Tibetan claim and reserve the right of sky burial, because they will not be able to adapt to this. Only the TIBETAN can have this ritual, this is for sure. As regard to the Panda, you need some time and much effort to try to change the "Chinese Panda" to "Tibetan Panda". Sad, but you can try.

02:04:47 April 20th 2008 - sky england: your blog

really enjoyed educating myself with your posting. read all the comments/opinions on your posting! i also agree with the circle of life/death way of life the tibet people believe and fully respect and admire it (i even feel a little jealous because i am a "ignorant" westerner and probably will be burnt or buried. can't wait.) i think we may have really lost touch with nature as westerners, and enjoyed a slap in the face of purity from your privileged encounter. i will end with What is the meaning of life? To prepare to die. thanks sky

02:04:05 April 28th 2008 - tenzin: from my experience

I've been to Tibet few times leading US students and seen myself of this holy practice of sky burial. From the surface it seems cruel to see such acts, but if you look deeper through buddhist perspective than it makes so much sense. This act is the highest form of giving oneself, a final sacrifice - you come to this world with nothing at birth and you leave this world with nothing! The final act of your sacrifice is to give your body to benefit other beings in this case to these special birds - vultures. This teaches people the meaning of impermanence. That one should not hold to material wealth only! I was definitely reminded of this one when i witnessed this ceremony. I saw some Chinese tourists they were very insensitive, they would go right up front to the site, without even asking and start making all these gestures and talking loud while this ceremony was happening. they couldn't keep their mouths shut to show some decency. But regardless, the American HS students that I was with were all so touched by this ceremony that we didn't talk for about 3 hrs after what we had witnessed and later in the evening when we reached Lhasa we discussed of what they had seen in the afternoon and 99% were so thankful to their parents and loved ones.. that they called their parents in the States to say they love them and thanked them!!! Overall, they felt that life is very valuable and sacred. One cannot take it for granted! This is kinda of the effect that one gets when witnessing such a unique tradition of Tibetan culture. Yes Chinese gov't is using this as ways to attract tourists and unfortunately some people still don't understand and some do. This obviously is too difficult to understand for the Chinese (occupiers) who have no religious understanding and usually label it as "barbaric" culture.

00:05:11 May 1st 2008 - Diane: Also witness to sky burial

Hi. I was also witness to the sky burial, but back in 1984. We were taken at dawn to the site and saw the disposal of 3 bodies in total. They asked that we NOT take photos, although at the end we were able to photograph the vultures. I believe a few years later some journalists photographed the ritual and that caused the ban. I think it is a pragmatic way to dispose of bodies in Tibet. The thing that moved me that most was that a young boy of about 12 years was an 'apprentice' butcher and was helping. That was quite hard to deal with.

01:05:52 May 23rd 2008 - Tibetan: A Tibetan comments

Hi all, Another Tibetan here to contribute to the discussion. What the writer describes and shared photos of is an important Tibetan custom. Unfortunately, the writer describes what he saw without any appreciation of and sensitivity to local beliefs and philosophy of life. For the Tibetan Buddhist, sacrificing yourself for the sake of others is one of the highest aspirations, and giving your body to the vultures, a lowly being, is act of ultrism even in your death. Also, philosophically, we believe that the body is only physical and impermanent and transitory in nature. The soul is the more important one and it is something that transmigrates to another body upon our death. So attachment to physical aspects of ourselves are discouraged, even while we are living, and definitely, when we die. All that being said, as a Tibetan and I know many Tibetans will agree with me, I think the practice of Sky Burial should end in this time and age. It is too gruesome and does not accord dignity to the deceased and his family (altruistic though it may be).

01:05:59 May 26th 2008 - Eric: A practical rationalization of a necessary sadness.

Thank you for your sharing on the Tibetan "sky burial". It is people like you who remove the wall of ignorance and misunderstanding among people. That there are people who react so angrily to your sharing here only serves to unmask the inherent barbarism in the "sky burial" that these people want to hide. Down in their hearts, they know such acts of violence against the human body, whether dead or alive, are revolting to the ordinary people and very hurtful to close relatives. Otherwise, why is there such display of anger? But this does not mean that Tibetans are, by nature, barbaric. They are human beings like all of us and they love and honour their loved ones whether in life or in death. It may be noted that "sky burial" were for the serfs whose lives worth very little. So their bodies could not be worth more when they are dead. "Sky burial" was a manifestation of extreme poverty in "traditional" Tibetan society and of geographical necessities which made ordinary burial often impractical. Those who can afford the firewood like the Dalai Lamas have their dead bodies cremated. This shows that the often cited religious justification is nothing more than a practical rationalization of a necessary sadness. Mercifully, "sky burial" is not an indispensable Buddhist obligation. So when cremation is widely affordable to the masses in the future and when Tibetans are better informed, such a practice like many others before it will, in time, die a natural death. For those who have a romantic fantasy of "sky burial", please give some thoughts to the feelings of your loved ones who still love you in death. Anyway, "sky burial" is an oxymoron. You cannot do a burial in the sky.

02:05:51 May 30th 2008 - Rachel: Just silly..

I think it's ridiculous how many people are so upset about these photographs... And whoever claimed this was a case of voyeurism is seriously lacking in vocabulary skills. This is only one man's educational experience and his choice to share the experience with others, which I can appreciate very much. And to bring into the discussion the photographers own family members (asking him if he's ever known someone who died) is the stupidest thing I've heard. These people chose to perform this ritual for their loved one. They do not view death in the same light as most of you condemning the photographer. This is about the deceased individuals wish to give back to nature. The family was obviously aware that photographs were being taken and had no problem with it. So for everyone crying about his disrespect and lack of professionalism... get over yourself. You may not feel comfortable with it and that's your prerogative... But that doesn't at all make you right.

01:06:36 June 1st 2008 - Paul Butler: Disappointing

I'm disapointed that you would choose to photograph and describe (without understanding of meaning) this event. I don't intend to explain to you the significance as it's clear your not interested in understanding but purely to check the 'shock' box on your tour of tibet. Congratulations.....

02:06:38 June 2nd 2008 - Noelani: Sky burial

The Tibetan have a unique way of understanding of life and death. Its seems barbaric to most people but they are very practical. Why waste limited land with dead bodies that just get eaten by bugs anyway. Why not give back to nature from where we came right up front. Knowing their loved ones will reincarnate, they have not problem with seeing this body die. It's probably that other cultures do not accept death as a natural process as they do, hence get upset by it. I know cremation is done, but I am not sure if you have to be a monk, enough money for the wood, or what...anyway...there are many cultures with different values and beliefs...good to respect them all.

00:06:23 June 8th 2008 - Eddy: sky burial

In traditional Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet (NOT CHINA BY THE WAY) the sky burial was seen as the last act of absolute charity. Giving your body for others to feed on. In this culture even a worm or a bird could have been your Mother in a previous life and the body is nothing more than a sacred vehicle so giving it as a last act to support others is the ultimate in selflessness.

00:06:47 June 19th 2008 - tsering sonam : thank you.

you are the man who know about tibet and limi village.tashi delek go head.i will be with you..

02:06:11 June 26th 2008 - Simon: Sensativity

Regardless of the situation, weather you're invited to a ceremony such as this(or wether you intrude) people should be very carefull about how they act. This is a facinating cememony and I was glad to read about it, but is taking photos really needed. How would you feel if a picture of a body of your loved one appeared on a webiste. Tourists/travelers have a very important role to play when it comes to cultural sensativity and I think you've crossed it.

00:08:10 August 24th 2008 - Claudia: \"Sky Burial\" Author:Xinran

I recently finished reading a memoir of a Chinese woman searching for her husband in Tibet for 30 years. It is a very intriguing and "eye opening" read. The title is "Sky Burial" by Xinran. I highly recommend this read of a beautiful and complicated country.

00:09:39 September 4th 2008 - kathy: Photos

I think you were perfectly correct in the photos you choose to post. I didn't see any nude body being ripped apart; the pulverized skeleton was a little disturbing, but no longer recognizable as a person. We all have to remember that at that point the body is just an empty vessel. The vultures looked healthy and beautiful. In the Zorastrian tradition the body is left alone for in a 100 ft tower, called a tower of silence. After time goes by, nature (vultures, ravens etc.) takes it's course. This is still practiced in India, but because of the toxins in many human bodies has lead to a significant decline in the vulture population. The vultures are loved for all their qualities -primarily their patience in waiting and never attacking anything still living.

00:09:35 September 13th 2008 - c moore:

it never ceases to amaze me the difference in our cultures. I see nothing wrong with you posting these pictures. First I've heard of this. Thanks for the education.

00:09:50 September 21st 2008 - Wm. Webb: Provincial Thought

Those who are offended by jhator, along with those put too much importance on it, are both deluded. To Tibetan Buddhists, the body is unnecessary after death, when the (soul) has departed. To dispose of it in a way that is not consistent with a respect for still-living beings would be wrong. Tibet is a country nearly devoid of ground suitable for burial, and the same is true of fuel that could be used for cremation. Giving the body back to living creatures who can use it is respectful both to the person who has died and to all living things. From a practical standpoint, it also solves a fairly serious health problem. Westerners, with our morbid preoccupation with death and our quaint ideas about resurrection, find this sort of thing disgusting, but consideration in a respectful, thoughtful way will reveal to most that it is, indeed, far more sensible than destroying a body's integrity with chemicals and sealing it in a

container. There is a movement in the US and Great Britain toward natural burial in burial "parks," to allow the constituents of the body to return to the earth and nourish its beings. That, to me, is true reverence. So is jhator. It is the common Western practices that are barbaric.

00:09:04 September 30th 2008 - Lama Jinpa: Stupidity

Yes, there is no excuse, other than pure self-centered ignorance, for disrespecting ANY other culture, especially the religious and sacred traditions of a country. This material should be taken off the internet...But of course that wont happen, as the deeply pathological individual who posted will never likely have that kind of realization... One can hope of course, for the nearly impossible...

01:10:17 October 6th 2008 - Elaine: Refreshing to see

I honestly like hearing about this. I worked with a girl, that said this is what she wanted to do when she died. I thought, that really sounds like the best thing. I think it makes much more sense than what we are doing. Of course, it's your own choice. Jeff and Anna, you're entitled to your, of the blog, but deep down, I think maybe you're just jealous, it's not you getting praise for the pictures. It's JUST a body. I think we should practice the same thing in the US. I really don't see why we don't? If you understood what happens when we die you really wouldn't be so upset with these pictures. It's not like they kill the body and THEN gave it to the vultures! He will come back to live again, just his BODY was eaten. I see no harm in sharing this with the less fortunate who have not seen it. Thank you for sharing your pictures, Rotem. It's refreshing to see, as I again, I think the Tibetan's have the right idea, sacrificing their bodies for the living.

00:10:53 October 20th 2008 - Mell:

Just reading your blog is making me feel faint. There are some sides of life that I hope I will only ever experience by reading about. Mel

00:10:10 October 21st 2008 - vik: Differen thinking

I read so many stupid comments, from many people who dont know anything about respect. but i think that you are privileged by see mourning process, so in any culture who a traveled are invited to a mourning or wedding are considered to be special guest, more was allowed to take pictures. Thanks to show us the blog.

01:11:41 November 4th 2008 - Candy Satterfield: Very good post

I think that you did a great job with this, and you described the experience of any tourist pretty well with this situation. I would love to bear witness to this ritual, as I respect the process of life returning to the earth as they have done it. The sky burial is such a sacred experience for families, i actually think that it is awesome that they want to share the experience with some tourists and educational inquirers. Good going.

01:11:57 November 16th 2008 - anonymous:

Rotem- with all said and done, i want to know what have you learned from this experience? about yourself, your place on earth, your own life and death?

00:11:06 November 18th 2008 - Amazing blog!:

Twaddle is useless. Just let the S_____ to decide.