

Sky Burial in Upper Mustang: Cultural, Spiritual, and Ecological Perspectives on a Death Rituals in Nepal

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Abstract

This research explores the cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance of the sky burial ritual (Jhator) in Upper Mustang, Nepal a remote Himalayan region where Tibetan Buddhist practices persist despite growing external pressures. Sky burial, in which the deceased body is ritually dismembered and offered to vultures, embodies Buddhist principles of impermanence, compassion, and interdependence with nature. This research is based on qualitative study. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the research relies on primary data collected in April 2025 through semi-structured interviews with local elders and ritual specialists and 6–7 days of participant observation. This study highlights how the ritual not only reflects spiritual cosmology but also contributes to ecological sustainability through the natural disposal of human remains. The study combines primary ethnographic data, which includes interviews and observations of ritual, with secondary data from relevant literature, to examine the cultural, spiritual and ecological importance of sky burial in Upper Mustang. The tradition faces critical threats: declining vulture populations, outmigration, modernization, and the erosion of indigenous knowledge. The collected data were analyzed by a systematic thematic analysis of cultural, spiritual and ecological aspects. The research reveals that while the practice of sky burial is diminishing, it continues to serve as a powerful marker of identity, cultural continuity, and human-nature connection. This study aims to fill gaps in interdisciplinary scholarship by offering a comprehensive account of sky burial in Upper Mustang, thereby contributing to anthropological literature, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation discourse in the Himalayan region. The implications of this research involve the areas of cultural preservation, ecological conservation, and heritage policy and suggest how indigenous rituals can provide a foundation for sustainable practices and support the safeguarding of Himalayan intangible heritage.

Keywords: sky burial, Upper Mustang, ritual ecology, cultural preservation, vulture conservation

1. Introduction

Death rituals are not just rituals marking the end of life; they are cultural messages that contain spiritual values, environmental relationships, and cultural identities. In the far northeast

corner of the Himalayan region Upper Mustang in Nepal, the death ritual of sky burial (Jhator) and tell us a lot about Buddhism, environmental awareness, and the persistence of local culture. In the Jhator ritual, the dead body is placed on a raised plateau, it is ritually dismembered, and offered to vultures, the dead body is not just abandonment, but an offer to vultures to help the cycle of life continue. The basis for the Jhator ritual remains within the Tibetan Buddhist perspective of impermanence Anicca, in which the body of a deceased person is regarded as a short-lived vessel and returning it to nature in this case, as food for the vulture's links compassion with humility (Gyatso, 2015).

Sky burial is still practiced in a few locations in Upper Mustang, where Tibetan cultural practices have endured through geographic isolation. The proposed Upper Mustang region also exhibits strong historical and religious ties to Tibet, and traditional practices for death are characterized by a blending of practices from Vajrayāna Buddhist, indigenous Bon, and local ecological contexts (Mumford, 1989). There are increasing threats and challenges to the viability of these sacred practices, including modernization, processes of outmigration, competitors for ecological resources, and declining vulture populations (Acharya *et al.*, 2009). Sky burial is culturally and ecologically significant but has remained absent from academic work in Nepal. Existing literature primarily engages Tibetan practices across the Chinese border, or only mentions sky burial as part of a more general ethnography. Given substantial ecological pressures, spiritual shifts, and demographic shifts in Upper Mustang, this study attempts to disentangle sky burial from the perspective of its cultural, spiritual, and ecological



components.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Despite the prominence of sky burial in the cultural and spiritual landscape of Upper Mustang, it is under increasing threat due to factors such as ecological imbalance due to the vulture crisis, the encroachment of modern funerary practices, and the loss of indigenous knowledge. However, there is a significant absence of ethnographic and ecological big-picture research that empirically and holistically looks at the current status, meaning, and conversion of the ritual of sky burial.

1.2 Research Questions

- What is the cultural practice and belief underlying the continued practice of Sky Burial in Upper Mustang?
- How does the Sky Burial illustrate the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of death, the afterlife, and spiritual emancipation?

- What are the environmental implications or concerns of the practice of Sky Burial in Upper Mustang?
- In what ways does the practice of Sky Burial contribute to the maintenance of cultural identity in Upper Mustang in the context of increasing external influence and modernization?

1.3 Research Objectives

- To identify the cultural significance of Sky Burial in Upper Mustang.
- To examine the spiritual connotations inherent with Sky Burial.
- To assess ecological impact of Sky Burial operations.
- To ascertain the role of Sky Burial in community continuity and identity.

1.4 Significance

This research is significant because it works to document a dying tradition reflecting the ecological balance and spiritual worldview of Himalayan Buddhism. It wishes to contribute to anthropology literature, ecological conservation work, and cultural preservation work. It will also enlighten the connection between cultural rituals and ecological systems of relevance to policymakers and conservationists in the Himalayas.

1.5 Literature Review

1.5.1 Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Sky Burial

The practice of sky burial expresses a profound philosophical understanding of the relationship between life and death in the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology. According to Gyatso (2015), sky burial is a deed of generosity, a gift of the deceased to give food for the beings, and an embodiment of Mahāyāna interdependence and non-attachment. In her piece, she bridges the processes of funerary medicine, death rituals, and spirituality in Tibetan medicine and religious traditions together. Thus, a sky burial is not just a method of disposal of the deceased body. Instead, it is understood as a journey composed of practices supporting the transference of consciousness (Bardo) into the next realm. This is also highlighted in Mumford's (1989) ethnography of Gurung shamans and Tibetan lamas in Nepal, who examine the processes involved with ritual specialists' management of the borderline behaviours of the soul whilst demonstrating absence of disruption in this karmic cycle. For lamas in Upper Mustang, this means chanting prayers, establishing auspicious times, and enacting various rituals of the deceased, which both affirm their spiritual authority and intercalate the community. However, with modernity have developed additional factors. As Krech (1999) and Salick *et al.*, (2014) note, traditional death rituals in the Himalayas are diminishing with cultural loss, especially for younger members of older generations permeated in societies that are either migrating or folding into the more dominant Hindu and more globally accessible Christian or secular crematory models.

1.5.2 Ecological Dimensions and Vulture Population Decline

Sky burial is a naturally eco-spiritual ritual which depends upon the scavenger birds of the Himalayan region; chiefly the Himalayan griffon (*Gyps himalayensis*), and other vultures all of which act as both symbolic and ecological actors. Without vultures, neither do we get to experience the ceremonial aspects of sky burial (the sacred experience) or the ecological aspect (removing carrion and preventing the spread of disease); which these scavengers were fulfilling by eating the human corpse to maintain ecological balance in their natural environment. However, Acharya *et al.*, (2009), conducted a study that revealed vulture population levels in Upper Mustang, Nepal and throughout Nepal has declined by more than 90% in the past 20 years. This decline is due to diclofenac (a veterinary drug), habitat destruction, and society's

lack of food source for vultures. In a follow-up study, (Birdorable, 2025) reported that having vulture's present in the carrion community is essential not only to provide ecological functioning, but to fulfill a function of culture within the community to conduct sky burials. Without vultures to facilitate the sky burials, people gravitated to cremation or burial. This environmental crisis creates a socio-cultural crisis, as the spiritual aspect of sky burial ritual and the environmental aspect of vultures are intimately connected.

1.5.3 Modernization, Cultural Adaptation, and Identity Crisis

Mustang, which was previously a restricted area, is now more accessible to visitors, tourism, road access, and communication technologies that have socially and economically valuable future for Mustang, but also added cultural pressures from outside communities and ideas that changed the traditional worldviews. Salick *et al.*, (2014) revealed that climate change, global ideologies, and the out migration of youth have affected the ritual practices and spiritual cosmologies of the Himalayan communities. Moreover, Dorje (2011), indicates that ritual flexibility and hybridization is common survival strategy for culture in many Buddhist societies. In Mustang, some families practice some sky burial or symbolic completion, while other families moved to complete cremation. However, there is no comprehensive research investigating these ritual transformations in the context of the sky burial in Mustang specifically, and therefore gaps exist in understanding the conversion of this death ritual.

1.6 Research Gap

Tibetan Buddhist funerary practices are well documented throughout Tibet and parts of India, but Upper Mustang has not received the same degree of scholarly attention. Few ethnographies provide localized, current representations of sky burial, and none have assessed the local practice from an ecological approach. Additionally, there are no interdisciplinary papers that address the spiritual status of human remains, ecological sustainability, and cultural anthropology to highlight the present implications of sky burial.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative ethnographic research design to investigate the cultural, spiritual, and ecological aspects of sky burial practices in Upper Mustang, Nepal. Ethnographic research is used in this study because it gives the researcher more opportunity to immerse in the social and spiritual context that the community demonstrates as well as to make sense of meanings from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2016). Along with documenting oral traditions and embodied practices, it also captures the inevitable lived experience and evolving lived expression of death rituals in Himalayan Buddhism and beyond.

2.2 Research Site

The fieldwork was done in villages of Upper Mustang, and specifically in places where sky burial rituals are being practiced or even remembered. Upper Mustang, known as the former Kingdom of Lo, is remote and traditional making it an important place to study these ancient "Tibetan" inspired rituals Bhusal *et al.*, (2020). The socio-religious environment and ecological condition of the study site are vital to understanding the study.

2.3 Data Collection Method

The researcher observed local rituals, temple spaces, and ecological interactions, respecting sacred boundaries. Special focus is given to sky burial ritual and the symbols associated with it. The observations focus on sequence of ritual performance, raw materials used, and relations of the dead, nature, and the sacred. The researchers interviewed members

of the local community elders, younger generations, and traditional healers. The interviews discussed their understanding of sky burial, its ecological importance, symbolic meanings, and any changes that have been noted over time. The video-taped interviews were transcribed and coded thematically with the consent of the interviewees.

2.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with presentations of the data (transcripts, field notes, and images) were carefully reviewed, coded, and organized to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Working with death rituals, especially sacred ones like sky burial, necessitates ethical sensitivity and awareness. The researcher takes the time to secure informed consent from all participants. Respect religious, cultural boundaries and remain sensitive to these factors also uphold anonymity and confidentiality, follow ethical protocols and guidelines and share findings with local communities, as appropriate, to give back and recognize their contributions.

3. Findings and Discussion

Sky burial, a traditional funerary practice found in various Himalayan cultures, reflects a unique cosmology that intertwines environmental ethics, spiritual beliefs, and communal ritual. In Upper Mustang, Nepal, this practice locally known and maintained by the Buddhist community continues to reflect a deep respect for the cyclical relationship between life, death, and nature. This ethnographic section presents findings based on oral testimonies from local elders and practitioners in Upper Mustang, focusing on the continuity and change in sky burial rituals.

According to local informants, sky burial has been practiced for generations, “from the time of our grandfathers” In the past, cremation was not customary. Instead, the deceased were traditionally offered to vultures (Giddha), who are seen as sacred scavengers playing a role in the spiritual and ecological order. It was believed that burning bodies in fire without proper ritual offerings could disturb the deities. As one elder explained, “If you burn herbs with proper prayers, their aroma replaces the smell of burnt flesh, so it does not disturb the gods.”

The ritual involves consultation with Lamas, typically a group of eight or more, who examine the body and determine the appropriate rites. In earlier times, the body was not placed on rubber tires for burning a practice seen as modern and disconnected from tradition. Rather, symbolic purification was emphasized to ensure both spiritual and environmental harmony. One of the most profound insights from local narratives is the view of the soul and consciousness. An elder stated: “The body dies, but the mind doesn’t. It returns after three days to see who is eating what and doing what.” This indicates a belief in a liminal period where the soul remains connected to the earthly realm, observing the living.

Only the frontal bone is preserved after the rest of the body is consumed by vultures. On the 49th day, it is taken to a remote, elevated location and placed there with reverence. This act symbolizes the completion of transitional rites and the release of the soul. Despite pressures from modernization and migration, the tradition of sky burial remains active among many older generations. “Our parents’ traditions are still being followed. The younger boys and girls have not completely abandoned it but they do it less now,” one mother reported. Urban migration has led to a partial decline. Some families now migrate to cities like Kathmandu or Pokhara for various purpose and many young people have settled outside the country. However, Lamas, even those living in cities, continue to observe auspicious dates and perform required death rites, maintaining the spiritual rhythm of the tradition. The ritual is conducted exclusively by Lamas. “Lamas must perform these rites other priests are not accepted,” said one respondent.

After completing local schooling up to 10th grade, many Lamas travel to India for further education, studying for 8 to 12 years to attain high-level status. It is believed that such extensive training leads to spiritual merit, even heavenly rebirth.

There is both confidence and concern among locals about the future of this practice. One elder expressed hope: “Our culture may not vanish entirely,” but also worry: It may fade, especially as young people move away and stop performing the rituals. This uncertainty reflects broader themes of cultural erosion and adaptation in the face of modernization. One poignant reflection came from a 60-year-old woman who said, It’s our turn now. When our time ends, so will the tradition, perhaps. She emphasized that offering the body to vultures brings blessings: “They eat, they are satisfied, and it is a good deed.” Interestingly, it is considered inappropriate to perform the ritual for one’s own family member; a neutral person from the village does this task. Failure to perform it properly is believed to bring negative consequences like strong winds, illness, or communal misfortune.

3.1 Comparison with Previous Studies

The results of the study are generally consistent with prior research related to Tibetan Buddhist funerary practices, while emphasizing the distinctive characteristics of Upper Mustang. Similar to Gyatso (2015), this study has determined that sky burial is an act of dharma generosity and that sky burial incorporates the principles of Mahāyāna Buddhism related to impermanence, compassion, and transference of consciousness (Bardo). While local informants maintained that the ritual promoted a good journey for the deceased, they also resonated with Mumford’s (1989) recognition of the role of Lamas and ritual specialists as facilitators of the liminal aspect of the soul. As in other Himalayan regions, Lamas (i.e., representatives of spiritual authority) contribute to the ritual by chanting prayers, performing auspicious rites, and directing the ritual, providing authority, control, and ultimately contributing to social cohesion.

This study, however, also demonstrates the impact of modernization and demographic shift on ritual practice, confirming Krech’s (1999) and Salick *et al.*, (2014) observations. Older generations continue to practice sky burial in the ways it has always been done. However, younger generations are increasingly becoming urbanized, or migrating to another country. As a result, there is the partial decline of the original rituals, but also adaptation of the rituals. Some families are now practicing a combination of traditional ritual and cremation, or completing a symbolic process. This demonstrates the flexibility of the kind of practices, and hybridization suggested by Dorje (2011). The study confirms both continuity and change as it demonstrates that sky burial continues as a cultural marker, despite outside pressures.

The research supports prior studies by Acharya *et al.*, (2009) that underscored vultures’ importance within the ecological perspective of the ritual. The local narratives we recorded indicated that vultures were not simply less important ecological actors within the process, but spiritual agents or intermediaries as well, and their loss therefore represents both an ecological and cultural crisis. Whereas the studies conducted in broader Tibetan region explored local reactions to ecological stressors, this project presents the ways in which the Upper Mustang community specifically interpreted and adapted to these ecological pressures, providing them with alternative symbolic actions to follow and selected rituals to enact. The overall findings suggest that sky burial serves to perform, and maintain, an ecological and social relationship in Upper Mustang. This finding affirms what previous scholars have documented with respect to the spiritual and cultural aspects of the ritual, as well as offering new ideas about symbolic substitution, our perceptions of the importance of ritual to younger generations, and the relativity of practices deemed indigenous in the face of ecological pressures and modernization.

4. Conclusion

This research shows that sky burial in Upper Mustang is a meaningful practice and spiritually, culturally, and ecologically significant. It indicates that the Upper Mustang community respects the cyclical relationship of life, death, and nature. While some of the ritual has clearly adapted and declined because of modernization, urban migration, and outmigration of young people, the sky burial tradition in Upper Mustang continues and is enacted and maintained symbolically, while the auspicious rites surrounding the sky burial continues to be observed in accordance with sky burial customs.

Sky burial not only represents Buddhist principles of impermanence, compassion, and interdependence but it also contributes to ecological balance by replenishing the energy of vultures, emphasizing the interconnectivity of social and ecological systems. This study also shows that the Upper Mustang community has a delicately negotiated balance of continuity and change by both the way they continue traditional practices and adapt to modernity under contemporary circumstances. Ultimately, this research highlights that sky burial remains a culturally significant marker of cultural identity, spiritual belief, and ecological ethics in Upper Mustang and perhaps provides important ideas for protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the context of contemporary modernization and ecological change.

5. Recommendation for Future Research

Future research on sky burial in Upper Mustang could go deeper into the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of the younger generation, which would enhance knowledge of the sustainability of these rituals, and might also identify opportunities for cultural education, and the intergenerational transfer of indigenous knowledge. It would also be interesting to understand how youth understand, engage with and react to sky burial amid modernization, migration, and transformations in priorities, both spiritual and otherwise. This research would provide knowledge of how the sustainability of sky burial practices might be preserved and supported. Additionally, comparative studies between Upper Mustang and different Himalayan communities or Tibetan Buddhist areas would help demonstrate similarities and differences in ritual practices and show how ritual expression and adaptation are creatively negotiated in response to ecological conditions, socio-structural constraints, and political contexts. The current research provided a lot of valuable information and insight, but leaving constraints, it was limited in other productive ways. The current study had limited time and resources, that limited other potential examinations of unlimited practices, their variations informed by the communities' own narratives, or knowledge systems, and explorations of symbolic substitutions, negotiations related to ritual, and unresolved contradictions involved in their dynamics of relating the past in place to the future, or modernity. An in-depth study would provide an even richer and more complex understanding of sky burial and the hold on intangible heritage as continuities in the Himalayan context.

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