

Death and Corpse Disposal Rituals

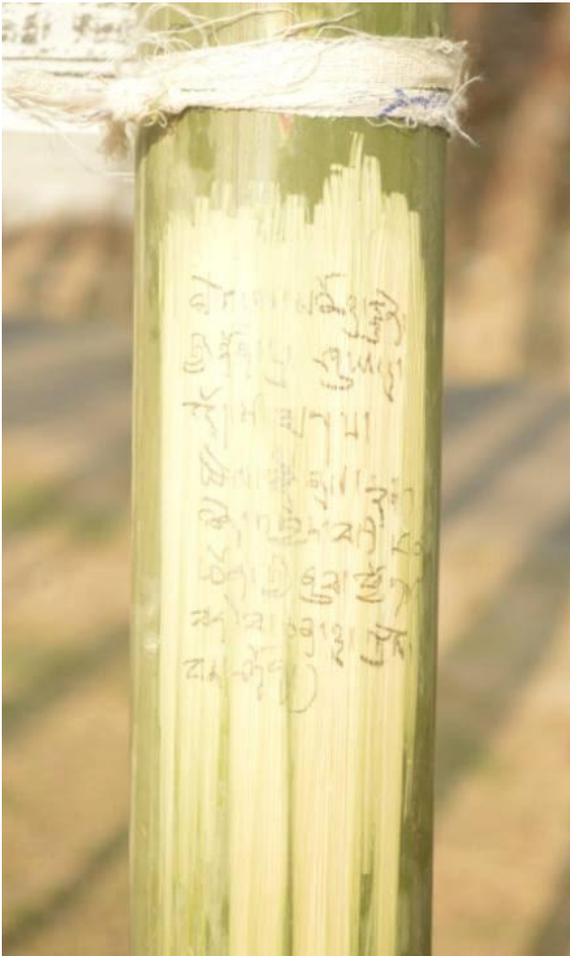
In Bhutan, different regions have different funeral practices. Most people prefer to cremate a dead body near one's own house or on a riverbank so that the ashes and remains can be easily disposed of in the river. However, in Lingzhi, dead bodies are placed on a mountaintop for vultures and other scavengers to consume. People in Merak and Sakteng communities cut the corpse into 108 small pieces and throw them into the river. In the Lhop community, the dead body is buried in the ground.

The rituals surrounding death and disposal of the dead body can be separated into two main practices: pre-Buddhist practices and Buddhist practices, though most of the rituals are a mixture of both pre-Buddhist and Buddhist elements. For most eastern Bhutanese, death is considered the most important event. Death is not considered the end of life but a beginning of a new one. During his or her lifetime, a person is expected to adhere to the basic precepts of accumulating merit (དགེ་བ་). At the moment of dying, a lama is supposed to perform *phowa* (འཕོ་བ་) practice to transfer the consciousness (རྣམ་ཤེས་), which leaves the body through the fontanel, thereby severing the bond between the consciousness and the remaining corpse.

Immediately after death, the death horoscope or *shintsi* (གཤེན་ཚེས་) is drawn up by a lama or astrologer. This determines the cause of death and lists the rituals that need to be undertaken to assure a certain rebirth. The details are often meticulous, including the direction from which the body should be removed from house, the way the corpse should be disposed, the offerings to be made, the rituals to be conducted, and the astrological years of the people involved. The corpse is usually tied in a fetal position and placed in a wooden box decorated with colored scarves. Offerings of cooked food, fruits, *torma* ritual dough cakes and alcoholic drinks are made to a small shrine marked with an effigy of the deceased, associated with pre-Buddhist practices.

Consecutive rituals and prayers are conducted on the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-one and forty-nine days after the person has died, and rituals also performed on the day of the demise in subsequent years for a certain number of years. During the forty-nine days after death, the consciousness is believed to roam in the *bardo* (བར་དོ), the

intermediate state between death and rebirth. It is considered the duty of the relatives to increase the merit of the deceased. The monks and priests perform elaborate rituals to guide the soul from one incarnation to the next. One hundred and eight prayer flags printed with the Om Mani Padme Hum (ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧུམ་) mantra are hoisted for the deceased. It is a custom mostly in eastern Bhutan for people to write some wishes on the surface of prayer flag post. Such a note may contain prayers such as the wish that through the prayer flags hoisted by the bereaved, the deceased will be born in the happy realm of Buddha Amitabha in the west.



Prayers on the surface of prayer flag post dedicated to a deceased person

Representatives from all the village households bring donations in cash and kind and recite the Om Mani Padme Hum mantra for the benefit of all sentient beings and the deceased in particular. Meals as well as profuse amounts of alcohol are consumed. The people from the community will prefer to come mostly during the important days, particularly the day of the cremation and on the 21st day when the

main rites are performed. The families who can afford to will carry on the prayers every day for twenty-one or forty-nine consecutive days. They would also accomplish all the rituals and activities which the astrologer has recommended for the welfare of the deceased and the living.

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