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Funerals in Alxa Right¹ Banner, Inner Mongolia

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Alxa Right Banner is one of three banners in Alxa League, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the People's Republic of China. Founded in 1961, the banner was later (1969-1979) incorporated into Gansu Province.² It borders Alxa Left Banner, Gansu Province, and Mongolia. Total population is 20,327 of which 7,029 (33.7%) are Mongols; 13,713 are Han Chinese (66%); and 35 are 'other' nationalities. Total land area of the banner is 73,443 km².

Materials for this article were collected by Narsu during a visit to Alxa Right Banner in the summer of 1988.³ See State Nationalities Affairs Commission (1986) for a somewhat differing account of Alxa funerals.⁴

Pre-Burial Rituals

At the moment of death, or shortly before, the clothing of an old person is removed and a *hadag* is draped over the person's eyes. The right hand is put in a supporting position under the right cheek, the body is turned on its side, and the left hand is placed on the belly. The legs are bent at the

knee and the posture the corpse assumes resembles that of sleep. This is done at the moment of death, or shortly thereafter, for the body should retain whatever position it is in at the moment of death.

Presently, lamas are invited to the home after death to chant scriptures, which lead the deceased to another world. Lamas also calculate a suitable time and place for disposing of the corpse. This calculation is based on the date of the person's death and the animal year the person was born in. Usually, Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays are not chosen. Mondays and Fridays are generally considered suitable. During winter the corpse may be kept within the home for seven days. In other seasons the time is generally three days. If relatives from distant places are expected the time for waiting may be prolonged.

Generally, four or five lamas are invited to chant and to make the calculations. Lamas also give sacred water, *dulcun* and *arasan*, to the family. However, if lamas are not available an old person is asked to substitute.

Disposition of the Corpse

A small basin on a hilltop is considered the best place for leaving the corpse. The person invited to remove the corpse should not be a relative of the bereaved family. This man is called the 'bone supporter.' As the corpse is being taken out of the home the deceased's children kowtow to express respect and a final farewell. The corpse is taken out through a window or, in the case of a yurt, through a side of the yurt⁵ and placed on two bundles of willow limbs. This is conveyed by the bone supporter and a few other people to a camel, to which the corpse is bound. The bone supporter may then take the corpse alone to the preselected disposal site, or he may be accompanied by two other people. Once this site is reached the corpse is placed in the designated place. Customarily, if the area is hilly or mountainous, a basin on a mountain or hill top is selected so that the head and feet each point toward a hill. The corpse should also face the sun. *Dulcun* is sprinkled about the corpse, which has previously been placed in the sleeping posture described, and is not buried. Formerly, the corpse of the deceased was often left by the side of its ancestors' remains. Valuable things belonging to old people such as

pipes and jewelry are claimed by the children and used generation after generation.

In Yaburai Commune the bone supporter and several others collect small stones and place them in a circle around the corpse, indicating that they have purchased a living place from the Landlord of Heaven.

Post-Disposition Rituals

On the return to the deceased's home the bone supporter passes between two fires previously prepared on either side of the road and washes his hands in *arasan*. Upon arriving at the home, he again washes his hand with *arasan*. In Erbugi and Yaburai communes, he cleanses his hands with sand. At the home the bone supporter is served food by the family of the deceased, which the family does not eat.

The mourning period lasts seven, twenty-one, or forty-nine days. During this period drinking of liquor and eating meat are taboo. The deceased's family members also do not greet others with, "How are you?" If other people ask them this question, they only nod their head in acknowledgment.

After the mourning period the family invites the bone supporter, relatives, and friends to a meal called *xara darax*,⁶ which symbolizes the end of the mourning period. However, in Yaburai Commune, some families offer this meal immediately after the bone supporter returns from disposing of the corpse.

Certain families burn the corpse⁷ and then take the ashes and place them in a small box or bag. Next, this is taken to the place the lama identified as the final resting place for the deceased. Ashes may also be allowed to blow away in the wind with none being collected; placed in a river; or taken to a mountain by men (never women) and scattered.

In Erbugi Commune, if a certain red mud is available,⁸ ashes of the cremated corpse are mixed with *arasan*, red mud, and goat hair⁹ and packed inside a cone-shaped can imprinted with Buddha images. Lamas select a place, which is leveled into a one-meter square and sprinkled with cypress needles. The cones are placed on the square of needles. More needles are

placed to the top of the cones, and then another layer of cones, and so on until the whole resembles a pagoda. A small structure is constructed around this.

Long before, rich people placed pieces of gold and silver in the cones, while common people placed pieces of cloth and food into the cones. These materials were intended for use by the deceased after they entered the other world. Certain people put the deceased's ashes in a small white bag or box and took it to Wutai Mountain¹⁰ or to Kumbum,¹¹ which were considered the best places for leaving remains. However, during the Cultural Revolution¹² this was discontinued. Now this custom has been resumed.

Death of a Child

Dead children are placed inside a small white bag, along with candies, pieces of cloth, and things they were particularly fond of. The opening of the bag is tied shut and the bag is tied to the saddle of a horse or camel. The bone supporter, without stopping, rides the camel or horse to the place designated by the lama, loosens the bag tie, and makes the camel run about the area. In this way the small white bag drops without the bone supporter being immediately aware of it. The bone supporter then returns. This symbolized, to our informants, that the baby is not dead, only lost, and in the future the parents will find the child again.

When a man has performed bone supporter services he is treated as a respected elder and is given some articles, whose value depends on the economic situation of the family in question. Usually, the camel used in transporting the corpse is given to him or, instead, several sheep or goats.

Notes

1. Chinese: Alashan.
2. "A readjustment was made in the administrative division of the Mongolian Autonomous Region: Three leagues and three banners which had been amalgamated into other provinces and autonomous regions during the Cultural Revolution were restored to it," (Ma 1989:33).
3. Majig, an old herdsman in Erbugi Commune, various herdsmen living in Yaburai, Mungunbolag, and Altanobo communes, and Baga are thanked for their assistance. Narsu

recorded certain other impressions of an extended journey across Inner Mongolia in Narsu and Stuart (1991).

4. Portions of this manuscript were translated and published in DU and Stuart (1989).
5. Not through the yurt door.
6. Suppressing black.
7. Some pour oil on the corpse as it burns.
8. The arid climate makes this difficult to obtain.
9. To give the dried structure strength.
10. In Shanxi Province.
11. Chinese: Ta'er Temple. The birthplace of Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419) located in the present Qinghai Province (Koko Nor).
12. 1966-1976.

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