



Cremation in Norway: regulation, changes and challenges

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ABSTRACT *In this article, I explore the development of modern cremation and cremation events in Norway. I focus on the multiple ontologies of cremation events and the relationships between the living mourners and the dead during the gradual transformation of the social person within Christian, secular as well as Hindu traditions in Norway. Within Christian tradition, this is a linear process that I intentionally contrast with the predominantly cyclical process within the Hindu tradition. I illustrate how various cosmological, eschatological, soteriological, economical, environmental, as well as socio-political factors regulate and shape the form and content of cremation events and disposal in Norway.*

KEYWORDS: cremation; crematoria; disposal; Christian; Hindu; regulation

Introduction

This article attempts to describe and explain the development of modern cremation as a legitimate form of disposal in Norway over the last century. I also explore the challenges Hindu immigrants in Norway face when it comes to performance of their cremation events in Norwegian crematoria. In my attempt to explain some of the reasons and rationales behind cremation practice and crematoria regulation, I draw on published literature, legal acts, procedural manuals, official websites, documentation from public hearings, personal communication and observation gained during my habitation and fieldwork in India and Norway.

The format of the first section of this article is, first, a presentation of the theoretical approach to mortuary events. Second, a background and history of cremation, crematoria and funerals in Norway is given. In the second section of this article, cremation in Hindu context and some challenges connected to Hindu cremation in Norway are explained and explored. Finally, some of the changes and challenges concerning cremation events in Norway are discussed. The article ends with a short summary and some concluding remarks.

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Theoretical approach

Over the last century, anthropologists have underscored that the orchestration of mortuary rituals accompanying death of any member of a certain group or society is closely tied to that person's changing position in that group or society (Cederroth, Corlin, & Lindström, 1988; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Robben, 2004). In his pioneering sociological work first published in 1907, *A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death*, the Durkheimian Robert Hertz (1907/1960) paid close attention to the connection between the fate of the body, the mourners and the fate of the soul,¹ as an illustration of the relationships between the living mourners and the dead during the gradual transformation of the social person.² Hertz focuses on the various relationships that develop between the three primary actors after a death has taken place. Through an analysis of what takes place with and between these three actors – the corpse, the soul and the mourners – Hertz's model illuminates the social aspects and consequences of these events. In addition Hertz model focus on the two major phases of mortuary processes. The first phase deals with separation events tied to the immediate decay of the flesh of the corpse, the so-called 'wet' phase. The second phase, the so called 'dry' phase focus on the incorporation events tied to the dry bones or ashes (Davies, 2005, p. 232). The major purpose of Hertz's model is to illustrate how the biological body is treated at significant mortuary events in order to recreate or resurrect the social being, grafted on that body, in another realm and status (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 77). Hertz's approach is particular apt for an analysis of cremation (Davies, 1997).

In this article, I explore how cremation in Norway is dealt with over time. The focus is on interventions (Mol, 2002, p. 152), that is, actions contributing to different and context-dependent enactments of death and the dead through cremation events – positioned actors' perspectives on or social constructions of death and the dead during cremation events. Utilising insights from actor-network-theory, Mol launched the term *enactment* to describe the multiple 'doings' in medical practice, which manifest themselves in relational networks between *actors* and *actants*, human and non-human, such as health care personnel, medical equipment, legal acts, protocols and procedural manuals (Latour, 2005). Mol underlines that if practice becomes our entry into the world, then ontology is no longer a monist whole. Ontology in practice is multiple (Mol, 2002, p. 157). Following her approach, I argue that death and cremation in Norway is a multiple affair, embedded in material, social, legal, ethical, aesthetical, environmental and economic practice – at collective as well as individual levels (Hadders, 2009).

Cremation and crematoria in Norway

The word cremation is derived from the Latin word *cremo*, which means to burn. In the middle ages prior to Christianisation of Norway, cremation was one of the practised ways of disposal (Oestigaard, 2006). Christianisation in

Norway during the eleventh century gradually made cremation obsolete. Traditionally, in a Christian eschatological context, fire has been associated with hell, sin, humiliation, punishment and annihilation (Davis, 1998; Ruud, 2008, p. 62). Cremation did not follow the belief in burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ expressed in the Apostle's creed. That is, the basic confessional linear Christian belief in the resurrection of the body to eternal life. The Christian preferred way of disposal has been traditional earth burial in consecrated ground, in order to keep in line with Christian metaphorical liturgical focus on the whole body as a symbol of hope for a future resurrection and eternal life (Alfsvåg, 2006, p. 28). This disposal has been the only favoured way until the mid-nineteenth century in Norway.

In the wake of budding modernity during the mid-nineteenth century, the intellectual birth of modern cremation took place in Europe. Pragmatic notions of hygiene and order, tied to modernity were closely linked to the development of cremation as a modern form of secular disposal (Seale, 1998). Cremation was seen as a clean favourable option to sanitary unsound earth burial. On 9 October 1874, the first modern cremation of a dead human body took place in a Siemens cremation oven in Germany (Keizer, 2005, p. 376). Over the next century Cremationist movements and cremation societies emerged and established the practice of cremation in Northern and Western Europe. In several European countries, the Cremationist movements gained impetus from anti-Christian or secular movements (Davies, Kent, & Keizer, 2005).

Before 1898, cremation was illegal in Norway. The advent, advocating and development of modern cremation in Norway are closely tied to the history of Norwegian Cremation Society (*Norsk Kremasjons Forening*). This society was founded on 7 February 1889. In 2003 the cremation society was dissolved and re-established as the Norwegian Cremation Foundation. Initially, the cremation society had few members, highly qualified and mostly recruited from urban intellectual elite. These were mainly lawyers, physicians, academicians, business entrepreneurs and some artists. The main goal of the cremation society was legalisation of cremation and establishment of crematoria. They actively advocated the sound and scientific nature of cremation and worked to remove existing obstacles and objections to cremation. Some initial objections to cremation in Norway were its association with pre-Christian pagan mortuary practice and the forensic disadvantage of doing away with evidence of committed crime.

The first Norwegian Act on cremation was adopted on 11 June 1898 (Rikheim, 2005, pp. 329–330). The first certified crematory in Norway was built in Møllendal in Bergen in 1907 by the municipality, and the first cremation in Norway took place in that crematorium in 1907. At the time few cremations took place in this crematorium mainly due to the fact that cremation was more costly than burial, as well as the Church's and the general public's initial objection to cremation (Ottesen, 2006, p. 45). It is important to underscore that the Church of Norway never took an active stance against cremation based on theological objections (Alfsvåg, 2006, p. 30). At first, the acceptance of

cremation in Norway was slow due to a more general scepticism. However, it is important to underline that in comparison with some other European countries, there has been less disagreement on religious ground between the cremation society and the Church of Norway.³ In this respect, the Norwegian Cremation society always sought to remain neutral. The initial opposition towards cremation gradually diminished. In 1913, the cremation act was amended, and some provisions were added that made the conditions for cremation more favourable (Rikheim, 2005, pp. 330–331).

Cremation statistics give us a clear picture of a gradual acceptance of cremation in Norway during the last century. Meagre 13 cremations took place in 1907, 1185 cremations in 1930 and 14,224 cremations in 2002, which constitutes 32% of all disposals during that year (Davies & Mates, 2005, pp. 438–456). In the year 2011, 37% of all disposals in Norway were cremations. Cremations are more prevalent in an urban setting than in the countryside. According to Statistics, Norway data from the 24 available crematoria from 2011 the municipality of Bærum peaks the list with 85% cremations, the municipality of Oslo have 71% and the municipality of Bodø has fewer amount of cremations with only 15% (Statistics Norway, 2012). In several rural municipalities in Norway, the earth burial rate is 100%. Some likely reasons for choosing earth burial are the inaccessibility or lack of available crematoria, additional cost for cremation,⁴ and availability of cemetery space for earth burial and a traditional Christian view of funerary practice. Nevertheless, it is obvious that cremation is a well-established and increasingly popular mode of disposal in contemporary Norway in municipalities where crematoria is available. However, compared with Denmark and Sweden, where approximately 75% of the population are cremated, Norway has been slow to adopt cremation.

Funerals and the Church of Norway

Currently, approximately 80% of the Norwegian population are the members of The Church of Norway. This Church has belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran branch since the sixteenth century when the relationship between the church and state was very close. The Church of Norway became a state church with the founding of the Norwegian constitution in 1814 and remained so up until 21 May 2012, when § 2 of the constitution was changed and church and state separated formally. According to the revised § 2, the foundation for the Norwegian constitution is based on a Christian humanistic heritage, and the constitution shall safeguard a state based on democracy, judicial and human rights and individual freedom to practise religion (Church of Norway, 2012). However, the link between state and Church still remain strong. Church of Norway still receives its funding from state and municipalities and priests and bishops still remain government employees.⁵

Christian earth burials have been the major prevalent method of disposal practised since Christianity was established in Norway. Burial grounds or churchyards, as these came to be designated in Norway, were established by local communities and parishes in the vicinity of churches. In 1897, Norway amended the first comprehensive act on cemeteries, cremation and burial. Thus, around the beginning of the twentieth century burial becomes a public responsibility. However, a new and comprehensive act on cemeteries, cremation and burial came in force on 1 January 1997 (The Funeral Act, 1997). This act integrated the old cremation act into the wider comprehensive funerary act. The new law gave the Church of Norway full administrative responsibility for the management of funerals organised in Norway. The Norwegian church parish council execute this mandate at the local level. The Church of Norway receives funding from the central and local authorities to perform these services. Nevertheless, the local authorities carry the major economic burden for funerals (Official Norwegian Report, 2013; Rikheim, 2005, p. 331). The Funeral Act of 1997 opened the option of giving over partial or full administration and management responsibility to the municipalities. *Government Report to the Norwegian Parliament Nr. 17 (2007 – 2008)*, *The State and The Norwegian Church* also support a referral of responsibilities to the municipalities, as part of a wider gradual secularisation process in Norway. In approximately 50 municipalities (out of total 428), the gradual process of referring more administrative responsibility to the municipalities has started. Solely, in Oslo, the referring process is complete and the Oslo municipality has been fully in charge of administration, management, and economical responsibility of funerals and crematoria for the last decade. In spite of the changing trend described previously, the Church of Norway still is one of the main suppliers of premises for funerals in Norway in most municipalities. The Church of Norway has been and still is the major controlling, executive and appeals body in most matters relating to funerals in Norway (Ministry of Culture, 2008; The Funeral Act, 2012).

The factors described previously has resulted in a system where the Church of Norway carries the major responsibilities for all funerals in Norway, including all faiths and organisations, for instance for Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and The Norwegian Humanist Association. This system resembles the situation in the other Nordic countries (Ministry of Culture, 2008). These groups have been designated their own areas within the cemeteries and groves maintained by the Church of Norway. However, the Jewish communities in Oslo and Trondheim, and some Christian communities in Norway, have had their own cemeteries prior to 1997 (The act of religious communities, 1969; The Funeral Act, 2012). Up until recently entire cemeteries were routinely consecrated by the Church of Norway. Today it is common practice that newly established areas for minority faiths are exempt from this practice. According to the Funeral Act of 2012, all religious faiths and organisations are entitled areas of their own within the public cemeteries. For instance, currently approximately 50 municipalities have established separate areas within cemeteries for Muslim burial.

There are some 2000 officially approved cemeteries in Norway today. At present there are crematoria in only 24 out of the 428 municipalities in Norway.⁶ Crematorium is secular and open to all creeds. Most crematoriums have more than one oven. The use of a coffin is obligatory for cremation. Initially, crematoria in Norway did not have a reception or ceremony room for relatives and mourners. However, more recently constructed crematoria are built with such religiously neutral facilities. Other faiths can utilise Christian chapels and premises if they wish where there is no other option. According to § 10 of The Funeral Act of 2012 cremation can take place as long as it is clear that cremation is not against the wishes or religious conviction of the deceased. Minimum three days prior to cremation, the local police have to be notified in order to make clear that there is no forensic investigation or need for autopsy (The Funeral Act, 2012).

As we have seen previously, modern cremation has been incorporated in the Norwegian funeral scheme and to some extent compromised within Christian eschatology. However, participation by The Church of Norway is not obligatory. Nevertheless, the Norwegian Church's participation is still high. In 2002, 95% of all deaths in Norway were officiated by The Church of Norway and over 30% of these were funerals followed by cremation. In 2010, 92% of all deaths in Norway had a funeral officiated by The Church of Norway (Statistics Norway, 2011). At a Christian funeral with cremation, the funeral service usually takes place in a church or chapel, prior to the cremation. Funerary liturgy for funeral with cremation practised by the Church of Norway is very similar to the one performed at earth burial and involves the traditional and common Christian ritual of thrice throwing earth on the coffin at the earth burial site. However, at a Christian funeral with cremation, this ritual usually takes place in a church or a chapel, some times in the vicinity of crematoria. The minister performs the 'committal of the body to the ground' and throws earth thrice on the coffin uttering the following words (Genesis 3:19); *you have come from earth, you shall become earth and you shall be resurrected again from earth.*⁷ When the funeral service is complete, the coffin is mechanically lowered, when this is a technically available option (Church of Norway, 2011). Through this symbolic burial of the body (e.g. the first phase in Hertzian terms), the liturgical order at Norwegian Christian funeral with cremation incorporates the cremation event within Christian eschatology. However, the industrial act of combustion is not a focus of liturgical or ritual activity or invested with eschatological meaning for Christians in Norway.

The Church of Norway is responsible for maintaining most crematoriums in Norway with the exception of crematoriums in some municipalities, for instance Oslo. Maintaining private crematoria is illegal. Chapels and crematoriums are open for all faiths and communities. It is important to underscore that private or cooperative undertakers usually assist family members with mandatory funeral arrangements and formalities. These commercial agents coordinate their services with the Church of Norway, parish council and the municipality.

It is forbidden to disperse cremated ashes at public Norwegian cemeteries. Storage of ashes in columbarium is not an option in Norway so far. As a general rule, citizens of Norway shall be buried in an officially approved cemetery. This applies to earth burial of bodies as well as earth burial of cremated remains in urns. Urns with ashes have to be buried within six months of death. Ceremonies in connection with earth burial of urns at public cemeteries can take place with or without participation of the Norwegian Church. So far the participation of The Norwegian Church at such urn burials is limited (The Funeral Act, 2012). Nevertheless, the Church of Norway has developed a Christian liturgy for urn burials. The option of a full-fledged Christian funeral after cremation has so far not been discussed in Norway (Alfsvåg, 2006).

Regulation of dispersion of ashes

The Funeral Act of 2012 allow limited scattering of ashes outside public cemeteries, albeit still under strictly regulated conditions.⁸ Permission to scatter ashes in any Norwegian county can be obtained from the County Governor of that county. Uncultivated and less frequented unpopulated desolate areas such as large lakes, large rivers, fjords, open sea, mountainous regions and woodlands can be considered sites for dispersing ashes. It is forbidden to divide cremated remains into parts for separate dispersion or burial. Ashes must be contained in specified types of urns and dispersed undivided at granted designated sites. At the age of fifteen one is eligible to apply to the County Governor to have once ashes dispersed. If no application has been made prior to death, an application can be made by close relatives as long as it is clear this was the wish of the deceased. Close relatives are also eligible to apply for children under age of eighteen (Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs, 2012; The Funeral Act, 2012). Most applications are granted and the practice to disperse ashes has increased in popularity considerably over the last 15 years. The County Governor of Oslo/Akershus received 92 applications for permission to scatter ashes in Oslo/Akershus County in 2009. According to a journal published by The Church of Norway, currently (as of April 2012) approximately 1% of all funerals in Norway (approximately 400) end with dispersion of ashes and approximately half of these belong to The Church of Norway (*Kirkeaktuelt*, 2012).

The practice of scattering of ashes has not been perceived as a Christian option by The Church of Norway until recently. Previously, the Council of Bishops have perceived scattering of ashes as individualistic and pantheistic (Alfsvåg, 2006; Høiesen, 1997, p. 485; Ruud, 2008). However, a significant change made in the Funeral Act of 2011 was the omission of § 20, second part, concerning The Church of Norway's *non-obligation* to officiate at ceremonies where ashes are scattered. This change in the Funeral Act entailed that The Church of Norway and The Council of Bishops had to take an updated independent stance on the issue of minister participation in funerals followed by

cremation and at ceremonies with dispersion of ashes. They did so on the 17th April 2012 at the Church Council (*Kirkemøte*). Their historic decision was based on The Council of Bishops decision on the issue in February 2012 and on a recent hearing, including more than 20 participants, the various Christian bodies and organisations in Norway. The majority voted in favour of the proposition for The Church of Norway to allow participation in funerals followed by cremation and at ceremonies with dispersion of ashes when there is a request for participation by the family. In extreme brief, the Council's stance states that dispersion of ash does not conflict with the Christian belief in resurrection and there is no dogmatic reason to object to Christian participation. Christian resurrection does not depend on a fixed state or geographical place for the remains. However, priests and employees of The Church of Norway shall have the right to conscientiously object to officiate or participate. The Church Council ask that guidelines for Christian participation and ceremonies shall be developed based on the ones the Church use at the time of urn burial (Church of Norway, 2012).

Thus, the liturgical order at Norwegian Christian funeral with cremation have not so far incorporated scattering of ashes (e.g. the second phase in Hertzian terms), due to Christian eschatology. However, as I have shown above Norwegian Christian liturgical and funerary order has to some extent incorporated ashes as a kind of substitute body, preferably buried in consecrated ground for future resurrection (Davies, 1997, p. 31; The Funeral Act, 2012).

Professional standardisation and regulation of the modern cremation process

The modern cremation process in Norway is secular, industrial, highly regulated and supervised by various laws, standards and professionals. Everything from obtaining cremation permit to; transport of coffins, timings tied to cremation, sanitary aspects, combustion, coffin size and materials, environmental pollution, fire safety precautions, oven and machine maintenance, sound pollution and protection, access to crematoriums, documentation of cremations, identification of ashes, storing of ashes, transport of ashes, urn size and materials, working conditions for crematorium employees, debriefing for employees, to qualifications of crematorium employees is strictly regulated and supervised. Within the small scope of this article, there is not enough space to go into detail. Nevertheless, I shall give a few examples in order to illustrate the level of minute regulation and control. The multiple 'doings' surrounding cremation practice illustrate how death is enacted and controlled. Multiple ontologies of death manifest themselves in relational networks between *actors* and *actants*, human and non-human, professionals, the deceased and cremation machinery (Mol, 2002).

Due to safety and psychological aspects of cremation work, two crematorium employees must be present to watch the beginning of the cremation process for

a minimal period of 20 min. After this initial period, supervision by one employee is sufficient. Mourners' access to crematoria is restricted by § 32 of the Regulation of The Funeral Act which state that none other than crematorium employees can be present at the cremation without special permission from the leader in charge of the crematorium. According to § 4 of the Funeral Act, use of coffin is obligatory at cremation and coffins must be produced of wood. Coffin size shall not exceed length 230 cm, width of 80 cm and height of 60 cm. Regulations for the Funeral Act § 28–30 stipulates that at oven temperature of 700 C the coffin should not ignite before 10 s. After cremation, the coffin including shroud and stuffing materials should not exceed one litre of uncompressed ashes. Air pollution, for instance, mercury, soot, dust and tar particle emissions are strictly controlled by a governmental climate and pollution agency. Emissions are restricted and regularly registered in accordance with detailed and lengthy multi-paged manuals (Fagforbundet, 2005; Regulation for The Funeral Act, 2013). Cremation takes approximately two hours. The deceased is placed in a properly closed coffin. When cremation combustion is complete the porous skeletal components of the corpse remain. These remains are raked into a metal box, manually placed in a granulator and grained into approximately 3–4 L of ash. In accordance with § 34 of the Regulation for the Funeral Act safeguarding of identity of the cremated person is secured by a ceramic or metal identification tile with a personal identification number. This tile follows the cremated remains all through the process of cremation, combustion and granulation, and is finally placed along with the ashes in a sealed urn of a specific size and material (Fagforbundet, 2005; Ottesen, 2006, p. 46; Regulation for The Funeral Act, 2013). The safeguarding of individual social identity for posterity constitutes a second phase in Hertzian terms in a modern secular context.

Hindu cremation in Norway

Due to globalisation and conflicts in South Asia during the last couple of decades there are a small group of Hindu immigrants in Norway. In Norway, there are approximately 12,000 Hindu immigrants, which constitute about 0.24% of the entire Norwegian population of approximately 5 million people. These immigrants consist of approximately 70% Tamil groups mainly from Sri Lanka, 25% of various groups from North India and a smaller group of Gujarati immigrants who fled from Uganda during Idi Amin's reign. About half of these immigrants belong to registered Hindu organisations in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2011). Hindus in Norway have a decentralised population pattern and many practice their rituals mainly in their private homes. There is a scarcity of Hindu priests in Norway. Tamil groups have several temples, and there are also a number of other Hindu organisations who have centres and temples in several parts of Norway. In most places, Hindu centres and temples are housed within the same premises (Døving, 2010, pp. 7–8; Ruud, 2008, p. 53).

In India, the majority of Hindu cremations are still performed with open pyres. These cremations are fluid-open air public events organised and controlled by local communities. Such traditional events are full of cosmological, eschatological and soteriological significance. The purpose of these cremation events is to purify and free the soul from the deceased body in order to secure a rebirth in another realm, render the soul a safe journey to heaven or to turn the soul into a benign ancestor instead of a haunting ghost.

Cremation in the Hindu context

The belief in transmigration and reincarnation plays a central part in the cosmology of the boarder religious traditions in India. This belief is tied to cyclical rebirth, known as *samsara*, and moral ideals for righteous living, known as *dharma*. Further, tied to these concepts is the idea of *karma*, the belief that every action has an effect, closely tied to merit, sin and atonement, determining future rebirths. The ultimate goal is salvation and release from the cycle of rebirths. *Dharma*, *karma*, *samsara* and salvation are connected to a wider cosmology through various notions of cosmogony, eschatology and soteriology. These cosmological notions have developed over thousands of years and are seminal in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism and have far-reaching consequences for mortuary practice and cremation. Cremation is the main form of disposal practised within all these Indian faiths (Davies, 1997, pp. 82–83; Filippi, 1996; Flood, 1996; Parry, 1994). In what follows I shall focus solely on Hindu mortuary practice.

Before I proceed with a brief exposition of Hindu mortuary practice it is apt to make a few comments about the vast conglomerate of traditions, beliefs and ritual practices known as Hinduism. Hinduism contains several main traditional strains. One unifying fundament is the Veda scriptures that have evolved out of the Vedic religious tradition established during 1750–500 BCE. These scriptures consist of a large body of canonical literature, divided into four major parts, composed in Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism. Another is the *Purana* traditions (Jacobsen, 2004).⁹ These sources contain the revelation of *dharma*; ideas of ‘truth’, ‘duty’, ‘ethics’ and ‘law’ which uphold society and cosmos and make up the rules for virtuous conduct and righteous life. Flood comments that ‘The nineteenth-century Hindu reformers speak of Hinduism as the eternal religion or law (*santana dharma*), a common idea among modern Hindus today in their self-description’ (Flood, 1996, pp. 11–12). A second aspect of Hindu tradition is that it contains a great number of sects or organisations (*sampradaya*). Most of these traditions share an idea of a sacred societal order known as *varna-asrama-dharma*; ‘duties, ethics and law tied to class, society and life stages’ (Jacobsen, 2004, p. 21).

Jacobsen underscore that death does not exist as state of being in Hinduism. Consequently, with some exceptions, Hindus do not bury their dead and keep them in cemeteries like Christians do.¹⁰ Most Hindus are cremated, and the

funerary ash is scattered in running water in order for the self or soul to be reborn in another realm and form (Jacobsen, 2004, p. 30). This way of disposal sounds quiet simple and straight forward. However, as I have sketched out above, the Hindu cremation practice cannot be isolated from the wider complex eschatological and soteriological context of Hindu cosmology. It is also important to keep in mind that in Hindu tradition, there are many parallel ideas and beliefs about the destiny of the 'life principle' or a soul, and afterlife in general for instance, the seemingly contradictory belief in transmigration, reincarnation and cyclical rebirth of the soul, *samsara*, and the aspiration for salvation of the soul in heaven, *swarga*. One of the reasons for the plurality of beliefs and practices is the wealth of textual sources as well as an abundance of ideas from different periods of time. Klostermaier underscore that 'Here, as in most other cases, Hindu practice and belief does not simply follow from a logical extension of one basic idea but of a plurality of basic notions from which, quite logically but not always in mutually compatible fashion, specific beliefs and practices flow.' (Klostermaier, 1989, p.162).

Cremation purifies various impurities through fire, *agni*. Cremation is also the last significant life cycle ritual and sacrament for Hindus, known as *dah sanskar*, 'sacrament of fire' or *antyeshti* 'last sacrifice' (Filippi, 1996; Parry, 1994, p. 178). In other words, the logic inherent in cremation is the same as the logic inherent in sacrifice; something has to be destroyed and sacrificed in order for something else to be purified, re-created and reborn. Prior to cremation, the corpse is treated as sacred and is worshiped in the same manner as a sacrificial victim or a deity. Parry and Das (1982) emphasises that there are precise parallels between cremation and sacrificial procedures tied to fire worship within the Hindu Vedic and *Purana* traditions (Parry, 1994, p. 178).

Thus the site of cremation is prepared in exactly the same manner as in fire-sacrifice, i.e. the prescriptive use of ritual pure wood, the purification of the site, its consecration with holy water, and the establishment of Agni [god of fire] with the use of proper *mantra* [Sanskrit recitation from sacred texts]. (Das, 1982, pp. 122–123; quoted in Parry, 1994, p. 178)

It goes without saying that there is great variation within all the various sects, settings and traditions known as Hinduism. Today, electrical and gas powered modern crematoria are becoming increasingly common in urban India. These developments influence and changes Hindu cremation events in several ways (Caixeiro, 2005; Firth, 1997, 2003; Parry, 1994). In what follows I shall restrict my exposition to a general sketch of the most common Hindu mortuary practice connected to the act of open pyre cremation and the placing of ashes in running water.

Hindu cremation practice

Cremation preferably takes place within 24 h of death. The corpse is washed, anointed, decorated and dressed in special cloth by relatives of same sex as the

deceased. The face of the deceased is uncovered and family, friends and community view the deceased (*darsana*) and pay a last homage. The deceased is tied to a bier and carried to the cremation ground by male mourners in a public procession. Ideally the corpse is placed on the cremation pyre with feet facing southwards, towards the realm of the god of death (*Yama*), and head facing north towards the realm of the god of wealth (*Kubera*). The funeral pyre is ideally lit by the chief mourner and legal heir; the eldest surviving son or the nearest male relative available. Ideally, the pyre consists of sandalwood. Prior to igniting the funeral, fire the chief mourner circumambulates the pyre several times, first with a pot of water and finally with a burning tinder. The pyre is then ignited at the head end of the deceased. Participants follow and await the destruction of the corpse, which normally takes 3–5 h. Sometime, during the cremation, the skull is usually broken. This act is known as *kapal kriya*, literally ‘skull action’. If the skull does not break on its own accord due to the heat, this act is performed with a bamboo pole by the chief mourner or a cremation attendant. In short, this is done to release the soul or life principle, *dhananjaya vayu* or *prana*, from the corpse (Filippi, 1996; pp. 140–141; Firth, 1997, p. 78; Parry, 1994, p. 179). Ashes and bones of the deceased are usually collected a couple of days after cremation and dispersed in running water (1983; Filippi, 1996; Flood, 1996, p. 207; Parry, 1994, p. 181). When cremation does not take place on the banks of a river ashes are stored outside the house until they can be brought to a river for ritual immersion (Parry, 1994, p. 187).

Death causes considerable contagion and is fraught with potential danger for mourners, as well as for the Hindu community at large. Therefore, mourners have to observe a number regulations and ritual rules to avoid polluting themselves and others. Performance of various mortuary rituals by ritual specialists is crucial for mourners in order to regain ritual purity and to be re-integrated in Hindu community (Hertz, 1907/1960; Parry, 1994; van Gennep, 1960).

Hindu cremations in Norwegian crematoria

From what I have described above, it is evident that there exist a number of considerable challenges for Hindus in Norway when it comes to performance of their cremation events. Recently Plesner and Døving (2009) conducted an investigation of various socio-political challenges connected with various life cycle rituals performed by immigrants in Norway. In Norway the Board members of the various Hindu organisations and local minister function as spokespersons and central actors who negotiate and organise Hindu cremation events in cooperation with municipality, professional undertakers and crematorium staff. Døving interviewed some Hindu stakeholders and one of them, a Hindu priest had this to say about their situation;

We compromise very much, we are liberal, but when it comes to death, there is so many special rituals that should be done in a special way, and [if we

acquire] our own ceremony room with a crematorium would make this possible. (Døving, 2009, p. 79)

Below I shall present a number of issues where the Hindu communities in Norway face challenges.

Due to shortages of crematoria, cremation can seldom take place within 24 h of death. One of the major challenges has been the restricted access to crematoria and the restriction to run their own crematoria. These restrictions makes it difficult for Hindu families and community to witness and participate in the major event, the act of cremation. One of the informants of Døving's study made this comment about relatives presence; 'We would like it to be everyone also because it is hard for a son to do this without the support of his family. It is psychologically hard, he should have somebody backing him' (Døving, 2009, p. 79). Most crematoria in Norway have an attached chapel where the final ceremonies before the cremation take place. The decorated open coffin is placed in the centre of the room in north–south position, and the local Hindu minister officiates and recites sacred texts. The community gives praise to the deceased and light incense. If available, a piece of sandalwood is placed in the coffin along with other symbolically significant items. The common procedure has been that the mechanically lowering and disappearance of the coffin in the chapel end the ceremonies for most mourners. However, in many crematoria, it has become commonplace to allow the chief mourners access in order for the mourner to ignite the cremation oven by pressing the start button of the oven. In some crematorium the chief mourner is also allowed to push the coffin into the furnace. More recently, a few crematoria have allowed access to the entire families at this crucial point of the cremation. However, the restricted space in many crematorium oven rooms often restricts the amount of persons. The use of closed coffin and the restricted access at the time of cremation has hindered a number of rituals performed during the cremation process. Some of these rituals are performed in advance of the cremation. For example, *kapal kriya*, the act of braking of the skull. This ritual is performed symbolically by the chief mourner prior to cremation by touching the forehead of the deceased with a bamboo stick (Døving, 2009, p. 79). The ritual circumambulations around the pyre are usually performed along with the main gathering in the chapel adjacent to the crematorium. In some crematoria, the chief mourner performs a symbolic ignition of the cremation by placing a lit candle or by burning a piece of paper on top of the closed coffin before the coffin is placed in the oven (Christian Svanholm, personal communication, November 29, 2010). The prescribed north–south placement of the corpse is usually difficult to comply with as the Norwegian crematoria ovens are not commonly placed in this manner. Christian churches and chapels are traditionally placed in east–west position. Timing of cremation also poses a major challenge. Delayed access due to lack of crematoria (e.g. more than 24 h) is a challenge for the Hindu community; § 10 of the Funeral Act which states that local police have to be notified at least three days in advance of cremation in

order for legal forensic clearance also pose a challenge (The Funeral Act, 2012).

There are also some challenges in connection with storing urns and scattering of ashes in running water in Norway. The most common way of disposal of ashes is to bring them or send them in the mail for dispersal in a sacred river in India. Døving report that Hindu community would like to acquire a legal right to store ashes in temple premises. Relatives are in need of a proper storing space for ashes as they await a future opportunity to take these with them to India for dispersion. Hindu communities also hope for legal permission to disperse ashes in Norwegian rivers, as this is an attractive option for future generations in need of an alternative to dispersion in India (Døving, 2009, p. 79). Collection of bones along with ashes is presently out of the question as all remains are routinely grinded at Norwegian crematoria prior to delivery to relatives, in accordance with current regulations (Fagforbundet, 2005; Regulation for The Funeral Act, 2013).

Discussion

According to Hertz, the corpse serves as a vehicle, loaded with contradictory social meanings. In the transitional phase, especially during the ‘wet’ phase, the corpse must be handled with care due to its ambiguous social, moral and physical status, a source of contagion and repulsion as well as something sacred. As I have illustrated above, handling of the corps and cremated remains are managed with a large amount of regulation embedded in material, social, legal, ethical, aesthetical, environmental and economic practice – at collective as well as individual levels (Hertz, 1907/1960; Mol, 2002).

The second paragraph of the Norwegian constitution grants individual freedom to practice religion. Religious and secular individual rights are given equal importance. The Funeral Act of 2012 and The Discrimination Act safeguard these religious and secular rights (e.g. non-discrimination and equal rights) in connection with mortuary ritual and practice (Høstmælingen, 2009; The Discrimination Act, 2005; The Funeral Act, 2012). In accordance with these acts, there is a budding tendency to increase accommodation of relatives at the time cremation events in Norway. Another driving force for this practice, the tenet behind the wish to include relatives in viewing or other leave-taking events, is to help relatives face the reality of death and assist them in their grief (Walter, 1999; Worden, 1991). Furthermore, more generally involving relatives at this time is also an outcome of the late-modern trend to celebrate the social identity and biography of the deceased (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999; Seale, 1998). Nevertheless, the current legalisations and regulations often impede on religious and secular individual rights.

Hindu communities in Norway comply with Norwegian rules and regulation tied to their mortuary rituals and practice. As illustrated above, this entails considerable compromises and adaptations on their part. As far as I know, Hindu

communities have not submitted any written complaint or accusation of discrimination to The Church of Norway or to the Norwegian authorities. One reason for this might be that these communities are modest and want to keep a low profile. Døving underscore that the lack of conflicts in this regard can be explained by a common far ranging compliance among minority groups towards the religious and cultural codes of the majority. Typically, you may hear them say ‘What we do at home we cannot do here’ (Døving, 2009, p. 90).

The Funeral Act of 2012 is intended to be inclusive and contain a so-called flag paragraph with the following statement; ‘Funeral shall be carried out with respect for the deceased religion and worldview’. The Funeral act of 2012 also intends to safeguard the rights of religious minorities (Official Norwegian Report, 2013; The Funeral Act, 2012). For instance, The Funeral Act of 2012 advocates the use of the secular term ‘grave place’ (*gravplass*) instead of churchyard. Further, The Funeral Act of 2012 demands that burial and cremation take place within 10 days of death. This is a two-day extension of the rule within the previous version of the Funeral Act. According to § 32 of the Regulation of The Funeral Act, relatives have access to be present during cremation when crematoria facilities permit this and when the wish to be present is motivated by religious or confessional sentiments. In a recent memo, The Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs encourage a more lenient and uniform practice, within the framework of the current law, among County Governors when it comes to granting permission for dispersing ashes. At present, the practice among County Governors varies considerably (Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs, 2012; Regulation for The Funeral Act, 2013). The Ministry recommend County Governors to consider the option of dispersing ashes in larger rivers in desolate places with less public through fare. The changes in the Funeral Act of 2012 and the Regulation came in force by 1 January 2013 (Regulation for The Funeral Act, 2013).

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have explored the multiple ontologies contributing to different and context-dependent enactments of death and the dead through cremation events (Mol, 2002). As I have shown above, regulation and management of crematoria and cremation is strictly controlled by various stakeholders. However, over time the Church of Norway and the Norwegian government has been the major supplier of premises for funeral and cremation practice. It is very unlikely that Hindu communities will gain permission to build or manage their own crematorium in Norway in the near foreseeable future.

Robert Hertz’s model of mortuary events illuminates the various rationales of cremation and focus on the relationships between the living mourners and the dead during the gradual transformation and incorporation of the social person in an afterlife. The most common purpose given for the observance of cremation events among Hindus are to free the soul of the deceased from the

corpse, remove impurities to ensure auspicious rebirth, heed religious and social duties, such as, that of the son towards his father, and the duties towards the ancestors. The Church of Norway has to some extent incorporated cremation as a legitimate disposal for Christians in Norway. Ashes are conceived of as a kind of substitute body, preferably buried in consecrated ground, but sometimes also dispersed in desolate places, for future resurrection and eternal life. Thus, cremation with urn burial and dispersion of ashes has become a legitimate, albeit not favoured, Christian way to heed duties to the Christian community and towards the deceased family member. Modern cremation in Norway brings with it various forms of regulation and challenges for Hindus in Diasporas as well as for Christians and secular groups. In the wake of late-modern trend to celebrate the social identity and biography of the deceased there is an increasing individualised secular practice and improvisation connected to the treatment of ashes, relocating or incorporating the dead within the world of the living at individual significant memorial sites with special personal significance (Davies, 2005; Hallam et al. 1999; Heessels, Poots, & Venbrux, 2012; Seale 1998). Davies underscores that such reinvention of cremation events marks a significant shift from the ecclesiastic eschatological and public sphere to a secular and private biographical domain (Davies, 2005, pp. 64–65).

In Norway more detailed ethnographic research is needed to better understand how Hindu immigrants' reason, compromise and re-invent their cremation events (Firth, 1997, 2003; Garrey, 2003; Laungani, 1996). More research is also needed to investigate the on-going Christian incorporation of cremation events, secular individualised memorialisation and the normalisation of cremation practice in Norway.

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Notes

- [1] The soul is an imprecise term, inadequate to cover the many nuances concerning mind, vital essence, animation or life principles dealt with in connection with the topic discussed here. However, for the sake of convenience I still use this term as a denomination for a larger eschatological field.
- [2] For a detailed discussion of 'the category of the person' see Carrithers, Collins, & Lukes (1985).
- [3] In general, countries with a Protestant religion adopted cremation more readily than countries with a Catholic religion. The Catholic Church did not lift its ban on cremation until 1963, at the Second Vatican Council (Davies, 1997, p. 191; Javeau, 2001, p. 245).
- [4] At present burial with coffin is gratis whereas there is a fee for cremation in accordance with the Funeral Act of 2012, § 21.

- [5] Any further discussion of the relationship between The Church of Norway and state falls outside the scope of this article.
- [6] Earlier there were 40 crematoria in Norway. Due to strict environmental emission regulations there are only 24 in operation at present (Bergen von, 2012, p. 36).
- [7] According to Genesis 2 (6–7) God created man from earth and bestowed him with life. In Norwegian, the words uttered by the minister epitomise the Christian adherence to earth burial and the belief in the resurrection of the buried body.
- [8] Dispersion of ashes was first allowed within The Funeral Act of 1997.
- [9] Any further detail about this large body of literature and tradition falls outside the scope of this article (see Firth, 1997; Flood, 1996).
- [10] Ascetics, some low castes and very young children are usually buried. In some cases of disease water burial is practiced to avoid contagion (Filippi, 1996, pp. 171–176; Flood, 1996, p. 207; Parry, 1994, pp. 184–185).

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