ON THE USE OF HUMAN REMAINS IN TIBETAN RITUAL OBJECTS

AYESHA FUENTES

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2020

Department of History of Art and Archaeology
SOAS, University of London

Abstract

This dissertation explores material knowledge and cultural histories of the use of human remains in Tibetan ritual objects by means of the combined methodologies of conservation, technical art history, iconographic analysis, cultural anthropology and material culture studies. This research describes historical narratives for the formalization of Buddhist tantra through the incorporation of practices and materials for ritualized charnel asceticism as well as the diverse refinements, applications and representations of these objects in Tibetan visual and material culture. Specifically, this work explores evidence for the use of skulls and charnel (*viz.* bone) ornaments in sources for Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra; the *rkang gling* or thighbone trumpet in the material culture of *gcod;* and the cultivation of Tibetan iconographies which utilize these instruments in representations of siddhas or other accomplished ritual practitioners as well as the characterization of wrathful deities (*e.g.* Heruka) and yoginī/ḍākinī intermediaries. Furthermore, this dissertation presents a technical study of skulls, bone ornaments, *rkang gling* and the skull *ḍamaru* by means of objects accessible in museum collections and a campaign of fieldwork in which a variety of practitioners, fabricators and observers were engaged directly in order to document the sourcing, preparation, construction, and circulation of these materials and a diversity of present social values, handling strategies and ritual functions. By positioning current practices in relation to the historical narratives and sources which have conditioned the use and valorization of these objects in Tibetan material religion, this research suggests an interpretive rubric and technical vocabulary for understanding the ritual instrumentalization of human remains as a dynamic and continuously innovative cultural process.

Table of contents

List of figures

All photos are by the author or made digitally accessible by the current custodians (*e.g.* made available to download via the museum website) unless otherwise noted. Accession numbers are provided for objects in museums or public collections, and dates for objects which were photographed during fieldwork.

3.18: Pha dam pa (at right) is opposite ‘Jig rten mgon po (left), looking up into the four-walled inner chamber of the dPal ldan ‘Bras spung mChod rten. Photo by author, April 2018.

3.19 and 3.20: Pha dam pa at the base of Mañjuśrī in the Alchi gSum brtsegs, c.1220. Images from Linrothe 2006 (3.19) and Tsering 2009 (3.20).

3.21: Two-armed Lakulīśa from Śaiva monument at Balasore, Orissa, 8th-9th century. Image from Donaldson 2001.

3.22: Pha dam pa in the ‘Bri gung bKa’ brgyud monument of Sumda Chung (Zangskar), late 12-13th century; on the right with digital enhancement from George Weinberg at the Getty Research Institute. Image from Linrothe 2009.

3.23 and 3.24: Pha dam pa in the Alchi Lha khang So ma to the upper right of the Vajradhātu maṇḍala, mirroring an unidentified ascetic yogin (*ras pa*) in the same position on the left, 14th century. Image by Jaroslav Poncar with detail.

3.25: Pha dam pa in the Alchi Tsatsapuri sPyan ras gzigs Lha khang, 14th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

3.26: Pha dam pa framed by siddhas and their consorts on a *thang ka* from central Tibet (?), 14th century, currently in a private collection. Image via Himalayan Art Resources (no. 58524).

3.27 and 3.28: Pha dam pa at top and Ma gcig beneath (see fig. 3.11) in cave 3 at Saspol, 14-15th century. Images by Rob Linrothe.

3.29: Pha dam pa as a naked ascetic with skull and bag (left hand, behind), central Tibet,15th century, currently at the Rubin Museum of Art (C2005.6.1).

3.30: Detail of Pha dam pa with Atiśa on the entrance wall of the Guru Lha khang in Phyang, 15th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

3.31: Guru Rinpoche with Nyang ral nyi ma ‘od zer (1124-1194) (bottom left) and Khros ma nag mo in a six pointed maṇḍala, right, 14th century, now at the Rubin Museum of Art (P1994.26.1). Pha dam pa is in the top row, second from the right, holding *ḍamaru* and *rkang gling*.

4.3 Bone ornaments, *rus rgyan*

4.3.3 and 4.3.4: Detail from figs. 2.32 and 3.4 showing a *mekhalā* (Tbt. *ska rags*) of alternating loops and tassels around the hips; note the bells at the ends of the tassels.

4.3.5: Yamāntaka as Rakta Yamāri (Tbt. gShin rje gshed dmar) and consort wearing a lattice-shaped apron with multiple registers of beads and plaques hanging from the waist, 15th century, central Tibet and now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (67.829).

4.3.6: Bone ornament with a six-pointed maṇḍala of Vajravārāhī, from the Hedin Collection at the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm (group no. 1903.11). Image from Montell 1938.

4.3.7: Six-pointed maṇḍala of Vajravārāhī from a central Tibetan bKa' brgyud tradition,13th century, now in a private collection. Image via Himalayan Art Resources (no. 77206).

4.3.8 and 4.3.9: Apron of human and animal bone at the Brooklyn Museum (23.289.27201) with detail of multiple carving campaigns from the upper register, proper left. Overall image by museum with detail by author, December 2012.

4.3.10-4.3.13: Overall, two details of the top register and central plaque from an apron made from human bone in the collection of Hemis Monastery in Ladakh and on display in its museum; with central 12-armed Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī, framed and supplemented by yoginī assembly and Buddhist iconography. Images by Christian Luczanits.

4.3.14: Four-armed sPyan ras gzigs (Avalokiteśvara) in a British Museum apron (2003, 0929.1) in the second register of secondary plaques at center, August 2017.

4.3.15: Bone ornaments worn on the chest, arms and lower body as part of masked dance (‘*chams*) in Khams. Image from a local source, November 2017.

4.3.16: Dil mgo mkhyen brtse bkra shis dpal ‘byor (see also fig. 4.3.2) wearing *rus rgyan* on his chest while performing deity yoga during a group empowerment (*sgrub chen*). Image courtesy of the Tibet Museum Archives, Dharamsala.

4.3.17: Two small-sized votive photographs of dGe lugs leaders and *sprul sku* wearing the six ornaments of a Heruka yogin, purchased at a pilgrimage site in A mdo, December 2017.

4.3.18: Self-portrait of the tenth De mo *sprul sku* (d.1973) in the ornaments of a Heruka yogin, printed from negatives preserved by his son and first published in *Photographers International* (Taiwan), August 1998.

4.3.19: The current rGyal dbang ‘brug pa (b.1963) wearing the bone ornaments of Nāropa at Hemis in 2016, photographer unknown via drukpa.eu.

4.3.20 and 4.3.21: This object is a pastiche of plaques and beads attached to a silk-fabric support and purchased by National Museums Liverpool (1973.81) from an auction house, July 2017.

4.3.22: Detail of a chest ornament in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.1:5.2007) donated as part of a full set of *rus rgyan* in animal bone, acquired in 1932 by a former escort at the British trade agency in Gyantse, March 2017.

4.3.23: A Newar carver making a buffalo bone knife sheath using electric hand-tools, June 2018.

4.3.24: Simplified human bone ornament for sale in Khams, November 2017.

4.3.25: This apron was donated to the British Museum by a collector in the early twentieth century (1930,0306.1) and exhibits a wide variety of materials including human and/or animal bone, silk, glass beads, tassels and bells, August 2017. Published in Braunholtz 1930.

4.3.26: Bone apron attached to a dark-colored backing cloth with the face of a protector and used in *‘chams*, photographed in storage of the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena (number unknown), January 2013.

4.3.27: Performers wearing bone ornaments and the geometric, flat cut-away masks used for ḍākinī *‘chams*, here in front of the Potala in Lhasa, date unknown (early 20th century). Image courtesy the Tibet Museum Archives, Dharamsala.

4.3.28 and 4.3.29: Helmet-shaped crown and triangular apron with yoginī iconography, pink-colored *sindur* deposits and textile supports, presently in the collection of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (1947.762 A and B). Images by Lauren Burleson.

4.3.30 and 4.3.31: Crown and apron similar in shape to figs. 4.3.28 and 4.3.29, presently in the Wellcome Collection (A161208 and A161210), photographed in storage with the National Science Museum, February 2017.

4.3.32 and 4.3.33: Details of an orange-colored *sindur* deposit on a small plaque of a damaged apron from Nepal, originally part of the Wellcome Collection but later gifted to the Fowler Museum at UCLA (X69.300 A). Images from Fuentes 2014.

4.4 Thighbone trumpets, *rkang gling*

4.4.1: Screenshot from a video made by a tourist to Larung Gar, 2014. A non-monastic practitioner plays his *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* during *bya gtor*. Image from youtube.com.

4.4.2: *rKang gling* in a monastic collection wrapped in thin, damaged hide or leather and hand-stitched. Image courtesy of Christian Luczanits.

4.4.3: A selection of *rkang gling* on display at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, July 2018.

4.4.4: *rKang gling* at National Museums Liverpool (56.27.811) with dark-colored fabric tape covering the bell and mouthpiece, July 2017.

4.4.5 and 4.4.6: *rKang gling* purchased by the British Museum from an early 20th century collector who acquired it in the Himalayas (1913,0718.1) with leather or hide wrapping around the bell and mouthpiece, September 2017.

4.4.7 and 4.4.8: A *rkang gling* inherited by a local practitioner from a family member who had been a member of a nearby bKa’ brgyud monastic community in Ladakh. The decorative bands, setting and mouthpiece are made from white metal, possibly silver. Image shared digitally by owner.

4.4.9: Ornate *rkang gling* at the British Museum (2016,3040.2) with precious stones on silver fittings exhibiting Buddhist motifs in repoussé, including a *garuḍa* on the side of the bell.

4.4.10: A pair of *rkang gling* at the Wellcome Collection (A5408/1 and 2) produced as a set with red and green tassels, silver and brass ornamentation, February 2017.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to the many anonymous informants who generously shared their knowledge and experiences of these objects with me, as well as those who sheltered, fed, directed, transported, instructed and welcomed me in my travels across the Himalayas. This project could not have been conceived or executed without their kindness and curiosity.

I am also grateful for the SOAS Overseas Research Studentship which allowed me to undertake this work, and the SOAS Neil Kreitman Studentship and PhD Research Grant from Khyentse Foundation which further allowed me to complete it.

At SOAS, I benefited from the guidance and encouragement of my cohort and colleagues in History of Art and Archaeology and the Centre for Buddhist Studies, specifically Louise Tythacott and Ulrich Pagel, both members of my supervisory committee. I'd also like to thank my examiners Clare Harris and Cathy Cantwell for their invaluable comments.

Thanks as well to the institutions and staff who made their collections accessible at the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Wellcome Collection/National Science Museum, National Museums Liverpool, and Pitt Rivers Museum; thanks also to colleagues at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok and Tibet Museum in Dharamsala.

I would also like to most humbly thank those who have supported me emotionally and intellectually throughout this process, starting with my incredible parents, who always believed I could do it; and my friends, from Whidbey Island to Kalimpong, thank you for your wit, love and patience. I have also had the most amazing luck in sharing this experience with my partner Hassan Ould Moctar.

Lastly, I cannot adequately express my gratitude for having had the honor to work with Christian Luczanits as a supervisor, and whose expertise and support were always available to me.

This work is dedicated to my teachers, especially Rene.

1 Introduction

This research explores the use of human remains in Tibetan ritual objects and their historical development in the region's religious life and material culture. The following describes how these objects have been documented in tantric and Buddhist visual culture, how they have been promoted and maintained through Tibetan discourse and performance, and how their present production, social value and diversity of liturgical functions relate to these histories. Moreover, this project aims to build an object-centered narrative, and to examine continuities in Tibetan material religion as a dynamic process of knowledge transfer and ritual skill. This investigation incorporates multiple disciplinary perspectives, including technical art history, iconographic analysis, cultural anthropology and material cultural studies.

There are four object types with which this research is primarily concerned: the skull vessel (Sanskrit *kapāla*, Tibetan *thod pa, ka pa la)*, bone ornaments (Tbt. *rus rgyan*), thighbone trumpet (Tbt. *rkang gling*), and double-sided skull drum (Tbt. *thod rnga*).[1] The ritual applications for these objects are numerous, often tantric, and their use is contingent on the setting and purpose of the ritual or practice, the ability of the practitioner/performer, and the specific liturgical tradition in which the object is being used. The cultural historical significance of these objects is related to the formation of Buddhist tantra and its establishment in the Himalayas and Tibet where the use of human remains was further refined through religious institutional discourse and innovations in ritual performance.

This research draws from a diversity of sources in order to explore the use of human remains as a standard of material specificity and the intersection of complex, interdependent values including those evident through ritual texts and commentary, visual culture, the construction and condition of surviving objects as well as the current perspectives of active practitioners and observers in the extended Tibetan cultural region, including communities in Bhutan, Sikkim and Ladakh. This dissertation will show that throughout their histories, these instruments have been associated with a specialized form of religious training and their use represents a volatile type of ritual efficacy and cultural technology suited to the expression of tantric and/or nondual teachings.

---

[1] Tibetan vocabulary is given using the Wylie transcription system and the names of objects provided here are derived from literature and usage in Sanskrit and/or Tibetan. Moreover, these names are intended to be precise; whereas the ḍ*amaru* (Tbt. *cang [r]te'u*) is a round, double-sided drum made from any number of materials (*e.g.* wood, resin, etc.), a *thod rnga* is precisely a "skull drum", a specific type of ḍ*amaru.*

Interpretation and context

This project is framed in response to previous scholarship on human remains in Tibetan ritual objects — primarily by European authors — which has engaged relatively little with the complexity of their context(s), material specifications, cultural history or ritual functions, and/or the relationships between these aspects of their use. Moreover, the vocabulary of these earlier authors has had a demonstrable effects on the interpretation of these objects in public institutions like museums and universities as well as tibetological and art historical discourse.

This is, in part, the legacy of early European tibetology as a product of British and other colonial authors' intellectual priorities during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Clare Harris has elsewhere provided an extended discussion of how British historians and collectors exploited their access and mobility within colonial south Asia and the Himalayas to shape the display and interpretation of Tibetan objects in UK collections (and globally) after the mid-nineteenth century.[2] In many present interpretations of ritual instruments made with human remains there is a lingering influence of the language of Laurence A. Waddell (1854-1938), who visited Tibet secretly from the then-British hill station of Darjeeling before his role as consultant to the 1903-4 invasive military expedition of Tibet by Francis Edward Younghusband (1863-1942). Through his role as a cultural historian, collector, educator and advisor to research institutions like the British Museum, Waddell facilitated a number of misrepresentations about these objects and their use in Tibetan Vajrayāna, which he viewed as a "degenerate" form of Buddhism.[3]

In Waddell's *Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism*, originally published in 1895, he writes, for example, that in the preparation of thighbone trumpets "an elaborate incantation is done, part of which consists in the Lāma [*bla ma*] eating a portion of the skin of the bone, otherwise its blast

---

[2] Clare E. Harris, *The Museum at the Roof of the World: Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Almost all of the objects to which I had access in UK collections, presented here, were found and acquired in the Himalayan region by British colonial and/or military representatives. See also Emma Martin, "Charles Bell's collection of 'curios': Acquisition and encounters during a Himalayan journey," in *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories: Essays in Honour of Professor Susan M. Pearce*, eds. Sandra Dudley, *et. al.* (London: Routledge, 2012), 167-183.

[3] Charles Allen, *The Buddha and the Sahibs: The Men who Discovered India's Lost Religion* (London: John Murray, 2002), 288. Waddell would also teach at University College London after his return from Asia and his attitude towards tantra is anticipated in the reception of later studies: David Snellgrove, for example, includes an explanatory preface for sexual yoga and charnel imagery in his critical study of *Hevajra* tantra as a ritual form of Buddhism sometimes viewed by non-specialists as "corrupt", see *idem.,* "Introduction 1. Apologetic", *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2010 (1959), 1ff.

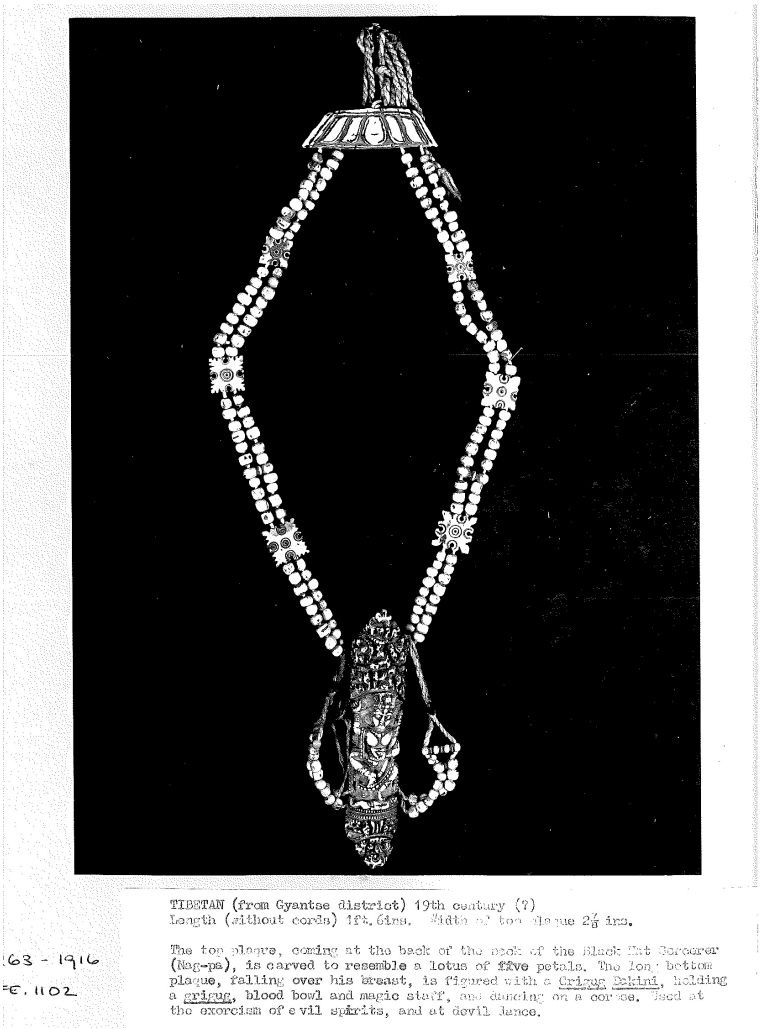


Figure 1.1: An historic object record from the Victoria and Albert Museum (IM.263.1916) for a set of bone ornaments donated by the mother of a former member of the British Trade Agency escort at Gyantse (rGyal rtse) from 1909-1911. The text below this image of a chest ornament — here depicting rDo rje rnal ‘byor ma or Vajrayoginī, a deity common to *rus rgyan* — reads: “The top plaque, coming at the back of the neck of the Black Hat Sorcerer (Nag-pa), is carved to resemble a lotus of five petals. The long bottom plaque, falling over his breast, is figured with a Grigug Dakini, holding a grigug [knife], blood bowl, and magic staff [*khaṭvāṅga*], and dancing on a corpse. Used at the exorcism of evil spirits, and at devil dance.” Image courtesy of John Clarke.

would not be sufficiently powerful to summon the demons.”[4] Based on his observations and experiences in the region, this may refer, vaguely, to the use of *rkang gling* in *bdud kyi gcod yul,* (shortened to *gcod*, or “cutting”) where the object *bdud* is often translated as “demon” (see chapter 3). Waddell does not clarify these terms, however, and his description of eating “bone skin” is inconsistent with any other known source, yet his work has occupied a foundational role in the interpretation of these objects by European and American scholars.[5] Moreover, his ethnographic perspective was supported by photographers within the British colonial sphere who generated and circulated images of their use as “curiosities”.[6]

---

[4] Laurence A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism,* second edition (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd, 1958 [1895]), 300.

[5] Waddell’s influence would moreover extend beyond museology and cultural history: He also presented his collection of Tibetan skulls at the Royal College of Surgeons, where they became the subject of comparative analysis by a craniometry student at Oxford in 1923. *c.f.* G.M. Morant, “A first study of the Tibetan skull,” *Biometrika* 14, no. 3 (1923): 193-260.

[6] Harris, *op.cit.,* 83.

Records for these objects in UK museums — many collected between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries — sometimes preserve Waddell's rhetoric on the use of human remains in Tibetan religious life. The caption for this chest ornament of human bone in fig. 1.1. and now at the Victoria and Albert Museum — donated by the mother of a former British military escort at Gyantse — describes the object as being used for "the exorcism of evil spirits, and at devil dance". Mrs. Dora Creagh — mother of Aubrey Osborne Creagh (d. 1915), a British soldier killed on duty "in Mesopotamia" — donated a number of objects acquired by her son to the museum and wrote to the V&A curators that Laurence Waddell had been a frequent visitor and gave explanations of a "tantric sorcerer's apron of carved human bone… [w]orn by… sorcerers in driving out disease demons and in other necromantic ceremonies".[7] The British Museum would repeat this language in their presentation of a "necromancer's bone apron" in a 1930 publication distributed to its members.[8]

These distortions would be exported to the United States where collections of Tibetan materials were also accumulated during the last century and simultaneously sensationalized and made obsolete in their presentation to American audiences: In 1923, Berthold Laufer of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago referred to tantric ritual objects made with human remains as "relics of an age of savagery and a barbarous cult".[9] Moreover, Laufer implies that these instruments had no contemporary relevance, despite other anthropologists, ethnographers and travelers of the same era finding that they were an active and valued component of the region's religious life (figures 1.2 and 1.3).[10]

---

[7] "Nominal file: Mrs. Dora Creagh", *Victoria and Albert Museum*, no. MA/1/C3162, accessed 12 May 2018. My thanks to the V&A collections staff and especially curator Dr. John Clark for facilitating access to these materials. I was very sad to hear of Dr. Clark's passing the week before the initial submission of this dissertation.

[8] H.J Braunholtz, "A necromancer's bone apron from Tibet," *The British Museum Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1930): 29-30.

[9] Berthold Laufer, *Use of Human Skulls and Bones in Tibet* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1923), 10. I was introduced to this text on a visit to the Field Museum in 2012; my thanks to JP Brown and museum staff for their guidance in finding this information.

[10] Alexandra David-Néel, for example, observed that human remains were a visible part of Tibetan material religion through tantra ("magic") and that bone ornaments were worn by specialists as evidence of their ritual skill. *idem., Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969 [1929]), 41. On the American collection of Tibetan materials, see also Dianne McGowan, "Consuming the devil's idols?: (Re)presenting Tibetan art in the United States" (PhD diss., Australia National University, 2010). Thanks to Dr. Rob Linrothe for sharing this with me.

Figure 1.2 (above): Non-monastic tantric practitioner (Tbt. *sngags pa*) drinking from a skull cup. Image by Heinrich Harrer (1912-2006) from Stein 1972.

Figure 1.3 (below): *rKang gling* on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum (accession no. 1930.71.15), purchased by curators in 1930; the man in the photograph demonstrates the performance of *gcod* or "cutting" with thighbone trumpet and double-sided hand drum, September 2017. All photos by author unless otherwise noted.

Later authors on Tibetan cultural history would engage with the presence of these objects through more focused ethnographic research: In *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* — published in 1956 — René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz notes that he did not find Waddell's descriptions entirely accurate. His work moreover preserves essential technical details on the specific materiality of these objects:

> Various kinds of human bone, mainly skulls and thighbones, are used for magic purposes. From the former skull cups (*thod phor*, *mi mgo'i phor pa*) and drums (*thod rnga*) are prepared, from the latter the so-called *rkang gling* trumpets are manufactured. The bone-aprons, bracelets, etc., worn by Tibetan tantrics when performing their rites, are made, too, of human bone, the bones of a Brahmin being preferred for their manufacture. In some cases also ground human bones, human nails, teeth, which had been extracted from a corpse, the bone and hair of a woman who had died in childbirth, the hair of a widow or prostitute, hair taken from a corpse and human skins have to be applied.[11]

This information is drawn from the author's study and observation of practices associated with wrathful deities and protectors, undertaken near Sikkim in the mid-twentieth century and with contributions from a series of informants from central Tibet. While his work is an essential document for understanding the dynamic and idiosyncratic relationships between the materials, practitioners and textual sources which support Tibetan religious life, Nebesky-Wojkowitz' description also provokes a number of unanswered questions about the value, longevity and manufacture of these instruments: Why are some bones preferred to others? Where do the remains come from and how are they useful for the purpose of the ritual? Why does it need to be human? This dissertation aims to discuss how these cultural narratives and ritual technologies have been and continue to be cultivated, expanded, formalized and socially conditioned.

An additional dimension of cultural history, social value and ritual logic is revealed through an examination of the relationship between burial practices in the Tibetan cultural region — particularly that of *bya gtor*, or "scattering to the birds" — and the use of human remains in material religion. This has been most elegantly proposed by Dan Martin in his model of "cultural ecology", where the arid and treeless natural environment of the Himalayan plateau encourages the widespread use of exposure burial, which resonates with ritual dismemberment in practices

[11] René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 345.

like *gcod,* and where ritual objects like *rkang gling* and skulls used as vessels are illustrative of a latent availability and/or valorization for human remains.[12] Moreover, it has been suggested that the soteriological value of human remains in Tibetan communities is made explicit through the interpretation of exposure burial as an opportunity to cultivate merit through the donation of the corpse as food to vultures and other living beings.[13] This research addresses these larger narratives of social valorization and the utilization of available material resources through fieldwork documenting the present methods for the acquisition of human remains to be used in ritual objects and an historical examination of human remains as a platform for Buddhist and tantric practice.

The most comprehensive treatment of these objects to date was published in 2008 by Andrea Loseries-Leick and combines religious literature, practical experience and interviews with craftsmen working in northern India in the latter decades of the last century into an "ethno-historical study".[14] As both scholar and skilled practitioner, Loseries-Leick supplies various accounts of the selection and maintenance of these instruments, ritual applications and sources, many details of which will be further explored and re-contextualized here. In her fieldwork, Loseries-Leick indicates that the commercialization of these ritual instruments after their introduction to the global market in the past century has changed how they are made: The drive to produce objects for commercial sale and availability of electric hand tools have shortened the expected timeline for design and production, while the dominance of representational forms of material culture like *thang ka* and a dearth of committed apprentices willing to work as carvers have endangered the continuity of the tradition's technical knowledge.[15]

Loseries-Leick's work sets an important precedent for documenting these objects in historical perspective by presenting technical models drawn from Tibetan texts, including one of the earliest commentaries on the implements for yoga in the form of Heruka by the Sa skya scholar

---

[12] Dan Martin, "On the cultural ecology of sky burial in the Himalayan plateau", *East and West* 46, no. 3/4 (1996): 353-370.

[13] Nancy Malville, "Mortuary practices and the ritual use of human bone in Tibet," in *Interacting with the Dead: Perspectives on Mortuary Archaeology for the New Millennium*, eds. G.F.M. Rakita, *et al*. (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 190-204. See also Margaret Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist Funerary Practices* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[14] Andrea Loseries-Leick, *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra: An Ethno-Historical Study of Skulls, Bones, and Relics* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2008).

[15] *ibid.*, 193-206.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216).[16] Loseries-Leick moreover suggests how an anthropological study of ritual objects can be refined by engaging with Tibetan historiography and ritual literature, such as the genre of manuals for the examination of skulls known as *thod brtags,* where individual lineages have developed unique traditions of technical standards and interpretations for cranial morphology.[17] To Loseries-Leick's substantial (though methodologically uneven) effort, this dissertation hopes to add recent studies on early tantra and its iconography, an increasingly robust discourse about religion and material culture, and a broader perspective on Buddhist materiality and the technical specificity of tantric objects.

Shaped by these previous efforts, this project is thus an attempt at a more comprehensive study of this technical tradition as a body of knowledge passed within and between communities, both historically and at present. In the second and third chapters, each instrument is treated as the subject of a cultural historical narrative: Skulls and bone ornaments are introduced through the formation, circulation and practice of Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra. What is identified as a Buddhist mode of ritualized charnel asceticism is explored here as a textual, iconographic and liturgical tradition culminating in Tibetan depictions of siddhas (Tbt. *grub thob*) and the maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara (*'Khor lo bde mchog*) as well as its deities (*e.g.* Heruka) and intermediaries (yoginī/ḍākinī).

The history of thighbone trumpets, on the other hand, is told in relation to the practice of *gcod* taught by Ma gcig lab sgron (1055-1149) and the earliest surviving visual evidence for these instruments found in representations of the Tibetan master from the fourteenth century in the western Himalayas. Though the wooden ḍ*amaru* or Tibetan *cang (r)te'u* is found in a range of images and applications — through the practice and popularization of Buddhist tantra, yoginī iconography and Tibetan innovations in ritual performance after the tenth century — a double-sided drum made with skulls, or *thod rnga,* eventually comes to figure prominently in Tibetan representations of ritualized charnel asceticism and its teachers, deities and practitioners, as well as offerings made to protectors and other wrathful deities.

Finally, this dissertation will put these material cultural histories in context by documenting existing objects in museum collections and re-interpreting their technological specificities in relation to the diverse perspectives of active communities of practitioners and observers,

---

[16] *ibid.,* 107**;** Grags pa rgyal mtshan, "He ru ka'i chas drug", in *Grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi bka' 'bum*, ed. bSod nams rgya mtsho (Tokyo: Thō-yō sBuṅ kho, 1968 [13th c.]), 266-278 (fl.185-196). See also chapter 2 and chapter 4, section 3 on *rus rgyan* (bone ornaments).

[17] See chapter 4, section 2; also Martin Hanker, "Thod brtags: Tibetan craniological manuals," (MA thesis, Prague: Charles University, 2018).

gathered by interview across the Tibetan cultural region during a year of fieldwork. Each type of instrument will be described in terms of its diverse applications, formal characteristics and iconographic presence as an implement for practice or visual indications of ritual skill. This technical study moreover includes an exploration of the present methods for sourcing human remains for the manufacture of ritual objects and the effects of circulating these charnel instruments as global commodities and cultural properties.

Terms and concepts

This research draws from a variety of sources in order to discuss these ritual instruments and render their categorization in the religious life of the Tibetan cultural matrix.[18] The language and hermeneutical rhetoric used here is unique to the multi-disciplinary approach of this research and aims to clarify many of the ambiguities and inconsistencies of previous scholarship.

Relics, for example, represent a different historical model of Tibetan material religion and Buddhist valorization for human remains and as such, are not explicitly treated here. The popularity of relics precedes the formation and spread of Buddhist tantra and its ritual instrumentation of human remains: Gregory Schopen has written, for example, on the “public value of relics” in the Buddhist world in the first centuries of the common era, as well as their capacity to inspire the production of material culture through the creation of stūpas.[19] The veneration of human remains through the circulation of relics is likewise testified by the Chinese scholar Xuanzang (c.602-664), who documented the distribution of teeth, bones, and other remains of the historical Buddha, as well as their installation in stūpa as demonstrations of civic

[18] The “Tibetan cultural matrix” encompasses Bon as well as *chos*, or Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the types of public, non-monastic and/or practical applications sometimes referred to as popular religion (*mi chos*), *e.g.* the control of weather, subjugation of disease, etc. This heuristic term is also meant to encompass the dynamic cultural geography of the Himalayan plateau, including A mdo, Khams, dbU and Tsang as well as Sikkim, Ladakh, Bhutan, areas of Nepal and Himachal Pradesh, and the increasingly mobile Tibetan diaspora further south in India and abroad.

[19] Gregory Schopen, “Burial ad sanctos and the physical presence of the Buddha in early Indian Buddhism: A study in the archaeology of religions”, in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 1997), 131. Likewise, the secondary burial practice of creating *tsha tsha* (molded clay figures, made with post-cremation ash) represents a different — though related — process of object-making which values or incorporates human remains, see Gregory Schopen, “Stūpa and tīrtha: Tibetan mortuary practices and an unrecognized form of burial ad sanctos at Buddhist sites in India,” *The Buddhist Forum* 3 (1994): 273-293.

prestige across central and southern Asia.[20] He moreover noted that these relics attracted pilgrims and were known to propagate through devotional action.

More recently, in a 1994 article on signs of saintly death in Tibetan cultural history, Dan Martin indicates that "relic" is a broad category including several types of material (*e.g.* bodily remains, words, textiles and images) which have the capacity to confer blessing (*byin rlabs)* to the practitioner and establish an ontological continuity with the sacred. The value of this continuity, Martin argues, can be illustrated by the proliferation of relics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, where "authenticity" is established through practical mechanics that were "more 'social' than 'theological'".[21] This emphasis on the communal maintenance and promotion of relics illustrates a distinction between these and tantric ritual objects made with human remains, where the latter are more likely subject to skilled activation by ritual specialists in controlled settings. Loseries-Leick, on the other hand, discusses relics through the shared, often interdependent value of human bones which are used in ritual instruments, but without making any social, practical or technological distinction about their religious function.[22] While the Tibetan term *ring bsrel* ("relic") is a general category*,* in practice it often refers to the pearl-like concretions resulting from the cremation of a saintly person.[23]

As this dissertation will explore in depth, ritual instruments are designed, fabricated and valorized in a way that relics — which can replicate through devotional action — are not. The description of these objects as instruments is meant to emphasize their use, construction and interpretation as material culture and ritual technology. This perspective has been inspired by recent work in social and material anthropology and an increasing body of academic knowledge on Tibetan ritual.

---

[20] Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, trans. Li Rongxi, *BDK English Triptaka* 79, vol. 51, no. 2087 (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996), 190.

[21] Dan Martin, "Pearls from bones: Relics, chortens, tertons and the signs of saintly death in Tibet," *Numen* 41 (1994): 279.

[22] Loseries-Leick, "Human bones & the wonders of precious relics", in *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra*, 133-151.

[23] Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *A rga cho ga'i dang rab tu gnas pa don bsal ba (Clarifying the meaning of the arga and consecration rituals)*, trans. Yael Bentor (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2015), 51. This thirteenth century text gives four categories for relic including organic materials like hair and nails, and *dhāraṇī* (speech relics), and also treats the creation of *tsha tsha*. My thanks to Dr. Rob Linrothe for bringing this text to my attention and Dr. Yannick Laurent for helping me clarify this technical distinction.

Daniel Miller has described object-making and acquisition as an expression of individual agency or identity known as objectification, a discursive process between people and things resulting in the creation, circulation and use — or consumption, in his modern examples — of material culture.[24] As an object of study, objectification describes the formation and perpetuation of cultural knowledge as the reproduction, legitimization and transformation of values and ideas as they are represented in the material record.[25] Here, this continuity in knowledge and skill is also called a tradition, which is both historical and contemporary. The study of methods for that material knowledge transfer will be discussed and defined here as cultural technology.

This interpretation of objectification as a cultural process is heavily indebted to the field of social anthropology, in particular the French thinkers Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), for whom technology could be understood a form of externalization conditioned by social practice and communal logic.[26] In this dissertation, materials and techniques are interpreted as a reflections of these cultural mechanics and the product of dynamic social and historical processes of exchange and knowledge transfer. Moreover, by documenting the continuity of these instruments as a material cultural tradition for two millennia until the present, this perspective means to address not only the biography or cultural history of individual objects, or types of objects, but rather entire processes of object-making through the study of technique, (*i.e.* technology).[27]

In the Tibetan cultural and historical paradigm, these processes are largely shaped by an emphasis on ritual in religious life, often exhibiting tantra's characteristically dynamic physical or material expressions paired with a narrative emphasis on Buddhist authority. José Ignacio Cabezón notes that the word commonly used for ritual in some Tibetan communities (*cho ga)* can be translated as "a means to attain a goal" and that ritual elements — verbal, gestural and material — share common rhetorical and performative aspects which are managed and

---

[24] Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1987), 27ff; Miller defines objectification as a phenomenological process of differentiation between the self and material culture.

[25] Christopher Tilley, "Objectification" in *Handbook of Material Culture*, eds. Christopher Tilley, *et al.* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 61.

[26] Marcel Mauss, "Techniques and technology", in *Techniques,Technology and Civilisation*, trans. J.R. Redding (New York and Oxford: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books, 2009 [1941]), 150. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline for a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 [1972]) for the discussion of *habitus* as the performance of social and cultural standards.

[27] This is a departure from the object-biography approach for individual examples as social agents, for example in Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as a process," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective,* ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64ff.

expressed through the mastery of tantra as an adjustable, modular grammar or method.[28] The use of human remains in ritual objects can be understood as an element of this grammar, conditioned by the purpose, skill and resources of the practitioner, including their training and the knowledge of their teachers.

An historical and practical reliance on Buddhist pedagogy in Tibetan religious life is pervasive in the majority of contexts in which these ritual objects have been used or valued. Janet Gyatso notes that methods employed by Buddhist teachers are valued for their capacity to transmit more than one type of knowledge or skill, for example, in the Tibetan medical tradition where discourse "reveals the value of the *permeability between* subject and object, the tending of one towards the other *before* their full collapse", while at the same time facilitating the acquisition of practical knowledge (emphasis the author's).[29] This articulation of object-nature is essential to understanding the value and function of these objects as instruments within the Buddhist and Tibetan intellectual and ritual traditions.

More recently, James Gentry has articulated a role for Tibetan ritual materials as "power objects" with the capacity for social, liturgical and political relationships, as demonstrated through seventeenth century writings on the preparation of accomplished medicine (*sman sgrub*) from the flesh of a brahmin seven-times over (*bram ze skye bdun pa'i sha)*.[30] By relating the use of materials or substances with particularly antinomian criteria to the broader mechanics of the Tibetan author's political, cultural and historical context, Gentry has shown how rituals have been used to mediate volatile relationships between political institutions and religious authorities, individuals and their social status, experience and knowledge, and non-humans and their manifestations. Moreover, by connecting the value of ritual materials to their specific historic environment and social priorities, Gentry describes how only these rare and problematic materials were effective in establishing the appropriate relationships between various channels of religious authority and social power.[31] Through ritual action, substances associated with the death of the body or corpses, otherwise a source of impurity, are transformed into pure and positive materials with a lasting cultural legibility and capacity to empower or enlighten.

---

[28] José Ignacio Cabezón, "Introduction", in *Tibetan Ritual,* ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

[29] Janet Gyatso, "Healing burns with fire: The facilitations of experience in Tibetan Buddhism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no 1 (1999), 142.

[30] James Duncan Gentry, *Power Objects: The Life, Legacy and Writings of Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen,* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017). See also chapters 2 and 4, section 2.

[31] *ibid.,* 301.

Figure 1.4: Guru Rinpoche with *khaṭvāṅga* and skull, left hand, *rdo rje* in the right, Thimphu valley, Bhutan, October 2013. The tantric master is associated with the subjugation of the landscape here and elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural region and throughout its religious historiography.

The longevity of this relationship between the ritual, material and social is furthermore discernible in the visual culture of Buddhist tantra and Tibet. This dissertation integrates an iconographic study of deities, teachers and ritual masters like the eighth century Padmasambhava — or the more familiar Guru Rinpoche, in popular discourse — whose characteristic depiction with skull and skull-topped staff (Skt./Tbt. *khaṭvāṅga*) represents the promotion of tantric method and charnel implements in the cultural and religious history of the establishment of Vajrayāna in the Tibetan cultural region (figure 1.4). This story has been written in part by art historians like Robert Beer, for example, who places implements made with human remains within the historical relationship between ”The Hindu Kāpālikas, Padmasambhava, and

the Buddhist Mahāsiddhas".[32] Beer's summative association of these three identities reflects a model for the dominant cultural historical narrative offered in this dissertation, where the illustrated use of skull and *khaṭvāṅga* by Guru Rinpoche, for example, reflects the popularization and transmission of Buddhist tantra conditioned by the charnel materials and ritual methodologies of Indian sources, including Śaiva ascetics and other siddha yogins, after the eighth century.[33]

As noted by Beer, these implements — the skull and *khaṭvāṅga* especially — were common to representations of the Buddhist *mahāsiddhas* (Tbt. *grub thob chen po, "*great accomplished ones"), a group of charismatic teachers and tantric innovators whose collective visual identity emerged in Tibet and Nepal after the twelfth century (figure 1.5). Unknown amongst Indian sources and authors, a collective biography of the 84 mahāsiddhas was assembled in the

Figure 1.5: Accomplished tantric ritual specialist known as *siddha*, with skull and *khaṭvāṅga* at the Alchi gSum brtsegs, c. 1220, image by Jaroslav Poncar. This monument records some of the oldest preserved examples of siddha iconography in the Himalayas.

[32] Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (London: Serindia Publications, 1999), 249.

[33] Any traveler in the region should be familiar with Guru Rinpoche's pacification of the landscape and his role in establishment of a tantric Buddhist cultural territory across the Himalayan plateau: I have heard and seen first-hand evidence of his feats as cultural hero and ritual master in Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Khams. See also chapter 2 on the early recorded use of charnel materials within the Tibetan mahāyoga tantra corpus.

twelfth century in the *Caturaśitisiddhapravṛtti* (*Grub chen brgyad bcu rtsa bzhi'i rnam thar)* and attributed to an Indian scholar named Abhayadatta as it was translated into Tibetan.[34]

Moreover, Rob Linrothe has observed that the iconography of the mahāsiddhas is a Tibetan and/or Himalayan visual innovation that is intended to illustrate the diversity (and extremity) of Buddhist tantra's methods as well as the origins and ritual expertise of its community of founders.[35] While many of these individuals are key historical figures in the spread and formalization of Buddhist tantra, as an iconographic program mahāsiddhas often illustrate a mode of practice that incorporates the use of charnel implements as a foundational aspect of Tibetan material religion and its ritual methodologies. This dissertation will examine the origins of the siddha as a model practitioner of Buddhist tantra in Tibet.

There is, however, no automatic correspondence in the relationship between the iconography of ritualized charnel asceticism and Tibetan material religion: Though the *khaṭvāṅga* has been described in Śaiva and Buddhist sources and iconographies since the seventh and eighth centuries, the object itself is extremely rare and/or inaccessible.[36] No *khaṭvāṅga* has been documented, observed in use, or examined as part of this research. Another object which is often valued in textual sources as a charnel implement and/or iconographic feature but which is fairly rare in surviving examples is the skull garland (Skt. *muṇḍamālā*, Tbt. *thod pa'i phreng ba*) or bone garland (*asthimālikā, rus pa'i phreng ba*) (figure 1.6). Though these objects have similar cultural historical narratives to the four instruments examined here, they exhibit fewer consistent liturgical applications and/or surviving examples on which to base a material and technical study.

However, while iconography and visual culture will be treated here as a form of documentation, Christian Luczanits has emphasized how a study of evidence for material religion in tantra produces an unreliable chronology for ritual use:

---

[34] Abhayadatta, *Masters of Mahāmudrā: Songs and histories of the Eighty-four Buddhist siddhas*, trans. Keith Dowman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985). See also chapters 2 and 3 on sources for siddha iconography.

[35] Rob Linrothe, "Group portrait: Mahāsiddhas in the Alchi Sumtsek", in *Embodying Wisdom: Art, Text and Interpretation in the History of Esoteric Buddhism*, eds. Rob Linrothe and Henrik H. Sørensen (Copenhagen, The Seminar for Buddhist Studies, 2001), 198.

[36] These are used nevertheless by practitioners of a few current traditions such as the non-Buddhist Aghori, and by some Tibetan *sngags pa* or ritual specialists, though usually in restricted settings (Westin Harris, personal communication by e-mail, 10 May 2019). At present, the name *khaṭvāṅga* may also be used for liturgical objects not made with human remains, according to a practitioner in Leh, April 2018.

> In principle, it is the esoteric nature of the teaching involved that accounts for the absence of early art-historical evidence in this regard. We are actually faced by the interesting fact that laying down such teachings in writing as well as in art meant that the secrecy of the topic was to some extent already given up.[37]

Here, Luczanits is referring to the study of painted maṇḍala as the monumentalized version of a ritually-established visual program, where, though known in Buddhist sources recorded prior the eighth century, there are relatively few surviving examples of painted maṇḍala dated before 1100. Instead of trying to establish their origins, this dissertation aims to extract narratives on the use of these objects from visual and written sources as a process of formalization in the adoption and refinement of Buddhist tantric methods and materials.

Figure 1.6: A set of 112 beads made of discs cut from human crania in the collection of the National Science Museum, London (1987-716 pt 3) collected in the late 20th century in the Kathmandu valley, February 2017. Though often suggested by the earliest visual and textual sources examined here, the skull mālā was too rarely encountered as an object to be treated as part of this study. This is a highly specialized object for use by skilled ritual practitioners.

[37] Christian Luczanits, “On the earliest mandalas in a Buddhist context,” in *Mahāyāna Buddhism: History and Culture*, eds. Darrol Bryant and Susan Bryant (New Delhi: Tibet House, 2008), 113.

Nevertheless, as an iconological exercise, this project will attempt what Hans Belting has called an “anthropology of visual practice”, or an approach to art history, even religious images, as the documentation of cultural forms.[38] This approach assumes an intellectual or rhetorical continuity between images, texts and practice. Moreover, in his recent study on the historiography of antinomian methods and materials in tantra, Christian Wedemeyer applies Roland Barthes’ articulation of connotative semiology to suggest how the ritual use of charnel materials was neither literal nor figurative but rather discursive.[39] Similarly, Jacob Kinnard has observed that in the ritual systems of early tantric Buddhism “images, really, function as what we might call metapractical objects: they provide, at once, an opportunity for practice… as well as an opportunity for reflection on such a practice”.[40] Though this project necessarily assumes a literal interpretation for the use of charnel materials — resulting in physical objects made from human remains — it also adopts a similar connotative and pedagogically-motivated rubric for interpreting their materiality within the tradition of Buddhist tantra and Tibetan material religion.

Methodology and structure

This project will add a contemporary perspective from a diversity of actors in the present Tibetan cultural matrix to existing scholarship and the visual or textual historical record. This is inspired by historians like John Cort, who proposed an ethnographic and material cultural approach to the study of Jain sculpture, for example, as part of an art history which engages with the dynamism and longevity of ritual methods.[41] The extended historical narrative of this research — from the emergence of *kāpālika* (“skull-bearer”) practices in south Asia in the first centuries of the common era, to the establishment and perpetuation of charnel instruments in Tibetan material religion until the present day — is meant to illustrate the technical continuity and dynamic interpretive complexity of these objects.

By engaging with how ritual and material knowledge has been transmitted throughout the centuries — through images, texts and cultural historical narratives — this dissertation aims to document the technology of using human remains in ritual objects as an enduringly innovative

---

[38] Hans Belting, “Iconic presence. Images in religious traditions”, *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 12, no. 2, (2016): 235.

[39] Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology and Transgression in the Indian Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 123-124.

[40] Jacob N. Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

[41] John Cort, “Art, religion and material culture: Some reflections on method,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 3 (1996): 613-632.

process. The understanding of documentation as a collective production of knowledge is essential to the discipline of information science, for example, where data is recorded, interpreted, and organized as a cultural technique for understanding relationships between forms of information.[42] Here, the relationships between objects and their visual or material histories, individual practitioners and communities, cultural history and social value, and materials and efficacy will be described through an object-focused study.

The methodologies used in this research — both historical and ethnographic (that is, interview and observation-based) — are intended to privilege information which is publicly available and avoid details or descriptions which, as part of the tantric tradition, should be restricted to qualified or initiated practitioners. This represents a shift from the study of the content or experience of protected information in esoteric communities to its forms of knowledge exchange in a model of intellectual engagement proposed by Hugh Urban, a scholar of esoteric social and religious groups.[43] The negotiation of access to and protection of tantric boundaries, information, narratives and ritual objects represents the primary ethical consideration of this project's methodologies, simultaneous to a concern for the safety and security of the informants and objects.[44]

Alternatively, for European and American cultural institutions, access to these objects is controlled primarily by policies governing the study and handling of human remains as anthropological specimens or funerary materials.[45] In this project's first phase of fieldwork, skull vessels, bone ornaments, thighbone trumpets and skull drums were examined in the collections of the British Museum, Victoria and Albert, Wellcome Collection/National Science Museum (London), Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) and National Museums Liverpool. At each institution, protocol for handling, documentation and access was managed in accordance with the Human

---

[42] Suzanne Briet, *What is Documentation?,* trans. Ronald E. Day, Laurent Martinet and Hermina G.B. Anghelescu (Paris: Editions Documentaires, 1951).

[43] Hugh B. Urban, "Elitism and esotericism: Strategies of secrecy and power in south Indian tantra and French Freemasonry", *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 3.

[44] Throughout this dissertation, informants will remain anonymous unless they have given explicit permission for the inclusion of their identity and personal information. Moreover, informants in Dharamsala are often migrants whose observations were made elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural region including in or around Shigatse, Lhasa, Chamdo and Gyantse. Likewise objects which are not publicly accessible in museum collections, on display, through ritual use or on sale will be described generally in terms of location and affiliation (*e.g. "*a monastery in Ladakh"); this is to protect these objects from confiscation or theft.

[45] For previous work on these objects as a postgraduate researcher in conservation, see Ayesha Fuentes, "Technical examination of a bone ornament ensemble from the Himalayan region with comments on handling, treatment, storage and display," (MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2014).

Tissues Act of 2004 and copyright laws for academic researchers.[46] Approximately 50 objects and their curatorial records were studied and their materials, construction, condition and evidence of use or repair were recorded (see chapter 4 and Appendix). Where these objects are restricted by ritual specialists and tantric practitioners in one setting, they are restricted for different, legal reasons by public museums and academic institutions, demonstrating a range of values and priorities for the maintenance of these objects by different types of custodians.

The technical examinations undertaken at the above-mentioned institutions during the first year of doctoral research facilitated an accumulation of formal details, material information and images to form a basis of comparison and series of hypotheses to be tested in a year-long campaign of fieldwork across the Himalayas and south Asia from September 2017 to August 2018. Sharing objects from UK collections via digital images on a phone (*i.e.* photo-elicitation) became essential to engaging informants across the region in Tibetan — or Tibetic — communities of A mdo and Khams (China), Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, West Bengal and Sikkim (India) and the Kathmandu valley (Nepal) (see map in fig. 1.7).

Figure 1.7: Key research locations visited from September 2017 to August 2018; the route was planned according to seasonal weather patterns, travel conditions, language skills and accessibility, and included visits to archaeological collections and pilgrimage sites in Kolkata, Varanasi, Sarnath and Bodh Gaya.

[46] UK Department for Culture Media and Sport, *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums,* http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/publications/3720.aspx, (accessed 26 December 2016).

Approximately 140 sites were visited during this period of fieldwork including monasteries, temples (Tbt. *lha khang*) and pilgrimage destinations as well as workshops, markets, regional museums, arts organizations and private collections within the region. Individuals within monastic communities, ritual specialists, lay practitioners (both male and female), craftspeople, vendors and non-practicing observers were surveyed informally and anonymously on their knowledge or experience of these objects, their use, and the circulation or sourcing of raw materials; the answers of 102 of these people are included here.[47] These included lay and monastic lineage holders in various rNying ma, Sa skya, dGe lugs and bKa' brgyud traditions as well as *gcod* and *brtul zhugs* practitioners and non-Buddhist tantric specialists including Śaiva Aghori.

Active participant observation was an essential component of this research though as an uninitiated non-Buddhist, this was limited to large and/or publicly accessible practices such as *'chams* (masked ritual dance), *sgrub chen* (large ritual accomplishments which may include *'chams*, *sman sgrub* and a number of other subsidiary practices discussed in this dissertation), monthly feasts and offerings (*e.g. mkha' 'gro tshogs*) according to the lunar calendar, funerary proceedings and installations or offerings made in the *'du khang* (assembly hall) and specialist spaces of wrathful deities and protectors (*e.g. mgon khang, srung ma khang*). These conversations and observations were documented as daily field notes and the data gathered from interviews and observations — including digital photographs taken with the verbal permission of object custodians — will be integrated throughout the narrative of this dissertation.

There are no doubt many ways the cultural history of these objects can and will be told. The following represents a best attempt to utilize available resources and propose an essential narrative architecture and chronology which, at the very least, expands on previous scholarship by indicating the complexity and longevity of the material tradition of using human remains in Tibetan ritual objects and its means of knowledge transfer. At the same time, this work is meant as a complement to religious scholarship and ritual knowledge, a technical study which is accessible to non-practitioners, yet indicates the diversity of narratives and sources by which these objects have been conditioned and perpetuated.

---

[47] These participants were informed of the purpose of my research as well as the condition of their anonymity and in regulation with the SOAS Doctoral School *Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Degrees,* available at https://www.soas.ac.uk/registry/degreeregulations/, (accessed 1 February 2017). This work includes observations made during periodic work in Bhutan with the Department of Culture between 2013 and 2015.

In the second chapter, skulls and bone ornaments are explored through evidence of the formation of Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantras and it is argued that, especially in the latter, an emphasis on yoga and ritual empowerment through the use of charnel implements represents a major source for the iconographic and liturgical valorization of human remains in Tibetan material religion. The foundations of Tibetan traditions for ritualized charnel asceticism will be explored through textual and visual sources that document the cultivation of yoga in the form of the wrathful deity Heruka, and the iconography of the Samvara maṇḍala, including the intermediaries the yoginī and ḍākinī, as well as the practice of *gaṇacakra* (Tbt. *tshogs kyi 'khor lo*) and representations of the *aṣṭaśmāśana*, or eight charnel grounds. This chapter will also explore how *kāpālika* methodologies and materials were exchanged with brahmanical and Śaiva groups such as the Pāśupata.

In the third chapter, images of Ma gcig lab sgron (1049-1155) from bKa' brgyud sites in the western Himalayas constructed in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries will be interpreted as evidence for the use of *rkang gling* in the *gcod* sādhana of *lus sbyin.* Earlier images of her teacher Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas (d. 1115) as an Indian siddha from the same monuments are furthermore used to emphasize how *lus sbyin* was interpreted within the greater traditions of ritualized charnel asceticism and the performance of the nondual. Though *ḍamaru* emerge much earlier than *gcod* in yoginī imagery and yoga tantra, in Tibet the double-sided skull drum or *thod rnga* is promoted as a specific type of *ḍamaru* suitable to the charnel methods and teachings of *gcod* and/or the observance of *brtul zhugs spyod pa*. These instruments are explored as part of the expansion of Tibetan ritual traditions, lineages and monastic institutions after the widespread adoption of Buddhist tantra during the *phyi dar* (late tenth to twelfth centuries).

Finally, these historical narratives will be contextualized through an object-based technical study on the use and construction for each instrument type based on direct observation, the knowledge and experiences of informants, and surviving or accessible material evidence. This fourth chapter is divided into parts, one each devoted to the most prominent ritual object types made with human remains in Tibetan material religion: skulls, bone ornaments, thighbone trumpets and skull drums, plus an introduction describing current mechanisms for sourcing raw materials, producing, activating and circulating these objects. These sections will also describe formal variations, techniques for ornamentation and their illustration in Tibetan or tantric visual culture. This section positions the cultural histories of the second and third chapters in relation to information supplied by present individuals or communities of practitioners, as well as material evidence preserved in the objects themselves.

Overall, this dissertation proposes a narrative platform and technical vocabulary for the interpretation of human remains in Tibetan ritual objects as a cultural historical and material study, from the earliest recorded evidences for their use and collective value, to their expanding and increasingly complex functions in Buddhist tantra, and finally to present global trends in their manufacture, handling and circulation.

2 Historical sources for the use of skulls and bone ornaments in Buddhist tantra

This chapter draws on a diversity of historical texts and iconographic sources to describe the ritual use of charnel materials within the formalization of Buddhist tantra. Specifically, the following explores how skulls and bone ornaments were cultivated as ritual instruments through the methodologies of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra as Buddhist forms of ritualized charnel asceticism.[1] This work will moreover examine evidence for the exchange of charnel methods with other religious traditions and communities active across south and central Asia during the first millennium CE, including brahmanical and Śaiva ascetic practices like the observance of the *kāpālika,* or skull-bearers. Moreover, this discussion investigates sources for the Tibetan iconography of siddhas, yoginī/ḍākinī, and the deity Heruka and these figures' consistent, prominent depiction with ritual objects made with human remains.[2]

In one of the oldest preserved painted representations of a transmission lineage on the top floor of the early thirteenth century Alchi gSum brtsegs in Ladakh (figure 2.1), the Indian siddhas Tilopa (988-1069) and Nāropa (b.1012) are dark-skinned and naked wearing charnel ornaments on their heads, ears, necks, arms, wrists and ankles, and around the waist as a girdle or belt (Skt. *mekhalā,* Tbt. *ska rags*), indicating the fundamental prestige of these materials. Each holds a skull in the left hand with a musical instrument — a horn and *ḍamaru,* respectively — in the right. Between them is the blue figure of Vajrasattva (or Vajradhara) and, on the ground, a maṇḍala with skulls placed at the four corners. The two yogins turn toward one another, illustrating the oral transmission of teachings between them while, to the left, the founding bKa' brgyud translator and student of Nāropa, the white-robed Marpa (1012-1097), rotates towards them as the source for his tantric knowledge.[3]

---

[1] Italics are used here for the Sanskrit and Tibetan names of objects and words which are not common in English-language scholarship (unlike *e.g.* yoga, tantra, ḍākinī) with the exception of proper nouns and the names of deities. Diacritical marks for Sanskrit vocabulary are retained for accuracy.

[2] Yoginī and ḍākinī are largely treated as synonymous entities in Buddhist tantra though the latter name (*mkha' 'gro ma*) is preferred in Tibetan sources; their iconography is derived from common sources (see below).

[3] See Christian Luczanits, "Beneficial to see: Early Drigung painting", in *Painting Traditions of the Drigung School,* ed. David P. Jackson (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014), 214-259. For an extended discussion of the historiographic importance of this lineage painting see *idem.,* "Art historical aspects of dating Tibetan art," in *Dating Tibetan Art: Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium, Cologne,* ed. Ingrid Kriede-Damani (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag: 2003), 25-57. See also chapter 3 for additional discussion of siddha iconography in the thirteenth and fourteenth century monuments of Alchi Chos 'khor.

Figure 2.1: First three figures in the founding lineage of the ‘Bri gung bKa’ brgyud from the top floor of the Alchi gSum brtsegs, c.1220, from right to left, Tilopa, Nāropa and Marpa. Image from Tsering 2009. Each has a small single skull in their hair, indicating that these ornaments are charnel materials.

In images such as this, skulls and charnel ornaments are prominent features of the siddhas’ appearance, thus associated with the Indian and revelatory sources for Buddhist tantra as well as its transmission to local and/or Tibetan religious leaders.[4] However, the collective identity of these figures as *mahāsiddha* and the refinement of their iconography in the Himalayas was established only after the twelfth century through the consolidation and translation of earlier sources and teachings on Buddhist tantra.[5] Earlier, generic representations of Buddhist charnel ascetic yogins are found in two twelfth century maṇḍala, for example, in which are also illustrated the use and visualization of corpses or human remains as ritual method, the feast-gathering of *gaṇacakra* (Tbt. *tshogs kyi ‘khor lo*) and the iconographic program of the eight

[4] Geoffrey Samuel, “The siddha as a cultural category,” in *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas, op.cit*, 45. Samuel suggests that Tibetan authors and lineage founders in the *phyi dar* (c. tenth to twelfth centuries) particularly emphasized the extremity of siddhas’ ritual methodologies in order to support their local authority.

[5] See the introduction in chapter 1, notes 34 and 35. Wedemeyer notes that Abhayadatta’s twelfth century collective biography *Grub chen brgyad bcu rtsa bzhi’i rnam thar,* is a compendium of historical and hagiographic material and “almost certainly a Tibetan apocryphon”, *idem., Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism,* 175. See also Matthew T. Kapstein, “ An inexhaustible treasury of verse: The literary legacy of the mahāsiddhas,” in *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas,* ed. Rob Linrothe (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006), 22-35.

charnel grounds (Skt. *aṣṭaśmāśana*, Tbt. *dur khrod chen po brgyad*) (figures 2.2-2.3).[6] These are two of the oldest surviving painted examples of Buddhist maṇḍala and, like the transmission lineage at the Alchi gSum brtsegs, suggest the ways in which charnel materials had become important to the visual culture of deity yoga in Buddhist tantra during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In each of these maṇḍala, the central deities — Saṃvara in figs. 2.2 and 2.4 and Vajraḍāka as Saptākṣara in figs. 2.3 and 2.5, each embracing the consort Vajravārāhī — are represented as a form of Heruka with a skull and *khaṭvāṅga* and, like the siddhas in fig. 2.1 above, wearing bone ornaments on the head, waist, limbs, *etc.* (figures 2.4 and 2.5). These two maṇḍala and the iconography of their figures reflect sources compiled during or previous to this period: The triple-wheel assembly and twelve-armed form of Saṃvara in fig. 2.2 corresponds to a description from the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* of Abhayākaragupta (d.1125) as well as the textual sources which would form the basis of the Tibetan Cakrasaṃvara iconography.[7] The six-armed Saptākṣara, on the other hand, is one of many forms of the deity Heruka taken by the buddha Akṣobhya in the *Sādhanamāla*, the earliest surviving copies of which also date from the twelfth century.[8] Each deity is moreover surrounded by a retinue or network of ḍākinī and/or their consorts as well as protectors. The following chapter examines the origins of their wrathful (Skt. *krodha*, Tbt. *khro ba*) characterization through their association with charnel materials as well as evidence for historical exchanges between Buddhist and Śaiva or brahmanical iconographic traditions.[9]

The work of the Indian Buddhist tantric scholar Abhayākaragupta — including the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* cited above — was highly valued by Tibetan scholars in the period after the

---

[6] Christian Luczanits, “The eight great siddhas in early Tibetan paintings,” in *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, *op.cit*., 77-91. Luczanits observes that the siddhas in the two twelfth century maṇḍala included here do not necessarily correspond to the collective biography of the 84 mahāsiddhas nor the ‘Bri gung conventional grouping of eight, but rather represent variations in a general type drawn from other sources which will be explored here.

[7] This description is number 12 in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*; see Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann, *Introduction à l’iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique* (Paris: Librarie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1986), 50-52. This triple-wheel maṇḍala assembly is also described in the root tantra for the Tibetan Saṃvara corpus, the eighth century *Laghusaṃvara* (see below).

[8] Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 64-65. This form of Heruka is described as the deity Vajraḍāka in union with his consort in *sādhana* numbers 250 and 251.

[9] See Rob Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (London: Serindia Publications, 1999), 299-304 for an iconological summary of Saṃvara as a Buddhist re-contextualization for Śaiva imagery. My field of inquiry roughly corresponds to the third phase of Linrothe’s periodization for the development of *krodhavignāntaka* (wrathful protectors) in Vajrayāna iconography, after the tenth century.

Figure 2.2: Triple-wheel Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala surrounded by the eight charnel grounds with a form of Heruka and Vajravārāhī at the center of an oath-bound network of ḍākinī, central Tibet, c. 1100, now in a private collection.

Figure 2.3: Maṇḍala of Heruka as Vajraḍāka in the form of Saptākṣara in union with Vajravārāhī within the eight charnel grounds, central Tibet, c. 1100, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1995.233).

Figures 2.4 (above) and 2.5 (below): Detail of the central assembly of figs. 2.2 (above) and 2.3 (below) with forms of Heruka and Vajravarahī (as *vajrayoginī*) in union trampling their non-Buddhist adversaries within a circular network of ḍākinī. Note also the skulls positioned on top of vases with offerings in the corners of fig. 2.5.

phyi dar during the (re)establishment of the region's religious institutions and gSar ma monastic lineages.[10] This includes as well the *Vajravāli* (Tbt. *rDo rje phreng ba*), a compendium of Buddhist texts and commentaries which include the description of a yogic vow to hold a skull and *khaṭvāṅga* and wear charnel ornaments in a practice identified as *vajrakāpālikacaryāvrata*.[11] This represents the result of a Buddhist re-contextualization for the *kāpālika* observance which had been adapted in the preceding centuries by Vajrayāna authors, most explicitly and consistently in the visual and liturgical modes of Saṃvara tantra.[12] This chapter will examine surviving evidence for this process and the emergence of a Buddhist yoginī tradition after the eighth century, defined in part by its prominent use of charnel materials.

Drawing from the writings of Abhayākaragupta as well as the textual corpus of Buddhist tantra, the Sa skya scholar Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216) would further develop the yoga of ritualized charnel asceticism in his *He ru ka'i chas 'drug*, which describes the skull vessel, *khaṭvāṅga* and bone ornaments as the implements of one who assumes the form of the deity Heruka.[13] This thirteenth century text on Heruka deity yoga would form an early textual precedent for the Tibetan tradition of *brtul zhugs spyod pa* (Skt. *vratacaryā*), or practice of observance.[14] Grags pa rgyal mtshan moreover developed narratives which associated the

---

[10] According to 'Gos lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal (1392-1481), Abhayākaragupta is most prominently associated with the composition of the *Vajravāli*, *idem., The Blue Annals* (*Deb ther ngon po*), trans. George Roerich, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1949), 1048. See also David B. Gray on support for Abhayākaragupta's interpretation of the Saṃvara tradition by Tibetan political and religious leaders after the twelfth century, *idem.,* "Introduction" in *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: The Discourse of Śrī Heruka (Śrīherukābhidhāna)*, trans. David B. Gray (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 69-71.

[11] Cited in Alexis Sanderson, "Vajrayāna: Origin and function," in *Buddhism into the Year 2000: International Conference Proceedings* (Bangkok and Los Angeles: Dhammakāya Foundation, 1994), 91.

[12] Sanderson (*ibid.*) has effectively demonstrated the intertextuality of Śaiva and Buddhist sources that incorporate the charnel methodologies of the *kāpālika* vow, most prominently in the Saṃvara corpus; see below and *idem.,* "The Śaiva age - The rise of dominance of Śaivism during the early medieval period," in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism* ed. by Shingo Einoo (Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009), 145ff.

[13] Grags pa rgyal mtshan, "He ru ka'i chas drug", 267. His iteration of bone ornaments is taken from chapter 6 of the first part of the *Hevajra* tantra, see below.

[14] This description of the six implements of the Heruka yogin would be repeated by the seventeenth century rNying ma teacher Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med, for example, in his own "He ru ka'i chas kyi rnam bshad", included as "Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med dpal gyi rig pa brtul zhugs spyod pa'i rnam thar" in *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos*, ed. bKra shis rgya mtsho (Lha sa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skyun khang, 1996); available at the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), no. W22300, 105-116. My thanks to Westin Harris for sharing his unpublished translation and knowledge of this text with me; see also chapter 3 on the integration of *gcod* and the *brtul zhugs* practice.

adaptation of charnel methodologies from non-Buddhist sources with the origins of the Saṃvara corpus and the characteristic appearance of Heruka as its central deity.[15]

Grags pa rgyal mtshan's description of deity yoga in the form of Heruka and its application of charnel materials is reflected in the early thirteenth century image of the siddhas Nāropa and Tilopa seen in fig. 2.1, including as well their use of musical instruments and seat of animal skins.[16] At the same time, the Sa skya scholar's contribution to the exegesis of these practices was informed by his knowledge and study of mahāyoga texts also found at Dunhuang and authored before the eleventh century, such as those describing subjugation through *sgrol ba*, or liberatory ritual killing, in the tradition of Vajrakīlaya (rDo rje Phur pa) and which are also characteristic to the rNying ma corpus.[17] This chapter will also explore the contribution of these mahāyoga sources to the formalization of Buddhist tantra in Tibet through their evidence for ritualized charnel asceticism.

Therefore, it can be seen that by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was a comprehensive historiographic, iconographic and practical interpretation for the ritual use of charnel materials in Tibet. Moreover, these objects were given emphatically Indian origins by Tibetan religious authorities of the gSar ma traditions through representations of siddhas as tantric innovators, and were primarily cultivated in the mahāyoga and yoginī tantras. This chapter will examine evidence for how these materials came to be valued as ritual objects by the patrons, authors and practitioners who would formalize the ritual methodologies of Buddhist tantra. Furthermore, this work will describe the development of iconographic programs — particularly in the Saṃvara corpus — which feature the use of skulls and bone ornaments, including the wrathful deity forms

---

[15] Ronald Davidson, "Reflections on the Maheśvara subjugation myth: Indic materials, Sa-skya-pa apologetics, and the birth of Heruka," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no.2 (1991): 205-207.

[16] Nāropa's bone ornaments — now at Hemis Monastery in Ladakh — are dated locally to the eleventh century when the bKa' brgyud translator Marpa (b.1012) received them directly from the siddha in Bihar with teachings of Buddhist tantra; see Loseries-Leick, *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra,* 126 and chapter 4, section 3. According to Grags pa rgyal mtshan and his sources, the six implements of the Heruka yogin are bone ornaments, skull vessel, ritual implements (including *khaṭvāṅga*), a garment (of animal skin) and an appropriate seat. The use of musical instruments by these ascetics includes a double-sided hand drum or *ḍamaru*, which can be made of wood or skulls according to the Grags pa rgyal mtshan and based on descriptions from the *Samputa* tantra (see chapter 4, section 5).

[17] Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, "The Dunhuang Phur pa corpus: A survey", in *Contributions to Tibetan Buddhist Literature, PIATS 2006: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies,* ed. Olga Almogi (Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2009), 250. Cantwell and Mayer note that much of Grags pa rgyal mtshan's scholarship on *phur pa* is furthermore inherited from his father, Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092-1158).

of Heruka and the yoginī or ḍākinī, and how these representations existed in conversation with adjacent, non-Buddhist traditions.

Formative sources for ritualized charnel asceticism in iconography and practice

Charnel asceticism can be understood as the historical innovation of Buddhist and brahmanical *śramaṇa*, or renunciate, traditions which emerged in the social geography of south Asia over the course of the first millennium BCE.[18] As these communities grew and diversified, they cultivated methods and modes of observance which instrumentalized transgressive, antinomian or left-handed (*vāmācāra*) qualities of pollution, impurity and social marginality.[19] The *kāpālika* observance to carry a skull or skull-topped staff (*khaṭvāṅga*) is first recorded amongst these *śramaṇa* groups as the religious performance of a legal punishment for killing a brahmin, first documented in the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (c. third-fifth centuries C.E) as a twelve year period of exile and charnel asceticism, after which one is restored to society.[20] Here, rather than a distinct sectarian affiliation, the name or title *kāpālika* can be understood as a ritual identity defined by the socially transgressive and ascetic instrumentation of charnel materials and human remains.

As a religious practice, the *kāpālika* vow is first documented in the Pāśupata corpus where the *khaṭvāṅga* is described as one of the implements taken by initiates during a period of public observance.[21] This was done in order to identify with Rudra — associated in the Vedas with disorder and transgression — by which they would be liberated from rebirth through union with the deity Maheśvara or Śiva-Pāśupati.[22] However, the *kāpālika* use of *khaṭvāṅga* is only one of the ways in which the Pāśupata performed their religious identity with other observances included feigned madness, singing and bathing in ash.The Pāśupata came to dominate the

---

[18] Geoffrey Samuel describes the common origins of Buddhist and brahmanical *śramaṇa* ascetics through their relationship to historical urbanization patterns across south Asia, including their early associations with charnel settings and specialization in socially provocative behaviors in *idem., The Origins of Yoga and Tantra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120-128.

[19] See Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism, passim* for an extended text-based historical and semiotic study of the discursive process of identifying and engaging concepts of the antinomian in the Indian sources for Buddhist tantra.

[20] David Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and Kālāmukhas* (New Delhi: Thomson Press, 1972), 13.

[21] Wedemeyer finds this reference in the c. fourth century *Pāśupatasūtra* in *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism,* 157.

[22] Peter Bisschop and Arlo Griffiths, “The Pāśupata observance (Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 40),” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 46, no. 4 (2003), 331-332. See also Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Delhi: Motlilal Banarsidass, 1988 [1981]), 331-332. Kramrisch describes Rudra (later Śiva) as lord of the animals (*pāśupati*) for the Pāśupata, for whom the self was sacrificial like a beast.

Figure 2.6: Two ascetics under the seat of Pāśupata founding teacher Lakulīśa, at Taleśvara in Bhubaneśwar, 7th century. The *kāpālika*, on the left, holds a skull-topped staff or *khaṭvāṅga* while the figure on the right holds a *triśūla*. Image from Donaldson 1986.

brahmanical *atimārga*, or ascetic path, by the fifth and sixth centuries and within this growing community, the Lākula distinguished themselves as a sub-group of charnel specialists, adding to the implements of the *kāpālika* vow an initiatory thread (*upavīta*) made of hair and charnel ornaments made from pieces of skull, further instrumentalizing the notoriety of these materials by identifying themselves as a community through them (figure 2.6).[23]

After the sixth century, the Pāśupata tradition was a demonstrably active and diverse proportion of the Śaiva communities then expanding across south Asia and who would further re-contextualize these charnel ascetic observances within the brahmanical mainstream. Reflecting a division between orthodox Pāśupata ascetics (*e.g.* Pañcārtha) and more inclusive Śaiva

[23] Wedemeyer notes this version of the *kāpālika* vow in the Lākula text *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*, *op.cit.,* 157-158. See also, *ibid.,* 254n81 on the materials used for this thread by the Lākula; note that Sanderson elsewhere renders *vālayajñopavīta* as “snake skin” in *idem.*, “Śaivism and the tantric traditions,” in *The World’s Religions: the Religions of Asia,* ed. F. Hardy (London: Routledge, 1988), 133. On the use of human remains for the *upavīta* as an alternative to the cotton thread of non-ascetic brahmanical groups, see Sanderson, “The Śaiva age”*,* 209n479. According to the same, Lākula practitioners are progenitors of the ninth-thirteenth century community of Kālāmukha charnel ascetics in southern India.

practitioners of the *mantramarga*, or ritual path, narratives like the *Skandapurāṇa* — sections of which are dated as early as the late sixth or early seventh centuries — would describe the *kāpālika* vow as one of the methods with which to identify with Śiva-Maheśvara in a text oriented towards laity as well as ascetic specialists.[24] This work moreover describes the legendary second century Pāśupata founder Lakulīśa as an incarnation of Śiva, reinforcing a fundamental relationship between these modes of charnel asceticism and Śaiva sources.[25]

Other narratives from this period further these associations between Śiva and the *kāpālika* vow: A number of Śaiva monuments constructed between the seventh and tenth centuries in or around Bhubaneśwar in the eastern region of Orissa reflect the prestige of Pāśupata modes of charnel asceticism by juxtaposing Lakulīśa with images of Śiva-Bhikṣāṭanamūrti, illustrating the account of Śiva as a wandering *kāpālika* ascetic found in the *Matsyapurāṇā* (c. third to sixth centuries) as well as the *Skandapurāṇa*.[26] As Bhikṣāṭanamūrti, Śiva performs the *kāpālika* observance after killing the deity Brahmā, whose skull he carries for twelve years until he is released from his expiatory exercise in the charnel grounds of Varanasi, a center for Pāśupata

Figure 2.7: Śiva-Bhikṣāṭanamūrti with female donor and dancing figure at right, mid-7th century, Paraśurāmeśvara temple at Bhubaneśwar. Śiva holds a skull in his left hand and a peacock-feather topped staff on the right. Image from Donaldson 1986.

[24] In his study of the *Skandapurāṇā* and its historical context, Hans Bakker finds that, by the seventh or eighth century *kāpālika* was an increasingly and broadly applied identification for Śaiva ascetics, *idem., The World of the Skandapurāṇā* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 149. Bakker moreover notes that the connection of Śiva with the *kāpālika* observance is foremost in this purāṇā (p.151).

[25] Bisschop and Griffiths, “The Pāśupata observance,” 323.

[26] Thomas E. Donaldson, “Bhikṣāṭanamūrti images from Orissa,” *Artibus Asiae* 47, no. 1 (1986), 51-66. See also Lorenzen, *op.cit.,* for a comprehensive treatment of historical and narrative sources on the *kāpālika* vow including several purāṇās, inscriptions and satirical accounts. Other Śaiva sources for this narrative are given in Kramrisch, *op.cit.*, 287.

Figures 2.8 (right) and 2.9 (above): Reverse and obverse of Śiva-Bhūteśvara (Rudra addorsed to Maheśvara) with a single skull in the hair of both Rudra and Aghora/Bhairava (obverse, proper right), Fattehgarh, Kashmir, c. 6th century. Image from Granoff 1979.

activities during these centuries.[27] In an image preserved at the temple of Paraśurāmeśvara, the ithyphallic, two-armed Śiva solicits a female donor by holding the empty skull towards her with his left hand (figure 2.7).

At the same time, an integration and popularization of charnel ascetic observances emerges in the iconography for comprehensive representations of Śiva as well. A series of sixth to eighth century images of Rudra addorsed to Śiva-Maheśvara — a figure identified as Bhūteśvara — have been found in Kashmir, in which region brahmanical traditions dominated after the seventh

[27] Wedemeyer notes that many ascetic *vrata* — including those which pre-date the *kāpālika* vow — were also temporary, ranging in length from one month to a lifetime, *op.cit.,* 153. See also Diana L. Eck on the historical association of Varanasi with Śaiva *kāpālika* practitioners and Śiva's liberation at the place of Kapālamocana, *idem., Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 119. Eck describes the deity as skull-bearer in the form of Bhairava, according to the later, likely twelfth century material in the *Skandapurāṇa*, *ibid.* 190ff.

century (figures 2.8 and 2.9).[28] Here, Rudra has a single skull ornament in his hair, above which the figure of Lakulīśa carries his characteristic club (Skt. *laguḍa, lakula*), while the deity holds a staff topped with a Śaiva trident (*triśūla*) horizontally across his body.[29] On the obverse, the figure of Aghora — also called Bhairava, to the proper right of Mahādeva at center — has a skull ornament and wide-eyed, wrathful visage like Rudra on the reverse.

The broader integration of charnel ascetic materials into Śaiva iconography is seen as well at the site of Elephanta, the construction and iconography of which has been explicitly related to Pāśupata sources and patronage after the seventh century.[30] The central image of this temple

Figure 2.10: Śiva-Maheśvara as Śādaśiva, with Aghora/Bhairava at left with a single skull in his hair, Elephanta, 6th century. Image from Kramrisch 1981.

[28] John Siudmak, *The Hindu-Buddhist of Ancient Kashmir and its Influences*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 154. Both Siudmak and Phyllis Granoff relate the iconography of Rudra on the reverse of this figure to contemporaneous representations of Nandin, Rudra's non-transcedent form; see *idem.,* "Maheśvara/ Mahākāla: A unique Buddhist image from Kaśmir," *Artibus Asiae* 41, no. 1 (1979), 64-82. Granoff, however, identifies this image as Buddhist. Another sixth century example of Bhūteśvara from the same region and presently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2014.687) has three skulls in Rudra's hair on the reverse. Note also Rudra's use of stick or club suggests his role as a charnel figure and protector, see below on the *yamadaṇḍa*.

[29] A similarly addorsed image to a figure of Maheśvara from Kashmir has been identified as Rudra with Lakulīśa in his crown by Pratyapaditya Pal in *Bronzes of Kashmir* (Graz: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975), figs. 4 and 4a.

[30] Charles David Collins, *The Iconography and Ritual of Śiva at Elephanta* (New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991 [1988]), 128.

Figure 2.11: Śiva-Andhakāsura with skull in the left hand and single skull ornament in the hair, Elephanta, c. 6th century. Image from Kramrisch 1981.

complex is a five-headed Sadāśiva, a comprehensive form of the deity as Maheśvara related to the expansion of the Śaiva community from an ascetic to ritual tradition accessible to a diversity of social groups (figure 2.10).[31] Here, a single-skull ornament is found — as above in fig. 2.9 — in the hair of Aghora/Bhairava to the proper right of Mahādeva; in the slightly later figure of Śiva-Andhakasura at the same site, however, the wrathful deity — now a solitary central figure — holds a skull in the front left of his many hands under the damaged figure of Andhaka, with a single-skull ornament in his pile of hair (figure 2.11).[32] Śiva is elsewhere illustrated at Elephanta as the ascetic Yogeśvara, or lord of yoga, who is also identified with Lakulīśa.[33]

This shift in iconography towards centralized images of Śiva with *kāpālika* implements corresponds to a further expansion of the Śaiva *mantramārga,* within which the goal was the ritual cultivation of *siddhi*, or accomplishment. This ritual corpus is preserved in two substantial traditions, the *mantrapīṭha* and *vidyāpīṭha,* which were collectively identified as *śāstra* or *āgama*

[31] Sanderson notes that the figure of Sadāśiva is iconographically associated with the least unorthodox trends in Śaiva ritual methodologies during this time, *idem.,* “Śaivism and the tantric traditions,” 136.

[32] Kramrisch, *op.cit.,* 457-8.

[33] Collins, *op.cit.,* 33.

(rather than tantra) of Bhairava.[34] However it was in the latter collection (*pīṭha*) of applied ritual knowledge (*vidyā*) that *kāpālika* methods and materials were especially prominent.[35] And though yoga has its roots in the oldest *śramaṇa* traditions, the practice of a *siddhayogin* — one who ritually instrumentalizes the body through performance, visualization and other actions in order become accomplished or empowered — became central to the expansion of the *mantramārga* and the Śaiva cultivation of what would come to be the characteristic methods of tantra, including mantra, maṇḍala and mudrā.[36] Moreover, the identification of a siddha as one who is accomplished by means of deity yoga, antinomian behaviors and ascetic observances was historically associated with the (non-tantric) Pāśupata community.[37] Therefore, *kāpālika* siddhas were not an innovation of tantra (or Śaiva *āgama*), but rather an integration and valorization of charnel asceticism as part of its expanding ritual methodologies.

After the seventh century, siddhas were an increasingly valued category of skilled ritual practitioner whose utility was known to Śaiva and Buddhist communities as well as a variety of political patrons.[38] Building on the historical repertoire of the *vidyādhara* — one who possesses applied ritual knowledge, often translated as sorcerer, magician or wizard — siddhas diversified their ritual methodologies with means to attain practical *siddhi*, including powers of flight, control

---

[34] Sanderson, *ibid*., 136. In another classificatory system, these texts are classified by having been revealed by the proper right face of Mahādeva/Sadāśiva, which is Aghora/Bhairava, see Alexis Sanderson, “History through textual criticism in the study of Śaivism, the Pañcarātra and the Buddhist yoginītantras”, in *Les sources et le temps,* ed. François Grimal (Pondicherry: École Française d’Extreme Orient, 2001), 19.

[35] *Svacchandabhairava* was the dominant *kāpālika* practice of the *mantrapīṭha* though “its position as the standard Śaivism of the Kasmirian householder had modified its heteropraxy” resulting in a decreasing emphasis on the instrumentation of impure materials and observances towards the tenth century, see Alexis Sanderson*,* “Purity and power among the Brahmans of Kashmir,” in *The Category of the Person* ed. Michael Carrithers, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 204.

[36] Samuel elsewhere describes the formation of tantra through its historical relationship to yoga, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 223ff. Alexis Sanderson has made the case that these innovations were first recorded by Śaiva authors, with Vajrayāna formed in response as a Buddhist adaptation, see *idem.,* “Vajrayāna: Origin and function,” 96.

[37] Ronald Davidson finds the term *siddhāyogin* in the *Pāśupatasūtra* describing a practitioner who is “un-smeared by ethical action or guilt”, see *idem., Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002),184*.* Samuel elsewhere explores how, through the expansion of ritual traditions after fifth century, the ascetic *vrata* was reformulated as the deity yoga practice of Buddhist tantra in *idem., Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 238.

[38] For a social history of siddhas in south Asia in the seventh to eleventh centuries, the political applications of their knowledge and contributions to the formation of Buddhist tantra, see Davidson, *ibid.*

of enemies, and invisibility.[39] In some of these applications, the volatile associations of the skull — rather than indicating identification with a legal or brahmanical transgression — were instrumentalized as a vessel for extraction, refinement or purification, including the production of elixirs for immortality (*amṛta*) and the intoxicant *soma*.[40] Where integrated into these methods of ritual empowerment, *kāpālika* implements came to define ritual methodologies which incorporate charnel materials as well as a specific type of vow-holder.[41]

Moreover, *kāpālika* methods were cultivated as part of a brahmanical tradition oriented towards the group of female deities known as *mātṛkā.* Though there is archaeological and literary evidence for this assembly from the early centuries of the Common Era, after the sixth century these figures came to be primarily associated with Śaiva practices of charnel asceticism.[42] Foremost in illustrating this connection was the deity Cāmuṇḍā,

Figure 2.12: Cāmuṇḍā from an unknown site in Orissa, 9th century, now at the British Museum (1872,0701.83). This multi-limbed *kāpālika* deity has a skull in the lower left hand as well as the severed head of Brahma, a garland of skulls, the emaciated form of an ascetic and corpse as a seat. Note also the *vajra* in the top left corner.

[39] Davidson, *ibid.,* 194. In Buddhist literature, *vidyādhara* may also refer to non-Buddhist tantric practitioners and siddhas. See also David Gordon White, “Mountains of wisdom: On the interface between siddha and vidhyadhara cults and the siddha orders in medieval India,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 1, no. 1 (1997): 73-95.

[40] David Gordon White further discusses the integration of *kāpālika* methods with the foundations of tantric alchemy, the production of *amṛta* and the yoga of Nāth siddhas, *c.f. idem., The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[41]Judit Törzsök notes the intersection of these definitions in evidence for a widespread *kāpālika* ritual tradition which centered on the cultivation and consumption of the intoxicant *soma, idem.,* “Kapalikas”, in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism,* vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 357-8.

[42] Shaman Hatley has identified earlier *mātṛkā* iconography with no representation of charnel associations from the Kuṣāṇa period while the Pāśupata Śaiva authored *Skandapurāṇa* (sixth to ninth centuries) describes both Skanda and Śiva as a *kāpālika* in the company of a group of fearsome *mātṛkā, idem.*, “The Brahmayāmalatantra and early Śaiva cult of yoginīs,” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 48ff. At Elephanta, a group of seven *mātṛkā* accompanies Śiva as Yogeśvara/Lakulīśa; Collins, *op.cit.,* 24.

Figure 2.13 (above): Eight-armed Cāmuṇḍā seated on a corpse as the object of *kāpālika* devotion at Someśvara, near Bhubaneśwar, 10th century. Image from Donaldson 1986.

Figures 2.14 and 2.15 (below): *Kāpālika* practitioners in the iconographic program at Someśvara, near Bhubaneśwar, 10th century. Charnel ascetic yogins are distinguished by a single skull ornament in the hair, *khaṭvāṅga* and/or skull, shown with female companions and students. Image from Donaldson 1986.

Figure 2.16: Another *kāpālika* figure with *khaṭvāṅga* and skull from Someśvara, likely a teacher and/or ritual master (at left) instructing a student from his raised seat. Image from Donaldson 1986.

whose iconography and characterization became of increasingly complex and central importance in the expansion of *kāpālika* practices of the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha* oriented towards female deities, or *śākta* traditions (figure 2.12).[43] At the tenth century temple of Someśvara at Mukhalingam, for example, near the Śaiva religious center of Bhubaneśwar, *kāpālika* and other ascetics are prominent and numerously depicted — and in veneration of Cāmuṇḍā, emaciated and seated on a corpse — in an iconographic programs which also feature images of the Pāśupata teacher Lakulīśa (figures 2.13-2.16).[44]

In a tenth century free-standing relief from Puri, another site of tantric activity in Orissa, Śiva as Gajāsūrasaṃhāramūrti — a form of the deity historically associated with *mātṛkā* iconography — holds a skull in the left hand with a single skull in his hair and wears a *mālā* of skulls*,* similar to Cāmuṇḍā in the eighth century representation in fig. 2.12, above.[45] In fig. 2.17, an emaciated companion is positioned beneath Śiva's feet as — and with Andhakasura above in fig. 2.11 — the figure holds a skull to catch the blood of the slain demon who has been liberated at death in a narrative which supports the Pāśupata soteriological model of liberation in union with the deity

---

[43] Sanderson has elsewhere detailed the development of tantric ritual traditions oriented towards fearsome central female deities — *i.e. śākta* tantra, Kālī and Krama practices — within and adjacent to the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha,* including their integration of *kāpālika* materials and methods, see *idem.,* "Śaivism and the tantric traditions," 140ff. See also *idem.,* "Maṇḍala and Āgamic identity in the Trika of Kashmir," in *Mantras et diagrammes rituels dans l'hindouisme: Table ronde, Paris 21-22 juin 1984,* (Paris: Editions CNRS, 1986), 169-214 for the influence of the Kashmiri author Abhinavagupta (c.950 - 1016) on the reformation of *kāpālika* elements in later *śākta* tantra, or *āgama*.

[44] See Mary F. Linda, "Nārāyanapuram: A tenth century site in Kalinga," *Artibus Asiae* 50, no. 3/4 (1990): 232-262 and Walter Smith, "Images of divine kings from the Mukteśvara temple" *Artibus Asiae* 51, no. 1/2 (1991): 90-106 for a comparison of style to other nearby monuments in the eastern region, as well as an exploration of the local political connections of the Pāśupata siddhas community in the tenth century. Linda notes a number of *vajra* in the iconography of Someśvara, a Pāśupata site.

[45] Michael W. Meister, "Regional variations in mātṛkā conventions," *Artibus Asiae* 46, no. 3/4 (1986), 242. Meister documents forms of Śiva found with *mātṛkā* iconography in examples from the fifth to fourteenth centuries; Gajāsūrasaṃhāramūrti is the form of Śiva at the majority of these sites.

Figure 2.17: Śiva-Gajāsūrasaṃhāramūrti from Puri, 10th century, now at the Indian Museum in Kolkata. The figure has a single skull ornament in his hair and — like Andhakāsura, above in fig 2.11 — lifts a skull with a left hand to catch the blood of the vanquished demon, December 2017.

by adopting the form of a transgressor. Multi-limbed, variously empowered forms of Śiva-Bhairava became increasingly central in the monuments of these brahmanical communities though after the tenth century, Śiva was less explicitly represented as a wrathful, *kāpālika* deity and charnel materials are integrated into the deity's expanding assortment of martial and ritual implements (see fig. 2.19, below).[46]

Early *vidyāpīṭha* texts reflect how *kāpālika* methodologies and groupings of *mātṛkā* were integrated into the foundations of what would later be known as yoginī tantra. In the sixth to eighth century text of the *Brahmayāmala* (also called *Picumata*), charnel materials are made part of a ritual system which uses mantra, maṇḍala and mudrā, and is centered on a male and female deity pair whose primary forms — Kapāliśabhairava and Caṇḍakapālinī — are each recognized as skull-holders (*kapālin/ī*).[47] In this text, methodologies of ritualized charnel asceticism — including the use of skulls as vessels for the preparation or refinement of substances which facilitate *siddhi* — are derived from earlier Lākula sources in the *Niśvāsa* corpus, and the *kāpālika* vow is described as an especially valued and refined means for embodying the

[46] Thomas E. Donaldson finds that images of Bhairava — who has many forms — are increasingly seen at *śākta* sites in Orissa during the seventh to tenth centuries; after the mid-tenth century his tantric, though not prominently charnel ascetic form becomes more common; *c.f.* Donaldson, "Bhikṣāṭanamūrti images from Orissa", 62 as well as *idem., Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa,* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd, 2001), 440.

[47] Hatley explores this text, its sources and iconographic innovations at length in his doctoral dissertation (*op.cit.*); this text is classified as a *yāmala* or *mata*, though the *Brahmayāmala* is also referred to as a *matṛtantra* in the roughly contemporaneous *Skandapurāṇa* (a non-tantric Pāśupata Śaiva text) (p.35).

deity as Bhairava.[48] However, while Lākula sources acknowledge *mātṛkā* figures in their cosmological models and at times used sexual fluids in their prepared substances, they were primarily celibate ascetics concerned with practical *siddhi* like invisibility, the controlled reanimation of corpses and, ultimately, liberation through Rudra.[49]

In the methods of accomplishment (*sādhana,* Tbt. *sgrub thabs*) which were innovated in *vidyāpīṭha* texts like the *Brahmayāmala*, the yogin applies *kāpālika* practices primarily in order to ritually engage with volatile female deities called *yoginī,* through which they attain *siddhi* and become empowered in the form of the deity Śiva-Bhairava. No longer restricted to the historic grouping of seven or eight *mātṛkā*, in these practices the yoginī becomes an ever-expanding category of figures organized into clans (*kula*) oriented around the primary deity whose form is actualized through mantra, maṇḍala and mudrā.[50] At the same time, the *Brahmayāmala* describes the yoginī as a figure complementary to that of a siddha or yogin whose most extreme observances incorporate the implements of the *kāpālika* vow: In this text, yoginī — like the deity Cāmuṇḍā, above in figs. 2.12 and 2.13 — are represented as empowered charnel ascetic figures, naked with a corpse as vehicle or seat, holding a skull and *khaṭvāṅga*, wearing a skull *mālā* and raising the right hand in a gesture of munificence.

The models of ritual engagement cultivated in practices of the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha* expanded the definition and functions of *kāpālika* implements by identifying them within the tantric (*viz.* āgamic) systems used to become empowered and attain *siddhi*. The *Brahmayāmala*, for example, describes the skull and *khaṭvāṅga* — as well as a set of charnel ornaments worn on the head, ears, neck, hands, arms and hips, and an initiatory thread — as a comprehensive set

---

[48] Hatley finds citations and repetitions in the *Brahmayāmala* from various *Niśvāsa* sources which were shaped by the charnel specialization of Lākula ascetics (*ibid.,* 133ff). On the *kāpālika* vow as *bhairavavrata* or a *mahāvrata* in the same corpus, see *ibid.,* 181. Hatley notes that, amongst Śaiva sources for *kāpālika* ritual methods, the *Brahmayāmala* is more explicit in its ritual instrumentation of impurity than the Lākula *Niśvāsa* corpus.

[49] On the celibacy and cosmologies of the Lākula see Sanderson, “Śaivism and the tantric traditions”,134 as well as Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra,* 173 on the fundamental relationship between celibacy and asceticism in *śramaṇa* traditions.

[50] See Hatley on the history, characterization and diversification of yoginī iconography, including its relation to earlier representations of *mātṛkā, op.cit.,* 11ff. Hatley defines the yoginī as any number of figures with shared properties including multiplicity and formation into clans, the appearance of a female *kāpālika* (*e.g.* with charnel implements and ornaments), a volatile character and capacity to transmit teachings and empowerments, frequently including flight. Other methods for obtaining *siddhi* in the *Brahmayāmala* include visualizations (*dhyāna*), *homa (*offerings made by fire) and processes of consecration, *ibid.,*190ff.

of mudrā used to embody the deity as the skull-bearer Bhairava and engage yoginī.[51] Though Lākula *kāpālika* practitioners also ornamented themselves with skulls and a thread of hair in their *vrata* — in addition to their use of skull and *khaṭvāṅga* and in order to assume the form of Rudra — there is no indication that these were recognized as a set of mudrā.[52] Moreover, by integrating the yoginī as a ritual consort — also interpreted as a mudrā — the *Brahmayāmala* indicates the combination of charnel asceticism and sexual yoga which would characterize the yoginī tantra corpus.[53]

The integration of yoga and charnel methodologies would be further refined and popularized in the formalization of *kaula* traditions which, after the ninth century, promoted a ritual model which internalized within the body of the yogin the transgressive dynamics of *kāpālika* and yoginī practices.[54] In this corpus, the instrumentation of impurity, polluting materials, ritualized sex and the performance of deity yoga are increasingly systematized through visualization and the tantric methods of mantra, mudrā and maṇḍala in order to facilitate ecstatic knowledge or gnosis (*jñāna*), with a decreased emphasis on gaining *siddhi* through encounters with yoginī consorts and the use of charnel materials.[55] As a result, the embodiment of Bhairava — as well as the actualization of the deity's maṇḍala and its assembled clans of yoginī — could be

---

[51] Sanderson cites these mudrā — which are not enumerated — in the *Brahmayāmala* (ch. 80) in a passage which suggests a sustained historical association with Lākula and Śaiva ascetic sources by describing them as the implements of Rudra accompanied by a gathering of mātṛ(kā) (*rudro matṛgaṇaiḥ sārdhaṃ*), *idem.,* "The Śaiva age," 179n435. In the same note, he cites two passages in another *vidyāpīṭha* source for *kāpālika* practices, the *Jayadrathayāmala,* describing charnel ornaments as mudrā though again, without being enumerated: First as ornaments for a *sādhaka* (*viz.* siddha) who takes the form of Bhairava wearing earrings, bracelets, an ornament in the hair, a necklace and thread of hair; and elsewhere as the indication of a vow-holder with a skull ornament in the hair, charnel ornaments on the ears and limbs and with skull *mālā*, skull vessel and *khaṭvāṅga*.

[52] See Wedemeyer, *op.cit,* 157-8 and 253n81-83.

[53] Siddhas are moreover associated with ritualized sex by secondary sources after the fifth century, *c.f.* Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism,* 174.

[54] Hatley, *op.cit.,* 157. See also David Gordon White on the *kaula* contributions to hatha yoga and tantric alchemy by Nāth siddhas, *c.f., idem., The Alchemical Body, passim.* The same author has explored the foundations of the *kaula* tradition through its reformed, internalized interpretation of sexual yoga in *idem., Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). Hatley, unlike White, does not recognize the *kaula* as a formal sectarian identity, but rather a tantric literary and liturgical tradition cultivated by a diversity of authors and communities (*op.cit.,* 20).

[55] Sanderson credits the *kaula* tradition — its authors, teachers and practitioners — with the reform and popularization of yoginī tantra and notes that *kāpālika* ritual methodologies are more prominent in earlier sources from the *vidyāpīṭha*, *i.e. the Brahmayāmala*, *c.f. idem.,* "The Śaiva age," 49 and *idem.,* "Śaivism and the tantric tradition," 147ff. White moreover notes that the legendary ninth century *kaula* author and Nāth yogin Matsyendra was against the open use of charnel materials, *idem., Kiss of the Yoginī,* 164. These reforms in gnostic ritual methodology and decreased reliance on charnel materials would be further developed in the Trika Kaula corpus by the eleventh century Abhinavagupta, resulting in the diminished popularity of *Svacchandabhairava kāpālika* practices, see Sanderson, "Purity and power," 204.

accomplished as a yogic exercise, rather than an externalized practice.[56] At the same time, in *kaula* yoginī methods, the *kāpālika* vow was further systematized as one of a number of antinomian observances which included having sex or eating with consorts from non-brahmanical groups, eating impure substances, wearing animal skins, drinking alcohol in excess and the habitation of liminal social spaces, including charnel grounds.[57]

The refinements of *kaula* ritual methodologies — internalized yoga and a shifting focus from empowerment to gnosis — encouraged the expansion of yoginī traditions within a broader range of social groups, facilitating the patronage necessary for the monumentalization of these practices.[58] At Hirapur — also near to Bhubaneśwar in Orissa — a tenth century yoginī temple

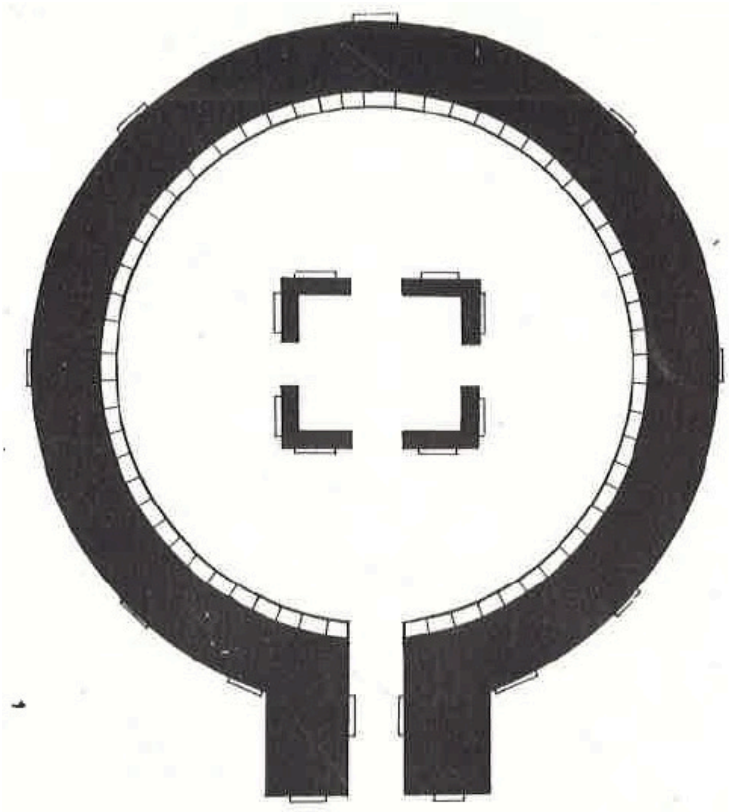


Figure 2.18: Plan of the yoginī temple at Hirapur with interior niches for 60 yoginī, four couples surrounding the main deity at center (now missing) and nine exterior yoginī with charnel implements, 10th century. Image from Dehejia 1986.

[56] Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 270. Samuel moreover notes that before the tenth century, this practice of embodying the deity at the center of an array of yoginī was more often referred to as *kaula*, rather than tantra.

[57] Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism,* 138. Wedemeyer finds that it is primarily through yogic practice and observance (*caryā* and/or *vrata)* that socially and ritually impure materials like human remains are instrumentalized in Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra, and primarily in the latter. He moreover tabulates these behaviors in Buddhist sources in *op.cit.,* 142.

[58] For a review of yoginī temple sites — round, open-roofed temples with numerous yoginī and a central deity, constructed predominantly between the tenth and fourteenth centuries across south Asia — see Vidya Dehejia, *Yogini Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition*, (New Delhi: National Museum, 1986). The number of yoginī figures varies at these sites from approximately sixty to as many as eighty.

Figure 2.19 (left): Unidentified form of Bhairava from the central pavilion at Hirapur seated on corpse with yoginī holding a knife and skull in the lower register, c. 10th century. Image from Donaldson 2001.

Figure 2.20 (below, left): Cāmuṇḍā as one of the 60 yoginī on the interior of the Hirapur temple, 10th century. Image from Hatley 2014.

Figure 2.21 (below, center): One of the few charnel implements from the interior of Hirapur, yoginī drinking from a skull, 10th century. Image from ASI/ Dehejia 1986.

Figure 2.22 (below, right): Yoginī with knife in the raised right hand, skull and staff on the left, standing on a decapitated head with animals of the charnel ground; one of nine such figures on the exterior of Hirapur, 10th century. Image from Donaldson 2001.

suggests a regional transition towards *kaula* imagery, supported in part by the changing political dominance from the Buddhist Bhauma-Kara regime of previous centuries to the Śaiva Somavaṃśī, who promoted *kaula* teachings (figures 2.18-2.22).[59] At the same time, this site illustrates the emergence of yoginī tantra as a distinct iconographic program and monumental strategy, with the primary deity (no longer *in situ*) and assembly at the center of a circular array of numerous yoginī.[60]

In addition to demonstrating local material support for the *kaula* tradition, this temple suggests unique historical evidence for the monumentalization of a maṇḍala in the context of yoginī practices and is illustrative of their tantric ritual dynamics.[61] However, within this composition, *kāpālika* implements are largely absent from the interior though consistently seen in the nine exterior yoginī figures, each standing on a severed head framed by two jackals, holding a skull in the left hand with a knife raised in the right, as in fig. 2.22. The diverse interior program and central assembly incorporate Śaiva and *mātṛkā* iconography (figs. 2.19 and 2.20) but without prominent charnel elements and only one of the inward-facing yoginī survives holding a skull (figure 2.21). Moreover, the narrow entrance at Hirapur suggests the esotericism and restricted access promoted in *kaula* teachings, as well as the division between an interior, ritually activated and refined space, and an exterior marked by the volatile impurities of charnel materials.[62]

Altogether, this section has explored the refinement and integration of *kāpālika* implements from their earliest surviving evidences into the expansion of the Śaiva and brahmanical ritual corpus and its iconographies including changing concepts of deity yoga, the engagement and control of volatile entities like yoginī, and methods for empowerment including both practical applications (*e.g.* immortality, flight) and the cultivation of gnosis (*jñāna*). Moreover, within these sources, the significance of charnel implements is dynamic and diverse, from the public observation of transgressive ritual identity, to a comprehensive system of mudrā and finally within a

---

[59] Donaldson, *Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa,* 653.

[60] Shaman Hatley has explored this site in relation to the Śaiva yoginī corpus and notes that the earlier *vidyāpīṭha* was more oriented toward solitary practice than the construction of communal spaces, *idem.,* “Goddesses in text and stone: Temples of the yoginīs in light of tantric and purāṇic literature,” in *Material culture and Asian religions: Text, Image, Object,* ed. Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 207.

[61] This is noted as well by Hatley in *ibid.,* 214.

[62] Hatley observes that these monuments are inherently both “exoteric and esoteric”, and were suitable for the monumentalization of a ritual tradition which increasingly valued secrecy, “Goddesses in text and stone,” 217.

monumental illustration of ritual methodologies and visual programs that would come to dominate Buddhist tantra.

Kāpālika implements in the formalization of Buddhist mahāyoga tantra

In the same centuries in which the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha* was expanding across south Asia, the Buddhist tantric and commentarial corpus was similarly defining itself and formalizing its ritual methodologies. There was, however, an established precedent for charnel ascetic methods in Buddhist communities as the contemplative tradition of *aśubhabhāvanā*, for example, wherein the decomposition of a corpse is visualized or observed as a meditation on the impurities of the body or its impermanence.[63] This practice was demonstrably popular in central and south Asian Buddhist communities in the fourth to seventh centuries, resulting in some of the earliest Buddhist images of the religious use of human remains, as well as some of the oldest references to Buddhist charnel yogins (*śmaśānika*) (figure 2.23).[64] At the same time, Buddhist

Figure 2.23: A painting suggesting *aśubhabhāvanā* with a human skeleton, from a cave of the monastic community of Tepe Shotor (Afghanistan), 4th-7th centuries. Image courtesy of the Société Européenne pour l'Etude des Civilisations de l'Himalaya et de l'Asie Centrale, credited to Gérard Fussman.

[63] *C.f.* Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrifying Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). On p. 270, Wilson writes that there is a "strong affinity" between the practitioners of *aśubhabhāvanā* and later, tantric modes of ritualized charnel asceticism.

[64] Eric Greene, "Death in a cave: Meditation, deathbed ritual, and skeletal imagery at Tape Shotor", *Artibus Asiae* 73 no. 2, (2013): 265-294. Greene notes that illustrations of dead bodies were acknowledged by monastic authors as acceptable substitutions for a charnel setting for the practice of *aśubhabhāvanā*. Wedemeyer finds references to Buddhist *śmaśānika* in the fourth-fifth century *Lankāvatārasūtra, op.cit.,* 164. See also chapters 3 and 4, section 1 on dismemberment and exposure burial in relation to regional Buddhist charnel practices.

monastic restrictions on handling the dead demonstrate that the social and material transgressions of charnel practice were not uncontroversial to these communities.[65]

After the sixth century, however, competition and exchange with the expanding Śaiva ascetic and ritual traditions discussed in the previous section stimulated Buddhist institutions to engage with and develop their own tantric corpus.[66] As this next section will explore, a parallel development in ritualized charnel asceticism is evident in Buddhist tantric texts and iconographic programs formulated during this period, illustrating the circulation of ritual and visual innovations between non-Buddhist and Buddhist practitioners across south and central Asia especially and including the use of *kāpālika* implements.[67] In the organization and systemization of these innovations, tantric traditions which prominently incorporated transgressive or volatile materials and practices came to be restricted by Buddhist authors to

[65] Gregory Schopen has elsewhere discussed regulations on contact with the dead for Buddhist monastic communities and notes that concepts of the social and religious impurity of charnel materials were shared with adjacent brahmanical traditions, *idem.,* "On avoiding ghosts and social censure: Monastic funerals in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya", in *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India,* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997 [1992])*,* 219.

[66] Davidson has suggested that the Pāśupata Śaiva were the first ascetic community to challenge the dominance of Buddhist religious institutions in south Asia, while at the same time, the political instabilities of the post-Gupta era stimulated the cultivation of ritual methods for empowerment, *idem.*, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism,* 186. Thomas Donaldson finds evidence of iconographic exchange in images of Lakulīśa and representations of the historical Buddha as an ascetic yogin and teacher after the seventh century in Orissa, see *idem., Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa* (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2001), 391-2; see also chapter 3 of this dissertation on early Tibetan images of siddhas.

[67] Alexis Sanderson has explored the ways in which Vajrayāna and its textual corpus draw from and adapt Śaiva sources in "Vajrayāna: Origin and function," *passim.* as well as *idem.,* "The Śaiva age", 124ff. Other scholars have demonstrated how Buddhists participated in tantric innovations from their earliest evidences; *c.f.* Wedemeyer, *op.cit.,* 31. The most liberal model for the circulation and selective use of ritual innovations across social groups in religious communities in south Asia between the seventh and eleventh centuries has been proposed in Phyllis Granoff, "Other people's rituals: Ritual eclecticism in early medieval Indian religions", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28 (2000): 399-424.

the most esoteric and specialized methodologies of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra.[68] It is within the formation and transmission of these bodies of religious literature and visual culture that Buddhist methods using charnel implements are most evident and comprehensively contextualized.

There is, however, some evidence for a broader integration of these implements and iconographies where ritualized charnel ascetic methods or materials are occasionally applied to subsidiary practices or figures, particularly in early characterizations of protectors. In the *Subahūparipṛccha,* for example, translated into Chinese in the eighth century, a maṇḍala of Mahāvairocana is established with a corpse at its center and the *heruka,* who later becomes central to mahāyoga and yoginī tantra (see below), is included as a local *yakṣa*.[69] And in the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* — also dated to the eighth century — Vajrapāṇi is the central ritual actor who, in one of his maṇḍala in the form of Trailokyavijaya, tramples Bhairava and his consort Bhairavi at the center of an assembly of eight other *bhairava* and their *mātṛkā* consorts whom the yogin has summoned with a skull full of offerings of meat and alcohol.[70] This maṇḍala is accomplished in order to gain unconditional *siddhi,* obtain control over the assembly's deities, and exert influence on the mundane world as a *vidyādhara*. Like the contemporaneous *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha,* the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* is concerned with mortuary

---

[68] Jacob Dalton has noted that *mahāyoga* was used to designate the highest category in Indian and Buddhist sources until the tenth century, "A crisis of doxography: How Tibetans organized tantra during the 8-12th centuries," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 115-181. Alexis Sanderson further suggests that the Buddhist classificatory system was an adaptation of the Śaiva *mantramārga* categories wherein *yoga*, *jñāna* or *vidyā* describe the most esoteric and specialized, *idem.,* "The Śaiva age," 145-147n337. At the same he notes that the term **anuttarayoga* is unknown in Indian sources and a misrepresentation of *yoganiruttara* or *yogānuttara* (Tbt. *rnal 'byor bla na med*), while *mahāyoga* is more precisely rendered as *yogottara* based on the classification system in the bKa' 'gyur, see also *idem.,* "Vajrayāna: Origins and functions", 97n1. According to the thirteenth century Tibetan scholar Mkhas grub rje, **anuttarayoga* tantra was divided into mahāyoga and yoginī tantra*,* see below and *idem*., *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, trans. F.D. Lessing and Alex Wayman (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 251. Note also that *mahāyoga* is more clearly distinguished as a doxographical category in Tibet than Indian Buddhist sources who used this term generally to describe a major yoga tantra, while the rNying ma characterizations for the most esoteric practices of tantra as *mahāyoga, anuyoga* and *atiyoga* are also Tibetan characterizations, see Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa from Dunhuang*, (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008), 14-19 as well as *idem.,* "The Dunhuang Phur pa corpus: A survey,", 2.

[69] Sanderson,"The Śaiva age"*,* 148n340. Sanderson finds that the Tibetan translation of *heruka* as *khrag 'thung,* or blood-drinker, has no etymological significance in Sanskrit and resonates instead with the Chinese translation (*shi xue* 食血) of *heruka* in the *Subāhuparipṛccha*; see also Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism,* 203.

[70] Tadeusz Skorpuski, *The Sarvadurgatipariśodhana tantra: Elimination of all Evil Destinies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 59-61. This is referred to as the nine Bhairava maṇḍala.

practices and rebirth, though its application of charnel materials is limited to this more practically oriented sādhana and a destructive *homa* practice.[71]

Furthermore, in the *Mahāvairocana* corpus — one of the oldest sources on Buddhist deity yoga, dating to the eighth century at the latest — though the text is described as *vidyāvrata,* or the observance of applied ritual knowledge, the central figure is a form of Vairocana or Vajrapāṇi as Trailokyavijaya and does not involve the explicit use of charnel implements.[72] However, also in the *Mahāvairocana* corpus it is Yama, lord of the dead and one of eight worldly protectors of the cardinal directions (Skt. *dikpāla*), who is accompanied by seven *mātṛkā* and a consort in the manner of Śiva as Rudra or Bhairava.[73] As guardian of the south, Yama has been represented holding a *daṇḍa* — a stick or staff, sometimes but not always topped with a skull or *triśūla* — and mounted on a buffalo in south Asian monuments dated as early as the sixth to seventh centuries.[74]

Similarly to Yama, Daṇḍapaṇi is shown seated and holding a staff horizontally across his knees at sites dated as early as the seventh century — including at Śaiva and Pāśupata temples in

---

[71] *ibid.,* 71. See also Steven Weinberger, "The significance of yoga tantra and the Compendium of Principles (Tattvasaṃgraha Tantra) within tantric Buddhism in India and Tibet," (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2003) 207ff; the author compares these two yoga tantras and their tantric funerary methodologies, which are primarily concerned with the rebirth of the deceased rather than the instrumentation of charnel materials. Trailokyavijaya is also the empowered, wrathful form of Vajrapāṇi in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha;* see Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion,* 194 and below on the figure of the heruka.

[72] See Wedemeyer, *op.cit.,* 162. The *Mahāvairocana* tantra was likely composed in the seventh century by Indian Buddhists but, like the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* and *Guhyasamāja* (see below), its earliest datable reference is found in eighth century Chinese translations, see Stephen Hodge, *The Maha-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra: With Buddhaguhya's Commentary* (New York: Curzon, 2003), 11-12.

[73] Hodge, *ibid*., 116ff (ch. 2).

[74] Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, *The Gods of the Directions in Ancient India* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2001), 98-99. Though Yama is consistently shown with a *daṇḍa,* unlike the *khaṭvāṅga* it not always topped with a skull. There are representations of Yama as one of the eight *dikpāla* and holding a staff or club at sites dated as early as the seventh century near historically active Buddhist sites in Bihar — including one with a skull — and also at Bhubaneśwar, including at the Śaiva site of Paraśurāmeśvara (see fig. 2.7, above). In the tenth century *Śmaśānavidhi* (see below) Kāla is equated with the protector Yama and described holding a *daṇḍa* as well as a skull, dark in color (*e.g.* black, *kāla*) and mounted on a buffalo, *c.f.* Elizabeth English, *Vajrayogini: Her Visualizations, Rituals and Forms* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 142nxvi. Note that the deity Yamāntaka (or Yamāri) is also represented in Buddhist iconographies with a *daṇḍa*, as well as charnel implements and mounted on a buffalo; *c.f.* de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 465-469. Interestingly, Vajrabhairava (as Yamāntaka) is not described in either the *Sādhanamāla* or *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, except to be trampled by a sixteen-armed form of Mahākāla, nor is Vajrabhairava mentioned by mKhas grub rje, who otherwise describes six maṇḍalas of the guardian Yamāntaka, *idem.,op.cit.*, 119; see also de Mallmann, *ibid.,* 400-1. A buffalo-headed form of Saṃvara is associated with the *Vajrabhairava* corpus in Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 38n114.

Bhubaneśwar — though his relationship to the eight *dikpāla* is tangential; he may have once been guardian of the south, like Yama, but after the seventh century he was increasingly associated with the city of Varanasi.[75] As protector of this religious center, Daṇḍapaṇi's identity — like Rudra and Maheśvara — became closely related to that of the *kāpālika* deity Kāla-Bhairava, where both acted as keepers of cosmological order at a site which at that period was a pilgrimage center for charnel ascetics as well as a funerary destination for the broader brahmanical and Śaiva community.[76] Moreover, as early as the seventh century, the Chinese Buddhist scholar Xuanzang observed that charnel asceticism and ritual expertise were characteristic of "heretical" groups across south Asia and especially in Varanasi where temples of Maheśvara outnumbered Buddhist institutions three to one.[77]

However, in other Buddhist sources dating to the fourth and fifth centuries, it is Mahākāla that is recognized as the guardian of Varanasi.[78] In an eighth century Chinese commentary on *Mahāvairocana* by its translator and tantric specialist Śubhakarasiṃha (d. 735) and his collaborator Yixing (683-727), the authors identify the lord of the charnel ground as the "great black deity" (Ch. 大黑天神 *da hei tian shen,* Skt. *mahākāla*) who is leader of the *yakṣa* and *mātṛkā,* and whose form Vairocana takes by smearing himself with ash in order to subjugate this volatile retinue and Maheśvara.[79] The eighth century Buddhist scholar Amoghavajra also translated into Chinese a text describing a "great black god of the cemetery" who is recognized as an incarnation of Maheśvara and accompanied by seven *mātṛkā.*[80]

---

[75] Wessels-Mevissen, *ibid.,* 107-109.

[76] See note 27, above and Eck, *op.cit.,* 189-201 for a discussion of the inter-related identities of Kāla-Bhairava and Daṇḍapani and their respective roles in the city according to purāṇic literature, particularly the *Skandapurāṇā.* See also Bakker, *op.cit.,* 258 on the potential influence of yoginī tantra on the revision of earlier narratives of Śiva and the group of *mātṛkā* in later material from the *Skandapurāṇa.*

[77] Xuanzang notes that many of these non-Buddhist practitioners smeared themselves with ash, sometimes wore skulls, and were skilled with applied ritual knowledge, *idem., op.cit.*, 54 and 195ff. He further noted that this was especially true in the eastern region south of Kolkata (*i.e*. western Bengal and Orissa) where these ascetic ritual specialists outnumbered Buddhists by five to one, *ibid.*, 302.

[78] Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 151. The *Mahāmāyūrī*, for example, identifies Mahākāla as a *yakṣa* of Varanasi.

[79] Megan Bryson, "Mahākāla worship in the Dali kingdom (937-1253): A study and translation of the Dahei tianshen daochang yi" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 35, no. 1-2 (2012), 9. See also Hodge, *ibid.,* 19-20 on the speculative origins of Śubhakarasiṃha in Orissa and his Buddhist education in northern India, as well as Chou Yiliang, "Tantrism in China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 3/4 (1945), 257n30 on the translator's location at Ratnagiri. On the relationship between the *Mahāvairocana* corpus and Saṃvara tantra in the development of yoginī tantra, see David B. Gray, "Eating the heart of the brahmin: Representations of alterity and the formation of identity in Tantric Buddhist discourse" *History of Religions* 45 no. 1 (2005): 45-69.

[80] Bryson, *ibid.,* 23.

Figure 2.24: Four-armed Mahākāla holding a skull with upper jaw exposed in the right hand and trident-topped staff, from an illustrated scroll dated to the 11-12th centuries, Dali (Yunnan). Image from Chapin and Soper 1971. Note the double-sided hand drum on the deity's left.

The transmission of iconographies associated with these subsidiary integrations of charnel ascetic figures is suggested, for example, in representations of Mahākāla in the Nanzhao and Dali cultures of the southeastern Himalayas (present-day China) where, after the ninth century, the great black deity was venerated — though not with charnel materials and implements as in mahāyoga or yoginī tantra — as a local protector.[81] Figure 2.24 is a detail from a twelfth century scroll from this region wherein the deity is illustrated as one of many non-Buddhist figures acting as a guardian, here with four arms and holding a skull and skull-topped staff on the right side — rather than the left, as in south Asian examples — and the characteristically black deity is white with ash.[82]

Surviving images from south Asia which have been identified as Mahākāla exhibit variation in their iconographies: In Figure 2.25, a ninth century four-armed deity from Bihar holds a knife in the front proper right hand and a *triśūla*-topped staff to the left; in two eleventh to twelfth century examples from Bihar and Orissa (figs. 2.26 and 2.27) a single skull has been added to this staff and there is a skull in the front left hand, demonstrating an emerging emphasis on visual associations with charnel practice which would remain consistent in later Tibetan iconography (*e.g.* fig. 2.28). This representation of Mahākāla with skull and skull-topped staff suggests a connection between the *kāpālika* vow, the deity's role as a local guardian and the oath-bound commitment of non-

[81] See Bryson, *ibid*. This author moreover notes that similar representations with charnel implements are found for Mahākāla and/or Maheśvara in Japanese and central Asian Buddhist sources from the ninth and tenth centuries.

[82] This image is introduced in Helen B. Chapin and Alexander Soper, "A long roll of Buddhist images IV," *Artibus Asiae* 33, no. 1/2 (1971), pl. 45.

Figure 2.25: Four-armed Mahākāla without skull or charnel ornaments, holding a *triśūla*-topped staff at left, from Bihar, 9th century and now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.71.110.3).

Buddhist figures to act as wrathful *dharma* protectors (*krodhavignāntaka*), where the charnel implements illustrate the specific character of their conversion and/or commitment to Buddhism.[83]

These representations also suggest that a distinction between the *yamadaṇḍa,* or staff of Yama, and *khaṭvāṅga* (skull-topped staff) can be made dependent on the identity and role of the deity holding it: Where Yama's staff in his role as *dikpāla* does not necessarily include a skull or head, the *khaṭvāṅga* does by definition through its historical association with the *kāpālika* observance.[84] At the same time, the deity Mahākāla's iconography with skull and chopper (*kartri,* Tbt. *gri gug*) in the two foremost hands (*e.g.* figs. 2.27 and 2.28) reinforces historical associations between this figure and *kāpālika* methods for the preparation of ritually empowered substances (Skt. *rasayāna*, Tbt. *bcud len*), where the positioning of the implements in the foremost hands suggests the use of a mortar and pestle and/or the (ritual) action of mixing and

[83] See Linrothe on the history of *krodhavignāntaka* iconography where many — like Mahākāla, as well as Vajrapāṇi — had been historically identified as non-Buddhist figures or *yakṣa* which were integrated into Vajrayāna as guardians, *idem., Ruthless Compassion*, 24ff. It can be seen that many of these figures are found in Buddhist iconographies previous to their acquisition of charnel implements in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Note also that Granoff identifies the sixth century image of Rudra with a single-skull charnel ornament in the hair and *triśūla* staff in fig. 2.8 as Mahākāla, *idem.,* "Maheśvara/Mahākāla".

[84] Bhattacharya, working from the *Sādhanamāla,* defines the *khaṭvāṅga* as a staff or club topped by a skull with *vajra*, banner, and/or *triśūla, op.cit.,* 193. de Mallmann, on the other hand, distinguishes the *khaṭvāṅg*a from the *yamadaṇḍa* by the three skulls or heads on the former and a single skull on the latter, *op.cit.* 17. However, this distinction reflects later Tibetan iconography (e.g. fig. 2.28), rather than its precedents. mKhas grub rje identifies the *daṇḍa* with the oath of Yama as a *dharma* protector, *op.cit.,* 115; he also describes the protector Mahākāla (mGon po) with a stick (*beng*), *ibid.,* 119.

Figure 2.26: Seated Mahākāla with four-arms holding skull and single skull-topped *khaṭvāṅga* on the left, also from Bihar, 11-12th centuries, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1996.465).

Figure 2.27: Mahākāla on a corpse with skull and knife in the front left and right hands, as well as a *khaṭvāṅga* on the left, Orissa, 12th century and now at the Victoria and Albert Museum (IM.10-1930).

compounding.[85]

As Buddhist tantric iconography was formalized in the twelfth century in the *Sādhanamāla* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, Mahākāla was described as having a number of forms — with two, four, six or sixteen arms — and each of these maintain his charnel associations by including amongst

[85] This association may be further reinforced by the practice of *rasayāna* amongst Nāth yogins, many of whom would become important innovators in Tibetan traditions of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra; see Westin Harris' forthcoming dissertation the legacy of the siddha Virūpa from the University of California, Davis. See also Cathy Cantwell, "Reflections on rasayāna, bcud len and related practices in Nyingma (rNying ma) tantric ritual," *History of Science in South Asia* 5, no. 2 (2017): 181-203.

the deity's implements the skull and knife or chopper, as well as a *daṇda* and a five-skull crown.[86] Moreover, by the thirteenth century, a Buddhist *Mahākāla* tantric corpus emerges that is primarily concerned with the preparation of substances intended to empower through ingestion and frequently with the use of a skull as vessel.[87] Also by the thirteenth century — as lord of the pavilion, or Mahākāla Pañjaranātha (Tbt. Gur gyi mgon po) — this deity was identified as guardian of both the *Hevajra* corpus and the Sa skya monastic lineages that had come to dominate central Tibet (see next chapter).[88] The iconography of the *thang ka* in figure 2.28 reinforces the protector's origins as a deity associated with ritualized charnel asceticism through the implements of skull and chopper as well as the corpse on which he stands.

Yet the alchemical techniques associated with Mahākāla are found in *kāpālika* ritual methodologies of the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha* as well*,* for example in the *Jayadrathayāmala* whose central deity is Kālī, the female wrathful, charnel counterpart to the deity Kāla (a form of Bhairava).[89] Furthermore, using charnel ascetic materials for *rasayāna* is also characteristic to practices (*caryā*) of the Buddhist *Guhya* corpus — *e.g. Guhyasamāja* tantra — which also describes *tshogs* (Skt. *gaṇa*, tantric feast gathering) and ritualized liberatory killing (Tbt. *sgrol ba;* see more on both below).[90] Here, skulls are used in rituals for the preparation, collection and consumption of impure substances such as human bodily fluids and flesh, alcohol, or animal meat which have been transformed and empowered in order to facilitate immortality, control adversaries and other practical *siddhi* or *vidyā,* as well as liberation, initiation and enlightenment.[91]

---

[86] *C.f.* de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 238-239 and Bhattacharya, *op.cit.,* 120-123. There are eight sādhana for Mahākāla (nos. 300-306 and 312), and at least one describes Mahākāla with a retinue of female deities while the six-armed form is surrounded by the *aṣṭaśmāśana,* or eight charnel grounds (see below).

[87] This text was known by mKhas grub rje and is included in the bKa' 'gyur though its oldest surviving evidence is from the twelfth century, see William Stablein, "The Mahākālatantra: A theory of ritual blessings and tantric medicine," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1976). This tantra discusses techniques of *bcud len* wherein the skull is used as a crucible to prepare substances which confers the benefits of *byin brlabs.*

[88] For the diversification of Tibetan Mahākāla iconography after the twelfth century, see Marilyn Rhie, "Mahakala: Some tangkas and sculptures from the Rubin Museum of Art," in *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond,* ed. Rob Linrothe (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004), 44-98. See also fig. 4.2.34 for an early thirteenth century image of the protector Mahākāla with skull at Alchi gSum brtsegs.

[89] Sanderson, "Purity and power," 213. See also White, *The Alchemical Body*, 148 and *passim* on the eleventh century *Rasārṇava*, a technical and alchemical text of the Nāth yoga tradition which was active in Varanasi and across south Asia at this time and also cultivated the use of skulls as ritual vessels.

[90] See also Wedemeyer, *op.cit.*, ch. 4 for an historical analysis of the characteristically antinomian consumption practices of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra, particularly in the *Guhyasamāja.*

[91] *C.f.* Francesca Fremantle, "A critical study of the Guhyasamaja tantra," (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 1971), 94 and 100 (ch. 14).

Figure 2.28: The protector Mahākāla Pañjaranātha (Gur gyi mgon po), two-armed with skull, chopper and *daṇḍa,* wearing a five-skull crown, central Tibet, 13th century, now at the Rubin Museum of Art (F1996.27.2). Note the ten-armed figure of Hevajra, with Nairātmya at top, left of center, as well as the figure in a black hat holding a *phur ba* in the bottom right.

However, though eighth century Buddhist commentators on the *Guhya* corpus were familiar with Śaiva *kāpālika* methodologies and interpreted the charnel grounds as the domain of *mātṛkā* and an appropriate setting for ritual practice, this tradition's observances and iconographies are less explicitly reliant on charnel implements than yoginī tantra (see below).[92] Instead, *Guhyasamāja* describes visualizations of various deities, maṇḍala and buddhas, and processes of subjugation and oath-binding — some of which incorporate charnel materials — that, along with those in the similar *Guhyagarbha* tantra, would flourish after the late ninth century across the Tibetan cultural region, with evidence for its study and transmission preserved in the early eleventh century collections at Dunhuang.[93] Yet as these mahāyoga tantras were increasingly translated from Indian sources and cultivated by Tibetan practitioners, their use of charnel materials also provoked a conservative response from the Guge ruler Ye shes 'od (947-1040), for example, who objected to these teachings on the grounds that they violated Buddhist monastic vows and led to the mistreatment of corpses.[94]

Nevertheless the ritual and physico-chemical preparation of empowered, ingestible substances refined in *kāpālika* methodologies of *rasayāna* (*bcud len*) would be further developed and expanded in Tibetan mahāyoga tantra through various traditions of accomplished medicine (*sman sgrub*) and medicinal offerings (*sman mchod*) as well as in the purified nectar of *bdud rtsi* (Skt. *amṛta*) that is frequently ritually integrated into tantric deity yoga (*yi dam*) as an inner offering (*nang mchod*) rendered from the impurities of the five meats or nectars (*sha lnga, bdud*

---

[92] Wedemeyer, *ibid.,* 163 and Sanderson,"The Śaiva age," 141-145. Sanderson notes that an eighth century commentary on *Guhyasamāja* assumes a knowledge of Śaiva methodologies and makes explicit reference to the Lākula *Niśvāsa* corpus.

[93] Sam Van Schaik has discussed how mahāyoga practices and the *Guhya* esoteric ritual corpus spread in the Tibetan cultural region after the collapse of its central political institutions in the late ninth century, with evidence from Dunhuang as well, *idem.,* "Tibetan Buddhism in central Asia: Geopolitics and group dynamics," in *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (8th-13th Centuries)*, ed. Carmen Meinert (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 57-85. Elsewhere, the same author has noted that the transgressive methods of this corpus defined the tantric binding between a practitioner and teacher — called *dam tshig* (Skt. *samaya*) — in Tibetan mahāyoga after the eighth century and that this oath is treated by many Tibetan scholars as synonymous to *sdom pa*, or *saṃvara*; *idem.,* "The limits of transgression: The samaya vows of mahāyoga," in *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang,* eds. Sam Van Schaik and Matthew T. Kapstein (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 64.

[94] Samten G. Karmay, "The ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od, " in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies Oxford 1979*, ed. Michael Aris and Aung Sun Suu Kyi (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980), 154. In their opposition to the methods of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra, Ye shes 'od and his grandson Zhi ba 'od both promoted efforts for monastic reform, including the translations of Rin chen bzang po (d.1054) and teachings of Atiśa (d. 1055), see David Snellgrove, "Rulers of western Tibet", in *The Tibetan History Reader*, ed. Kurtis R. Schaeffer and Gary Tuttle (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 174-175.

rtsi lnga), or the five sense organs.[95] Any and all of these *bcud len* practices have been known to incorporate at least one skull vessel (see also chapter 4, section 2).

Alternatively, a small figure wearing a wide-brimmed black hat and holding a sharply-pointed triangular implement on the bottom right of the rendering of Mahākāla Pañjaranātha in fig. 2.28 — just above a skull vessel with tripod stand holding offerings to the protector and other deities — further suggests the establishment and expansion of Buddhist mahāyoga traditions which incorporated charnel materials and *kāpālika* methodologies: By the thirteenth century, when this *thang ka* was likely created, Sa skya tantric scholars like Grags pa rgyal mtshan who were active in the formalization of Tibetan gSar ma teachings also had an expanded knowledge of mahāyoga practices on the use of the ritual dagger or stake called *phur pa* (Skt. *kīla*) and associated practices of *sgrol ba* (often translated as “liberation killing”).[96]

Though there is evidence for this practice, its longevity and expansion in Tibetan-language materials preserved in the early eleventh century at Dunhuang, it can be seen that *sgrol ba* and the use of the *phur pa* are also present in Śaiva sources, for example in *Svacchandabhairava* practices, as well as the eighth-century Buddhist *Guhya* corpus.[97] Moreover, the ritual practice and narrative methodology of *sgrol ba* each reinforce a connection with other charnel ascetic traditions: In *phur pa* practices preserved at Dunhuang and especially prominent within the rNying ma mahāyoga corpus, charnel materials are instrumental to the description, conversion and subjugation of Maheśvara as Rudra and interpreted as indicative of impurities or

---

[95] See Cantwell, “Reflections on rasayāna”, *passim,* especially on the cultivation of these practices in the rNying ma tradition. See also Frances Garrett, “Tapping the body’s nectar: Gastronomy and incorporation in Tibetan literature,” *History of Religions* 49, no. 3, (2010), 300-326. For a discussion of the further development of *bcud len* in the Tibetan medical tradition, see Jamyang Oliphant, “Extracting the essence: Bcud len in the Tibetan literary tradition,” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2015).

[96] See note 17, above, as well as Cantwell and Mayer, “The Dunhuang Phur pa corpus: A survey,” 249-250.

[97] For Śaiva sources with parallel ritual themes see Olga S. Saraogi, “When to kill means to liberate: Structure and meaning of two types of ritual actions in vidyāpīṭha texts”, in *Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia (Section I)*, eds. Axel Michaels and Anand Mishra (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz Verlag, 2010), 65-84. See also Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa from Dunhuang*, (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008), 14-19. Though these authors condition their findings on the Dunhuang *phur pa* materials by noting that it is difficult to be certain about how these fragmentary texts represent earlier practices, it is argued that they nevertheless indicate ritual methodologies which are established within the Tibetan cultural region by the early eleventh century and which represent a local expansion on Indian precedents for the use of the *kīla* between the late ninth and early eleventh centuries. See also *idem.,* “The Bon Ka ba nag po and the Rnying ma phur pa tradition”, *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1, no. 1 (2013): 37-53 for a discussion of the relationship between sources for Bon and rNying ma *phur pa* practices pre-dating the formation of gSar ma traditions.

negativities transformed through Buddhist ritual action.[98] Also, death as a condition for liberation recalls the Pāśupata soteriological model of the self as sacrificial beast and the goal of extinction in union with the deity in the form of Rudra (Skt. *pañcārtha*).[99] Where skulls came to be used as a sacrificial platform or vessel (*bandha* or *bhandha*) in *sgrol ba* practices, they have the capacity to ritually transform and purify the negative associations of the victim.[100]

The central importance of mahāyoga ritual methodologies to the formation of the rNying ma tradition can also be seen in the iconography of Guru Rinpoche (*a.k.a.* Padmasambhava) and its sources.[101] In one of the earliest preserved images of the teacher from Tabo in the western Himalayas (fig. 2.29), a thirteenth century rendering shows Guru Rinpoche with a large hat and holding a *khaṭvāṅga* and skull on the left, paired with a *vajra* in the right hand raised at center.[102] Yet while older texts describe this figure as a teacher and ritual practitioner, it would be the work of Nyang ral nyi ma ‘od zer (c.1130-1200) that further developed his legacy as the foundations

---

[98] See Robert Mayer, “The figure of Maheśvara/Rudra in the rÑyiṅ-ma-pa tantric tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998), 301-2 on the fundamental position of this narrative to the rNying ma corpus as well as Jacob Dalton,*The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 165 on evidence for this narrative and ritual connection to Rudra as “lord of the charnel grounds” and his description with *kāpālika* implements at Dunhuang. On the longevity and fundamental status of this narrative in Tibetan religious historiography, see also Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, “Enduring myths: sMrang, rabs and ritual in the Dunhuang texts on Padmasambhava”, in *Tibetan Studies in Honor of Samten Karmay,* eds. Françoise Pommert and Jean-Luc Achard (Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, 2009), 289-312 and *idem., The Kīlaya Nirvāna Tantra and the Vajra Wrath Tantra: Two Texts from the Ancient Tantra Collection* (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007) on the specialization of *phur pa* practices, including the Buddhist “normalization” of *kāpālika* methods, in sources for the rNying ma tradition.

[99] This is articulated in a fourth century commentary on the *Pāśupatasūtra*, for example; Bakker, *op.cit.,* 141.

[100] These methods of subjugation and transformation would become central to the tradition of z*hva nag ‘chams* and for which the central deity is Vajrakīlaya (rDo rje Phur bu), see Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan Text and Annotated Translation of the ‘Chams yig* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1976), 86; also Cathy Cantwell, “A black hat ritual dance,” *Bulletin of Tibetology* 1 (1992): 12-23 and chapter 4, section 2.

[101] This is summarized by Beer*, op.cit,* 249 (see also chapter 1 of this dissertation, note 32). On formative sources for the hagiography of Guru Rinpoche before the twelfth century, see Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation and Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 155-161 as well as Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, “Representations of Padmasambhava in early post-Imperial Tibet,” in *Tibet after Empire: Culture, Society and Religion between 850-1000*, eds. Christoph Cüppers, Robert Mayer and Michael Walter (Kathmandu: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2013), 19-50 and Jacob Dalton*,* “The early development of the Padmasambhava legend in Tibet: A Study of IOL Tib J 644 and Pelliot tibétain 307,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124, no. 4 (2004), 759-772.

[102] My thanks to Christian Luczanits for this image and his advice on its context. On the prominence of Guru Rinpoche’s hat as a characteristic feature according to sources found at Dunhuang, see Cantwell and Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa*, 44.

Figure 2.29: Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) holding skull and *rdo rje* (Skt. *vajra*) with *khaṭvāṅga* (damaged), from Tabo in the western Himalayas, 13th century. Image by Christian Luczanits.

of the rNying ma tantric tradition.[103] Working with texts likely known to his Sa skya contemporaries and demonstrating continuities with materials preserved at Dunhuang, this twelfth century *gter ston* and his intellectual descendants would reinforce narratives linking the activities of Guru Rinpoche with the subjugation of deities local to the Tibetan plateau and establishment of Buddhist tantra, including connecting the practice of *sgrol ba* — and its further cultivation in the performance of *'chams* or ritual dance — with the actions of Padmasambhava at bSam yas as well as the death of the ruler gLang dar ma in 842.[104]

In the cultivation of his hagiography and legacy as a Buddhist teacher and tantric master, Guru Rinpoche's historical role in ritually subjugating local deities of the Tibetan cultural region promotes the model for a mahāyoga practitioner empowered through the use of *kāpālika* methods and materials. At the same time, it suggests the central importance of this figure's ritual expertise to Tibetan post-imperial religious life and its historiography: This reflects the ways in which the intermediary period of the late ninth to eleventh centuries (*bar dar*, also known as the time of

[103] On the formative role of this innovative author and treasure revealer in the expansion and formalization of the rNying ma corpus and hagiography of Guru Rinpoche, see Cantwell and Mayer, "Representations of Padmasambhava", 20ff.

[104] See chapter 4, section 2 and Carmen Meinert, "Between the profane and the sacred? On the context of the rite of 'liberation' (sgrol ba)", in *Buddhism and Violence,* ed. Michael Zimmerman (Lumbini: Lumbini Research Institute, 2006), 102 as well as Jens Schlieter, "Compassionate killing or conflict resolution? The murder of king Langdarma according to Tibetan Buddhist sources," in *Buddhism and Violence*, ed. Michael Zimmermann, (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006), 131-157.

fragments or *sil ba'i dus*) was conditioned by a need to articulate and maintain social well-being and/or control the local environment within an atmosphere of political change and instability.[105]

It is during this time as well that the figure of Heruka becomes increasingly central to the practice of Buddhist tantra: One of the earliest references to this figure is found in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* — formalized and circulated between south and central Asia by the eighth century — wherein the name *heruka* is used in a mantra for assembling the historically Śaiva *mātṛkā* to act in the interests of Buddhism.[106] In this same tantra, the primary deity Vajrapāṇi subdues Śiva-Maheśvara when he takes the form of Mahābhairava, then Mahāraudra (Rudra), whom he revives from the dead and re-identifies as Buddhist. This yoga tantra's description of *kāpālika* implements used or applied by Buddhist deities in order to subdue, transform and liberate adversities (or adversaries) became a widely acknowledged precedent for the adoption of charnel materials and methodologies in the practice of Vajrayāna.[107]

Here, as in later mahāyoga tantras, charnel materials are presented as illustrations of impurities or negativities that can be transformed or subdued through Buddhist ritual practice. This is found in some of the oldest sources for the rNying ma tantric corpus, for example, in the *Phur pa bcu gnyis* which describes Heruka (*viz.* Karmaheruka) as a Buddhist tantric figure empowered by *kāpālika* implements received from the primary deity Vajrakīla (or Vajrakīlaya).[108] Moreover, in the earliest surviving evidences for the Tibetan expansion of mahāyoga and its iconographies — including material from Dunhuang that predates the eleventh century and includes the ritual methodologies of *tshogs* and *bcud len* — Heruka emerges as a central figure in a maṇḍala of wrathful deities, though with less practical emphasis on his role in deity yoga as

---

[105] *C.f.* Cantwell and Mayer, "Enduring myths," 290ff. See also Sam Van Schaik, "Tibetan Buddhism in central Asia: Geopolitics and group dynamics," in *Transfer of Buddhism across Central Asian Networks (8th-13th centuries)*, ed. Carmen Meinert (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 57-85.

[106] Sanderson, "The Śaiva age," 156n357. The same mantra is adopted into the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* (see below) as the mantra of its primary deity Heruka. See also Weinberger, *op.cit.,* 173ff on the tantric innovations of the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, including the pedagogical use of violence sanctioned as *upāya,* and Buddhist tantric funerary practices.

[107] See Mayer, "The figure of Maheśvara/Rudra," 274ff as well as Davidson, "Reflections on the Maheśvara subjugation myth", 200ff.

[108] Mayer, *ibid.,* 289-290. The author notes that this exchange frames a version of a *Vajrakīlaya* root text and soteriological model which is consistent throughout the rNying ma mahāyoga corpus.

Figure 2.30: The maṇḍala of Che mchog Heruka from the rNying ma tradition of the Eight Precepts of Accomplishment (sGrub pa bka' brgyad), Guru Rinpoche and his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal in the top left of the central assembly, central Tibet, 13th century, now in a private collection. Guru Rinpoche appears twice: Once in the maṇḍala (see fig. 2.31) and again, alone, to the top left of the assembly.

Figure 2.31: Detail of fig. 2.30 with Guru Rinpoche and his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal, offering a skull from his left, within the assembly of the maṇḍala.

in later mahāyoga and yoginī tantras.[109]

Nevertheless, there was a developed iconography for Heruka as a central deity empowered by charnel implements within the rNying ma tradition by the twelfth to thirteenth centuries: In figs. 2.30 and 2.31, the six-armed Che mchog Heruka is positioned at the center of a maṇḍala wearing charnel ornaments and holding skulls in his left hands with a consort at his side and surrounded by seven other similar forms of Heruka as well as Guru Rinpoche, holding a bell and

[109] See Cantwell and Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa*, 16ff on the iconographic relationship between Vajrakīla (or Vajrakīlaya in the Tibetan tradition) and Heruka. See also *ibid.,* 38 and 53 and *idem., "*The Dunhuang phur pa corpus", 268-269 on the lack of evidence for a Heruka *phur pa* practice at Dunhuang or in Indian sources and *idem., Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa,* 88-94 for a practice with Heruka as the subduer of Rudra at the center of a charnel setting. Further, see these authors' critical translation of the *Thabs kyi zhags pa* and its commentary preserved at Dunhuang and which describes a multi-limbed Heruka (just as often called *khrag 'thung chen po* in the root text) with *kāpālika* implements — including skull and *rdo rje* in the front two hands (left and right respectively) and garland of skulls, though no charnel ornaments on the head or body — at the center of a maṇḍala of wrathful deities; though this corpus includes description of the deity with charnel materials it does not have a developed vocabulary or practical emphasis on their use by the practitioner as yogin (see below), *idem., A Noble Noose of Methods, The Lotus Garland Synopsis: A Mahāyoga Tantra and its Commentary* (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 74-75 and 294.

rdo rje in the manner of Vajradhara, with his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal offering a skull vessel from his left.[110] To the top left of this assembly, the siddha and tantric master is represented again with skull in the left hand, paired with *rdo rje* in the right, and a *khaṭvāṅga* rather than consort to his left. In this iconographic program derived from the Eight Precepts of Accomplishment (*sGrub pa bka' brgyad*) — which include the refinement and preparation of ritually empowered substances in a skull — Padmasambhava is represented similarly and in an equivalent position to the Heruka deities, further reinforcing the teacher's fundamental status to rNying ma traditions of mahāyoga tantra.[111]

However, it would be in the Saṃvara corpus and yoginī tantra that forms of Heruka came to be prominently and consistently represented as a Buddhist deity defined by the use of *kāpālika* implements and a charnel setting.[112] Thus far this chapter has broadly described evidence for the formation of *kāpālika* traditions from their origins in *śramaṇa* ascetic practices to the adaptation of their observances as yoga tantra, the refinement and popularization of these methods in non-Buddhist *kaula* traditions, and the foundations of Tibetan mahāyoga tantra. The following examines how Buddhist yoginī tantra first took shape in the late seventh to eighth centuries, how it exemplifies the exchange and refinement of methods and materials for ritualized charnel asceticism, and historical evidence for the further, specialized integration of the skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and charnel ornaments as Vajrayāna visual and material culture.

---

[110] This painting is introduced in Jane Casey Singer, " A Tibetan painting of Chemchok Heruka's mandala in the McCormick Collection, revisited" in *Dating Tibetan Art, op.cit.,* 113-132. See also Cathy Cantwell, "The Action Phurpa ('Phrin las phur pa) from the Eightfold Buddha Word, Embodying the Sugatas (bK'a brgyad bDe gshegs 'dus pa), revealed by Nyang-rel Nyima Özer (1124-1192, Tib. Myang ral Nying ma 'od zer)", *BuddhistRoad Paper* 7, no. 2 (2020): 3-137 on the historical relationship between Che mchog Heruka and the use of skull vessels in rNying ma suppression practices.

[111] Garrett describes this painting's relationship to its ritual textual sources which were historically associated with the eighth century Indian teacher Vimalamitra and his transmissions of mahāyoga tantra preserved in the rNying ma Māyājāla corpus (Sgyu 'phrul drwa ba), *c.f. idem.,* "Tapping the body's nectar", 214ff. See also Cantwell and Mayer, "Representations of Padmasambhava", 28ff on the development of a rNying ma cycle of eight Heruka *yi dam* deities, including the role of twelfth century *gter ston* Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer.

[112] Dr. Péter-Dániel Szántó has noted that Heruka deities were increasingly seen after the introduction of Buddhist yoginī tantra (*i.e. Sarvabuddhasamāyoga)* in the eighth century, Cantwell and Mayer, "Representations of Padmasambhava", 39n39; see below.

Charnel materials in the Saṃvara tradition

This section explores ritualized charnel asceticism as a consistent feature of the Saṃvara corpus of Buddhist yoginī tantra.[113] Within this liturgical, iconographic and commentarial tradition, the charnel implements of the *kāpālika* vow are made characteristic of Saṃvara deity yoga and its maṇḍala and through the popularization and circulation of yoginī tantra across the Buddhist world in the eighth to twelfth centuries, these objects would be cultivated in the performance and illustration of the most specialist ritual methodologies of Vajrayāna as well as the representation of its deities and practitioners.

In the characteristic liturgical model of Saṃvara tantras, by assuming the form of the central deity Heruka and ritually actualizing the maṇḍala, a vow (*saṃvara, saṃ* + √*vṛ,* Tbt. *sdom pa*) is made through the practitioner's engagement of a network of ḍākinī (*ḍākinījāla*) which results in supreme bliss (*śamvara* or *śambara,* Tbt. *bde mchog*).[114] As this section will show, this practice integrates historically *kāpālika* methods for ascetic observance as well as the ritual engagement of consorts, both of which were refined and re-contextualized in the expansion and adaptation of the tantric corpus by Buddhist communities during the ninth to eleventh centuries. Moreover, by the twelfth century, the methods and iconography of Buddhist yoginī tantra — including its application of charnel materials — had become foremost in the practice and representation of Vajrayāna.[115] This includes the ninth century *Hevajra* tantra, which is more comprehensively

---

[113] As Sanderson has iterated, based on the classificatory system of the bKa' 'gyur the three primary Tibetan yoginī traditions are Kālācakra, Saṃvara (and Vajravārāhī), and Hevajra (with Nairatmya); others are Buddhakapāla, Mahāmāyā, Yogāmbara, Candamahārosana and Vajrāmṛta, *idem.,* "Vajrayāna: Origin and function", 97n1. Similarly, the thirteenth century scholar mKhas grub rje lists Kālācakra, Saṃvara and Hevajra as mother tantras — *ma rgyud* or *yoginītantra,* also known as *ḍākinītantra* and *prajñātantra* — with Saṃvara foremost among them and distinguished by its ritual methodologies, *ibid.,* 267.

[114] See Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 35-37.

[115] In the twelfth century *Sādhanamāla*, the majority of Vajrayāna deities are described as wrathful (*krodha)* forms of the buddha Akṣobhya and empowered by the skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and/or charnel ornaments, *c.f.* Bhattacharya, *op.cit.*, 60ff. Also in Abhayākaragupta's *Niṣpannayogāvalī* the majority of maṇḍala are centered on a wrathful deity form, *c.f.* de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 41ff. Heather Stoddard moreover notes that of 118 maṇḍala described in Tibetan canonical sources, 77 are yoginī or mahāyoga tantras; *idem., "*Dynamic structures in Buddhist maṇḍalas: Apradakṣina and mystic heat in the Mother Tantra section of the Anuttarayoga Tantras," *Artibus Asiae* 58, no. 3/4 (1999): 178-179.

systematized and emphatically Buddhist than older sources for Saṃvara tantra through it likewise incorporates charnel materials into its methodologies and observances.[116]

The oldest surviving text from the Saṃvara tradition is the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga-ḍākinījālaśaṃvara* (hereafter, *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga*) which, at the time of the earliest commentaries in this corpus from the late ninth and tenth centuries, was the most widely known Buddhist yoginī tantra.[117] This text was translated into Chinese by the eighth century and Tibetan by the eighth or ninth where it is preserved, distinct from later yoginī tantras, in the rNying ma body of religious literature that includes other mahāyoga tantras which incorporate historically *kāpālika* methodologies.[118] Much of the material in the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* has been demonstrated as derivative or imitative of Śaiva sources, including its title and the name of its central deity, Heruka (here called Vajraheruka).[119] In the maṇḍala to which practitioners of this tantra are initiated, a four-faced and eight-armed deity is positioned at the center of an array of oath-bound ḍākinī (*viz.* yoginī), described with a charnel ornament on the head and holding a *khaṭvāṅga*.[120]

The *Laghusaṃvara* (*bDe mchog nyung ngu*) — root tantra of the Tibetan Cakrasaṃvara (‘*Khor lo bde mchog*) corpus — and *Saṃvarodaya* (*bDe mchog sdom pa ‘byung ba*) — root tantra of the Newar Saṃvara tradition, classified as an explanatory tantra (*bshad rgyud*) of Cakrasaṃvara in Tibetan systems — likewise are shown to have adapted significant amounts of

---

[116] As a Saṃvara tantra, *Hevajra* is nevertheless identified within the tantra as *srīhevajraḍākinījāla-śaṃvara*, see Shinichi Tsuda, “The Samvarodaya tantra: Selected chapters”, (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1970), 58. Hatley moreover observes that the characteristically transgressive material religion of yoginī tantra was minimized in the *Kālacakra*, which was compiled still later in the eleventh century, *idem.,* “Goddesses in text and stone,” 219n36. Samuel elsewhere notes that just as traditions of Śaiva and *kaula* tantra were reformed during the tenth and eleventh centuries, so was Vajrayāna, *op.cit.,* 325. See below on charnel implements in the *Hevajra* tantra and its description of Heruka deity yoga.

[117] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 176n19. See also the chronology for the Saṃvara tradition presented by David B. Gray, “Introduction,” in *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: The Discourse of Śrī Heruka (Śrīherukābhidhāna), Editions of the Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts*, ed. David B. Gray, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4ff.

[118] Sanderson, “The Śaiva age,” 145ff. This author credits the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* with the origins of “Śaiva-Buddhist intertextuality” and notes that this text was translated into Chinese by Amoghavajra (705-774) and classified — like the *Guhyasamāja* which describes both *sgrol ba* and *tshogs* — as *māyājāla* by the rNying ma. Sanderson also writes that Āryadeva (c. late ninth-eleventh centuries) classified the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* as mahāyoga*,* again like the *Guhyasamāja.*

[119] See *ibid.,*156 where Sanderson asserts that the name of this Buddhist tantra — *Sarvabuddha-samāyoga-ḍākinījālaśaṃvara* — is a calque of two texts from the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha,* the *Sarvavīrasamāyoga* and the *Yoginījālaśaṃvara.* See also Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra,* 40n122 and below on the origins of Heruka.

[120] *ibid.,* 147n338.

material from Śaiva sources, including *kāpālika* deities and practices.[121] Both of these eighth century texts identify themselves as the discourse of a deity called Heruka (*śrīherukābhidhāna*) and the maṇḍalas of these two tantras position Heruka in union with his consort Vajravārāhī — endowed with *khaṭvāṅga* and skull vessel — at the center of an oath-bound circular network of ḍākinī clans (*kula*). Like the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga*, both of these tantras incorporate charnel materials into various ritual preparations and empowerments as well as descriptions of the deity Heruka whose form is accomplished through yoga. These texts were largely formalized by Buddhist authors during the tenth and eleventh centuries.[122]

In the visual and material culture of Saṃvara tantra, there are a number of ways in which this exchange of Buddhist and brahmanical *kāpālika* ritual methods can be seen, including the cultivation of a deity-centered, wheel-like composition for Vajrayāna maṇḍalas.[123] In figs. 2.2 and 2.3 — each one of the oldest surviving paintings of a round-shaped maṇḍala — forms of the Saṃvara deity Heruka and his consort Vajravārāhī are at the center of a circular assembly of yoginī, indicating the characteristic ritual dynamic of *ḍākinījālaśaṃvara* as well as the historically *kāpālika* arena of *gaṇacakra* (Tbt. *tshogs kyi 'khor lo*, or *tshogs*).[124] By the tenth century, the tantric gathering of *gaṇacakra* — in which yoginī are summoned and engaged through the presentation of impure substances like body fluids, feces or meat which have been rendered into purified nectar (*amṛta*, Tbt. *bdud rtsi*) in a skull — came to be treated as integral to

---

[121] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra,* 20. In the Newar Vajrayāna tradition, *Saṃvarodaya* is more prominent, while *Laghusaṃvara* was favored as the root tantra by monastic institutions of northeast India from which the majority of Tibetan practices were drawn. See also Tsuda, "The Samvarodaya tantra", 29ff. For a breakdown of shared material between these Buddhist Saṃvara tantras and sources from the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha*, see Sanderson, "History through textual criticism", 42-44.

[122] Gray notes that this work initiated with the tantric scholar Jayabhadra (c. late 9th-10th century) at Vikramaśīla, *idem., The Cakrasamvara Tantra: Editions*, 19; see also *ibid.,* 6-8n14 on dating these sources and *ibid.,* 28 on the translation of *Laghusaṃvara* into Tibetan during the tenth to twelfth centuries.

[123] Luczanits has found that surviving maṇḍalas dated before the eleventh and twelfth centuries are rare or non-existent, with few examples at Dunhuang and none from India or Tibet, see *idem.*, "On the earliest mandala", 121. See also Stoddard, *"*Dynamic structures in Buddhist maṇḍalas*"*, *passim* on the characteristic circular and left-handed structures and spatial relationships of Tibetan yoginī tantra.

[124] Sanderson states that what he describes as the *gaṇamaṇḍala* — a ritual assembly with central male figure within a gathering of yoginī, also called *yoginīgaṇa* or *yoginīcakra* — is a "distinctive feature" of the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha*, particularly *śākta* practices and from which it is introduced into the Buddhist *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* and *Laghusaṃvara* tantras, *idem.,* "The Śaiva age," 154.

the practice of yoginī tantra and the accomplishment of the Saṃvara maṇḍala.[125] Moreover, this spatial composition resonates with the characteristically round, hypaethral structure of yoginī temples like Hirapur (*e.g.* fig. 2.18) as well as the historic association of Rudra and/or Śiva as a volatile, charnel ascetic accompanied by a group of *mātṛkā*.[126]

While *kāpālika* methods for refining materials and making offerings in order to obtain *siddhi* had been used by yogins previous to the construction of the earliest yoginī temples, it was at a time of the reform and innovation of yoginī tantra in the ninth to eleventh centuries — *e.g.* as the *kaula* system of internalized yoga — that the *yoginīcakra* came to be monumentalized. And as tantric gatherings and yoginī practices were given form in visual and material culture, the iconography of charnel grounds (*śmāśana)* became a valued yet specialized illustrated setting for ritual accomplishment.[127] In the *Laghusaṃvara*, the maṇḍala is said to be accomplished as or within a charnel ground, as in the Śaiva *Brahmayāmala*, a substantial source for its ritual methodologies.[128] This localization is suggested as well in the visual program at Hirapur, where the exterior (*i.e.* public) iconography prominently feature indications of a charnel setting and *kāpālika* methods (see fig. 2.22) though the interior assembly is relatively free of charnel imagery.

---

[125] See Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 160n17; Jayabhadra describes the Saṃvara maṇḍala as the *Laghusaṃvara*'s triple-wheel (*tricakra*) assembly while the tenth century commentator Bhavabaṭṭa further interprets the same ritual setting as *gaṇacakra*. Wedemeyer suggests that *gaṇacakra* can be interpreted as a ritual event wherein *kāpālika* observances and methods were practiced as an alternative to an extended period of charnel ascetic *vrata* which is characteristic of yoginī tantra*, idem., Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism,* 192. This same practice has been integrated into the liturgical calendar of many contemporary Tibetan communities as a monthly *ḍākinī* or *mkha' 'gro tshogs*, where alcohol or fruit juice is offered as *bdud rtsi* in a skull*;* observed in Kathmandu, West Bengal and Sikkim, May-August 2018, see also chapter 4, section 2. On *tshogs* in sources for Buddhist mahāyoga tantra (*e.g.* the *Guhya* corpus) see notes 90-93 above as well as Cantwell and Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa*, 137.

[126] Shaman Hatley has elsewhere discussed the architecture of Hirapur in relation to sources from the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha,* particularly the *Brahmayāmala*, and finds that the round, open-roofed plan of yoginī temples is conducive to ritual gatherings (*yoginīcakra*) described in these texts wherein the ḍākinī arrive through the *siddhi* of flight, *idem.,* "Goddesses in text and stone," 214. Dehejia likewise observes that yoginī monuments are uniquely round, while other temple architecture from the same period across south Asia is often rectilinear, *op.cit.,* 58. See note 51, above for a description from the seventh century *Brahmayāmala* of the practitioner using *kāpālika* implements to become *rudro matṛgaṇaiḥ sārdhaṃ*.

[127] Wedemeyer has elsewhere tabulated the variety of isolated, liminal sites recommended in the sources of Buddhist tantra formalized during this period and which include mountains, caves, places with one tree, and at the confluence of rivers. The charnel ground is a suggested setting in the *Guhyasamāja, Laghusaṃvara,* and *Saṃvarodaya* tantras, as well as later yoginī tantras like *Hevajra* and *Kālālcakra, idem., op.cit.,* 139.

[128] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 164n3. Gray speculates that "it is not necessary to locate the maṇḍala in a charnel ground" but rather, as the tenth century Jayabhadra suggests, to visualize and accomplish the maṇḍala as such a space. See also Hatley, "The Brahmayāmalatantra", 194. In *ibid.,* 175 Hatley discusses correspondences between this text and the *Laghusaṃvara*.

An interpretation of Hirapur as a monumental precedent for circular yoginī maṇḍala is supported by the reputation of Bhubaneśwar as an active Śaiva religious center after the seventh century, including its identification as a *pīṭha,* a pilgrimage destination and gathering site for ritual specialists.[129] Moreover, the *Brahmayāmala* describes two places in Orissa, including Bhubaneśwar — called Ekāmra and also identified as one of the text's eight *pīṭha* — within its systemized ritual landscape of eight charnel grounds, or *aṣṭaśmāśana* (Tbt. *dur khrod chen po brgyad*), located in eight cardinal directions across south Asia and within which its maṇḍala should be accomplished or visualized.[130]

This visual and liturgical landscape of *aṣṭaśmāśana* was cultivated in Buddhist yoginī tantra as a context for its methods of ritualized charnel asceticism. In the *Saṃvarodaya*, each of these locations is distinguished with a local protector (*dikpāla*), characteristic tree and a serpent, and the text provides a general description of the charnel grounds as a setting filled with threatening clouds, animals, corpses, siddha yogins, *vidyādhara* and yoginī.[131] The ninth-tenth century *Śmaśānavidhi* — an exegetical text in the Saṃvara tradition attributed to the *kaula* teacher Lūyīpāda — elaborates on the *Saṃvarodaya* description of the *aṣṭaśmāśana* by including consorts for the protectors, a description of the demon that lives in each location's characteristic tree — whose head corresponds to that of the protectors' mount — and a stūpa.[132] In the twelfth century *Sādhanamālā*, these charnel grounds are described uniquely in association with a maṇḍala of Vajravārāhī, a deity who is otherwise the primary consort of Heruka in the Saṃvara tradition.[133]

---

[129] Donaldson, *Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa,* 81. Though an active Śaiva center from the seventh century, the tenth century in this region is marked by the introduction of *kaula* teachings and the construction of many monuments with *śākta* and *kāpālika* iconography, *c.f. ibid.,* 655 and figs. 2.13-2.16 from Someśvara.

[130] Hatley, "The Brahmayāmala tantra," 232-234. In this text the *aṣṭaśmāśana* are Vārāṇasī, Virajā (also in Orissa, at Jajpur), Kollagiri, Prabhāsa, Ujjainī, Bhūteśvara, Ekāmra (*viz.* Bhubaneśwar) and Koṭivarṣa.

[131] Tsuda, *op.cit.,* 273-4. These are identified as (E) Caṇḍogra (N) Gahvara (W) Vajravāla (S) Karaṅkin (NE) Aṭṭaṭṭahāsa (SE) Lakṣmīvana (SW) Ghorāndhakāra (NW) Kilakilārava. The respective protectors are Indra, Kubera, Varuṇa, Yama, Iśāna, Agni, Nairṛta and Vāyu.

[132] For a comparative presentation of sources for *aṣṭaśmāśana* iconography in the yoginī tantra corpus, see English, *op.cit.*, 449n312. This visual program is absent from the *Hevajra* tantra and the *Laghusaṃvara* tantra, despite the latter text's emphasis on the charnel ground as a ritual setting.

[133] de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 349. The sādhana is number 223, though many of the names for these sites given here differ from those in the *Saṃvarodaya* and *Śmaśānavidhi*. Unlike Saṃvara tantra, the Vajravārāhī maṇḍala is centered on a female deity, similar to non-Buddhist *śākta* traditions which also used *kāpālika* methods and materials. For the history of Vajravārāhi as a yoginī and Buddhist deity with precedents in the *mātṛkā* tradition, see English, *op.cit.,* 47-49. This iconography would be further developed in a series of thirteenth century Tibetan paintings, see chapter 3.

Figure 2.32: Detail of Saptākṣara maṇḍala from fig. 2.3 with the worldly protector Nairṛta in the southwest direction, surrounded by charnel ascetic yogins and ritual specialists in a *śmaśāna* named Ghorāndhakāra.

In figs. 2.2 and 2.3, each maṇḍala and its assembled network of ḍākinī is located within a version of the *aṣṭaśmāśana* which reflects the systematic re-contextualization and elaboration of the liturgical and iconographic precedent set at Hirapur, with its charnel exterior, and in the *Brahmayāmala* as well. As with Yama and Mahākāla in Buddhist yoga tantras (see previous section), this includes the adaptation of non-Buddhist figures and deities as local protectors: In fig. 2.32, Nairṛta — a brahmanical figure who is identified in the *Saṃvarodaya* tantra as king of the *rakṣa* — occupies the southwest *śmaśāna* of Ghorāndhakāra, naked and blue-black, holding a sword and severed head, and seated on an animate corpse as he is described in the

Śmaśānavidhi, though without a consort.[134] The body on which he is seated recalls historical images of the *kāpālika* deity Cāmuṇḍā seated on a corpse (fig. 2.12), as well as the male deity at the center of the Hirapur yoginī maṇḍala (fig. 2.19).[135] Like the deities at the center of this painting (fig. 2.5), Nairṛta wears a five-skull crown while the yogins facing him have a single skull each in their hair (see more on these ornaments below).

In the same painted detail of the charnel domain of Nairṛta in fig. 2.32, a solitary yogin sits under an archway of skulls with an inverted gaze and crossed hands.[136] This illustration corresponds to a sādhana called *karaṅkatoraṇa* in which the yogin realizes an archway of skulls in a charnel setting and from inside which embodies the deity Cakreśa — lord of the *yoginīcakra, viz.* Heruka, the principle deity of Saṃvara — a practice described in a twelfth century text derived from the *kaula* teachings of the tenth century *Śmaśānavidhi.*[137] This — like many of the illustrated activities of the yogins in these two early maṇḍala (figs. 2.2 and 2.3) — suggests a more dynamic, ritualized form of charnel ascetic practice than the historically Buddhist method of *aśubhabhāvanā* (see fig. 2.23), for example, in which the corpse or its image was treated as an object of contemplation. At the same time, *kaula* sources primarily describe ritualized charnel asceticism as an internalized method of deity yoga.[138]

Within these maṇḍala and the *aṣṭaśmāśana*, the sādhana of the skull arch is a refined and specific illustration of the ways in which Buddhist yoginī tantra integrated, adapted and expanded on historical sources for charnel practice. At the same time, the more broadly applied

---

[134] Like the other *dikpāla* included as protectors in the *aṣṭaśmāśana,* Nairṛta has been integrated from earlier brahmanical and Vedic sources, appearing similarly elsewhere in Vajrayāna iconography, see de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 272-3. See also English, *Vajrayoginī*, 140-143 on historical sources for this iconography and the identification of these guardians in the yoginī tantra corpus.

[135] Wessels-Mevissen, *op.cit.*, for a history and iconographic review of this figure among representations of the eight cardinal *dikpāla* after the seventh century, where Nairṛta typically occupies the southwest. Though the vehicle of this deity is characteristically a human figure in surviving historic representations, it is only at the tenth century Śaiva monument of Kāmeśvara in Bhubaneśwar where Nairṛta is also holding a severed head and sword, though standing on the human corpse, *op.cit.*, 75 and fig. 244.

[136] Similar skull archways with solitary yogins are found in the other twelfth century maṇḍala in fig. 2.2 but I do not have access to sufficiently high resolution images of this painting to include a detail here.

[137] English, *Vajrayoginī*, 374-376. English translates “skeleton archway” but from these twelfth century images, *karaṅka* seems to have been understood as skull. This twelfth century collection of yoginī sādhana is called the *Guhyasamayasādhanamālā* and examined thoroughly in *ibid.*

[138] This internalization is also suggested in the *Laghusaṃvara* tantra, which superimposes cosmological, liturgical and physiological topologies for the body of the practitioner and the maṇḍala as arenas for ritual action, *c.f.* Gray, *The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, 56-60. See also David B. Gray, “Mandala of the self: Embodiment, practice, and identity construction in the Cakrasaṃvara tradition,” *Journal of Religion History* 30, no. 3 (2006), 294-310.

liturgical and iconographic innovations of yoga tantra facilitated a changing concept of the body in Vajrayāna as an instrument for Buddhist practice, where the death of the body became a further opportunity for Buddhist pedagogy through skillful means (*upāya*) and demonstrations of impermanence, and as a condition for liberation or extinction (*parinirvāṇa)*.[139] Moreover, like *aśubhabhāvanā*, or the contemplation of decaying corpses, the charnel methodologies which were definitive to the Saṃvara corpus and its sources relied in some part on the instrumentation of the death of the body as a source of impurity, transgression or volatility.

Just as the *kāpālika* vow had been integrated into the Śaiva *mantramārga* as a specialization of the Bhairava corpus and *vidyāpīṭha* as a means for empowerment through identification with the deity, in Buddhist tantra the use of skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and bone ornaments became a prominent feature of yoginī (and mahāyoga) tantras as part of their doctrinal and rhetorical "calculus of impurity and pollution" which utilized sexual yoga, killing or sacrifice, the consumption of impure substances, and other direct violations of monastic vows and norms.[140] These ritual methods were moreover cultivated as actualizations of the nondual (*advaya*, Tbt. *gnyis med*) by connecting the practitioner and deity through yoga and — most prominently and explicitly in yoginī tantra — by utilizing the historically and socially transgressive associations of the *kāpālika* vow in order to undermine dualistic thinking and become empowered in the form of these teachings' central deity, Heruka.

Where Bhairava is the primary identity of male deity forms in the Śaiva *mantramārga* corpus, Heruka is thus central to Buddhist yoginī tantra: Both the *Laghusaṃvara* and *Saṃvarodaya* tantras identify themselves as the discourse of Heruka, whose consort is the yoginī Vajravārāhī and whose iconography and methods of establishing the oath-bound network of ḍākinī (*i.e. saṃvara*) incorporate the use of skull and *khaṭvāṅga*, as well as wearing a set of five ornaments referred to as the *pañcamudrā*.[141] In the earliest source for Saṃvara tantra, the *Sarvabuddha-samāyoga*, the central male deity is identified as Vajraheruka and has a skull ornament on his

---

[139] See Gray, *ibid*. as well as *idem.,* "Skull imagery and skull magic in the yoginī tantras," *Pacific World* 3, no. 8 (2006), 21-39. David L. Snellgrove has remarked that the "overt cult of the body" dominated later Vajrayāna, though it was not entirely new to Buddhist practice, *idem.*, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors* (London: Serindia Publications, 1987)*,* 288.

[140] Wedemeyer, *op.cit.* 130; see this source for an extended study of antinomian rhetoric and observances in the historical sources for Buddhist tantra.

[141] See Sanderson, "The Śaiva age," 179ff on textual sources for the Buddhist adaptation of implements of the *kāpālika vrata* and/or *caryā* (vow/observance, practice). See also below and chapter 4, section 3 on charnel ornaments as a set of five mudrā.

head and *khaṭvāṅga*.[142] Furthermore, a connection of the practitioner and deity by means of charnel implements is emphasized in methods for yoga tantra in the Saṃvara tradition as well as the iconography of Heruka in its textual sources, wherein the accomplished practitioner is described as one possessing the yoga of the two-armed *heruka* (*dvibhujaherukayogavān*).[143]

Moreover, two-armed forms of Heruka may be the oldest surviving Buddhist iconographic programs to consistently feature charnel implements. A series of images likely dated to the eleventh century and found at the pilgrimage center and monastic community of Ratnagiri in Orissa — an active Buddhist site since the fifth century, and not fifty kilometers from the yoginī temple of Hirapur and Śaiva communities of Bhubaneśwar — show Heruka with two arms and one face, holding a skull and *khaṭvāṅga* on the left side and a *vajra* raised in the right hand, dancing in *ardhaparyaṅka* with the left foot grounded on a corpse (figures 2.33-2.34). On the larger free-standing relief (fig. 2.33), this figure has a crown of five skulls which can be seen above a third eye in the forehead, with ornaments on the chest, ears, neck, waist and arms. Another eleventh century example of a two-armed Heruka from Nālandā in Bihar (fig. 2.35), though damaged, shows the deity dancing on a corpse whose left hand is raised in *abhayamudrā,* and accompanied by an assembly of six yogini/ḍākinī also on corpses and holding charnel implements.[144]

Iconographically, this figure suggests a knowledge and value for ritualized charnel asceticism at Ratnagiri, a site which exhibits a diversification in visual culture through two periods of construction in the eighth and eleventh centuries that increasingly featured deities associated with tantric methods.[145] During this period of inter-communal exchange, material as well as ritual

---

[142] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 42. Gray also finds that the commentarial tradition of the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* equates Vajraheruka with the bodhisattva Vajradhara (*ibid.,* 40n126).

[143] Sanderson notes this two-armed form of Heruka is characteristic of Buddhist Saṃvara deity yoga in *ibid.* 150n343. In the *Samvarodaya,* the practitioner is described as *dvibhujaherukayogavān*, in ch. 13; *c.f.* Tsuda, *op.cit.*, 261. In the *Laghusaṃvara* chapters 2 and 27*,* the yogin is described as *ātmānaṃ śrīherukaṃ kṛtvā* on having taken a *khaṭvāṅga* and wearing a skull ornament in his hair; *c.f.* Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 164-5. Heruka is moreover described predominantly a two-armed deity in the *Laghusaṃvara*, *e.g.* ch.2.

[144] See Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion,* 250ff for an overview of early Heruka imagery and the distribution of surviving eleventh century examples from eastern India and Bengal. My thanks to Dr. Linrothe for advising me on the dating and interpretation of these sites and their iconographies.

[145] Natasha Reichle, “Imagery, ritual and ideology: Examining the mahāvihāra at Ratnagiri,” in *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of masters, texts, icons*, ed. A. Acri (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017). Reichle notes that the details of ritual culture at Ratnagiri as a monastic settlement and/or pilgrimage site based on its tantric iconographies are largely speculative. Debala Mitra, on the other hand, observes a proliferation of female deities associated with mantra practices in the monuments of Ratnagiri after the ninth century, *idem., Ratnagiri (1958-61),* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), 28.

Figure 2.33: Free-standing relief of a two-armed Heruka dancing on a human body with skull and *khaṭvāṅga* (damaged) on the left side, and a *vajra* in the raised right hand, wearing charnel ornaments including a five skull crown, Ratnagiri, 11th century. Image from Linrothe 1999.

Figure 2.34: One of the two-armed Heruka on a select number of votive stūpa at Ratnagiri, 11th century. Images from Linrothe 1999.

knowledge was shared between Buddhist and Śaiva sites in their expansion and monumentalization in Orissa, with similar techniques and motifs seen at Ratnagiri as well as nearby sites in Bhubaneśwar.[146] Moreover, in Tibetan histories, the name Ratnagiri is associated with the formation of the Buddhist tantric corpus, and other historical evidence supports an active role for Buddhist communities in eastern India and Bengal in the formation of

[146] Robert Brown, “The four stone façades of Monastery 1 at Ratnagiri,” *Artibus Asiae* 40, no. 1 (1978), 7. Brown connects specific motifs from the latter period of construction at Ratnagiri to Śaiva sites at Bhubaneśwar, including Vaital Deul, which has *kāpālika* and *māṭṛkā* imagery.

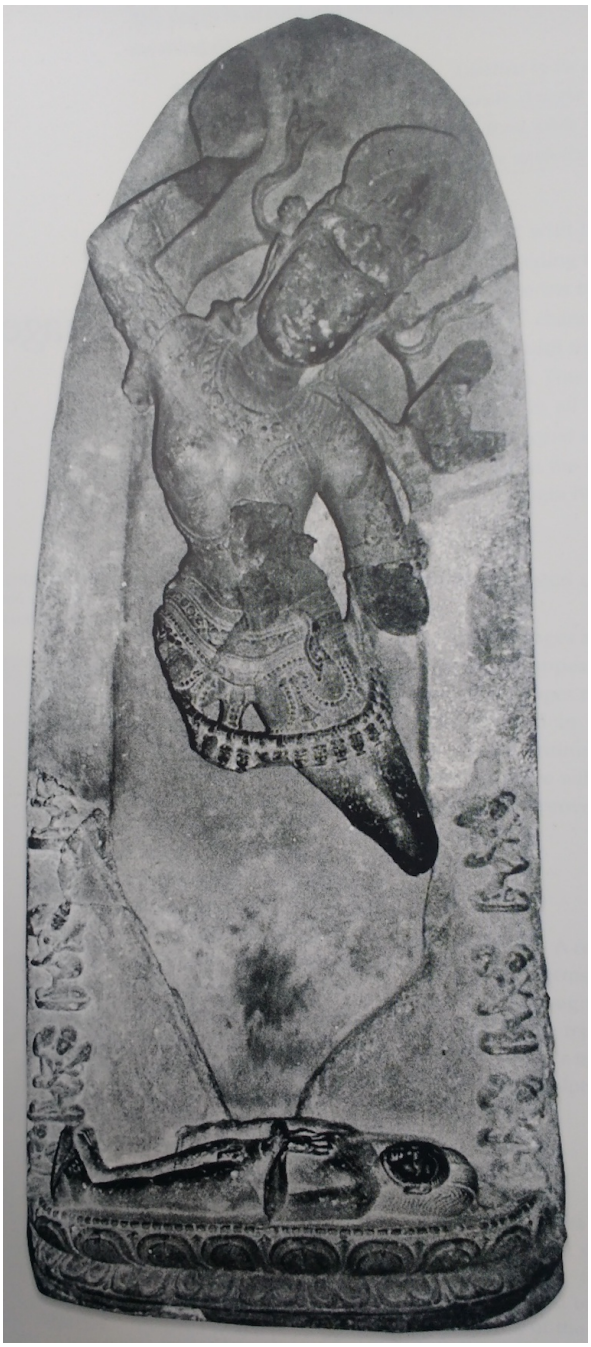


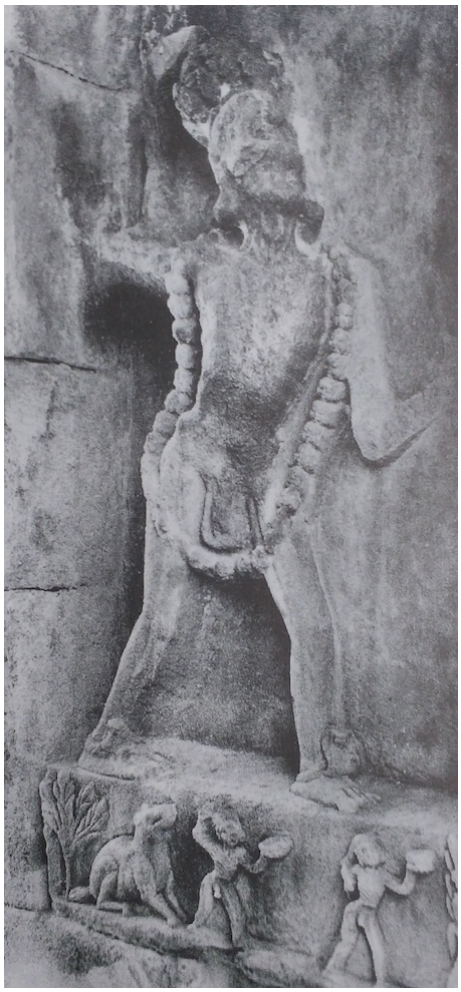
Figure 2.35: Damaged two-armed Heruka with an assembly of six yoginīs, each holding skull and *khaṭvāṅga* on the left and dancing on a corpse, currently in the Nālandā Museum, c. 11th century. Image from Linrothe 1999.

yoginī tantra.[147] Though they represent a small minority of the surviving Buddhist monuments of the region, these images of the two-armed Heruka nevertheless reflect the growing prominence of yoginī tantra after the tenth century and evidence for its support and interest within Buddhist monastic institutions.[148]

Furthermore, images of the two-armed Heruka at Ratnagiri demonstrate the re-contextualization of iconographic features exchanged with non-Buddhist communities. The deity's charnel implements and appearance reflect a refined, empowered version of *kāpālika* practitioners from the Śaiva and Pāśupata sites of Bhubaneśwar, for example at the tenth

[147] 'Gos lo tsā ba associates this site with the composition of the *Kalācakra* tantra*, op.cit.,* 755. Nancy Hock, on the other hand, uses Tibetan sources and iconographic study to suggest that Ratnagiri was connected to the practice of *Guhyasamāja* tantra, *idem.,* "Buddhist ideology and the sculpture of Ratnagiri, seventh through thirteenth centuries," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987), 133-4. Furthermore, Gray has argued that, based on botanical evidence, the *Laghusaṃvara* was likely written in an eastern region of south Asia and at least five of its earliest commentators from the tenth and eleventh centuries were based in Bihar and Bengal, *idem., The Cakrasamvara Tantra,* 21.

[148] Donaldson, *The Iconography of Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*, 57-58 and *idem.,Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa,* 655. Donaldson notes that while Śaiva and yoginī or *śākta* sites in Orissa expanded during the tenth century, drawing donors and pilgrims, nearby Buddhist institutions were largely diminished in population and resources with the notable exception of Ratnagiri.



Figures 2.36 and 2.37: Two-armed charnel ascetic figures wearing a garland of skulls and holding a severed head, from either side of the narrow vestibule at the entrance to the Hirapur yoginī temple, 10th century. Images from Donaldson 2002.

century temple of Someśvara (see figs. 2.13-2.16) as well as images of the skull-bearing ascetic Bhikṣāṭanamūrti (fig. 2.7). However, the pose and implements of these two-armed Herukas also resemble specific figures in the iconographic program at the nearby tenth century yoginī temple at Hirapur, especially its exterior set of nine yoginī, each with a knife raised in the right hand and holding skull in the left, with a tantric staff over the left shoulder and dancing over severed heads and animals indicating their charnel setting (fig. 2.22).

A speculative connection between deity yoga and the charnel ascetic practices characteristic to Heruka in yoginī tantra is suggested as well by the two skeletal figures in the narrow vestibule at the entry to Hirapur (figures 2.36 and 2.37). Though damaged, it can be seen that they are moving in opposite directions — entering and exiting the temple — and wearing a garland of skulls, with flaming hair and a raised right arm, and at least one of them carries a severed head in the left hand. Under each of these, smaller naked male forms hold up cups (or skulls?) surrounded by animals and trees, suggesting an ascetic setting. While the appearance of these figures recalls a two-armed version of the emaciated charnel deity *mātṛkā* Cāmuṇḍā (figs. 2.12

and 2.13), the position of this iconography in the vestibule might rather represent, like the deity Heruka and *kāpālika* practitioners at Someśvara (figs. 2.14-2.16), the accomplished form of a yogin or practitioner who is initiated to the methods of ritualized charnel asceticism indicated in the visual programs and design of this site.

It is noteworthy that the iconography of Heruka at Ratnagiri does not resemble the images of Śiva as the multi-faceted Bhairava (see, for example, figs. 2.11, 2.17, 2.19) which proliferated after the tenth century with increasingly complex and integrative forms with many arms, heads and implements, and who was less explicitly charnel than *śākta* deities like Cāmuṇḍā.[149] However, like Bhairava, the figure of Heruka can be understood as a general, expanding iconographic category which, by the twelfth century, came to describe the majority of Vajrayāna deities, collectively identified as forms of the buddha Akṣobhya and characterized by a wrathful appearance that very often includes a skull, charnel ornaments and *khaṭvāṅga*.[150] In the *Hevajra* corpus for example, the deity Heruka has two, four, or six arms, each form accompanied by eight yoginī in a charnel ground; alternatively, at the center of this tantra's maṇḍala the deity Hevajra in union with Nairātmyā has sixteen arms.[151]

Some of the earliest preserved evidence in a Buddhist context for the integration of charnel implements into these multi-faceted representations of tantric deities can be found in images of the twelve-armed deity Saṃvara which also survive from the eleventh century, and from within the same approximate geo-cultural region of activity, including examples from Ratnagiri as well as farther east in Bengal (figures 2.38-2.40). Like the two-armed Heruka, Saṃvara is wearing charnel ornaments and holds amongst many implements a *khaṭvāṅga* and skull on the left side as well as the severed head of Brahma which further reinforces this figure's associations with Śaiva and brahmanical narratives for the *kāpālika* vow.

---

[149] Donaldson, *Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa,* 440; see also Hatley, "Goddesses in Text and Stone," 211.

[150] Bhattacharya notes that Heruka is one of most popular deities in the *Sādhanamālā*, generally associated with yoginī tantra and with three of five of the deity's sādhana describing a two-armed form. No. 258 corresponds to the image of Heruka at Ratnagiri with skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and bone ornaments — including sacred thread and five-skull crown — and no consort, *op.cit.,* 61-63. See also de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 182-183 on the many forms of Heruka at the center of maṇḍalas in the *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī,* including Hevajra.

[151] These forms of Heruka are described in *Hevajra*, pt. 1, ch. 3, *c.f.* Snellgrove, *The Hevajra tantra*, 57. The deities Hevajra and Nairātmyā and their maṇḍala are described in pt. 2, ch. 5 of the tantra; *ibid.,* 110. In the *Niṣpannayogāvalī,* all four of these forms can be at the center of a Hevajra maṇḍala; *c.f.* de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 46-47.

In figs. 2.38 and 2.39, the integration of charnel and yoginī practices characteristic to Saṃvara tantra is further emphasized with a scenario in the bottom register that features Buddhist yogins — holding a *vajra*, center left — seated on corpses under a lone tree with another body between them at center. Above this, Saṃvara is accompanied by an assembly of four four-armed yoginī in low relief — three along the bottom and one at top center — standing, like the deity, in *alīḍha* and similar to the assembly of yoginī with the two-armed Heruka, in *ardhaparyaṅka*, in fig. 2.35.[152] This twelve-armed form of Saṃvara is described by Abhayākaragupta at the center of a maṇḍala in the twelfth century *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, while in the earlier *Śmaśānavidhi* this same deity, located within the eight charnel grounds, is identified as Vajraḍāka.[153]

While the charnel associations are fairly explicit, these early images of Saṃvara do not show the

Figures 2.38 (left) and 2.39 (above): Twelve-armed Saṃvara with single skull ornament in the hair, holding *khaṭvāṅga* and skull with assembly of four yoginī, c. 11th century, from Bengal and currently at the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Images from Linrothe 1999. The lower register (above) shows two yogin engaged in practices of ritualized charnel asceticism.

[152] *C.f.* John Newman, "Vajrayāna deities in an illustrated Indian manuscript of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1990): 117-132 for a discussion of stance in distinguishing between Heruka, Saṃvara and Hevajra in a late twelfth-thirteenth century manuscript from Bengal.

[153] de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 187-189. The maṇḍala is no. 12 in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī;* this twelve armed form is absent from the *Sādhanamālā* where Saṃvara is described in sādhana no. 277 as a two-armed form of Heruka as Vajraḍāka in union with Vajravārāhī, Bhattacharya, *op.cit.,* 64. Heruka is also identified as Vajraḍāka in the *Samvarodaya* tantra, ch. 8; *c.f.* Tsuda, *op.cit.,* 248.

Figure 2.40: Twelve-armed Saṃvara from Ratnagiri, c. 11th century, now at the Patna Museum. The deity has a row of skulls across his crown and a skull and staff or *khaṭvāṅga* on the left; this is one of two known surviving Saṃvara images from this site. Image from Linrothe 1999.

deity in union with Vajravārāhī as described by written sources or seen in the twelfth century maṇḍala in fig. 2.4. This iconography does, however, translate the ways in which the Saṃvara yoginī tantra corpus — like mahāyoga sources covered above — acknowledges an exchange of charnel methodologies with Śaiva *kāpālika* practitioners: In the earliest tantra of the Saṃvara corpus, the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga,* the central figure Vajraheruka adopts Bhairava's *kāpālika* methods in order to be empowered to rectify non-Buddhist teachings.[154] In figs. 2.40 and 2.41 — as well as the maṇḍala in fig. 2.4 — the central deity as a form of Heruka stands on the figures of Bhairava and his consort (*i.e.* Kalārātri) as described in the *Saṃvarodaya.*[155] Likewise, in the *Laghusaṃvara*, Heruka is described as the terror of Mahābhairava, whose form he takes by wearing charnel ornaments and taking the *khaṭvāṅga*.[156] Here, the iconography of Saṃvara illustrates the specific characteristics and advantages of Buddhist methodologies for ritualized charnel asceticism.

As Buddhist yoginī tantra came to characterize the majority of Vajrayāna

[154] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra,* 43.

[155] Tsuda, "The Samvarodaya tantra", 263 (chapter 13).

[156] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 9n23 and 167 (chapter 2.). Elsewhere in the Saṃvara corpus, Mahābhairava is interpreted — like Mahākāla — as both a subjugated Śaiva deity and a model for deity yoga, *c.f.* Gray, *ibid.,* 7 and 371n11.

practices and iconographies after the eight century, its authors made significant contributions to the cultivation and expansion of *kāpālika* practices and their visual cultural integration.[157] The ninth century *Hevajra* tantra, for example, describes itself as a means of accomplishing Heruka as a yogin seated on a corpse that represents the mundane world, albeit through an internalized and comprehensively Buddhist ritual methodology for yoga and yoginī tantra.[158] By the thirteenth century, a description from the *Hevajra* corpus of the tantric yogin as a charnel ascetic with skull vessel, the five charnel ornaments and *khaṭvāṅga* would form the basis for Grags pa rgyal mtshan's articulation of implements for the observance of yoga in the form of Heruka and reinforce what would become an important source for the Tibetan tradition of *brtul zhugs spyod pa*.[159]

Figure 2.41: Heruka as Saṃvara trampling on Śiva-Bhairava and Kalārātri, Kashmir, c. 10th century, now at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.85.2.4).

[157] Lorenzen observes that, after the seventh century, Vajrayāna authors discuss *kāpālika* methods more often and more explicitly than non-Buddhist sources, *op.cit.,* 4.

[158] This is in *Hevajra* pt. 1, ch. 3, *c.f.,*Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra,* 57. This text is positioned within the Saṃvara tradition with the title *Śrīhevajraḍākinījālāsaṃvara* (Tbt. *Kye'i rdo rje mkha' 'gro ma dra ba'i sdom pa*) and through its integration — largely through internal yoga — of yoginī (*kaula*) forms and practices.

[159] See notes 13 and 14, above and Grags pa rgyal mtshan, "He ru ka'i chas 'drug", 266ff. The Tibetan scholar cites the *Hevajra* corpus and Abhayākaragupta as his sources, as well as the *Saṃputa* tantra, which also describes charnel ascetic observances as yoga tantra and on which Abhayākaragupta wrote a commentary, *c.f.* Sanderson, "The Śaiva age," 157.

In conclusion, this section has examined evidence for a Buddhist liturgical and iconographic formalization of ritualized charnel asceticism — including the use of skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and charnel ornaments, and their representation as implements of Heruka — through the formalization and illustration of Saṃvara tantra and this tradition's demonstrable integration of historically *kāpālika* implements into Vajrayāna methods of deity yoga and its iconographies.

Conclusion: Skulls and charnel ornaments in Tibetan sources for Buddhist tantra

This chapter has discussed evidence for the ways in which charnel materials were accumulated, reformed and adapted by Buddhist authors during the eighth to twelfth centuries into the visual and liturgical traditions of tantra that would become fundamental to Tibetan religious life.

This was a gradual, incomplete and non-linear process, further elaborated by the expansion of *rnal 'byor bla na med* (or *yogānuttara, *anuttarayoga*) tantra in south Asia and the Himalayas during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[160] In many yoginī tantras especially, the five charnel ornaments — as well as the skull and *khaṭvāṅga* — became implements for the post-initiatory practice or observance (*caryā, vrata*) of its most skilled practitioners.[161] This is reflected as well in the characterization of many of the founding teachers and authors of Vajrayāna in the twelfth century collective hagiography of the *Grub chen brgyad bcu rtsa bzhi'i rnam thar* (see note 5, above). By the early thirteenth century when the siddhas Tilopa and Nāropa were depicted at the Alchi gSum brtegs (fig. 2.1), these materials, their associated methods and deities had come to define the most accomplished tantric specialists, whose modes of ritualized charnel asceticism represented the Buddhist contextualization of those practiced as well by historically adjacent non-Buddhist (*i.e.* Pāśupata, Śaiva, *śākta*) communities.

As Tibetan material religion was shaped by the translation and illustration of these ritual methodologies and their sources, these objects were cultivated as a particular type of instrumental technology: While holding a skull or mounting it on a staff had been characteristic of the *kāpālika* vow to identify with the transgression of killing a brahmin since its earliest known

---

[160] Hatley notes that the conversion of ḍākinī was similarly cumulative, beginning with their subjugation in the *Mahāvairocana* and *Guhya* ritual traditions and completed in the practice and maṇḍala of Saṃvara and other sources translated into Tibetan in the eleventh century, *idem.,* "The Brahmayāmalatantra," 188-189. On the translation and historiography of Indian sources for Vajrayāna into Tibetan *c.f.* Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism;* Dalton, "A crisis of doxography" and Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, passim.*

[161] Wedemeyer has tabulated the components of Buddhist tantric *vrata* and found that, while most advise wearing charnel ornaments, only five advise the use of skull and/or *khaṭvāṅga* including the *Laghusaṃvara* and *Saṃputa* tantras, as well as *Buddhakapāla, op.cit.*, 163.

Figure 2.42: Detail of Saptākṣara maṇḍala (fig. 2.3) with skulls holding offerings on vases placed around the central assembly, as described, for example, in the *Laghusaṃvara*, chapter 2 (see also fig. 2.1).

practice by Pāśupata ascetics, in the development of tantra the function of the skull was expanded to general use as an offering vessel (figure 2.42). Moreover, by the tenth century, these ritual objects had been technically specified by Buddhist commentators as equivalent to a relic of the reality body of the Buddha (*dharmakāyaśarīra*), simultaneously associating it both with the experience of Buddhist gnosis (*buddhajñāna*) and the historical valorization of relics.[162]

Therefore, in the formalization of sources for Buddhist tantra between the eighth and twelfth centuries, iconographically and liturgically, skulls had become points of engagement used to prepare, collect, transform or distribute ritually empowered substances; to bind together initiates and teachers or siddhas and their consorts; to illustrate the vow of guardians, ḍākinīs and other oath-bound affiliates of Buddhist ritual systems; as platforms to subjugate, transform and control adversaries or negativities; and used in *yab yum* figures at the center of maṇḍala to illustrate the accomplishment of the nondual through the accumulation of *bodhicitta* as *amṛta* and the

[162] Gray, “Skull imagery and skull magic”, 27-28. Note that the category of relics includes texts and other non-charnel materials. The ninth century *Buddhakapāla* tantra further legitimizes these objects’ efficacy by describing a skull as the source of its ritual and textual corpus.

Figure 2.43: Detail of the deity pair from fig. 2.3 with five-skull crowns, single-skull topped *khaṭvāṅga* and a skull vessel connecting them in union.

connection of complementary opposites (*i.e.* male and female, method [*upāya*] and knowledge [*prajñā*]; figure 2.43).[163]

The *khaṭvāṅga*, on the other hand, can be seen as a permutation of the banner-topped staff of more orthodox brahmin ascetics and the characteristic club of followers of Lakulīśa, as well as a form of *yamadaṇḍa*.[164] In yoginī tantra and its sources, this instrument is primarily used to facilitate deity yoga with forms of Bhairava or Heruka, and iconographically it is typically on the left side of the figure like the hand-held skull, visually suggesting how *kāpālika* methods and charnel materials were cultivated as *vāmācāra*, or left-handed conduct which ritually instrumentalizes transgressive or impure associations and materials.[165] However, while the skull has a variety of discernible applications as a vessel in the sources of Buddhist tantra, the *khaṭvāṅga*'s material function becomes more obscure, despite its being the most historically consistent visual representation of the various

[163] See, for example, Bhattacharya on *yab yum* figures, *op.cit.,* 163-4.

[164] See Wedemeyer, *op.cit.,*158 and 253n85 for an etymological analysis of *khaṭvāṅga* from a Pāśupata commentary which suggests the staff is the body (*-aṅga*) of the skull taken or torn from its corpse (*khadvā-* or *khaṭvā-*).

[165] Beer mentions a left and right-handed schism in Buddhist methods recorded in the third century *Lalitavistara*, *op.cit.,* 249. Stoddard moreover finds that left-handed ritual action is characteristic of Tibetan yoginī tantra, especially the *Laghusaṃvara*, *op.cit.,* 170-1. English also describes the ritual use of the left hand in brahmanical society as "social religious iconoclasm,"*op.cit.,* 41.

traditions of *vrata* discussed here.[166] In later representations of Buddhist tantra, as in Tibet, the *khaṭvāṅga* typically has three skulls — as in the top left figure of Guru Rinpoche in fig. 2.30 and fig. 2.38 — or three heads in various states of decomposition.[167]

The processes of formalization described here have also supported the refinement of charnel ornaments from a single piece in the hair to the *pañcamudrā,* a set of five seals or insignia worn on the body and made from human remains.[168] Drawing from the description of observances in the sixth chapter of the *Hevajra* tantra, Grags pa rgyal mtshan lists these as a crown, earrings, bracelets, a girdle, and rings around the upper arms and ankles.[169] The *Hevajra* tantra moreover includes an explanation for how the ornaments and implements of the Heruka yogin — including the *asthimālikā* or bone necklace, as well as the *khaṭvāṅga* and *ḍamaru* — correspond to specific buddhas and their respective clans or families (*kula)*, and that the crown should be made of five pieces of skull representing the five buddhas.[170] Moreover, in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* of Abhayākaragupta — whose *Vajravāli* was another valued source for early monastic leaders (see note 10, above) — the majority of wrathful deities are described wearing the *pañcamudrā* as crown, earrings, necklace, bracelets and girdle and, as in the *Hevajra* tantra, each of these are co-ordinated to buddha families.[171]

While Abhayākaragupta and Grags pa rgyal mtshan worked primarily within the *Hevajra* commentarial tradition in order to articulate this set, earlier tenth century commentators on the

---

[166] It is for this reason that this object, like the skull *mālā* and other iconographic features, is not included in the final chapter and technical study: While many skulls — as well as *rkang gling*, bone ornaments and skull *ḍamaru* — have been preserved and made accessible physically or through the descriptions in primary sources, I have never had the opportunity to examine a *khaṭvāṅga*. See also chapter 1, note 36. There is nevertheless a description of the *khaṭvāṅga* as a charnel implement for the Heruka yogin in Grags pa rgyal mtshan, “He ru ka chas ‘drug,” 268-269.

[167] See also chapter 3, figs. 3.4 and 3.15.

[168] On empowerment through bodily ornamentation in the material and visual culture of brahmanical and Buddhist south Asia, see Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries Between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Ornamental bands on the upper arms, hands and feet, neck and crown are found in images of royal figures as well as bodhisattva dating back to the last centuries BCE.

[169] See note 13, above and Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra,* 63 (ch. 6).

[170] *ibid,* 64.

[171] de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 38. de Mallmann (*ibid.,* n3) also notes the apron as an alternative sixth mudrā — rather than a form of girdle — though based not on the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, but rather a commentary on *Hevajra*, the *Yogaratnamālā* of Kāṅha, who introduced this ornament after receiving it from a ḍākinī. Kāṅha moreover associates these five mudrā with the practice of *gaṇacakra*, Sanderson, “The Śaiva age”, 179n435.

Saṃvara corpus engaged more directly with non-Buddhist *kāpālika* sources.[172] In the *Laghusaṃvara,* for example, while the text of the root tantra describes an accomplished Heruka yogin as smeared with ash and having hair marked by a skull or skulls (*kapālakṛtamūrdhaja*), the tenth century commentator Bhavabhaṭṭa clarifies that this is a five skull crown.[173] Moreover, this same author elaborates that the five mudrā mentioned in the *Laghusaṃvara* should be understood as the necklace, arm bands, earrings, sacred thread, girdle and *asthimālikā* or bone garland, a list reflected by select Tibetan translators as well.[174] At the same time, in the Śaiva *Brahamayāmala* — from which much of the *Laghusaṃvara* is derived — these mudrā are described as a skull ornament (as jewel, *ratna*) in the hair, earrings, necklace, sacred thread and girdle, with bracelets on the arms and hands.[175] As with the *khaṭvāṅga*, these represent permutations of other forms in brahmanical material religion: Where a *mekhalā* is technically any post-initiatory girdle, in the context of ritualized charnel asceticism, it was primarily made of human remains.[176]

However, as a system of ornaments worn on the body to facilitate deity yoga, the *pañcamudrā* which would become Tibetan *rus pa'i rgyan* represent the end of a cumulative process: Even in the twelfth century, some of these technical specificities were unresolved and where the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* resonates with the comprehensively Buddhist articulation of the *pañcamudrā* given in *Hevajra* tantra, the nearly contemporary *Sādhanamālā* gives this set as six by adding ash, reflecting both the legacy of Pāśupata sources and methods as well as earlier work by Buddhist authors on Saṃvara tantra.[177] Altogether, despite these variable systems and enumerations it can be seen that during the eighth to twelfth centuries, charnel ornaments as

---

[172] See Gray, *The Cakrasamvara tantra: Editions*, 11ff on the role of tenth century Buddhist commentators in the reform of Śaiva material in the Saṃvara corpus.

[173] Gray, *The Cakrasamvara tantra*, 164n4.

[174] Gray, *ibid.,* 278n40 Gray finds this explanation of the *pañcamudrā* in chapter 27 of the *Laghusaṃvara* in the sDe dge recension of Mardo's translation and the commentary of Bhavabhaṭṭa but not in other Sanskrit versions of the tantra. Like the *Laghusaṃvara*, the *Saṃvarodaya* mentions the five seals or ornaments as an implement of the Heruka yogin, but does not describe them; *c.f.* Tsuda, *op.cit.,* 284ff (ch. 21).

[175] This list — though not identified as a comprehensive, enumerated set (*i.e. pañcamudrā*) — is given in chapter 80 of the *Brahmayāmala* and repeated in the third part of the *Jayadrathayāmala*, Sanderson, *ibid.*

[176] Similarly, where a householder might wear a cotton *upavīta,* the charnel ascetic specialist would wear one of human hair or sinew; *c.f.* Sanderson, "The Śaiva age," 209n479.

[177] Bhattacharya, *op.cit.,* 196. Here the set is described as necklace, bracelets, single skull in the hair, girdle, ash and sacred thread (which is uniquely considered here as equivalent to the *khaṭvāṅga*). The tenth century Śaiva commentator Yāmunācaryā cites the list from the *Jayadrathayāmala*, but also adds ash, which is otherwise associated with orthodox ascetics and the Pāśupata vow, Sanderson, *ibid.* The tenth century Buddhist commentator Jayabhadra likewise articulates a system of six mudrā, also with single skull ornament in the hair, ash and sacred thread; Gray, *ibid.*, 165n5 and 278n43.

the *pañcamudrā* — like other *kāpālika* implements — became central to the dynamic practices of Buddhist tantra and the representation of its accomplished practitioners (*e.g.* siddhas) and characteristically wrathful deities (*e.g.* Heruka).

In conclusion, this chapter has introduced evidence for the integration and expanded visual and liturgical functions of skulls and charnel or bone ornaments in sources for Tibetan material religion. Though these objects may be related to or derived from informal practices of charnel asceticism which existed prior or adjacent to these traditions, this analysis has relied on historically formalized sources in order to present a document which is transparent to non-practitioners.[178] This research is not exhaustive in its treatment of written and visual sources but rather aims to articulate an object-based hermeneutical rubric based on available evidence. At the same time, descriptions of these instruments in the tantric textual corpus and/or its iconography are understood as an unreliable indicator for their material reality.[179] Nevertheless, this research has proposed a cultural historical narrative for the cultivation of charnel materials in Buddhist tantra from the origins of their ritualization through the *kāpālika* vow to the methods and iconographies of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra as they were introduced to Tibet during the eighth to twelfth centuries.

[178] In his semiotic reading of these sources and their utilization of antinomian associations, Wedemeyer has noted that the “sanitary” nature of tantric historiography is a necessity when there is no recorded evidence for the less refined version, *op.cit.,* 196. He also demonstrates how these practices were likely cultivated by the Buddhist monastic elite as well as non-monastic specialists who were equally deliberate in their use of transgressive rhetoric.

[179] Hugh Urban has argued that the material reality of *kāpālika* practices is irrelevant to the efficacy of their social and religious notoriety, *idem.,* “The remnants of desire: Sacrificial violence and sexual transgression in the cult of the Kāpālikas and in the writings of Georges Bataille,” *Religion* 25 (1995), 68.

3 *rKang gling* in the iconography of *gcod*

gCod and its sources in the bKa' brgyud traditions

While skulls and bone ornaments have been integrated into a diversity of ritual traditions in the Buddhist tantra of Tibet, the *rkang gling* — or leg flute, frequently translated as thighbone trumpet — is most consistently documented in relation to *bdud kyi gcod yul*, or the practice of cutting off demons, shortened to *gcod*. This chapter will explore the iconography of *gcod* through its two primary teachers and lineage founders Ma gcig lab sgron (1055-1149) and the Indian siddha Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas (d. 1117), and demonstrate how the *rkang gling* and sādhana of *lus sbyin,* or the gift of the body as food, were used to visually represent the characteristic practice of this tradition. This work will moreover describe how bKa' brgyud sources have shaped its historiography and iconographies, and examine *gcod* as a Tibetan innovation in the methods and instrumentation of ritualized charnel asceticism.

A nineteenth century painting of Ma gcig — produced in the style of the bKa' brgyud monastery of dPal spungs in Khams — depicts the founder of Tibetan *gcod* as white ḍākinī (Tbt. *mkha' 'gro ma*), naked and dancing in *ardhaparyaṅka* with a bell in the left hand and a double-sided hand drum called *ḍamaru* (Tbt. *cang te'u*) in the right (figure 3.1). In this image, this instrument is a *thod rnga,* or skull drum, a form of *ḍamaru* specialized to charnel ascetic and tantric practice.[1] Featured above her and to the right is the yoginī deity Vajravārāhī (rDo rje phag mo) in the form of a red ḍākinī with skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and chopper (*gri gug*); above and on the left, Ma gcig's Indian teacher Pha dam pa holds a *thod rnga* in the right hand and a *rkang gling* raised in the left. This *thang ka* — executed with minimal ornamentation and an atmospheric pastoral landscape characteristic to the regional style in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — illustrates the historical connection between bKa' brgyud communities and *gcod* in a number of ways.

When this painting of Ma gcig was produced, dPal spungs was a Karma bKa' brgyud institution shaped by the presence of the scholar 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899), an active historian of Tibetan Vajrayāna and *gcod* in particular. During his life, he produced a compilation of sources on this tradition in which he preserved a commentarial heritage which originates with Karma Pakshi (1204-1283), the second Karma pa, who is seen in fig. 3.1 under

[1] See chapter 4, section 5 on the history and use of the *thod rnga* as a specific type of *ḍamaru*.

Figure 3.1: Ma gcig Lab sgron, dPal spung (Khams), 19th century, now at the Rubin Museum of Art (C2010.3).

Pha dam pa, on the left.[2] ‘Jam mgon kong sprul also produced a commentary on *gcod* and a series of feast-offerings (*tshogs*) based on a sādhana written by the fourteenth Karma pa, Theg mchog rdo rje (1797-1867).[3] Many of the *gcod* texts and commentaries available to ‘Jam mgon kong sprul were edited in the seventeenth century by another bKa’ brgyud historian of *gcod* active in this eastern region of Tibet, Karma chags med (1610-1678).[4] Moreover, ‘Jam mgon kong sprul’s scholarship incorporates the knowledge of the nearby Karma bKa’ brgyud community at Zur mang, celebrated for their preservation of the oral and commentarial teachings of *gcod*.[5] The iconography of this *thang ka* therefore resonates with a localized interest in *gcod* and bKa’ brgyud historiography in the nineteenth century.

However, the sources of these teachings have been represented with an historically dynamic iconography: In the fourteenth century Tsatsapuri — a monument constructed by patrons of the ‘Bri gung bKa’ brgyud and near to the Alchi Chos 'khor in Ladakh — Ma gcig holds the *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* in the same manner as Pha dam pa in the later dPal spungs painting (figure 3.2). Here — as in other representations of Ma gcig from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries discussed below — it is the Tibetan *gcod* lineage founder rather than the Indian siddha who is featured holding these characteristic instruments. This chapter aims to describe the historical narrative connecting these two paintings and interpret its sources as evidence for the use of *rkang gling* in Tibetan visual and material culture, including the integration of *gcod* into the broader traditions of Buddhist monasticism, siddha iconography and the observances of *brtul zhugs pa.*

---

[2] Almost all recent scholars and translators of *gcod* have drawn from ‘Jam mgon kong sprul’s historiographic corpus: See Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chod,* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996). On p.195n35, Edou locates many of his sources within the fourteenth volume of ‘Jam mgon kong sprul’s compilation *gDam ngag mdzod*, or *Treasury of Precious Methods* (BDRC no. W20877) . See also Giacomella Orofino, “The Great Wisdom Mother and the gcod tradition,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 396-416 and Sarah Harding, “Introduction”, in *Machik’s Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting the Body out as Food*, trans. Sarah Harding (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publication, 2003), 21ff.

[3] *idem.,* “The garden of all joy” in *Chöd practice manual and commentary*, trans. Lama Lödö Rinpoche (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 34-80; Tbt. *Lus mchod sbyin gyi zin bris mdor bsdus kun dga’i skyed tshal.* ‘Jam mgon kong sprul records a lineage in which Karma Pakshi is the first of several Karma pas to have received *gcod* teachings or written commentaries on its methods. This volume also provides a schematic for a visualization resembling the composition of fig. 3.1, with Ma gcig as the central deity framed by Pha dam pa and Vajravārāhī (identified as Vajrayoginī) above her (p. 40).

[4] Edou, *op.cit.,*180n11. See also Harding, *op.cit., 2*85n1.

[5] ‘Jam mgon kong sprul, “The garden of all joy,” 36. The Zur mang monastic community was founded in the fifteenth century.

Figure 3.2: Ma gcig with *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* at Alchi Tsatsapuri sPyan ras gzigs Lha khang, 14th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

Ma gcig's iconography and the interpretation of *lus sbyin* as the definitive tantric practice of *gcod* is supported by early sources: The earliest bKa' brgyud commentators received oral transmissions on this sādhana from Ma gcig's descendent and disciple Thod smyon bsam grub (c. 12th century), recorded by 'Jam mgon kong sprul as the lineage of *gcod* feast-offering (*gcod tshogs rgyud pa*) which was transmitted to Karma Pakshi as well as Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339).[6] The third Karma pa's *Zab mo bdud kyi gcod yul gyi khrid yig* explains that *lus sbyin* should be practiced as teachings on Prajñāparāmitā (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa), and he furthermore produced some of the earliest documentation for the oral transmission of Ma gcig's teachings and a classification of those demons to be cut off through the practice of *gcod* based on obstacles to Buddhist goals such as an attachment to self or perceptual thought.[7]

[6] *ibid.,* 19. See also Janet Gyatso, "The development of the gcod tradition," in *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization,* eds. Barbara Nimri-Aziz and Matthew T. Kapstein (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 335 and Edou, *op.cit.,* 90.

[7] Rang byung rdo rje, *"*Zab mo bdud kyi gcod yul gyi khrid yig," in *Rang byung rdo rje gsung 'bum,* BDRC no. W30541, vol. 11, fols. 303-316, accessed 18 June 2019. Among these texts are the earliest datable references to the *bka' tshoms* (spoken teachings) of Ma gcig, also found in 'Jam mgon kong sprul's *gDam ngag mdzod,* vol. 14. See also Edou, *op.cit.,* 89. For a discussion of the ambiguous identity of the author Rang byung rdo rje as Karma Pakshi or the third Karma pa of the same name, see Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism,* 97ff.

Another source from the fourteenth century suggests how Thod smyon's transmissions of Ma gcig's teachings further shaped the historiography of *gcod*: At least the first two chapters of the *Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod kyi don gsal byed* — hereafter *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* — were written by a scholar called Nam mkha'i rgyal mtshan (b.1370) who identifies himself as eighth in a *gcod* lineage which descends from Thod smyon.[8] The fifteenth century bKa' brgyud historian 'Gos lo tsā ba writes about Thod smyon as an active tantric practitioner — also called Gangs pa — whose followers established a number of religious institutions in central Tibet in the centuries after Ma gcig's death.[9] In his *rnam bshad*, Nam mkha'i rgyal mtshan records details of Ma gcig's biography — including her identification at birth as a ḍākinī, education in Prajñāparāmitā and meetings with Pha dam pa — in addition to the instructions on feasts and empowerments (as well as sūtra) received and perfected by Thod smyon.[10]

Early bKa' brgyud commentators may also have had access to a biography by the Shangs pa author Sangs rgyas ston pa brTson 'grus sengge (1207-1278) who encountered a *sprul sku* or emanation body of Ma gcig in the thirteenth century.[11] 'Gos lo tsā ba describes brTson 'grus sengge as also having received extensive instruction in *gcod* from a teacher known as Sum ston ras pa (n.d.) who prophesied that his student would play an important role in the spread of Ma gcig's teachings.[12] Many prominent details of Ma gcig's life and teaching in brTson 'grus sengge's account reflect the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* of Nam mkha'i rgyal mtshan,

---

[8] As Harding notes in her translation of *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad,* a colophon at the end of the second chapter identifies the author as Nam mkha'i rgyal mtshan, the eighth in a tantric lineage of *gcod* descended from Thod smyon, while the colophon at the end of the full text lists *gang bdag* as the author, which may be *someone* or allude specifically to a Gangs lineage holder (*op.cit.*, 15-19). The Tibetan text from which these translations have been made is available as "Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod kyi don gsal byed", in *gCod kyi Chos 'khor* (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1974), fols. 10-410. The first two chapters of this same biography are also translated by Edou, *op.cit.,* 117-139.

[9] 'Gos lo tsā ba also identifies Thod smyon as Ma gcig's grandson in *The Blue Annals*, 986-7. He is elsewhere described as her son and spiritual heir; *c.f.* Harding*, Machik's Complete Explanation*, 286n7 and n8, and Edou, *op.cit.,* 89.

[10] Harding, *Machik's Complete Explanation,* 100-1.

[11] There are two versions of this text known to me: 1) *idem., Ma gcig lab kyi sgron ma'i rnam thar dang gcod kyi chos 'khor ma 'ongs lung bstan bcas pa*, BDRC, no. W1KG1646, accessed 7 June 2019. This copy is a scanned copy printed in *dbu can* from the National Archives in Mongolia and 2) *idem., Phung po gzan skyur ba'i rnam par bshad pa las ma gcig lab sgron ma'i rnam par thar pa mdor msdus tsam zhig,* University of Washington East Asia Collection, no. BQ7950.L377 B78 1900z, accessed 30 August 2019. Unfortunately, these two versions are in need of a critical reading which is not feasible within the scope of this dissertation. On the Shangs pa as an independent lineage defined by the oral transmission (*bka' brgyud*) of tantra, see Matthew T. Kapstein, "The Shangs-pa bKa'-brgyud: an unknown tradition of Tibetan Buddhism," in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, *op.cit.,* 138-144.

[12] 'Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 744. See also "Sangs rgyas ston pa'i rnam thar"*,* in *bKa' rgyud pa'i bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar khag cig dang khrid yig sogs,* BDRC no. W1KG1286, accessed 10 June 2019.

suggesting a common origin or knowledge of the *gcod* tradition.[13] In each, Ma gcig is recognized as a ḍākinī and student of Pha dam pa, as well as the source of the *gcod* sādhana of *lus sbyin*.

Many of these figures in the early *gcod* tradition are contextualized by ‘Gos lo tsā ba in the *Deb ther ngon po*, wherein the bKa’ brgyud scholar emphatically links Ma gcig to Pha dam pa through the transmission of several key teachings from India, including the precepts of Mahāmudrā (*Phyag rgya chen po*) and Prajñāparāmitā through which she would develop the doctrines of *gcod.*[14] However, ‘Gos lo tsā ba’s treatment of Ma gcig, *lus sbyin* and the innovations of *gcod* is brief and selective in comparison to his thorough documentation of Pha dam pa’s activities, accomplishments and teachings in both India and Tibet including those of *zhi byed sdug bsngal*, or the pacification of suffering.[15] Rather than describing Ma gcig’s recognition as a ḍākinī, ‘Gos lo tsā ba discusses her conditioning and education as a Buddhist religious leader — including her ordination, witnessed by Grwa pa mngon shes (1012-1090) who is opposite Karma Pakshi in fig. 3.1 — and the transmission of her teachings.[16]

Despite being an independent lineage which originates with Ma gcig, these thirteenth to fifteenth century sources set an important precedent for the cultivation of *gcod* in bKa’ brgyud traditions: As noted by Janet Gyatso, there is no *gcod* practice in the Sa skya teachings which dominated

---

[13] Harding notes this similarity between the bKa’ brgyud traditions and details of *gcod* ritual practice provided in *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad; op.cit.,* 49. Edou further speculates that the two versions of Ma gcig’s biography and teachings were taken from a larger text which no longer survives, but also that parts of Nam mkha’i rgyal mtshan’s text preserves work from the third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje, who died in 1339 (*op.cit,* 196n38). brTson ‘grus sengge’s text however may be the oldest datable version of Ma gcig’s work; *c.f.* Edou, *op.cit.,* 90. Alternative sources for Ma gcig’s biography are noted at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archive in Dharamsala, in Edou*, ibid.,* 197n44 and another fifteenth century version in Ladakh is mentioned by Heather Stoddard, “Eat it up or throw it to the dogs? dGe ‘dun chos phel (1903-1951), Ma gcig Lab sgron (1055-1149), and Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (d. 1117): A ramble through the burial grounds of ordinary and ‘holy’ beings in Tibet,” in *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas*, eds. Sarah Jacoby and Antonio Terrone, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 30. I have not had access to either of these latter texts.

[14] ‘Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 911.

[15] Dan Martin notes that *gcod* gradually overtakes *zhi byed* in popularity, though Pha dam pa did not knowingly establish either; these distinctions are rather a product of later — predominantly bKa’ brgyud — scholarship and historiography, see *idem.,* “Crazy wisdom in moderation: Padampa Sangye’s use of counterintuitive methods in dealing with negative mental states,” in *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism* ed. Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 193-214.

[16] The account of her education in Prajñāpāramitā with Grwa pa mngon shes is also found in other sources of her biography to which ‘Gos lo tsā ba likely had access, including the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* and/or brTson ‘grus sengge’s text; see Harding, *op.cit.,* 65 and Edou, *op.cit.,* 110.

central Tibet in the thirteen to fifteenth centuries.[17] And the fourteenth century history of Buddhism by the Sa skya scholar Bu ston (1290-1364) mentions neither Pha dam pa nor Ma gcig.[18] Likewise, the monastic reformer and dGe lugs founder Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) authored a commentary on *gcod* which preserves the central practice of *lus sbyin* and use of charnel instruments, yet derives in part from a revelatory lineage independent of Ma gcig's immediate disciples and descendants.[19] The rNying ma *gcod* tradition is also informed by later revelatory material, the source of which is not Ma gcig but rather Guru Rinpoche's consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal.[20] Similarly, the Bon *gcod* tradition does not originate with Ma gcig, but is rather an independent corpus of mother tantra (*ma rgyud*) with a white-bodied ḍākinī as its revelatory source.[21] It is nevertheless the practice of *lus sbyin* which is consistent to each of these *gcod* teachings.[22]

Within these textual sources the material culture of *gcod* and use of *rkang gling* is generally less evident or explicit: In the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad,* a description of the *rkang gling* — sourced from a corpse, determined appropriate for use and trimmed to size (see chapter 4, section 4) — is given in the context of Thod smyon's dialogue with Ma gcig on the practice of *lus sbyin* from the fifth chapter.[23] Though the date for this information is ambiguous, it nevertheless frames this material knowledge as a direct communication from Ma gcig on the instrument's necessity for calling ḍākinī and other demons during the practice of feast-offering*;* the same text says relatively little about other instruments or materials used in *gcod*. In 'Jam mgon kong sprul's well-researched commentary on the *gcod* sādhana, the *rkang gling* is similarly used to

---

[17] Gyatso, "The development of the gcod tradition," 337. Gyatso suggests that the Sa skya *kusali* can be understood as a similar practice and methodology. The bKa' brgyud traditions' early dominance of the historiography of *gcod* and the tantric teachings of Thod smyon is noted by Edou as well, *op.cit.,* 90-92.

[18] Ngawang Zangpo, "Translator's Introduction," in *Butön's History of Buddhism in India and its Spread to Tibet: A Treasury of Priceless Scripture* (Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 2013), xiv.

[19] Edou, *op.cit.,* 192n50. For a study and translation of Tsongkhapa's writings on *gcod* see also Carol Savvas, "A study of the profound path of gcod: The Mahāyāna Buddhist meditation tradition of Tibet's great woman saint Machig Labdron," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1990).

[20] Edou, *op.cit.,* 93. *rKang ling* nevertheless came to be used elsewhere in rNying ma mahāyoga tantra (see chapter 4 section 4).

[21] Alejandro Chaoul, *Chöd Practice in the Bön Tradition,* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2009), 27. Though its oldest sources are dated to the twelfth century, the majority of Bon *gcod*'s textual tradition comes from the fourteenth or nineteenth centuries. On the origins of Bon and its corpus of mother tantras — dated no earlier than the twelfth century — see Dan Martin, *Mandala Cosmogony: Human Body Good Thought and the Revelation of the Secret Mother Tantras of Bon* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994).

[22] Gyatso finds Ma gcig is nevertheless the oldest documented teacher of *lus sbyin*, *idem.,* "The development of the gcod tradition," 340.

[23] Harding, *op.cit.*, 140ff. This use of *rkang gling* is for the initial stage of the sādhana.

invite guests (*e.g.* demons, deities, ḍākinīs) to the feast-gathering or *tshogs* by first tapping the mouthpiece and then blowing it three times.[24]

Other sources reveal that the *rkang gling* may also have been integrated into Buddhist yoga tantra as an implement for the charnel ascetic yogin as early as the thirteenth century: Grags pa rgyal mtshan, for example, specifies that the *dung chen* described in the *Saṃputa* tantra as an instrument for Heruka yoga is in fact made from a human leg.[25] A source from the Bon *gcod* tradition dated to the fourteenth century similarly identifies *rkang gling* as one of the implements of its practitioners in combination with bone ornaments, a *bandha* (skull) and drum.[26] After the fifteenth century, the *rkang gling* came to be associated with the tradition of *brtul zhugs spyod pa*, or practice of the observance, which was especially cultivated by bKa' brgyud lineages as an expression of Buddhist tantric orthodoxy through the antinomian and nondual methods and materials of ritualized charnel asceticism.[27] This integration is noted by 'Gos lo tsā ba, who suggests the interrelation of the homophones *spyod* (practice) and *gcod* (cutting) are an indication of their similarities as tantric methodologies.[28]

Building on these historiographic narratives and sources, the following sections will address how the practice of *gcod* and its material culture relate to the historical cultivation of iconographies for Ma gcig and her teacher Pha dam pa beginning in the thirteenth century and specifically through their representation with the *rkang gling*.

---

[24] 'Jam mgon kong sprul, "The garden of all joy," 37. He gives no description of the instrument itself or its construction.

[25] Grags pa rgyal mtshan, "He ru ka'i chas drug", 270. The Sa skya scholar makes no mention of *gcod* or Ma gcig, however.

[26] Donatella Rossi, "An introduction to the 'mKha' 'gro gsang gcod' teachings of Bon," *East and West* 58, no. 1 (2008), 227. On the skull as *bandha* see chapters 2 and 4, section 1.

[27] David M. Divalerio, *The Holy Madmen of Tibet* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24ff and 54. Divalerio finds that the *rkang gling* and practice of *gcod* are included within the methodologies of sixteenth century bKa' brgyud religious leaders who take up the post-initiatory vows of Heruka yoga in response (at least in part) to dGe lugs monastic reformers and their political allies. Alternatively, Dan Martin finds an early mention of the *rkang gling* dated to a sixteenth century biography of Ma gcig from the corpus of tantric specialist Thang stong rgyal po (1361-1485) and his disciple gShong chen ri khrod pa (n.d.), "Ma gcig gi rnam thar mdzad par bco lnga ma" in *Thang stong rgyal po gsung 'bum* vol 1., BDRC no. W23919, accessed 25 March 2020. My thanks to Dr. Martin for confirming this by email, 13 December 2018. In this text, the *rkang gling* is one of a set of charnel implements — including *rus rgyan* and a skull — used to engage ḍākinī.

[28] 'Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 980. The fifteenth century historian goes as far as saying that the spelling of *gcod yul* was originally *spyod yul*.

Early representations of Ma gcig lab sgron, *rkang gling* and the practice of *gcod*

While the above has introduced sources for the history of *gcod* and the *rkang gling*, a series of fourteenth and fifteenth century images — a number of which, like fig. 3.2, are preserved in the ‘Bri gung bKa’ brgyud monuments of the western Himalayas — offer alternative perspectives on the representation of this practice and its characteristic instruments. This narrative initially centers on representations of Ma gcig Lab sgron as the Tibetan *gcod* lineage founder and the relationship between her iconography, teachings and the ritual methods of *lus sbyin*.

Figure 3.3: Ma gcig with five skull crown on corpse, Alchi Tsatsapuri mChod rten Lha khang, 13-14th centuries. Image by Rob Linrothe.

Firstly, surviving images of Ma gcig from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries support the longevity of her recognition as a white-bodied ḍākinī, otherwise recorded in biographical sources.[29] However, in another *lha khang* of Alchi Tsatsapuri — constructed slightly earlier and adjacent to the location of fig. 3.2 — an image of Ma gcig with *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* dancing on a corpse rather than directly on a lotus platform suggests how her iconography and the practice of *gcod* were interpreted in relation to that of the greater Buddhist tantric corpus and its historical sources (figure 3.3). Here, Ma gcig resembles the two-armed deities of yoginī tantra (see chapter 2), as in this thirteenth century central Tibetan image of Vajravārāhī in a six-pointed maṇḍala, an iconographic program popular in bKa’ brgyud liturgical

[29] See note 10, above and Harding, *op.cit.,* 57, for example, where Ma gcig is addressed as a ḍākinī in the first line of the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad.*

and visual culture following the *phyi dar* (tenth to twelfth centuries).[30]

In the *thang ka* in fig. 3.4, Vajravārāhī is framed at top and bottom by representatives of bKa' brgyud lineages and surrounded by an assembly of six yoginīs within the eight charnel grounds, shown as a red-bodied *vajrayoginī* with the skull and *khaṭvāṅga* on her left, chopper in the raised right hand, and wearing — similar to Ma gcig in fig. 3.3 — a five-skull crown and ornaments on the ears, hips, chest, arms and legs.[31] A comparison of the iconography for these two figures suggests an implicit connection between historical modes of Buddhist tantra and *gcod* as a method

Figure 3.4: Vajravarāhī (rDo rje phag mo) and assembly of yoginī within the eight charnel grounds, 13th century; see Kossak and Singer 1998.

[30] See English on the history of the Vajravārāhī tradition in Sanskrit commentaries of the Buddhist yoginī corpus and its preservation in Tibet by predominantly bKa' brgyud authors, *idem., Vajrayoginī,* xxii-xxiii and 47-54. There is another thirteenth century Vajravārāhī maṇḍala below in fig. 3.16 and in chapter 4, section 3.

[31] This painting is discussed within the early stylistic traditions of Tibetan painting by Jane Casey Singer, who notes that many of the figures in the bKa' brgyud lineages of the upper and lower register are unknown due to the condition of the inscriptions but they include prominent disciples of Phag mo gru pa (1110-1170), *idem., Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), pl. 21. This iconography for Vajravārāhī was cultivated in sources for Tibetan Cakrasaṃvara as the consort of the deity Heruka and found in the *Sādhanamālā*, see Bhattacharya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography,* 104-5. See also de Mallmann, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique,* 425-429 on the various forms of this yoginī deity — including a white form in *ālīḍha* — and *ibid.,* 349 for the connection between the *aṣṭaśmaśāna* and the maṇḍala of Vajravārāhī in the same twelfth century sources.

for ritualized charnel asceticism: In the mahāyoga and yoginī tantra practices of *gaṇacakra (*Tbt. *'khor lo'i tshogs*) discussed in the previous chapter, ḍākinī are engaged through offerings presented or refined with the use of a skull, whereas in the *tshogs* of *lus sbyin* this offering is made with the practitioner's own body and its recipients are summoned using an instrument which is also made with human remains.

The liturgical and iconographic connection between *gcod* and yoginī tantra is made more explicit in her biography, where her disciple Thod smyon recognizes Ma gcig not only as a ḍākinī but specifically as the deity Vajravārāhī.[32] Moreover, in many versions of the *gcod* sādhana — interpreted by a number of Tibetan religious scholars as an exceptional form of *ma rgyud* — the practitioner embodies this same tantric deity in order to perform the *tshogs* in which the ordinary body is offered as food.[33] Thus, illustrated as a ḍākinī and apotheosized as Vajravārāhī, Ma gcig's iconography suggests the efficacy of her teachings and the practice of *lus sbyin* as well as their interpretation in relation to historically established visual and ritual precedents for Buddhist tantra in Tibet. And similarly to the observances of mahāyoga and Heruka deity yoga which are characteristic to the Tibetan *rnal 'byor bla na med* (**anuttarayoga*) corpus, this practice is facilitated through the use of charnel materials.

In the fourteenth century Lha khang So ma at the Alchi Chos 'khor — another temple complex constructed by the local 'Brig gung bKa' brgyud community and not one kilometer away from the Tsatsapuri — the *gcod* founder is illustrated again as a ḍākinī with *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru*, here on the rear wall, opposite the entrance and under the central image of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha and to the upper right of an eight-armed, green Tārā (sGrol ma) vertically framed by representations of the eight dangers from which she protects (*'jigs pa brgyad las skyob pa*) which include snake bite and drowning (figures 3.5 and 3.6).[34] According to the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad*, Ma gcig's empowerment as a teacher as well as a ḍākinī was recognized by the deity Tārā and in his nineteenth century commentary, 'Jam mgon kong sprul specifies green

---

[32] This is in chapter 5 of the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad; c.f.* Harding, *op.cit.,* 137-139.

[33] Edou, *op.cit.,* 85 and Harding, *op.cit.,* 51-52. Depending on the specific teaching of *gcod* being followed, the *yi dam* is most often Vajravārāhī or Khros ba nag mo (see fig. 3.31 below). 'Jam mgon kong sprul identifies the deity as Vajrayoginī, described as two-armed with skull, *khaṭvāṅga* and chopper, red-bodied and dancing on a corpse as seen in fig. 3.1.

[34] This iconographic program — as Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā — is found in the *Sādhanamālā* (no. 99) where it features a white, two-armed form of Tārā, possibly the figure opposite Ma gcig on the top left in fig. 3.5; *c.f.* Bhattacharya, *op.cit.,* 136 and de Mallmann, *op.cit.,* 370. There is no eight-armed, green Tārā in either the *Sādhanamālā* or *Niṣpannayogāvalī*.

Figures 3.5 (above) and 3.6 (right): Ma gcig in the Lha khang So ma at Alchi Chos ‘khor, 14th century. Image by Christian Luczanits with detail and black square added by author to indicate the position of fig. 3.5.

Tārā as a source in a number of *gcod* lineages.[35] Another possible connection with this specific iconographic program is suggested in the Bon corpus of mother tantra, wherein a specific series of ritual methods otherwise strongly resembles the six dharmas of Nāropa (*Na ro chos ‘drug*) with the exception of a practice on the expediency of fear which resembles *gcod*, in which fear can be engaged as an object or demon to be cut off.[36]

[35] This is in the second chapter of the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad*, translated in Harding, *op.cit.,* 86ff. ‘Jam mgon kong sprul lists green Tārā as a source in the close lineage of the mantra tradition (*sngag lugs nye rgyud*) which was also transmitted from Ma gcig by Thod smyon, *op.cit.,* 18.

[36] Martin, *Mandala Cosmogony*, 33. See also Harding, *op.cit.,* 55 on fear as an object or demon in the practice of *gcod* or note 53, below, on Prajñāparāmitā.

In both the Tsatsapuri mChod rten Lha khang and sPyan ras gzigs Lha khang (figs. 3.3 and 3.2, respectively) and here again at the Alchi Chos ‘khor in the Lha khang So ma (fig. 3.5), Ma gcig is illustrated as a ḍākinī within iconographic programs that otherwise feature the Vajradhātu maṇḍala — related to the empowerments of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* tantra, see figs. 3.23 and 3.24 below — and this apotropaic form of green Tārā, as well as the historical Buddha and buddha families, thus visually contextualizing Ma gcig’s tantric form and teachings within a broader Buddhist discourse and its sources.[37] Moreover, the two images of Ma gcig at Tsatsapuri are in identical positions relative to the overall visual program of the two *lha khang*, to the bottom right of a Vajradhātu maṇḍala on the wall to the proper left of the rear wall; in both spaces as well, the green, eight-limbed form of Tārā is nearby, to the right of Ma gcig on the same wall. Yet in these successively constructed yet related monuments at Alchi, despite stylistic and technical variations, the image of Ma gcig with *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* — *i.e.* as a tantric practitioner of *gcod* — is repeated.

Figure 3.7: Ma gcig with Pha dam pa and Guru Rinpoche over her left and right shoulders, respectively, on a *thang ka* from central Tibet, 14th century, currently in a private collection.

While these images establish a consistent, local iconography for Ma gcig, other surviving examples suggest its circulation to other lineages and communities (figures 3.7 and 3.8). In each of

[37] For dates and an iconographic overview of these spaces see the work of Christian Luczanits, especially *idem.,* “Beneficial to See”, 214-259. For documentation of the visual program at Tsatsapuri, see André Alexander, “Alchi Tsatsapuri Preliminary Report” (Leh: Tibet Heritage Fund International, 2005).

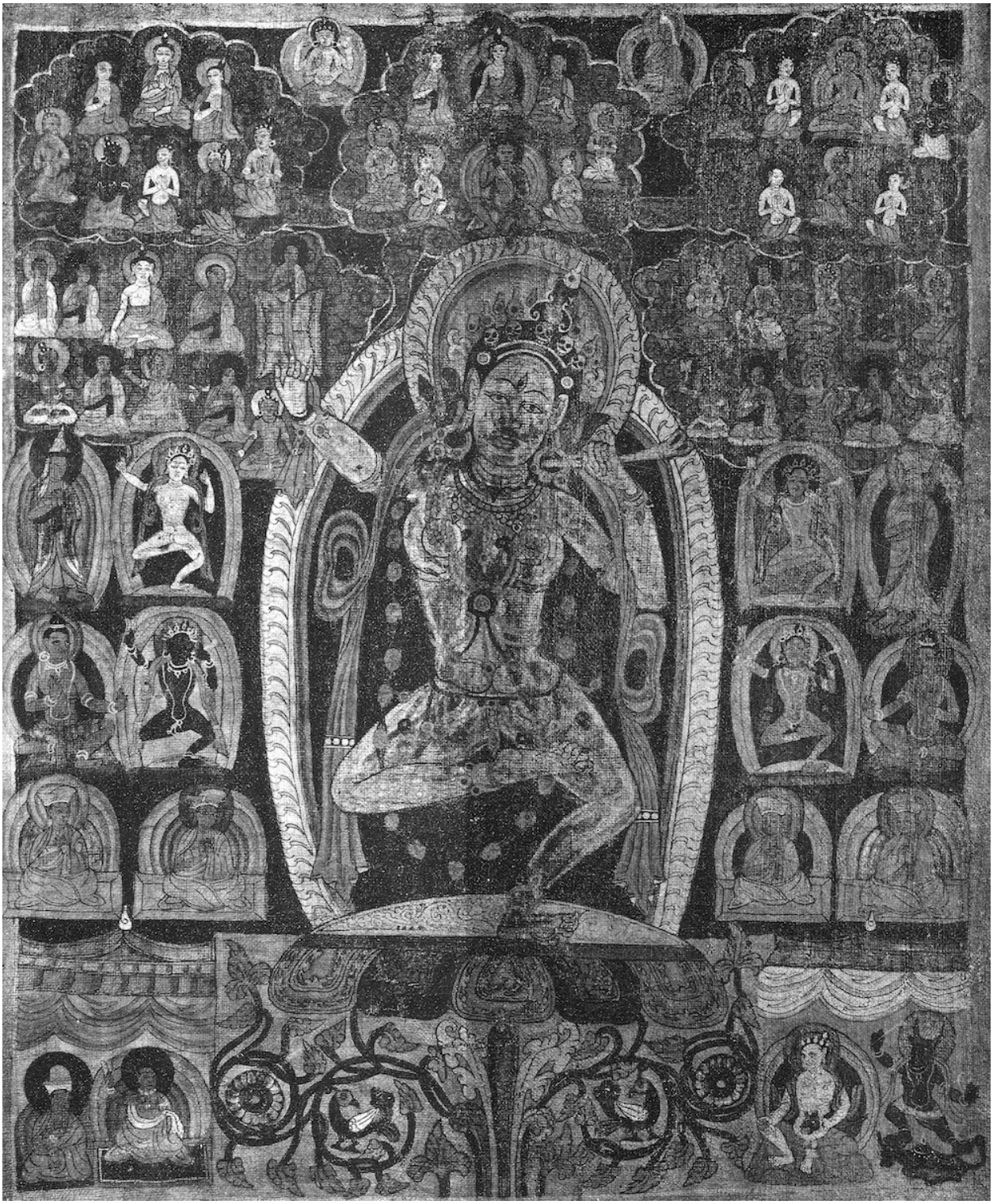


Figure 3.8: Ma gcig with *rkang gling* and ‘Brugs pa bKa’ brgyud lineage holders including Ras chung pa at left, western Himalayas (Guge or Kinnaur), 15-16th century. Ma gcig is accompanied by an assembly of four ḍākinī also holding *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru*. Published in Tucci 1949.

these *thang ka* from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Ma gcig is a white ḍākinī wearing ornaments, including the five skull crown, and holding the *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru*; in fig. 3.8, from the western Himalayas, this drum is shown as a *thod rnga* or skull drum.[38] As the central figure accompanied by an assembly of four ḍākinī, the *gcod* teacher again resembles a yoginī deity.[39] Figures in monastic dress and bKa' brgyud lineage holders frame the central group in each painting: In fig. 3.7, Pha dam pa — with empty hands raised in *dharmacakra* mudrā — and Guru Rinpoche are to Ma gcig's upper left and right, respectively. Alternatively, in fig. 3.8 Mi la ras pa (1040-1123) is just above Ma gcig's head, with his 'Brugs pa student Ras chung pa rdo rje grags pa (1085-1161) and the bKa' brgyud lineage founder Gam po pa (1089-1153) at the far left and right respectively.

By the fifteenth century, there was a diversification of Ma gcig's iconography, with increasing prominence of her representation as a ḍākinī with *ḍamaru* and bell, held low in the left hand (as in fig. 3.1) rather than the *rkang gling*. In the Guru Lha khang at Phyang (Phyi dbang), also in Ladakh and constructed under the patronage of local political authorities who supported the region's 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud community in the thirteenth to early sixteenth centuries, Ma gcig is not wearing charnel ornaments (*i.e.* the five-skull crown) and is framed by a rainbow and long-stemmed flowers as something beneficial to see (*mthong ba don ldan*), accompanied by two unidentified monastic figures (figures 3.9 and 3.10).[40] Whereas in the various examples at Alchi Chos 'khor and Tsatsapuri Ma gcig was a fairly minor figure incorporated into larger visual programs, in the Guru Lha khang she is shown with equal importance to the longevity buddha Uṣnīṣavijaya (gTsug gtor rnam rgyal ma) to her right and holding implements which have been rendered in gold and embossed.

---

[38] My thanks to Dr. Luczanits for advising me on the provenance of these two *thang ka*. Fig. 3.8 is published — but not examined at length — in Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (Rome: La Libraria della Stato, 1949), pl. 45. Tucci photographed it in Kinnaur in the early-mid twentieth century.

[39] At a number of points in the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad*, Ma gcig is attended by ḍākinīs who facilitate her activities and travels, even her (re)birth in Tibet; *c.f.* Harding, *op.cit.,* 60 and *passim.* These assemblies may moreover suggest the development of specific *gcod* empowerments, see "gCod dbang brgya rtsa'i dbang gi tsak li", an illustrated text with no colophon or publication record found on BDRC as no. W3JT13604, also discussed in chapter 4, sections 4 and 5. My thanks to Dan Martin for bringing this text — which includes representations of Ma gcig with assemblies of ḍākinī as well as the ritual implements of various *gcod* teachings — to my attention.

[40] On the rainbow halo in 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud iconography, see Luczanits, "Beneficial to see", 256. On the construction of the Guru Lha khang and its iconographic program, see Ernesto Lo Bue, "The Gu ru lha khang at Phyi dbang: A mid-15th century temple in central Ladakh" in *Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS, 2003. Volume 8: Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas*, eds. Amy Heller and Giacomella Orofino (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 175-196.

Figures 3.9 ad 3.10: Ma gcig with bell and *ḍamaru* in the Guru Lha khang in Phyang, 15th century. Images by Rob Linrothe (3.9) and Christian Luczanits (3.10) with black square added by author to indicate the position of the detail.

Ma gcig is found as well in the painted caves of Saspol (Sa spo la), fewer than ten kilometers from Alchi and dated to the fifteenth century like the Guru Lha khang.[41] In the largest of these caves, Ma gcig is to the left of the entrance just under an image of Pha dam pa of the same size (see figs. 3.27 and 3.28, below) ornamented, three-eyed and naked with a damaged rendering of an instrument being raised in the left hand, likely a *rkang gling*, as well as *ḍamaru* in the right (figure 3.11). However, in another cave at the same site, a faded painting of a two-armed ḍākinī might indicate the iconography of Ma gcig seen in in fig. 3.9 at the Guru Lha khang instead, with the left hand held lower against the body, though nothing of the implement is visible (figure 3.12).[42] Here she is again a minor figure, yet directly adjacent to the main image of Śākyamuni

[41] For dates, see Luczanits, *ibid.,* 247.

[42] My thanks to Dr. Rob Linrothe for sharing his images of Ma gcig and Pha dam pa at Saspol as well as Sreekumar Menon of the Courtauld Institute of Art for making available documentation produced by the Buddhist Architecture in the Western Himalaya research initiative at the Graz University of Technology; *c.f.* “FWF Research Project P22857”, https://archresearch.tugraz.at/results/Saspol (accessed 9 April 2020). Note that David L. Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski identify the figure of Ma gcig in the largest cave at this site as standing Vajrapāṇi, *idem., The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh,* vol. 2 (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980), 81.

Figure 3.11 (left): Ma gcig with *ḍamaru* in the right hand and an unidentifiable instrument raised to the left, Saspol cave 3, 15th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

Figure 3.12 (right): Damaged image of Ma gcig from Saspol cave 1 with left hand against the body and holding unspecified objects, 15th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

Buddha in *dharmacakra* mudrā in the center of the rear wall. These two examples at Saspol indicate how representations of Ma gcig and the practice of *gcod* had developed into diverse iconographies by this time.

Later images of Ma gcig would largely follow the convention seen in the Guru Lha khang of Phyang, showing her with a bell and *ḍamaru*. The *rkang gling*, on the other hand, would be incorporated into the iconography of Pha dam pa and later representations of siddhas, which is the focus of the next section in this chapter. In a nineteenth century *thang ka* illustrating her biography and the origins of her lineages, Ma gcig is depicted in her empowered form with bell and skull *ḍamaru* in the top register where she receives the teachings which would become *gcod* from Pha dam pa — with *rkang gling*, at top right — and another of his students, sKyo bsod rnams bla ma (n.d.) at top left (figure 3.13).[43] The narrative of this painting — including her training in the recitation of Prajñāparāmitā and marriage to the yogin Thod pa bha dra (n.d) — is generally coherent with ‘Gos lo tsā ba’s history of *gcod* as well as the fourteenth century *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* and the thirteenth century Shangs pa *gcod* scholar brTson grus sengge.

[43] ‘Gos lo tsā ba writes that the mother (*mo*) and father (*pho*) traditions of *gcod* are split according lineages starting with Pha dam pa’s students Ma gcig and sKyo bsod rnams bla ma, *op.cit.,* 982.

Figure 3.13: Ma gcig framed by scenes from her life story, including a meeting with Pha dam pa, dark-skinned and holding a *rkang gling* at top right, Tibet (provincial), 19th century, now at the Rubin Museum of Art (F1997.28.1).

However, ‘Gos lo tsā ba also indicates that Ma gcig’s tantric expertise and lay status were problematic to Buddhist monasticism, noting that she had been called *jo mo bka’ logs ma*, or a nun who has turned against her vows.[44] Yet in the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* Ma gcig’s marriage to Thod pa Bha dra — with whom she had several descendants that, like Thod smyon,

[44] ‘Gos lo tsā ba, *ibid.,* 983.

would become active in the transmission of her teachings and lineage — is prophesied and thus sanctioned by Tārā.[45] Moreover, in the same biographical source, her empowerment through the conception of *gcod* as a nondual doctrine is expressed through the removal of her clothing, as suggested in fig. 3.13 where Ma gcig is a naked, dancing ḍākinī at top when she receives the teachings of Mahāmudrā from Pha dam pa and sKyo bSod rnams bla ma, and no longer wearing robes as in her early training or later teaching, seen below.

Nudity was understood as an expression of the accomplishment or comprehension of the nondual in Pha dam pa's teachings on Mahāmudrā and Prajñāparāmitā, including as well amongst his many female disciples whom he encouraged to act in ways which were socially provocative in the late eleventh and twelfth century.[46] Another of his female students, Ma gcig Zha ma (b. 1062) was also a lay practitioner of tantra and sexual yoga, and a teacher of the bKa' brgyud founder and patron Phag mo gru pa (1110-1170), as well as an important lineage holder of the *Lam 'bras* tradition of Tibetan tantra which was cultivated by Sa skya institutions after the thirteenth century.[47] However, despite her work as a teacher, translator and *Lam 'bras* innovator, surviving images of Ma gcig Zha ma are rare, whereas Ma gcig Lab sgron's iconography would be developed through representations of *gcod* as an independent lineage, and primarily in bKa' brgyud settings.

Though Ma gcig is credited with the formalization of *lus sbyin* as the characteristic sādhana of *gcod* practice, historic and biographical sources emphatically position her as Pha dam pa's student: 'Gos lo tsā ba, the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* and the writings of brTson grus

---

[45] Harding, *op.cit.,* 70-71.

[46] Dan Martin, "The woman illusion? Research into the lives of spiritually accomplished women leaders of the 11th and 12th centuries," in *Women in Tibet,* eds. Hanna Havenik and Janet Gyatso (London: Hurst and Company, 2005), 74ff. Other methods for transgression included the abandonment of household duties and acts of incest. Pha dam pa's high concentration of female disciples is also noted by 'Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 915.

[47] 'Gos lo tsā ba records a more dynamic relationship between Ma gcig Zha ma and Pha dam pa than between the Indian siddha and Ma gcig Lab sgron, referring especially to Zha ma as Ma gcig and thus creating an ambiguity about their identities for later scholars, *op.cit., 225-7*. Zha ma was associated with *Lam 'bras* by Ma gcig Lab sgron's fourteenth century biographer Nam mkha'i rgyal mtshan as well, Harding, *op.cit.,* 74. For a foundational study of Tibetan cultural history through Sa skya historiography, including its institutional cultivation of the tantric tradition of *Lam 'bras*, see Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Figure 3.14: Pha dam pa with unidentified lineage holders, central Tibet, 14th century, now in a private collection. Ma gcig (or another female student) is seated beneath her teacher in the top row, second from the right with short hair and naked from the waist up.

sengge describe her meeting and being empowered by the Indian siddha and his teachings.[48] A fourteenth century *thang ka* from central Tibet shows Pha dam pa as the central figure with hands in *dharmacakra* mudrā while amongst his many students and lineage holders represented in the lower half, a woman in the top row, second from the right — naked from the waist up, with short hair and also with hands in *dharmacakra* mudrā — can be speculatively identified as Ma gcig or another of his female followers in the practice of Mahāmudrā (figure 3.14).[49] Rather than an independent lineage of

[48] See ‘Gos Lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 983 and chapters 1 and 2 of the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad*, translated in Harding, *op.cit.,* 57-102; see also Edou, *op.cit.,* 112. ‘Gos lo tsā ba’s treatment of Ma gcig and *gcod* is cursory compared to his descriptions of Pha dam pa’s activities throughout the *Deb ther ngon po*. In other sources, Ma gcig does not receive Pha dam pa’s teachings directly but instead by way of her primary guru sKyo bSod rnam bla ma, see Dan Martin, “Padampa Sangye: A history of representation of a south Indian siddha in Tibet,” in *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas,* ed. Rob Linrothe (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006), 116.

[49] My thanks to Christian Luczanits for bringing this figure to my attention and helping me read this painting.

tantra, here Pha dam pa's female student indicates her accomplishment in Mahāmudrā by replicating his nudity as a practice or observance of the nondual.

At the same time, the Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's thirteenth century commentary on *gcod* frames this practice as an expression of Prajñāparāmitā which, like Mahāmudrā, can be interpreted as a nondual doctrine.[50] 'Gos lo tsā ba likewise introduces *gcod* through the study of Prajñāparāmitā as well as *Hevajra* tantra and Pha dam pa's teachings on Mahāmudrā.[51] Moreover, the bKa' brgyud commentarial corpus describes Ma gcig as an emanation of the deity Prajñāparāmitā — as Yum chen mo — who is moreover a source in *gcod* lineages of mantra and sūtra.[52] This historically Buddhist foundation for the *gcod* tradition is reflected as well in what has come to be treated as its root text (*rgya gzhung*), a poem on Prajñāparāmitā by the brahmin Āryadeva (c. 9-10th c.) which was brought to Tibet by his student Pha dam pa:

> … To cut off mind itself at the root,
> To cut through the five poisons of mental afflictions,
> To cut through extreme views and mental formations during meditation,
> As well as anxiety, hope and fear in actions
> And to cut through [ego-clinging]
> Since all this is a matter of [cutting, *gcod*],
> This is the real meaning of [*gcod*].[53]

Though the date of this text's composition is uncertain, the articulation of *gcod* as the practice of cutting off demons (*bdud*) which represent historically Buddhist soteriological obstacles — *e.g.*

---

[50] See note 6, above and Gyatso, "The development of the gcod tradition," 325.

[51] 'Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 980.

[52] 'Jam mgon kong sprul, *op.cit.,* 16-17 and Lama Lödö Rinpoche, "Life of Machig Labdron", in *ibid.,* 13. See also Edou, *op.cit.,* 25ff.

[53] Translated by Edou, *op.cit.,*19 with my own adjustments in brackets. The Tibetan version — *Ā rya de was mdzad pa'i shes rab kyi pha rol du phyin pa'i tshigs su bcad pa chen mo* — is given as the root text (*rgya gzhung*) in the nineteenth century edition *gCod kyi Chos 'khor, op.cit.,* fols. 1-9, which also includes the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad.* See also below on "cut[ting] off mind itself at the root" in sources for the Pāśupata tradition and the iconography of Pha dam pa.

ego-clinging, distractions, fear and mental objects — resonates with the commentarial corpus initiated by Rang byung rdo rje.[54]

After the thirteenth century, bKa' brgyud traditions had expanded and established themselves through an emphasis on oral transmission and the practice of yoga tantra as well as the promotion of religious retreat: The monastery of gDan sa thil in central Tibet was established at a hermitage site in the twelfth century by bKa' brgyud lineage founder Phag mo gru pa, coincidentally in a valley not 100 km from Ma gcig's community of followers at Zang ri kang dmar.[55] And the 'Brug pa teacher rGod tsang pa mgon po rdo rje (1189-1258) — a student of *gcod*, *zhi byed* and Mahāmudrā according to 'Gos lo tsā ba — founded a retreat at Tsi bri nearby to Pha dam pa's community at Ding ri, where he had settled in a cave and which was celebrated for its charnel grounds (*dur khrod*) as a setting for practice.[56] As a nondual ritual tradition, the *gcod* teachings of Ma gcig were not incompatible with these bKa' brgyud projects of asceticism and ritual specialization.

After securing political and religious patronage from the Mongolian forces behind the Yuan dynasty (r. 1279-1368), the Sa skya monastic community came to dominate central Tibet after the thirteenth century, encouraging a westward expansion of bKa' brgyud traditions.[57] Of these, the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud lineage was established in central Tibet by 'Jig rten mgon po rin chen dpal (1143-1217) — a student of Phag mo gru pa who had been briefly at gDan sa thil — and introduced to Zangskar and Ladakh soon after, where it was favored by local leaders as the

---

[54] Āryadeva is acknowledged as Pha dam pa's teacher in the lineages recorded by Nam mkha'i rgyal mtshan in the *Phung po gzan skyur*, though there is no root text cited in this fourteenth century source; *c.f.* Harding, *op.cit.,* 98. On Āryadeva's contributions to the Buddhist nondual practices of Mahāmudrā and the *Guhyasamaja* tantra, and Tibetan — especially dGe lugs — historiography of this figure, see Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp that Integrates the Practices (Caryāmelāpakapradīpa*) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[55] 'Gos lo tsā ba, *op. cit.,* 560-3.

[56] Barbara Nimri Aziz, "Introduction" in *The Tradition of Pha Dampa Sangyas: A Treasured Collection of his Teachings Transmitted by T[h]ug[s] sras Kun dga'*, ed. Barbara Nimri-Aziz (Thimphu: Druk Sherik Parkhang, 1979), ii. See also David Molk, *Lion of Siddhas: The Life and Teachings of Padampa Sangye* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2008) in which sections of *The Tradition of Pha Dampa Sangyas* — found under the Tibetan title of *Zhi byed sngar bar phyi gsum gyi skor* (BDRC no. W23911) — have been translated. On *ibid.,* p.179, Pha dam pa recommends isolation and remote locations for practice.

[57] Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism,* xix-xx. Kapstein refers to "an age of Sa skya hegemony" in central Tibet from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Another source records that "in some years nearly half of the Yuan national income was spent on Tibetan Buddhism and art", preferentially from Sa skya sources, *c.f.* Jing Anning, "Financial and material aspects of Tibetan art under the Yuan Dynasty," *Artibus Asiae* 64, no. 2 (2004): 239.

largest monastic institutional presence in the region until the sixteenth century.[58] In the following section of this chapter, those ‘Bri gung sites of the western Himalayas which have been introduced above through their preservation of early images of Ma gcig will be further explored through representations of Pha dam pa as an Indian source for bKa’ brgyud religious authority as well as the teachings of *gcod*.

Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas and *rkang gling* in the iconography of Tibetan siddhas

This chapter has thus far explored evidence for the *gcod* of Ma gcig as a valued part of the greater bKa’ brgyud ritual corpus and its visual culture after the thirteenth century. However, as Ma gcig’s teachings were circulated and diversified into various lineages, the iconographic function of the *rkang gling* took on a different significance in linking *gcod* to Pha dam pa as an Indian siddha and source for Buddhist tantra. This section explores how this charnel instrument was integrated into representations of Pha dam pa and other latter-day siddhas, tantric archetypes and *brtul zhugs spyod pa* yogins, further contextualizing the material culture of *gcod* as an innovative and specialized method of ritual expertise in Tibetan religious life.

Pha dam pa traveled in Tibet — as well as China and Kashmir — in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries teaching Buddhism (Skt. *dharma*, Tbt. *chos*) in the nondual traditions of Mahāmudrā and Prajñāparāmitā, and through which he encouraged socially provocative behavior through displays of public nudity, renunciation and feigned lunacy.[59] In his earliest representations from thirteenth century manuscripts — initiated by his disciples in the community he established at Ding ri in southern Tibet — the teacher is nearly naked with a loose plain cloth around his waist and an animated expression, unruly hair, and shown teaching in *dharmacakra* mudrā or gesturing with raised and empty hands (figure 3.15).[60] However, there is no evidence in these sources of Pha dam pa teaching anything he called *zhi byed* — a name likely given by later bKa’ brgyud authors and disciples — or *gcod*, nor of his use or possession of a *rkang gling*.[61]

---

[58] See Christian Luczanits, “The early Buddhist heritage of Ladakh reconsidered”, in *Ladakhi Histories. Local and Regional Perspectives,* ed. John Bray (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 65-96.

[59] See Martin, “Crazy wisdom in moderation,” 199 on Pha dam pa’s use of extreme or “forceful” methods (*btsan thabs*). Aziz notes that ‘Gos lo tsā ba likely had access to the *Zhi byed sngar bar phyi gsum gyi skor* in writing the *Deb ther ngon* po and in which Pha dam pa is an active figure, *c.f. ‘*Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 684. Fig. 3.15 is taken from a thirteenth century copy of material from this collection.

[60] Martin, “Padampa Sangye”, 109.

[61] Pha dam pa’s disciples record instead the paucity of the teacher’s belongings and his frequent nudity, see Martin*, ibid.*, 113.

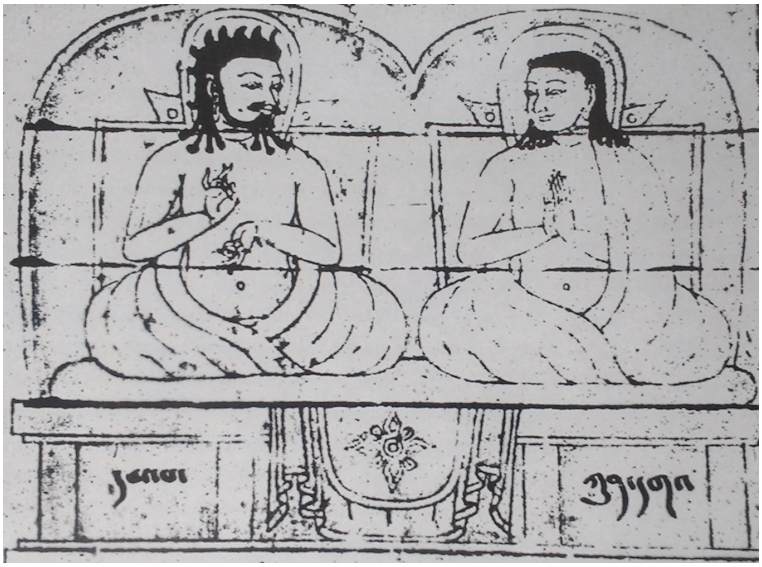


Figure 3.15: Pha dam pa (left) and his disciple Kun dga' (1062-1124) from a 13th century manuscript produced in Grwa nang, National Archives in Kathmandu. Image from Martin 2006.

Elsewhere, Pha dam pa's iconography was cultivated to represent him as a latter-day siddha — or *mahāsiddha* (Tbt. *grub thob chen po*) in Buddhist hagiographic narratives — where, like other such tantric figures, he illustrates both visually and historiographically the continuity of Tibetan Vajrayāna with its Indian sources.[62] In a thirteenth century *thang ka* from central Tibet, Vajravārāhī and her assembly are surrounded by the eight great charnel grounds (as above in fig. 3.4) and Pha dam pa is in the bottom row to the right of a figure which may be the bKa' brgyud translator Mar pa in a white robe with a text in his lap (figure 3.16).[63] As in fig. 3.15, Pha dam pa is naked and loosely covered with a plain white cloth with hands in *dharmacakra* mudrā and an animated expression, though in fig. 3.16 he is rendered with very dark skin which, like the other siddhas seen here, emphasizes his geographical origin in south Asia. In this painting, the representation of Pha dam pa locates these bKa' brgyud lineages and teachings as adjacent to and informed by the most recent (twelfth century) and locally valued transmissions from India.[64]

Though the Buddhist monastic community had deteriorated across most of south Asia by the twelfth century, in Tibet and the greater Himalayas they expanded by establishing themselves

---

[62] Rob Linrothe, "Subject, object and agent: Parsing the syntax of Tibetan mahasiddha art," *Orientations* 37, no. 2 (2006): 82-90. See also Kapstein, "An inexhaustible treasury of verse," 27ff on the documentation of siddhas as a visual and literary project and the historiographic emphasis on Mahāmudrā in twelfth and thirteenth century Tibetan sources.

[63] This painting is published in Pratyapaditya Pal, *Tibetan Paintings: A Study of Tibetan Thankas, Eleventh to Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Sotheby Publications, 1984), pl. 57. English finds that the bKa' brgyud lineages actively preserve a number of Vajravārāhī traditions transmitted by the translator Mar pa, *idem., Vajrayogini,* xxii-xxiii.

[64] Pha dam pa was moreover one of the few Indian teachers who spoke Tibetan and attempted his own translations; Martin, "Phadampa Sangye," 111 and *idem.,* "Crazy wisdom in moderation," 198. bKa' brgyud lineages were not the only ones to celebrate associations with Pha dam pa's teachings and transmissions from India during the early monastic period; see Davidson on similar work by Sa skya religious authors in *idem., Tibetan Renaissance,* 246. Note that according to Sa skya scholars, Pha dam pa was a student of the *Lam 'bras* innovator and Indian siddha Virupa, *c.f.* Martin, *ibid.,*196.

Figure 3.16: Vajravārāhī (rDo rje phag mo) and assembly with bKa' brgyud monastic figures, the translator Mar pa and Pha dam pa (bottom, second to right), central Tibet, 13th century, now in a private collection.

as institutions based on tantra and transmission lineages (*rgyud pa*) from historically Indian sources:

> In that climate, the association of ['Bri gung bKa' brgyud lineage founder 'Jig rten mgon po] with [Pha dam pa] fulfilled two critical roles simultaneously: the first was the emphatic need to identify the lineage in its early states with tantric yoga at a time when, in the first generation after ['Jig rten mgon po], it was launching itself as a celibate monastic institution; second, as it was a need to firmly relate its founding — and its founder — to

> the all-important desideratum of a direct Indian transmission, the sine qua non of authenticity at the time. [Pha dam pa], as a yogi of south Indian origin, met both needs.[65]

As the ‘Bri gung’s presence in the western Himalayas grew after the twelfth century, Pha dam pa would become a consistent feature of their monuments as well as a prominent figure in the cultivation of siddha iconography in these settings, visually supporting a connection between the teachings transmitted by the lineage of their founder ‘Jig rten mgon po — a lay tantric practitioner who was never ordained as a monk — and the Indian yogin.[66]

This historiographic proximity is made explicit in the inner chamber of the dPal ldan ‘Bras spung mChod rten at Alchi Chos ‘khor, constructed in the early thirteenth century and wherein Pha dam pa — a naked and dark-skinned yogin with his knees raised and bound with a *yogapaṭṭa* — is positioned opposite ‘Jig rten mgon po (with his characteristically deep hairline) who is wearing monastic dress with his hands in *dharmacakra* mudrā (figures 3.17 and 3.18).[67] Pha dam pa is moreover opposite the historical entrance to the *mchod rten*, placing a visitor below the ‘Bri gung teacher and face to face with the Indian siddha upon entering the chamber. The same iconography for Pha dam pa is found in the other, smaller *mchod rten* at Alchi Chos ‘khor as well, which was constructed at around the same time in the early the thirteenth century.[68]

Nearby at the Chos ‘khor on the ground floor of the Alchi gSum brtegs, Pha dam pa is again seated with knees raised and bound by a *yogapaṭṭa*, naked and dark-skinned with a loose white covering and seated on an animal skin. He is facing the viewer squarely and positioned at the base of a large sculpted image of Mañjuśrī (‘Jam dpal dbyang) as the most prominent figure in a field of approximately eighty small, generic tantric practitioners and charnel ascetics painted

---

[65] Rob Linrothe, “Strengthening the roots: An Indian yogi in early Drigung paintings of Ladakh and Zangskar”, *Orientations* 38, no. 4 (2007): 66.

[66] In addition to examples explored here, there are similar images of Pha dam pa at the late twelfth and thirteenth century sites of Wanla and Karsha and the Bardzong cave in west Tibet. My thanks to Rob Linrothe and Christian Luczanits for advising me on the distribution and dating of these sites. Luczanits notes that the ‘Bri gung emphasis on representations of siddhas distinguishes them from other bKa’ brgyud and monastic lineages, *idem.,* “Beneficial to see”, 259. See also Geoffrey Samuel on the Tibetan definition of a siddha through ritual action and yoga, rather than adherence to monastic discipline, “The siddha as cultural category,” 37.

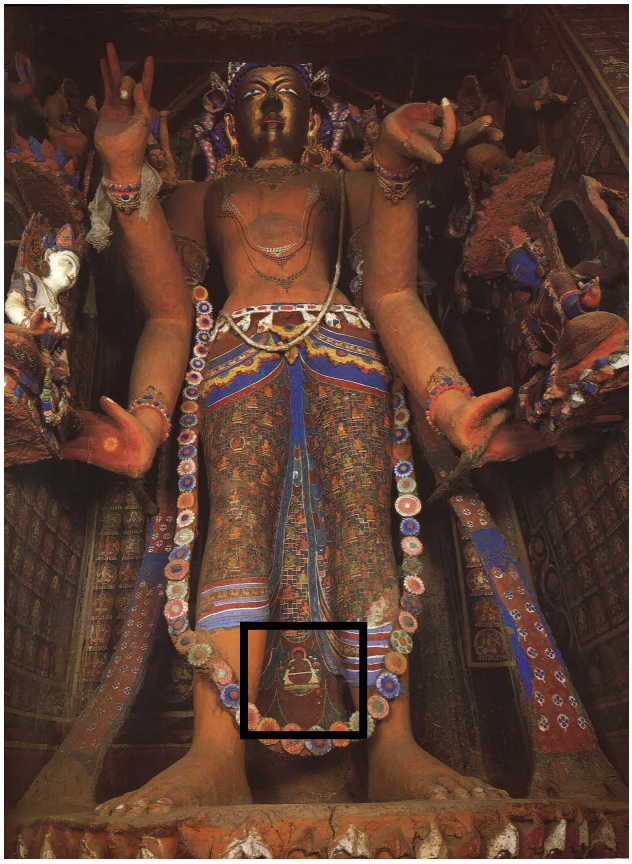
[67] These figures — including the two local ‘Bri gung authorities on adjacent walls — are discussed by Christian Luczanits in the chapter “Palden Drepung Chörten” in his forth-coming edition *Alchi, Ladakh’s Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary* (London: Serindia Publications).

[68] Linrothe, “Strengthening the roots”, 67.

Figure 3.17 (left): Pha dam pa in the dPal ldan ‘Bras spung mChod rten at Alchi Chos ‘khor, early 13th century. Image from Luczanits (*forth-coming*).

Figure 3.18 (above): Pha dam pa (at right) is opposite ‘Jig rten mgon po (left), looking up into the four-walled inner chamber of the dPal ldan ‘Bras spung mChod rten, April 2018.

Figures 3.19 (above) and 3.20 (right): Pha dam pa at the base of Mañjuśrī in the Alchi gSum brtsegs, c.1220. Images from Linrothe 2006 (3.19) and Tsering 2009 (3.20) with black square added at right by author to indicate the position of the detail.



onto the bodhisattva’s dhoti (figures 3.19 and 3.20, see also fig. 1.5).[69] As noted by Rob Linrothe, of the three large sculpted images in the gSum brtsegs, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī

[69] On the ambiguous identity of these figures and their relationship to Abhayadhatta’s twelfth century hagiography of the 84 mahāsiddhas, see Linrothe, “Group portrait”, 191.

Figure 3.21: Two-armed Lakulīśa from Śaiva monument at Balasore, Orissa, 8th-9th century. Image from Donaldson 2001.

suggests the perfection of the Buddha's body — with Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya illustrating those of speech and mind, respectively — and on which these siddhas can be interpreted as representations of Buddhist tantric methods used in this bKa' brgyud context for the purposes of purification and transformation through ritual action.[70]

However, Pha dam pa's iconography in the Alchi gSum brtsegs and dPal Idan 'Bras spung mChod rten also indicate how the teacher's representation as a siddha and yogin resonated with historical sources and modes for ritualized charnel asceticism. An eighth or ninth century sculpture from Orissa shows the Pāśupata founder Lakulīśa in a similar pose to these thirteenth century images of Pha dam pa from Alchi, with *yogapaṭṭa* across his raised knees and naked — though ithyphallic after the Śaiva convention — and resting his characteristic club (Skt. *laguḍa, lakula*) on his left shoulder (figure 3.21).[71] Like the Mahāmudrā of Pha dam pa — as well as the *gcod* of Ma gcig — the Pāśupata tradition advocated renunciation and yogic observance resulting in a state of being cut off (Skt. *chedāvasthā*) from distinctions between the self and deity, social conventions and other obstacles to liberation and/or empowerment.[72]

---

[70] Linrothe, *ibid.,* 199.

[71] Thomas Donaldson has explored iconographic exchanges between Pāśupata and Buddhist communities in Orissa during the eighth to eleventh centuries, including a visual emphasis on pedagogy in representations of their founding teachers, *i.e. dharmacakra* mudrā and facing the viewer directly (*abhimukha*), *idem., Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*, 391-2.

[72] Davidson describes *chedāvasthā* as the fourth most specialized of five levels for practice and observance in the pre-fourth century *Pāśupatasūtra*, *idem., Indian Esoteric Buddhism,* 184. See also chapter 2, note 36. The poem on Prajñāparāmitā credited to Pha dam pa's Indian teacher Āryadeva also describes cutting off (obstacles) at the root, see note 52 above.

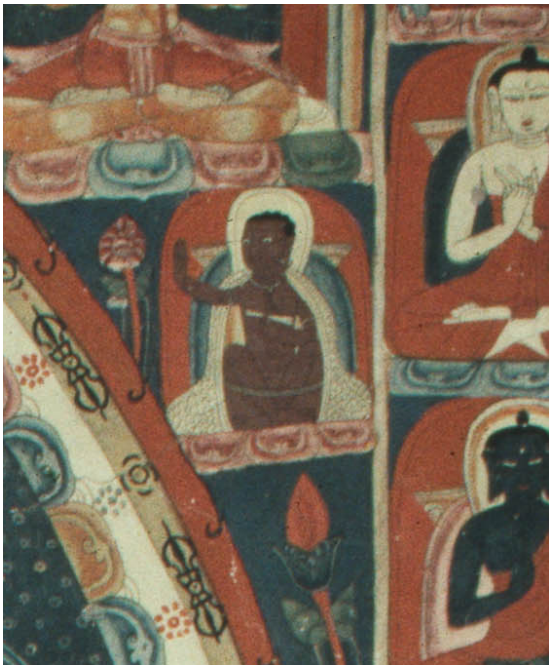
Figure 3.22: Pha dam pa in the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud monument of Sumda Chung (Zangskar), late 12-13th century; on the right with digital enhancement showing the plant cutting in the right hand, from George Weinberg at the Getty Research Institute. Image from Linrothe 2009.

This description of "cutting off" through ritual practice is moreover suggested by the plant held up in Pha dam pa's right hand in the dPal ldan 'Bras spung mChod rten and ground floor of the gSum brtsegs, as well as the approximately contemporaneous Sumda Chung in Zangskar (figure 3.22).[73] However, the long white tubular object which Pha dam pa holds at center against his body in these representations is more provocative to this discussion of *gcod* iconography: While it is not clearly rendered as a musical instrument nor shaped as a human thighbone, this representation nevertheless indicates how, in this visual cultural setting, Pha dam pa's teachings and contributions to the Buddhist tantric corpus might be illustrated as different objects.[74]

---

[73] See Linrothe, "Strengthening the roots," *passim* for a comprehensive review of Pha dam pa's iconography in 'Bri gung sites of the western Himalayas.

[74] The identification of this white stick, horn or tube remains speculative: Luczanits describes Pha dam pa's implement as a stick or flute in "Palden Drepung Chörten", 257 yet alternative sources identify this figure as Nāropa, from which Roger Goepper has suggested that this is a flute (Skt. *nāḍa* or *nāḍī*) and a reference to the siddha's Sanskrit name, Nāḍapada, *idem., Alchi: Ladakh's Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary,* 109. See also Nawang Tsering, *Alchi: The Living Heritage of Ladakh* (Leh: Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2009). This identification is undermined by the image of Nāropa with a ḍamaru, not a flute, in the top floor of the same structure (fig. 2.1).



Figures 3.23 and 3.24: Pha dam pa in the Alchi Lha khang So ma to the upper right of the Vajradhātu maṇḍala, mirroring an unidentified ascetic yogin (*ras pa*) in the same position on the left, 14th century. Image by Jaroslav Poncar with detail (left) and added square to indicated the position of the detail.

Elsewhere at Alchi and in later visual programs, this long white stick would come to be illustrated more clearly as a horn and/or tantric implement in variations of Pha dam pa's representation as a siddha.[75] In the fourteenth century Lha khang So ma, Pha dam pa is again a naked and dark-skinned yogin with *yogapaṭṭa* and loose white textile covering, holding a bone-shaped instrument horizontally in his left hand with the right raised opposite an unidentified cotton-wrapped ascetic (*ras pa*) on the far side who mirrors the teacher's gesture (figures 3.23 and 3.24). Here, Pha dam pa's image as a siddha is used to frame a maṇḍala which was historically associated with funerary practices and various modes of ritual empowerment described in the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* tantric corpus.[76] This visual program is located on the left wall of the Lha khang So ma, adjacent to the rear wall on which Ma gcig — as a ḍākinī with *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* — is illustrated with green Tārā and the eight dangers (figs. 3.5 and 3.6).

---

[75] Pha dam pa's position as a latter-day siddha is reinforced in the Alchi Shangrong Lha khang, also from the fourteenth century, where he is the final figure in a visual program of approximately 80 yogins, one of whom — named as Konkana in the inscription — also has a white flute; *c.f.* Luczanits, "Beneficial to see", 249. Because these paintings are heavily damaged, they are difficult to read and not included here.

[76] See chapter 2, notes 119 and 120 as well as Zeff Bjerken, "On mandalas, monarchs, and mortuary magic: Siting the Sarvadurgatiparaśodhana Tantra in Tibet", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 813-842. This was a fairly orthodox funerary practice in the western Himalayas by the eleventh century: The translator Rin chen bzang po performs its rituals after the death of Ye shes 'od, for example; Snellgrove, "Rulers of western Tibet," 176.

Figure 3.25: Pha dam pa in the Alchi Tsatsapuri sPyan ras gzigs Lha khang, 14th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

Similarly, in the fourteenth century sPyan ras gzigs Lha khang at the nearby Tsatsapuri, Pha dam pa is positioned at the top of a set of four maṇḍala at the center of which is a green eight-armed Tārā, and with Ma gcig and her *rkang gling* nearby on the same wall (see fig. 3.2).[77] In this iconographic program, the Indian teacher — with small knobs of black curly hair at the back of his head, naked, seated with raised knees and wrapped in a plain cloth — holds a white trumpet or horn to his mouth (figure 3.25). Unlike Ma gcig, whose representation is specific to *gcod*, Pha dam pa holds this implement with the right hand and it is less explicitly rendered as a bone-shaped instrument. In the left hand, however, Pha dam pa nevertheless holds a skull, which he was known by his disciples to have used and valued, and moreover indicates his knowledge of the charnel ritual methods and materials which were characteristic to the advanced teachings of Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra.[78]

Pha dam pa's iconography as a tantric yogin was moreover circulated and cultivated in a fourteenth century *thang ka*, for example, wherein he is framed on either side and above by a series of sixteen siddhas and their yoginī consorts (figure 3.26). In this painting, Pha dam pa — characteristically naked and dark-skinned with a loose white covering and animated expression — holds a thin bone-shaped instrument in the left hand and what is possibly a flower by the thumb and forefinger in the right, a central figure framed within a rainbow as *mthong ba don ldan* (see Ma gcig as same in fig. 3.9). Along the bottom, practitioners in lay and monastic dress indicate the diversity of lineage holders for his teachings. Reflecting this, the fifteenth century

[77] The same array of maṇḍala in the earlier and adjacent mChod rten Lha khang at Tsatsapuri (*e.g.* fig. 3.3) has a monastic figure in this position, not Pha dam pa.

[78] Martin, "The woman illusion?," 81n83. He once gifted a skull to one of his female disciples. On the iconography and functions of skulls as ritual objects, see chapter 2.

Figure 3.26: Pha dam pa framed by siddhas and their consorts on a *thang ka* from central Tibet (?), 14th century, currently in a private collection.

Deb ther ngon po credits Pha dam pa with the knowledge and transmission of many practices in the most specialized forms of tantra in addition to the nondual precepts of *gcod* and *zhi byed*.[79]

While the above examples suggest how Pha dam pa was represented as a tantric authority within the bKa' brgyud cultivation of siddha iconography, they demonstrate only an approximate relationship to Ma gcig as an illustration of the *gcod* practice. However, at the cave temples of Saspol in Ladakh, Pha dam pa and Ma gcig (fig. 3.11) are featured in a similar position of prominence in the largest and best preserved cave as the first two individual figures encountered in a clockwise reading of the visual program, just inside and to the left of the entrance (figures 3.27 and 3.28). As at Tsatsapuri, Pha dam pa has a short white instrument in his right hand with a skull in the left while below him, Ma gcig is shown with the *ḍamaru* in the right hand and a horn-shaped instrument — the rendering of which is damaged — raised in the left. At Saspol, these two figures and the traditions of religious knowledge or practice they represent are of equal size though the Indian siddha as the teacher is placed above on a lotus seat. Both Ma gcig and Pha dam pa are present in other caves at

[79] See 'Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 868-873. Despite my best efforts, the iconographic analysis of this painting is limited by the low resolution of available images.

Figures 3.27 (above) and 3.28 (right): Pha dam pa at top and Ma gcig beneath (see fig. 3.11) in cave 3 at Saspol, 15th century. Images by Rob Linrothe.

Saspol (see, for example, fig. 3.12) however it is only this space — the iconographic program of which favors tantric deities and the mahāsiddhas — that the two are found in proximity.

Pha dam pa's iconography with a bone-shaped instrument can be understood as an indication of his role in the transmission of doctrines and methods which would be the foundation of the *gcod* tradition. However, as this research indicates, the representation of this figure has been dynamic and diverse, while Ma gcig's iconography is more consistent as a ḍākinī with implements specific to the practice of *gcod*, including the *rkang gling, ḍamaru* and bell.[80] In the sculpture in fig. 3.29, for example, the Indian yogin is rendered instead in a manner more consistent with descriptions by his immediate disciples at Ding ri: naked, with a piercing gaze and holding a bag which may have contained divinatory materials or his few possessions.[81] At

[80] Luczanits has moreover suggested that Pha dam pa's iconography represents more than one individual siddha, and is rather a combination of a number of "small, dark-skinned" figures from Tibetan hagiographic sources, *idem.,*"Beneficial to see", 294n774.

[81] Martin, "Padampa Sangye", 113-114. There is an inscription on the reverse of this sculpture identifying it as (Pha) Dam pa; see Linrothe, *Holy Madness,* pl. 79.

Figure 3.29 (left): Pha dam pa as a naked ascetic with skull and bag (left hand, behind) with ornaments engraved on the chest arms and legs, central Tibet,15th century, currently at the Rubin Museum of Art (C2005.6.1).

Figure 3.30 (above): Detail of Pha dam pa with Atiśa on the entrance wall of the Guru Lha khang in Phyang, 15th century. Image by Rob Linrothe.

the Guru Lha khang of Phyang — where Ma gcig is a large figure (fig. 3.9) — Pha dam pa's image has been simplified as a dark-skinned and naked siddha with hands in *dharmacakra* mudrā, positioned between the eleventh century monastic reformer Atiśa and Guru Rinpoche with skull, *rdo rje* and *khaṭvāṅga* (not pictured; figure 3.30). While one of these fifteenth century images is more intimately shaped by his biography, the other suggests Pha dam pa's fundamental status as a teacher of Buddhist tantra and source for Tibetan monastic traditions.[82]

Other images indicate Pha dam pa's religious historiographic mobility during these centuries: A fourteenth century *thang ka* features Guru Rinpoche as the tantric master with skull, *rdo rje* and staff, with a long white-haired teacher who can be speculatively identified as the twelfth century rNying ma *gter ton* Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer at bottom left (figure 3.31, see also previous chapter). On the bottom right is a six-pointed maṇḍala of Khros ma nag mo, who would become an *yi dam* in the *gcod* tradition — alternatively or as a form of Vajravārāhī — and on whom

[82] On the mixed bKa' brgyud and rNying ma iconographies at this and other sites in the western Himalayas, see Lo Bue, "The Gu ru lha khang at Phyi dbang", 187.

Figure 3.31: Guru Rinpoche with Nyang ral nyi ma ‘od zer (1124-1194) (bottom left) and Khros ma nag mo in a six pointed maṇḍala, right, 14th century, now at the Rubin Museum of Art (P1994.26.1). Pha dam pa is in the top row, second from the right, holding *ḍamaru* and (likely) *rkang gling*.

Nyang ral nyi ma ‘od zer composed a sādhana, though not of *lus sbyin*.[83] In the top right of this painting, Pha dam pa is shown between unidentified monastic figures as a dark-skinned yogin with horn (possibly a *rkang gling*) and *ḍamaru* raised in the right and left hands respectively, one of his earliest renderings demonstrating the practice of *lus sbyin* and as he would be seen in later *gcod* iconography (*e.g.* figs. 3.1 and 3.13).[84]

Eventually, the *rkang gling* was integrated into the iconography of other charnel ascetic archetypes as well. A fifteenth century image of Mahākāla as

[83] My thanks to Westin Harris for this information and a series of insightful discussions on the history of *gcod* and *lus sbyin; idem.,* personal communication by email, 15 January 2020. Khros ma nag mo is recognized as an *yi dam* for *gcod* — characteristically black though notably playing the *rkang gling*, unlike Vajravārāhī — in the fifth chapter of the *Phung po gzan skyur,* see *ibid.,* 177. The deity is also an *yi dam* in a *gcod* sādhana composed by the rNying ma teacher bDud ‘joms gling pa (1835-1903), see Harding, *op.cit.,* 28. Khros ma nag mo is also seen at the bottom center of fig. 3.1.

[84] Nyang ral nyi ma ‘od zer is moreover associated with Pha dam pa through the *gcod* ritual method of *Nam mkha’ sgo ‘byed* by the rNying ma community at sMin grol gling; thanks again to Westin Harris for this information. See also Harding, *op.cit.,* 50 and Edou*, op.cit.,* 50.

Figure 3.32 (left): Mahākāla Brahmanarupa (mGon po bram gzugs can) with a femur in his hair, Tibet, 15th century, currently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.81.90.19).

Figure 3.33 (right): Mahākāla Brahmanarupa seated on a corpse, from the Sa skya tradition, Tibet, 17th century, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2007.1).

Brahmanarupa (mGon po bram gzugs can) — the deity in the form of an Indian ritual master and yogin, identified as a brahmin — has a human femur in the dreadlocked hair in addition to charnel ornaments on the head, chest, neck, arms and legs, and the skull and chopper in the left and right hands which are characteristic to forms of the protector Mahākāla (figure 3.32; see also chapter 2). Later representations like the seventeenth century sculpture in fig. 3.33 show the same deity form using the femur as a thighbone trumpet held up in the right hand with the skull in the left while seated on a corpse. This iconography reinforces the historical association of Indian tantric expertise with the ritual instruments of charnel asceticism, though the documented evidence engaged in this chapter indicates the *rkang gling*'s cultivation in Tibetan sources and primarily in association with the practice of *lus sbyin.*

The integration of *gcod* into the methods of *brtul zhugs spyod pa* and the observances of Heruka yoga moreover facilitated the adoption of the *rkang gling* as an indication of ritual

Figure 3.34: Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med with a *rkang gling* in the right hand, a skull in the left, from the '*du khang* of gSang sngags chos gling in west Sikkim, a community which he founded in the seventeenth century, sculpture is 19-20th century. Photo by author in August 2018.

expertise, as in representations of the rNying ma tantric master and Sikkimese cultural hero Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597-1653) (figure 3.34).[85] Similar to the thirteenth century commentary by Grags pa rgyal mtshan, Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med draws his articulation of *brtul zhugs spyod pa* primarily from the description of observances of a yogin in the sixth chapter of the first part of the *Hevajra* tantra, adding the *rkang gling* as one of the *dam rdzas*, or binding implements, of the secret empowerment of Heruka yoga.[86] Building on the precedent of Pha dam pa — and a number of similar historical figures in various bKa' brgyud traditions — the *rkang gling* and *gcod* have been re-contextualized and promoted in Tibetan visual and material culture by tantric yogins and ritual specialists like Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med.[87]

---

[85] See notes 24-28 on historical sources for the *rkang gling* as an instrument of the *brtul zhugs spyod pa*, above.

[86] Lha btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med, "He ru ka'i chas kyi rnam bshad", 5. This latter day Tibetan siddha is known for opening the *sbas yul* of Sikkim and the ritual establishment of its political legitimacy, in part through the use of *rkang gling*; see Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism,* 415ff as well as chapter 4, section 4 of this dissertation. See also, for example, the implements of a tantric yogin — including *rkang gling*, *ḍamaru*, skull and ornaments — listed in the "Rigs 'dzin sngags kyi rnal 'byor pa'i chas rgyan," in *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos*, *op.cit.*, 205-249.

[87] Divalerio writes that bKa' brgyud *brtul zhugs pa* frequently knew, practiced and taught *gcod* in addition to lineage-specific methods for empowerment like the *Na ro chos drug*, *op.cit.,* 54. Divalerio notes that many of these figures had monastic training and formal religious educations.

In conclusion, this research has described how changing representations of Pha dam pa and the *rkang gling* can be understood within the visual cultural innovations of Tibetan siddha iconography and how, as Ma gcig's teacher, this figure is illustrated as an Indian source for *gcod* and a Buddhist ritual tradition which accomplishes the nondual. Moreover, this work has demonstrated a reliance on bKa' brgyud settings for the preservation of these dynamic iconographies, and the historical and visual cultural valorization of the practice of *lus sbyin* and teachings of *gcod*.

Conclusion: *gCod* in context

gCod and its ritual objects were in part popularized through the ways in which Buddhist religious institutions were socially and historically conditioned during their foundational period. This includes a proliferation of charnel methodologies — what one scholar has called "funerary Buddhism" — during the tenth to fourteenth century (re-)construction of monastic and political institutions in the Tibetan cultural region.[88] The political decentralization of Tibet after the ninth century was also shared with neighboring regions, contributing to a circulation of ritual knowledge which focused on empowerment and subjugation.[89] Moreover, sources from Dunhuang suggest that Tibetan religious life in the tenth to twelfth centuries was oriented towards rituals which could be applied to practical goals such as the control of weather and the natural or human environment, and the protection of public health, contributing to the popularity of teachings and narratives associated with mahāyoga tantric specialists like Guru Rinpoche.[90]

The proliferation of these ritual methodologies before the twelfth century meant that by the time the monastic institutions of Tibet were establishing themselves based on continuities with Indian Buddhist traditions, there were other bodies of religious knowledge in place within the region, indicating the origins of a categorical distinction between what Giuseppe Tucci has described as *mi chos*, or popular religion, and *lha chos,* superior religion.[91] As an independent lineage

---

[88] David Germano, "The funerary transformation of the Great Perfection (rDzogs chen)," *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1 (2005): 1-54.

[89] Carmen Meinert, "Introduction" in *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th centuries),* ed. Carmen Meinert (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 3. See also chapter 2 on the tantric subjugation practices of *phur pa* and *sgrol ba*, both increasingly circulated in the region after the eighth century.

[90] See chapter 2 and Dalton, "The early development of the Padmasambhava legend", 769.

[91] Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 90-92. See also Geoffrey Samuel's exploration of the historical and social relationship between practical and clerical religion in *idem., Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press). Note however that in Samuel's later work he no longer uses "shamanic" to describe popular ritual traditions, *idem., The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 139.

originating in Tibet with social application as *mi chos*, *gcod* has been misrepresented by some historians as “shamanic” or a pre-Buddhist form of Bon.[92] However, its public function is acknowledged in the teaching’s sources, for example, in the second chapter of the *Phung po gzan skyur rnam bshad* which describes the *gcod* of Mahāmudrā received from Pha dam pa and composed by Ma gcig as a practice which protects against 404 types of disease.[93]

At the same time, the growth of *gcod* as a liturgical tradition follows the establishment of dismemberment and exposure burial as a preferential method for corpse disposal in the decentralized political and cultural landscape of Tibet after the ninth century.[94] Dan Martin has observed that not only are Tibetan exposure burial sites conducive to *gcod* as a ritual setting for practice, the sādhana of *lus sbyin* is in many ways similar to the process of *bya gtor* — or scattering to the birds — wherein a body is disaggregated and distributed to invited non-human intermediaries.[95] In this way the *gcod* sādhana can also be understood as an innovation in the historically Buddhist exercise of *aśubhabhāvanā* and the contemplation of the body or a corpse as impermanent, as well as other methodologies derived from charnel ascetic and *śramaṇa* traditions (see chapter 2).

As noted above, the practice of *lus sbyin* was interpreted and expanded by many Buddhist authors as a form of *tshogs* or tantric feast, the practice of which was central to yoginī tantra and its sources.[96] At the same time, as a donative gesture, *gcod* — like *bya gtor* — resonates with a number of Buddhist cultural and historical narratives which illustrate the soteriological relationship between self and body found, for example, in *jātaka*, stories of the Buddha’s

---

[92] Gyatso, for example, writes of *gcod*’s “debt to shamanism”, “The development of the gcod tradition”, 340. For a general critique of the historiography of shamanic traditions — a category which includes a wide variety of specialized and locally conditioned ritual methodologies — see Cecelia F. Klein, *et. al., “*The role of shamanism in Mesoamerican art,” *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 3, (2002), 383-419. *C.f.* also Zeff Bjerken, “Exorcising the Illusion of Bon ‘Shamans’: A critical genealogy of shamanism in Tibetan religions,” *Révue d’etudes tibetaines* no. 6 (2004): 4-59 and Per Kvaerne, “Aspects of the origin of the Buddhist tradition in Tibet,” *Numen* 19, no. 1 (1972): 22-40. On the longevity of the historical relationship between Bon and *chos*, see Cantwell and Mayer, “The Bon Ka ba nag po and the Rnying ma phur pa tradition,” 47ff and Martin, *Mandala Cosmogony*, 5.

[93] Translated in Harding, *op.cit.,* 86.

[94] Zoroastrians in Sogdia and Silk Road sites under Tibetan imperial control were practicing *bya gtor* by the eighth century, *c.f.* Frantz Grenet, *Les pratiques funéraires de l’Asie centrale sédentaire: De la conquête grecque à l’islamisation* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1984) and Stoddard, “Eat it up or throw it to the dogs?,” 14. See also chapter 4, section 1 on the historical relationship between exposure burial and Tibetan material religion.

[95] Martin*, “*On the cultural ecology of sky burial”, 365.

[96] ‘Jam mgon kong sprul, for example, provides a collection of *tshogs* and ritual dismemberments for the practitioner’s body in his *lus sbyin* commentary, *idem.,* “The garden of all joy”, *3*5-80.

previous births from the Pāli and Sanskrit canon in which an accomplished practitioner who is knowledgable of Buddhist values and doctrines — *e.g.* interdependent origination, attachment to material forms or self as an obstacle to liberation — gives their own body to sustain another creature.[97] Though it had a popular application which resonated with twelfth century ritual specialists and yogins, *gcod* was also conditioned by its relationship to these historically Buddhist narratives and values.

The charnel instruments of *gcod* can also be interpreted within the many types of musical and liturgical performance which have been documented in Tibetan religious life, where the use of human remains as a substrate seems uniquely tied to the later spread of Buddhist tantra after the tenth century.[98] The ritual use of music is an active topic of discourse during this formative period for religious institutions, though of the many percussion and wind instruments incorporated into monastic liturgical performance, those used in *gcod* — the *rkang gling*, *ḍamaru* and bell — are best suited to individual practice.[99] The *rkang gling* has a limited melodic range appropriate to the short blasts of the *gcod* sādhana, and the bell and *ḍamaru* are played by ringing (*khrol ba*), making these musical instruments relatively useful for self-accompaniment.[100] While the *ḍamaru* is historically associated with Buddhist tantra as well as Śaiva iconography, the charnel ascetic ritual methodologies of *gcod* would encourage its specialization as the *thod rnga* or skull drum.[101]

Working primarily within bKa' brgyud historiography and iconographic sources, this chapter has proposed an early record for *rkang gling* and the sādhana of *lus sbyin* in Tibetan material religion and visual culture. This narrative is based on available evidence for the teachings of Ma gcig and the Indian yogin Pha dam pa as well as their expansion and diversification after the twelfth century. While *gcod* and its ritual methods were first and most actively cultivated by

---

[97] See Reiko Ohnuma, "The gift of the body and the gift of dharma," *History of Religions* 37, no 4. (1998): 323-359. The author examines a body of early Buddhist literature she labels *dehadāna*, stories where the body is offered as a material gift through self-sacrifice and/or self-mutilation.

[98] Ter (Terry Jay) Ellingson, "Mandala of sound: Concepts and sound structures in Tibetan ritual music", (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 222.

[99] Ellingson, *ibid.,* 642.

[100] Mireille Helffer, *Mchod-rol: Les instruments de la musique tibétaine* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994),192. Helffer groups these iconographically diverse ritual objects and musical instruments under their "resonating function" (Fr. *fonction sonore*). See also Jeffrey Cupchik, "Buddhism as performing art: Visualizing music in the Tibetan sacred ritual music liturgies" *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 1, no. 1 (2015): 31-62.

[101] Helffer, *ibid.,* 235. *Thod rnga* can be used for *gcod* but are not exclusive to this tradition; see also chapter 4, section 5.

lineages established by Ma gcig and her descendants, it was through the integration of these practices into the monastic and institutional representations of Buddhist tantra that the *rkang gling* became a widely recognized element of Tibetan material religion.

4 Human remains in Tibetan ritual objects: A technical study

The preceding chapters of this dissertation have described the longevity and diversity of sources for cultural historical narratives associated with the ritual use of human remains in Tibetan material religion. The remainder of this research will focus on these objects through the documentation and analysis of their materials, techniques, functions and circulation.

Thus far, discussion has been centered on Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra as well as *gcod* as major traditions of ritualized charnel asceticism and within which many lineages, teachings, iconographic programs and commentarial traditions have emerged and established themselves throughout the Tibetan cultural matrix in the centuries since their introduction. What follows draws from these various practices to build a generalized interpretation of these objects and their materials. Moreover, this final, five-part chapter places historiographic sources in relation to observations and interviews from fieldwork, visual cultural evidence and the technical examination of accessible objects. Iconographic study will shift from representations of teachers, liturgical traditions and deities which use charnel materials to the ways in which these objects are seen as vessels, regalia or instruments in Tibetan visual culture, with notes on their formal variations in shape, ornamentation, and composition.

This technological work can be understood as complementary to the ritual and material expertise of practitioners and religious scholars which is available in Tibetan and the other languages of Buddhist tantra.[1] Moreover, the specificities of objects examined here have been determined by a ritual method — often expanded through oral transmission — which may not be evident to a non-practitioner such as the present author, or which may not be consistent to every setting: As such it must be remembered that every example given here can be understood as an exception to another's rule.

[1] See for example *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos* (*op.cit.*), a compilation of texts from both rNying ma and gSar ma traditions on liturgical objects, implements and musical instruments which classifies them according to their ritual activation and includes sources by Grags pa rgyal mtshan and Lha brtsun nam mkha'i 'jigs med which are cited elsewhere in this dissertation.

4.1 Sourcing, preparation and circulation

In order to document the use of human remains which are modified through technique and knowledge transfer into ritual objects in the Tibetan cultural region, it is necessary to first describe these materials' relationship to burial practices, their social and economic valorization, and the process of sourcing, preparing and circulating human bone.

Firstly, as suggested by the interpretive model of "cultural ecology", access to human remains — and bone in particular — might be facilitated by the practice of *bya gtor*, where the corpse is dismembered, flesh separated from the bone and scattered to vultures and other scavengers in a form of exposure burial which has been practiced historically in the largely pastoral and arid landscape of the Tibetan plateau.[2] This method of corpse disposal is similar to some Zoroastrian methods for corpse disposal which also used de-fleshing and dismemberment and were known to central Asian regions in contact with Tibetan and Buddhist communities by the eighth century.[3] Yet, as Heather Stoddard has observed, the historic spread and popularity of *bya gtor* was also conditioned by the decline and decentralization of the Tibetan political and civic institutions after the ninth century and the simultaneous spread of tantric methodologies which incorporated charnel materials and imageries.[4] The result was a ritual value for corpses and human remains in Tibetan material religion which was complementary to a method for the disposal of bodies that was conducive to the natural and geo-cultural landscape of the Himalayan plateau.

At the same time, this exposed treatment for corpses resonates with historically Buddhist renunciant charnel practices like *aśubhabhāvanā*, or the contemplation of decay, which was popularized during the first millennium of the Common Era across south and central Asia.[5] Furthermore, in northern Chinese Buddhist communities of the seventh to tenth centuries, natural exposure of the body in a forest or cave became a popular donative practice with

---

[2] Martin, "On the cultural ecology of sky burial", 360.

[3] Grenet, *Les pratiques funéraires de l'Asie centrale sédentaire,* 265. Grenet documents this method of corpse disposal as early as the first millennium before the Common Era. The archaeologist Mark Aldenderfer and his team have also found evidence for de-fleshing and/or dismemberment at the high-altitude fourth century site of Samdzong, *idem., "*Variation in mortuary practice on the early Tibetan plateau and the high Himalayas," *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1, no. 1 (2013), 293-318. See also chapter 3, note 94.

[4] Stoddard, "Eat it up or throw it to the dogs?," 12.

[5] Greene, "Death in a cave", 270. Greene finds that the contemplation of skeletons and corpses was an especially active pedagogical tradition in south and central Asian Buddhist communities from the fourth to seventh centuries, see also chapter 2.

householders and lay practitioners of the Tang Dynasty, previously having been documented as the result of ascetic practice or indication of saintly death.[6] Moreover, Gregory Schopen has elsewhere presented evidence for exposure burial — without dismemberment and as an alternative to cremation — being sanctioned in Indian monastic discourse after the first centuries CE.[7] Thus there is an historical precedent for the Buddhist use of exposure burial which informs the adoption of *bya gtor* across the Tibetan plateau.

Some of the earliest indications of the use of exposure burial in the Tibetan cultural historical corpus can be found in accounts of the deaths of disciples of the twelfth century teacher and ascetic yogin Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas, where a small number were carried to the mountain (*rir skyel*) — though there is no mention of feeding them to birds or dismemberment — while the majority were cremated.[8] Descriptions of de-fleshing and exposure are found in accounts by visitors to Tibet from the fourteenth century, while the phrase *bya gtor* is found in later sources from the eighteenth century.[9] Yet, as noted by a scholar of Zoroastrian exposure practices and their geographical distribution, there is an historical bias towards the study of burial methods in settled, literate populations who constructed monuments or kept written records, meaning that the widespread adoption of de-fleshing, dismemberment and exposure by nomadic or non-literate social groups is somewhat speculative.[10]

However, historical documentation from the past few hundred years as well as recent study suggest that *bya gtor* is only one of the ways in which corpses are processed after death in the Tibetan cultural region. Cremation is a common option and there exist as well alternative forms of dismemberment and/or exposure in water and (rarely) forests, with no consistent application

---

[6] Liu Shufen, “Death and the degeneration of life exposure of the corpse in medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28, no. 1, (2000), 17. Liu moreover describes evidence from Dunhuang for the promotion of this form of burial as an opportunity for the practice of *aśubhabhāvanā,* which was also introduced from central Asia after the fourth century.

[7] Gregory Schopen*,* “On avoiding ghosts and social censure,” *op.cit.,* 218.

[8] ‘Gos lo tsā ba, *op.cit.,* 919. See also the *Zhi byed snga bar phyi gsum gyi skor*, *op.cit., passim.* Thanks to Dr. Dan Martin for clarifying this in person, July 2019.

[9] Martin, “On the cultural ecology,” 355-6. The term “sky burial” is a translation of the Chinese *tian zang* (天葬) and largely absent from historical Tibetan sources.

[10] Grenet, *op.cit.,* 36.

for these practices across social groups or regional communities.[11] Rather, the historic popularity of *bya gtor* in Buddhist communities of the Tibetan plateau and Himalayas — based on both secondary and anecdotal sources representing a diversity of perspectives — represents a social and soteriological concern for the utility of the corpse as an opportunity to cultivate beneficial influence through a public act of donation.[12]

Moreover, as a method for recovering bones from a corpse, *bya gtor* is not necessarily more reliable than other burial practices: Where bones are intended for use as ritual objects, they are recovered as part of the preparation of the corpse for disposal.[13] The rest of the body, as a donation and vehicle for the exchange of merit, is distributed completely to be eaten by the assembled scavengers, leaving trace evidence (figure 4.1.1).[14] Where a donation — *i.e.* the skull or femur to be prepared as a ritual object — is made or sought directly by a practitioner, consent is given by the family of the deceased, their monastic community or a specialized religious authority.[15] This represents a different type of donation and instrumentalization for human remains than the disposal of the corpse by exposure burial and *bya gtor*.

---

[11] Gouin, *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, 1ff. Gouin's conclusion that there is no "standard" form of burial in Tibetan communities at present is largely confirmed in my fieldwork across the region (see map, fig. 1.7) where I found that the method of burial was more often determined by financial or astrological concerns than the natural environment (*i.e.* availability of fuel for cremation): For example, one female informant from a high-altitude nomadic community in a treeless region of Ladakh mentioned that dung could be used to cremate bodies where it was determined appropriate by the *bla ma* or religious authority, (personal communication, February 2018). Cremation is an increasingly popular option in urban communities of the Himalayas as well as within the global diaspora, and is used preferentially in areas with small or threatened populations of vultures and/or restricted intraregional movement; as told by male and female lay and monastic informants in Thimphu, Labrang, Nangchen and Dharamsala, January 2015, November and December 2017, and February 2018.

[12] See Gouin, *ibid.*, 69.

[13] This was repeated by multiple informants, predominantly monks and tantric specialists, in Khams, Ladakh and Sikkim, April and August 2018. See also Bhagawan Singh, "149. Disposal of the dead by mutilation in Spiti (W. Tibet)", *Man* 33, (1933): 1441-143. Gregory Schopen has also speculated on an undefined monastic post-mortem procedure known to Indian Buddhists of the sixth and seventh centuries as *śarīrapūjā,* which was performed after death and before disposal, typically by cremation, and was translated from Sanskrit by one Tibetan as *rus ba'i mchod byas; idem.,* "On avoiding ghosts and social censure", 211 and 227n38.

[14] Lay practitioners, various monastic and tantric lineage holders in multiple locations of dKar rdze, Nangchen and Labrang, November and December 2017; Dharamsala, February 2018. In *bya gtor*, the body should be eaten entirely and in a timely manner — *e.g.* within three days — before it must be further processed with additional rituals for purification and/or a successful rebirth of the deceased.

[15] This was information repeated by monastic informants, ritual specialists and lay practitioners from various lineages in dKar rdze, Nangchen, Dharamsala, Ladakh and Kathmandu, November 2017 - July 2018. See also Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.*, 172.

Figure 4.1.1: Aged and exposed fragment of a human cranium resulting from *bya gtor*, found in the charnel grounds of a Tibetan community in Khams, November 2017.

Donation at the time of death is only one of the ways in which human remains are sourced for ritual objects and at present, theft and resale from burials, hospitals or mortuaries is also a common method for procurement. This is especially noteworthy in urban areas with non-Buddhist communities which practice interment of the entire corpse, for example in the southern Himalayas where Muslim and Christian groups are living in proximity to Buddhists and tantric specialists.[16] Commissioned theft is also used by practitioners as well as commercial traders to procure raw materials throughout the region.[17] This illicit system of exchange for human remains used in ritual objects — including international systems for transport and smuggling — is sustained both within communities of practitioners and larger commercial networks (figure

[16] Buddhist and non-Buddhist lay practitioners (male and female) and vendor informants in Thimphu, Kathmandu and Sikkim, January 2015, June and August 2018. The archaeologist Marion Poux finds that the skulls and femurs are often missing from historic high-altitude burials in Mustang; *idem.,* “Early Buddhist period archaeology in Upper Mustang”, paper presented at the 15th Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, Paris, July 2019.

[17] Vendors and practitioner informants (lay and monastic) at multiple locations in Khams and A mdo, Kathmandu and Sikkim, November - August 2018. See also Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 174.

4.1.2).[18] This moreover includes trade with adjacent non-Buddhist tantric specialists and charnel ascetics, for example the Aghori residing at cremation ghats along the Ganges or in the Kathmandu valley.[19]

Figure 4.1.2: A selection of skulls of uncertain provenance for sale on the pavement in a Tibetan neighborhood of Chinese city, 2017. Image courtesy of a local source.

Where an individual practitioner has a specific requirement for their implement — *i.e.* a certain type of skull or femur best suited to their ritual methods and purpose — sourcing these remains might take many years of waiting and study as well as significant financial support.[20] These material criteria may include a donor of specific age, gender or biographical profile (*e.g.* male or female, Buddhist, non-Buddhist) and/or be qualified by the nature of their death as well as any other number of morphological features — color, shape, size, *etc.* — which are determined, selected and activated through the ritual expertise of the user and their mode of practice. It is noteworthy that these types of specific criteria and valorizations — some of which are explored in the following sections — are often repeated by contemporary vendors as well as cultural historical

[18] One female lay practitioner from western Bhutan has recounted how human remains intended for use in ritual objects — many for legal export — are sourced in West Bengal or Bihar and brought into the country with its food, which is facilitated in part by their national prohibition against industrial meat processing (Thimphu, January 2015). Nancy Malville has also recorded anecdotal evidence of precautions against theft during *bya gtor* in some Tibetan communities, *op.cit.,* 197.

[19] Traders and crafts people in Khams and A mdo, October-December 2018; and a male *gcod* specialist in Kathmandu, June 2018. See also Jonathan P. Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)*,* 253 for anecdotal evidence of a contemporary Aghori (Śaiva) charnel ascetic in Varanasi using skulls from a hospital mortuary.

[20] rNying ma *bla ma*s and *gcod* practitioners in Kathmandu and West Bengal, June - July 2018.

and anthropological scholars who emphasized narratives of violence and transgression rather than the longevity and diversity of historical sources and social values for these objects, significantly contributing their misinterpretation by non-practitioners and non-Tibetan authors and care-takers.[21]

The current network for theft and resale is supported by a global market for these materials and increasingly enforced legal restrictions on the transport, sale and possession of human remains across the region has stimulated their economic value as cultural properties and/or commodities.[22] In the past few decades, this has resulted in the confiscation of ritual objects made with human remains from religious sites in Nepal and India as well as an increased international regulation of online sales for these instruments.[23] This has had an adverse effect on the continuity of material knowledge needed to produce these objects: Andrea Loseries-Leick observed that the bone ornament fabricators from Tibet whom she met in West Bengal in the last decades of the previous century were no longer able to specialize in human bone because suitable materials were too difficult to acquire.[24] The same types of technicians working in the Kathmandu valley at present — the current manufacturing center for Tibetan Buddhist material religion — report similar legal obstacles and prohibitive fines for the use of human remains in their commissions for *rus rgyan*.[25]

The legal marginalization of these materials and the ritual objects into which they are crafted — as well as their relatively high economic value — add a layer of opacity in the study of this technical tradition: Where many practitioners might admit to having purchased human remains for ritual use, few could or would relate the sources for these materials. At the same time, multiple informants — vendors and practitioners — emphasized that the bones were very old,

---

[21] See chapter 1 and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Demons and Oracles of Tibet,* 398; Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet,* 300 and Balfour, “Life of an Aghori Fakir”, 347. Christian missionaries and European visitors from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries similarly spoke of the use of human remains as sorcery or magic, rather than religion; *c.f.* Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 26-27.

[22] This was repeated by many vendors, crafts people and a police officer (almost all practitioners as well) across the region in A mdo, Khams, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and the Kathmandu valley as well as Bodh Gaya and Varanasi, September 2017 - December 2018.

[23] Buddhist and non-Buddhist tantric specialists, including *gcod* and rNying ma lineage holders, in Varanasi, Kathmandu and Sikkim, June and August 2018; London 2020. In most legal codes being enforced at present, there is no distinction between the sale of human remains and that of cultural objects made from human remains which are intended for sale or ritual use; thanks to Ryan Seidenmann and Christine Halling from the United States Attorney General’s office in Baton Rouge for their legal perspective on this issue (personal communication, 2 March 2020). See also notes 54 and 55, below.

[24] Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.* 167ff.

[25] As told by two Newar carvers specializing in stone, bone and shell, Kathmandu valley, June 2018.

indicating that they were more valuable because they had already been used as ritual objects and thus had accumulated merit and prestige.[26] The majority of informants on fieldwork had acquired their objects by purchasing them, though less often in a monastic context where human remains were more easily acquired by direct donation from someone within the community; many practitioners in a diversity of settings received them as gifts.[27]

The value for techniques and materials evident in these objects is thus socially established: They are not necessarily inherently valuable because they are human but rather because they illustrate a system of shared cultural or religious standards informed by the historical practice of tantra in the Tibetan cultural region as well as economic necessity.[28] Moreover, these instruments, like relics, have the capacity to transmit soteriological benefit (*byin rlabs,* the gift of positive influence) and establish an ontological continuity between the practitioner and the accumulated merit of the donor, as well as that of the skilled specialist who administers the ritual.[29] As James Gentry has observed in his study of Tibetan tantric materiality, objects are only one aspect of a ritual method and they must be properly activated in order to be efficacious.[30] Furthermore, in some religious institutions, the skulls of lineage founders, teachers, and their incarnations (*sprul sku*) are reserved for specialized purposes within the community while other less economically, historically or liturgically significant materials can be used for public rituals, indicating their relative value.[31]

As ritual instruments, human remains are rendered into methods for the transmission of seemingly intangible values and qualities — *i.e.* impermanence, detachment from ego, empowerment, the accomplishment of the nondual, *etc*. — in an expression of what Janet Gyatso has identified as a Tibetan Buddhist and tantric pedagogical “tendency for the more

---

[26] Monastic and lay informants including shopkeepers and traders in areas of Khams and A mdo, September - December 2017.

[27] *ibid.,* as well as lay and monastic practitioners and local collectors in West Bengal and Ladakh, March - April 2018.

[28] This is a qualification shared by other religious traditions which have instrumentalized human remains as relics and cultural properties, see Patrick Geary, “Sacred commodities: The circulation of medieval relics,” in *The Social Life of Things, op.cit.*, 169-194.

[29] See Martin, “Pearls from bones,” 274.

[30] Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism,* 291ff.

[31] Monastic informants including bKa’ brgyud and rNying ma lineage holders in Ladakh and West Bengal, April and July 2018.

Figure 4.1.3: A plastic bowl painted as a skull with pink interior and sutures or veins in red on the exterior; the bowl holds *bdud rtsi* (alcoholic liquor) in a rNying ma *lha khang* in Sikkim, August 2018.

absorbed experiences to move into the domain of the objective".[32] Furthermore, though meeting specific criteria — such as a bone being human, or a specific type of human — is an advantage, the materials used are of less consequence than the religious education of the skilled practitioner, ritual specialist or teacher who activates or interprets them.[33] The efficacy or value of these objects is therefore not only social and religious, but performative as well.[34]

This informs the historic and present use of objects made from alternative substrates to facilitate ritual practice, including animal bone, artificial vessels shaped or decorated as skulls and more examples discussed in the following sections. Because of restrictions on the transport and sale of human remains, material specificity is increasingly determined by economic and logistical factors: Many present ritual users — including those within monastic communities and religious

[32] Gyatso, "Healing burns with fire," 126. Bodily evidence for effective practice and religious knowledge resonates with another method for sourcing skulls: those which form or are preserved as self-arisen (*rang byung*) vessels during the cremation of an accomplished practitioner, an event known to lay informants of various ages in Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, April - August 2018.

[33] This was repeated often by lay and monastic informants and practitioners across the Tibetan cultural region, in Khams, A mdo, Dharamsala, Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, September 2017 - August 2018. See also Malville, *op.cit.,* 204n4 and Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 167.

[34] This can also be understood as the "metapractical" aspect of tantric visual and material religion, see Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom*, 179.

institutions — use objects made from plastic, resin, buffalo bone, plaster and ceramic.[35] As part of the greater relational strategy of tantra, for many of these practitioners the substrate is of less importance than the social value of that material specificity, what Hugh Urban has described as a dynamic of "notoriety" historically cultivated through the practice of ritualized charnel asceticism.[36] The intra-regional and global popularity of Buddhist tantra has furthermore stimulated the creation of many alternatives for the construction of these ritual objects which has facilitated the participation of a greater diversity of practitioners and, at the same time, resulted in the specific use of human remains being understood as expression of orthodoxy, potency or religious authority.[37]

It is therefore possible to summarize the sourcing of human remains for Tibetan ritual objects as a dynamic and varied process which can be very discerning for the specialist and unscrupulous or commercial for the rest. At present, this acquisition is less dependent on the local method of corpse disposal or burial than the social or economic setting in which the donor's body is being treated. Moreover, the complex value for human remains in Tibetan material culture is conditioned by interrelated Buddhist soteriological goals, cultural historical narratives and economic factors, as well as the specific ritual methodology for which it will be used. Individual attitudes vary as well from indifference to skepticism, respect and/or intimidation, depending on the interests, religious education and unique personality of the practitioner or observer.

Where human bones are used, after being procured they can first be cleaned by boiling, soaking or a period of burial.[38] Cleaning methods can also be used to evaluate the suitability of the bone: One monastic specialist in the dKar rdze district of Khams relates that skulls can be buried at the base of a tree for one year, during which the fruits produced by the tree are

---

[35] This was observed and reported by lay and monastic practitioners and seen in markets in Khams, A mdo, Dharamsala, Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, September 2017 - August 2018. See also Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 169.

[36] Urban, "The remnants of desire", 68. Likewise, Christian Wedemeyer interprets the socially provocative specificity of these ritual materials as a semiotic strategy, see *idem.,* "Beef, dog and other mythologies: Connotative semiotics in Mahāyoga Tantra ritual and scripture", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 2 (June 2007): 383-417.

[37] One *gcod* specialist and teacher in Kathmandu explained that, from his perspective, the tradition was by definition an ascetic one, necessitating real human bone and the commitment to procure it in order to master the sādhana, June 2018. This resonated with one rNying ma *bla ma* in Kathmandu as well who stated that advanced practice requires advanced commitment to material specificity, July 2018.

[38] Boiling may include use of sodium bicarbonate; the use of other chemical agents has been reported but unspecified (*i.e.* "acid") by material specialists and observers (many lay practitioners) in Khams, Dharamsala, Kathmandu and West Bengal, November 2017, February, June and August 2018. Loseries-Leick records that one craftsman placed his fresh bones in a natural hot spring for a short period in order to clean them, *op.cit.,* 177-178.

examined to determine the skull's character.[39] At the same time, the plasticity of the material is essential to its workability and desiccated bone which has been left exposed to strong sunlight and dry air — such as that which might be recovered from an open charnel ground — is unsuitable for carving. Soaking these materials in water, beer or other solutions for a defined period facilitates them being carved, cut or smoothly shaped by allowing the retention of lipids and other organic material (figure 4.1.4).[40] Over-soaking can result in a brittle or scorched bone, which is considered damaged and unsuitable for use.[41]

Figure 4.1.4: Reverse detail of an ornament carved from a cranial fragment at the Fowler Museum at UCLA (X69.300 C), photographed in raking white light. Ridges of raised and displaced material along the carved edges indicate the workability of the material at the time of manufacture and the control of organic components within the bone's mineral matrix.

The human bones most often found in Tibetan ritual objects are skulls and femurs, with occasional use of fingers, ribs and smaller limb bones for supplementary elements like beads. This preferential use of skulls and femurs is not only a matter of cultural historical and liturgical continuity in the practice of Buddhist tantra — as the first two

[39] Sa skya monastic practitioner and *bla ma*, dKar rdze, November 2017.

[40] Beer (*chang*) in the pre-treatment of bone was recommended by at least one material specialist in Darjeeling, July 2018.

[41] One lay practitioner and female observer reported that the failure to control this process — over-boiling in an unsuitable vessel — was responsible for the destruction of a skull donated by a recently deceased member of a monastic community near Dharamsala, February 2018.

chapters have illustrated — it is also a technical necessity since these are the two bones with the densest and/or thickest cortical layer and therefore the most workable from a material cultural perspective.[42] In the preparation and selection of these bones, they are often evaluated for their specific morphological characteristics, many of which will be described in the following sections. Still more of these idiosyncratic criteria are unknown outside oral transmissions and explanations in a post-initiatory or religious pedagogical setting.[43]

While some ritual methods and ascetic observances recommend that the practitioner source and prepare these materials personally, in many cases the construction of these objects engages a number of specialists and functionaries.[44] Especially where these instruments are intended to preserve or demonstrate the prestige of a religious institutions or its lineage — *i.e.* in a monastic setting — there is often an investment in the quality of ornamentation through fine carving or the addition of metalwork and precious stones.[45] There is moreover a division of labor between those responsible for the recovery of human remains from the corpse or burial and those commissioned to fabricate or circulate them as ritual instruments and cultural properties.[46] This indicates an interrelation of technologies — ritual, material and cultural — used to shape these objects.

---

[42] For more on the material characteristics of human bone used in Tibetan cultural objects, see Fuentes, “Technical examination of a bone ornament ensemble”, appendix F.

[43] For a practitioner’s perspective on knowledge of these objects received through specific teachings or lineages, see Loseries-Leick’s use of personal narrative and direct observation, *op.cit., passim.*

[44] See Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 170. The acquisition of human remains for ritual instruments is interpreted as an opportunity for advanced practice in the Bon tradition according to Helffer, *Mchod-rol,* 257. Moreover, monastic informants and tantric specialists of various lineages in dKar rdze and Dharamsala (November 2017, February 2018) have each described methods for selecting a skull through personal contact — *e.g.* holding the cranium up to one’s chest — through which a unique connection is established, making the object suitable for use.

[45] Monastic and lay informants, including tantric non-specialists and crafts people, in areas of Khams, Dharamsala and Ladakh, November - December 2017, February and March 2018.

[46] Vendors and practitioners (both lay and monastic, Buddhist and non-Buddhist) — in Khams, A mdo, Dharamsala and Kathmandu, October and December 2017, February and June 2018. A number of metalworkers (all laymen and mostly practitioners as well) report having been presented with human remains — usually cleaned and trimmed — for which they were commissioned to make ornaments and improvements, areas of Khams, October - December 2017. A number of other practitioner-craftsmen in the Dharamsala area report that the skills necessary for working with bone are highly specialized and not often shared with other makers like metal workers or wood carvers; February 2018. This social economy is also exhibited through a division of labor within a religious community: The monk responsible for removing the bones from the corpse in one monastic community in Ladakh was not necessarily the same who commissions, selects, circulates or activates the objects through ritual use; Ladakh, March 2018. Sarah Harding also notes in her study of *gcod* that none of her informants — though experts in the practice — had recovered the bones for their *rkang gling* personally, *Machik’s Complete Explanation,* 310n7.

Figure 4.1.5: Shop front with bone ornaments for sale, carved from animal bone by a specialist technician in the Kathmandu Valley or nearby in Nepal, June 2018. This object is also intended as a sample for those who would commission similar for export and/or liturgical use.

At present, the circulation of these objects is largely organized through commercial vendors who purchase them directly from owners or practitioners for re-sale, sell them on consignment or facilitate the commission of new products from skilled craftsmen (figure 4.1.5).[47] Historically and locally, these objects have also been exchanged as gifts between family members or between a teacher and their student.[48] These mechanisms for exchange — gift or purchase — operate within the Tibetan cultural region as well as the larger global Tibetan and Vajrayāna Buddhist community, where permitted. Based on observations and interviews from fieldwork within the region, the majority of new bone ornaments are made in the Kathmandu valley — almost entirely of animal (buffalo) bone — whence they are exported throughout the Tibetan cultural

[47] Vendors (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, all laymen) in Chengdu, Khams, areas of A mdo, Dharamsala, Ladakh and Kathmandu, September 2017 - July 2018.

[48] Lay practitioners and monastic informants in Khams, Dharamsala and Ladakh, November 2017, February and March 2018. Divalerio has also explored sixteenth century bKa' brgyud sources which record gifts of bone ornaments — as well as *khaṭvāṅga* — between noteworthy *brtul zhugs pa* and their students or patrons, *idem., The Holy Madmen of Tibet,* 1ff. My thanks to Dr. Divalerio for confirming this as well by email (10 July 2019).

sphere as well as China, Taiwan, and abroad to Buddhist institutions or collectors in Europe and North America.[49] Where human remains are utilized, this mobility is severely limited.

Though international circulation and exchange is facilitated by the use of alternative substrates, the relative high economic value of human remains results in their scarcity within the region and inaccessibility to practitioners from local communities.[50] This is partially the result of the global exhibition and valorization of these objects as cultural properties after the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their acquisition through (predominantly British) colonial and military routes of access.[51] This mass export of Tibetan material culture was and continues to be facilitated by vendors within the region whose clients might be local or international, as well as the migration or displacement of practitioners of Buddhist tantra from their historical region of residence.[52] In the following technical study, it will be seen that those objects housed in museums and older than one hundred years are more likely to be human, while newer examples increasingly use mixed and alternative substrates.

This indicates a fundamental tension between the use of human remains as ritual objects and their collection as cultural properties: Where early curators and anthropologists may have felt they were encountering a material practice and ritual methodology which would not be sustained after its exposure to global commerce and infrastructure, by acquiring and valorizing these objects over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they precipitated their endangerment. This attitude is best summarized by former Pitt Rivers Museum curator Henry Balfour who wrote that “the interests of culture demand the suppressions of such ascetic doctrines, but the interests of anthropology demand that they should be thoroughly investigated

---

[49] These observation were supported by vendors and material specialists (mostly lay practitioners as well) in Ladakh, the Kathmandu valley and West Bengal, March - August 2018.

[50] This is particularly true in Ladakh, where many of its older or more prestigious ritual objects — including those made of human remains — have been sold to collectors and exported since the region was opened to tourism in the past 50 years; as described by multiple informants (vendors, lay and monastic practitioners of various lineages) in Ladakh, March and April 2018.

[51] See chapter 1, note 2.

[52] These vendors are found at present across the Himalayan region and several have been connected to the purchase (or theft) of a number of ritual objects and cultural properties; as told by practitioners and Buddhist and non-Buddhist observers in Chengdu, areas of Khams and A mdo, Ladakh, Kathmandu and West Bengal, September - December 2017, March - April, June and July 2018. See also the potential connection between illicit trafficking, the art market and cultural institutions in “Nepal: The great plunder,” *Al Jazeera 101 East*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0yKxj3KS3E&vl=en (accessed 22 November 2019).

before it is too late."[53] However, the results of this research into historically and presently continuous modes of ritualized charnel asceticism — including their adaption to current social, political, economic and material contingencies — show that these practitioners and their technologies are indeed still active.

Discrepancies between the interpretation of these objects as ritual instruments and their acquisition as artifacts or cultural properties have had a substantial effect on the maintenance and handling of Tibetan material culture. As Dianne McGowan has explored in her 2010 dissertation, the curation of Tibetan collections in the US, for example, has relied on the "aestheticization" of these materials and their presentation as art during the twentieth century.[54] Museums and collectors have therefore largely displayed and acquired Tibetan ritual objects with interest as fine art or material prestige, yet those ornaments with fine carvings and complex iconographies — facilitated by a characteristic density unique to human bone and similar only to ivory, which is rarely used — and other instruments with ornate embellishment are more likely to be human because they are highly specialized. The result is that some of the most historically valuable Tibetan ritual objects made with human remains have been made inaccessible to practitioners and craftspeople through preservation or sequestering in museum collections.

Moreover, the treatment of these materials as anthropological specimens in museums and cultural institutions has also been problematic where policies governing access to human remains often prioritize scientific materialism and proprietary concerns of consent or liability characteristic to the displacement of ancestral remains and funerary materials by colonial predecessors.[55] However, because the remains discussed here have been altered — having undergone a "process of skill" — they can be interpreted as cultural objects which is a distinction that provokes the engagement of epistemologies, practices, values and narratives that supports beyond their re-contextualization in the museum.[56] Nevertheless, there is currently

---

[53] Balfour, "Life of an Aghori Fakir", 341. He predicted that the Aghori yogis, in particular, would "likely die out at no very remote period" which has yet to be realized. See, for example, Parry, *Death in Banaras, passim.*

[54] McGowan, "Consuming the devil's idols?", 2ff.

[55] In the UK, these restrictions, written in 2005, are limited to remains which are dated within 100 years of the present; see *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums, op.cit*. as well as Ryan M. Seidemann, "Bones of contention: A comparative examination of law governing human remains from archaeological contexts in formerly colonial countries", *Louisiana Law Review* 64, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 546-588.

[56] Neil G.W. Curtis, "Human remains: The sacred, museums and archaeology," *Public Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2003), 23. This distinction between bodies and cultural properties which utilize human remains was repeated by Dr. Daniel Antoine, Institute for Bioarchaeology Curator of Physical Anthropology at the British Museum (personal communication, 21 November 2019).

an on-going and unresolved reconciliation with these materials in museological and academic discourse while institutions actively review their handling, exhibition and curatorial policies towards human remains as well as cultural materials.[57] It is hoped that this research into the history and technology of these objects will contribute to this effort.

In summary, this section has provided an overview of the current sourcing, preparation and circulation of Tibetan ritual objects made with human remains. The following four sections will describe each of these implement types and attempt to relate the cultural histories and social values of their ritual applications and religious historical use to their technology and construction as well as their illustration in visual cultural sources. These results are based on the examination of some 60 objects in museum collections (see Appendix) as well as observations of their use and fabrication at over 150 sites across the Tibetan cultural region (see chapter 1 on methodology). This investigation is further supplemented by information provided through a series of informal interviews conducted on fieldwork with over 100 lay practitioners, monks, nuns, tantric specialists, craftspeople, vendors, artists, scholars, and students. The following account is therefore a generalization drawn from various documented forms and functions for these ritual objects, as well as the dynamic cultural narratives, values and identities which have generously informed them at present.

[57] In the course of this research I have been contacted by curators, conservators and researchers in the UK, US, Austria, Canada, France, Sweden and Australia regarding the care and display of these objects. In each case, the concern is the material substrate (*i.e.* human remains) and its controlled access. This redress has been focused, for example, by the British Museum in consultations and workshops — July and October 2019, January 2020 — organized with ritual specialists, tibetologists and members of the UK-based Tibetan community in collaboration with myself, curator Dr. Imma Ramos and University of Oxford doctoral researcher Thupten Kelsang and made in advance of an upcoming show which will exhibit a selection of these objects. See Mark Brown, “Tibetan objects made of human remains to go on show at British Museum”, *The Guardian,* 23 February 2020; see also Kelsang’s forthcoming dissertation.

Figure 4.2.1: An illustrated selection of skulls at the Pitt Rivers Museum in the late 19th century. Image from Balfour 1897.

4.2 Skulls, *thod pa*

In a 1897 article on the use of skulls by tantric practitioners in India — with notes on their use in Tibet as well — Henry Balfour illustrates the formal diversity of these vessels with a number of examples from the Pitt Rivers Museum where he was curator, with rough-edged skulls suited to ascetic settings as well as ornate examples more often characteristic to monastic or institutional use with a lid and tripod stand shaped by repoussé (figure 4.2.1). Balfour's account emphasizes the transgressive dynamics of practices associated with their use by suggesting that "rebels", criminals and other enemies of religious or political authority are the preferential donors for these skulls.[1] While the second chapter of this dissertation introduced some of the historical sources for these cultural narratives and their antinomian qualification, this section will explore technical specifications and evidence for the variety of skulls used as ritual objects in Tibetan material religion.

Skulls (Tbt. *thod pa*, Skt. *kapāla*) are the most versatile ritual instruments made from human remains in Tibetan material religion, often used as vessels for collecting, transforming,

---

[1] Balfour, "Life of an Aghori fakir", 355. This information is repeated by European and other non-Tibetan scholars — see note 11 below — though uncorroborated by the findings of this research.

Figures 4.2.2 and 4.2.3: Interior and exterior of a one-piece skull with *tshangs pa'i bu ga* in the crown, a hole created from an expulsion or transference of breath or vitality made by an accomplished practitioner at death or during meditation, November 2017.

presenting or distributing offerings and empowered substances in a diversity of individual and public applications. Skulls are selected and prepared according to the accumulated knowledge and ritual skill of a practitioner or religious authority through an evaluation of physical characteristics such as color, shape, the morphology of its capillary patterns and sutures, number of cranial segments and structural cohesion with certain features being more or less suited to a ritual's purpose. Evidence for this body of ritual and material knowledge is found in the Tibetan *thod brtags* corpus, for example, which interprets these features of skulls according to their ritual applications and benefits or liabilities to the user(s).[2]

The skull in figs. 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 — used by an individual practitioner within a monastery in eastern Tibet — exhibits a number of highly valued physical and morphological characteristics, including an evenly polished and smooth exterior, white in color with minimal evidence of cranial

[2] Martin Hanker has compiled and translated a number of these texts from various teaching lineages and Tibetan liturgical traditions in his 2018 MA dissertation from Charles University (*op.cit.*) including sources dated from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries. See also W.W. Rockhill on "good" versus "bad" skulls according to one *thod brtags* in *idem.,* "On the use of skulls in Lamaist ceremonies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 14 (1890), xxiv-xxxi.

sutures and having the appearance of one coherent piece.[3] Moreover, these features — including the strong ridge on the interior of the frontal bone — are described by the thirteenth century Sa skya scholar Grags pa rgyal mtshan, for example.[4] The relative value of this skull's features was demonstrated through its selective use by the practitioner: An alternative skull — with a mottled, uneven color and more prominent cranial sutures — had black and greasy accumulations resulting from regular application as a vessel, while this one-piece skull was relatively clean because of its infrequent, specialized use.[5]

Physical features of the interior or exterior can also exhibit figures, letters, iconography and other marks which are recognized and interpreted through religious study and tantric knowledge. These can, at times, be an indication of the accumulated merit or ritual accomplishment of the donor, as well as the transformative effects of Buddhist tantra on the body, a process frequently recorded in Tibetan hagiographic sources.[6] Similarly, the small hole in the crown of the skull in figs. 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 — more clearly visible on the exterior — is attributed to *'pho ba,* an ejection of consciousness or vitality achieved by skilled practitioners during their lives or, more commonly, at death.[7] As a physical manifestation of advanced skill or

---

[3] As told by the skull's monastic user and custodian and reconfirmed by other lay and monastic practitioner-informants and material specialists across the region, November - December 2017, February - August 2018. Rockhill's translation also records evidence for the valorization of a skull with this appearance, *ibid.,* xxvii.

[4] *idem.,* "gSang sngags nang gi lhung bzed brtag pa," in *Grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi bka' 'bum*, ed. bSod nams rgya mtsho (Tokyo: Thō-yō sBuṅ kho, 1968 [13th c.]), 100-104. Loseries-Leick (*op.cit*., 90-93) provides a translation of Grags pa rgyal mtshan's morphological criteria and priorities, including a map of skull interiors used for divinatory purposes. This function and specifications in the number of pieces for a skull may be related to an older Chinese tradition of plastromancy, or the interpretation of turtle shells; Martin Hanker, personal communication, 11 December 2019.

[5] At the same time, other sources emphasized that an older skull vessel was more valuable because it had accumulated merit through use; monastic lineage holders and Buddhist and non-Buddhist vendor informants in Khams and A mdo, September - December 2017.

[6] For a related discussion of human remains as relics and *rten*, or support for practice, and their capacity to communicate *byin rlabs* see Martin, "Pearls from bones," 275ff. Martin notes two skulls with a self-arisen (*rang byung*, see below) letter A (ཨ) were described at pilgrimage sites by historic Tibetan guidebooks, indicating their popular appeal, *ibid*., 276. See also Loseries-Leick on "Human bones and the wonders of precious relics", in *op.cit.,* 133-151 for her descriptions of figures and letters observed in human remains and their connection to the death of an accomplished practitioner.

[7] Loseries-Leick notes that this aperture is called the *tshangs pa'i bu ga*, or brahma hole, op.cit., 88. On this accomplishment (Skt. *brahmarandhra*) through yoga tantra, including sources from historical Śaiva traditions, see Gavin Flood, "The purification of the body in tantric ritual representation", *Indo-Iranian Journal* 45, no. 1 (2002): 25-43. This hole was also identified by the custodian of the skull in fig. 4.2.2 as a mark of prestige. I have elsewhere seen coral and other precious materials inserted here, perhaps in part to maintain the object's integrity as a vessel, as suggested by a monastic scholar in Sikkim, August 2018.

Figure 4.2.4: A skull with *rang byung* Tibetan letter A (ཨ) and triple jewel in a temporary display at the Pitt Rivers Museum (1887.1.279.1-3.); two plaster casts illustrate the raised features, painted in red. Image courtesy of Nicholas Crowe at the PRM.

religious knowledge in Buddhist yoga tantra, this morphological feature — which can be single or multiple — is highly valued in skulls.[8]

Self-arisen (Tbt. *rang byung*) letters and figures on the surface of the cranium — found on the interior or exterior — are another demonstration of ways in which religious education can affect the body of the practitioner and facilitate engagement. In figure 4.2.4, a skull on temporary display at the Pitt Rivers Museum exhibits the Tibetan letter A (ཨ) on the exterior front with three tear-shaped jewels (*triratna*, Tbt. *dkon mchog gsum*) on the proper left, reverse. These marks can be understood as a distinction of social, religious and even economic value with the capacity for beneficial influence to the user, as well as evidence for the accomplishment of the

[8] A material specialist in West Bengal gave anecdotal evidence for the ritual and social valorization for 23 of these holes in the skull of a presumed sex worker in early twentieth century Lhasa, July 2018. The skulls of sex workers are elsewhere instrumentalized for making specific types of offerings to wrathful deities or protectors, Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.*, 93.

donor.[9] However, as indicated by many informants across the Tibetan cultural region, the legibility of *rang byung* features is at least partially dependent on the religious knowledge of the viewer.[10] Like the other morphological characteristics of skulls described and referenced here, these features and their significance must be recognized by the user(s) in order to be efficacious.

The biography of the skull in fig. 4.2.4 indicates not only the prestige of *rang byung* imagery but also its historical misinterpretation by untrained observers. Previous descriptions of this object — including those for its display at the 1862 International Exhibition of Arts in London under the label “Skull of Confucius” after its acquisition during a military expedition to Beijing — reflected the hermeneutical agenda of nineteenth century British colonial scholars and curators, rather than an accurate representation of its origins or religious value.[11] Moreover, at a 1869 meeting of the Ethnological Society of Great Britain, the scholar George Busk claimed — based on dubious, uncorroborated historical or anecdotal evidence — that this was a drinking vessel made from the skull of a slain enemy of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735-1796); his interpretation furthermore failed to recognize the religious or cultural significance of its *rang byung* features.[12]

The value of this skull and its exceptional features to its historical custodians is suggested by the materials and techniques which had ornamented and supported the object at its acquisition, including a stand and lid in a light-colored cuprous alloy, shaped through repoussé and possibly gilded.[13] These supplemental features — melted down by a collector after the object was

---

[9] Another skull with *rang byung* features — including the mantra *oṃ a huṃ* and a four-armed sPyan ras gzigs, as well as two holes from *‘pho ba* — was encountered in the home of a prosperous family in Khams whose patriarch had purchased the object in his youth and preserved it despite many offers to sell it over four decades, December 2017; photo documentation was not attempted. He attributed the success of his children and stability of their home to the proper maintenance of this skull.

[10] Janet Gyatso has noted this same type of reciprocal legibility in the legitimation of revealed teachings and *gter ma*, see *idem.*, “The logic of legitimation in the Tibetan treasure tradition,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 2, (November 1993), 123. Emphasis on the capacity of the viewer to perceive *rang byung* images was echoed by other informants and practitioners (both lay and monastic) in Khams, Ladakh and West Bengal, October 2017, March, April and July 2018, as well as the custodian of the skull described in note 9, above.

[11] Harris, *Museum on the Roof of the World*, 34-38. The identification of this skull with the sixth century BCE scholar Confucius (Kong fu zi) was motivated by the popular appeal of Chinese culture in the UK at that time. Harris notes that this skull with *rang byung* markings was likely preserved by practitioners in a shrine or altar with occasional use as a ritual vessel.

[12] Nick Pearce, “From relic to relic: A brief history of the skull of Confucius”, *Journal of the History of Collections* 26, no. 2 (2014), 212. Pearce speculates that, based on its *rang byung* markings, it was likely the skull of a Buddhist practitioner, and not a political enemy.

[13] Harris finds that this base and lid were described as “solid gold” by nineteenth century authors (*op.cit.*, 35) but this has not yet been documented in similar examples preserved in museum collections.

Figure 4.2.5: Another skull on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum in November 2016, with repoussé stand of flames and three heads, and lid with the *bkra shis rtags brgyad* and a single *rdo rje* handle, donated after its acquisition in Beijing by Maj. Gen. Gibbes Rigaud in 1886. The same object is illustrated second to the left on the bottom row of fig. 4.2.1.

purchased at auction and before it was donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1897 — are similar to many Sino-Tibetan examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including another skull acquired by British imperial forces during the 1868 looting of the Beijing Summer Palace, also in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum (figure 4.2.5). As Loseries-Leick has observed, these ornamental features were likely refined after the seventeenth century through the growing political and material patronage of monastic (*i.e.* dGe lugs) institutions, where these liturgical vessels were intended to simultaneously demonstrate the prestige of the skulls' donors as well as that of the community of lineage holders and their patrons.[14]

At the same time, these ornamental features indicate the liturgical function of skulls as vessels for the presentation and ritual refinement of offerings: In fig. 4.2.5, the triangular base has flames along its sides, framing the underside/crown of the skull, illustrating sacrificial fire as well

[14] Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.*, 95. A monastic practitioner (non-tantric specialist) in Nangchen (Khams) also observed that an investment in ornamental features is more often made when the donor of the skull was a significant figure in the community or lineage, December 2017.

Figure 4.2.6: Skull with copper lid and stand, and white metal or silver liner at the entrance to the *mgon khang* at a monastery in Ladakh, March 2018.

as the historical and formal precedent of Tibetan fierce *homa* practices which utilize a triangular-shaped hearth (*drag po'i me thabs*).[15] Moreover, this fire indicates the process of ritual transformation which activates the contents of the skull as *bdud rtsi* (Skt. *amṛta*) and a human head at each point emphasizes its suitability for offerings made to wrathful deities or protectors (*e.g.* charnel materials).[16] This tripod base for skulls can also be rendered as a tripod of metal or wood (figure 4.2.7), or replicated with the practitioner's hand during use.[17] In fig. 4.2.6, an ornate copper lid with a handle in the shape of a single *rdo rje* and triangular stand are framing a skull which holds offerings — soda and alcoholic beverages, seen adjacent — outside a monastic *mgon khang*, while in fig. 4.2.8, a textile ring and cover support a skull filled with

[15] Tadeusz Skorupski, "Tibetan homa rites according to the gter ma tradition" *The Tibet Journal* 20, no. 4 (1995): 5. Skorupski finds that Buddhist *homa* rituals are categorized as fierce, pacifying or enriching in seventh or eighth century tantric sources. Only fierce practices use a triangular hearth (see *ibid.,* 40). See also Cantwell and Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa*, 185 for evidence of the use of triangular *homa* pits "ornamented by skulls" for destructive practices at Dunhuang.

[16] This three-headed tripod is seen under the skull holding offerings to the left of the donor on the bottom right of the thirteenth century paintings of the protector Mahākāla in fig. 2.28 and Che mchog Heruka in fig. 2.30.

[17] Simplified support elements for skulls in wood, metal and cloth were encountered in various *lha khang*, shops and home altars in Khams, A mdo, Ladakh, Kathmandu, West Bengal and Sikkim, November 2017 - August 2018. Loseries-Leick describes positioning the left hand as a tripod at the base of the vessel during use, *op.cit.*, 96.

Figure 4.2.7 (above): Skull and wooden tripod for sale on consignment in West Bengal, August 2018.

Figure 4.2.8 (below): Skull with metal liner, textile cover and support, filled with an alcoholic beverage representing the purified *bdud rtsi* in a temporary installation of offerings to a wrathful deity in a *lha khang* in Kathmandu, June 2018.

alcohol used for *bdud rtsi* as part of an array dedicated to a wrathful deity.

In the practice of Buddhist tantra, the inner offering (*nang mchod*) of deity yoga might be made of the five sense organs in one of these vessels, or an offering of the five meats (*sha lnga,* Skt. *pañcamāṃsa*) which are purified, rendered and empowered as *bdud rtsi* in a liturgical dynamic derived from historically *kāpālika* methods for ritualized charnel asceticism and the instrumentation of transgressive materials (see chapter 2). These offerings of ritually-transformed meats, organs, fluids and/or other bodily impurities are suited to wrathful *yi dam* as well as worldly and enlightened protectors (*'jigs rten gyi/'jig rten las 'das pa'i chos skyong*), including local deities (*yul lha*).[18]

Figure 4.2.9: A painted array of offerings to the *chos skyong* Bhairava, including skulls on tripods of skeletal faces filled with a variety of suitable offerings, produced within a series of *rgyan tshogs* to wrathful deities and protectors in the 18-19th century and currently at the Wellcome Library (47091i).

This function as a vessel for the presentation of offerings to wrathful deities and protectors is moreover comprehensively illustrated in a visual cultural form called *rgyan tshogs* which was popularized in the Tibetan cultural sphere after the sixteenth century.[19] In these types of painted arrays of offerings and ornaments — such as the eighteenth or nineteenth century example in fig. 4.2.9 from a series of *rgyan tshogs* from central Tibet and now in the collection of the Wellcome Trust — skulls are shown filled with different suitable offerings (including the sense organs, at top left) and often supported on a

[18] Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, 343ff, chapter 18 on "Sacrificial objects and offerings".

[19] Black-ground *rgyan tshogs* have objects specialized to wrathful deities and protectors, therefore many made with charnel materials, see Irène Martin du Gard, "Une peinture d'offrandes à dPal-ldan dmag-zor rgyal-ma", *Arts Asiatiques* 40 (1985), 76. These paintings have also been referred to as *bskang rdzas*, the complete materials for a sacrificial offering (*ibid.*, 81n1). See other examples with *rkang gling* and *thod rnga* in sections 4.4 and 4.5.

Figure 4.2.10: A painted image of a skull over a tripod of human heads and flames containing animals of the five meats (*sha lnga*) positioned as an offering to a wrathful deity or protector in the '*du khang* of a monastery in Ladakh, April 2018.

Figure 4.2.11: A skull with silver or white metal rim decoration in the form of a line of skeletal faces, formerly used by a monk and tantric practitioner and inherited — with a *rkang gling* — by his descendant; Ladakh, March 2018.

Figure 4.2.12: Skull within a monastic collection with a shallow vee or chevron on one side (left) and a projection of the same shape opposite (right), in profile. Image by Christian Luczanits.

tripod of human or skeletal heads.[20] Similarly, in fig. 4.2.10, an illustration of a skull on a tripod of heads with flames and filled with the five meats is placed with other offerings on the exterior of a maṇḍala installation dedicated to a wrathful deity or the monastery's protector.

[20] Described and reproduced in Gyurme Dorje, "A rare series of Tibetan banners," in *Pearls of the Orient: Asian Treasures of the Wellcome Library,* ed. Nigel Allan (London: Serindia Publications, 2003), 161-177.

Figure 4.2.13: A skull in the storage of the British Museum (As1979,16.24 a-c) with copper-based metal ornament and stand, including a line of skeletal faces along the edge and four projections above the rim with a larger head of a protector at the front and three small buddhas, donated with a group of Tibetan objects acquired by a collector in the late 20th century, August 2017.

Figure 4.2.14: Interior of a skull similar to fig. 4.2.13, framed and supported with copper-based fittings, round base, and skeletal figures projecting above the rim at the Victoria and Albert Museum (IM.21-1928), March 2017.

Other ornamental techniques which reinforce the liturgical or ritual function of these objects include adjustments to the vessel's edge where it is prone to damage. This may include a chevron cut into skull along the rim to facilitate handling or the addition of a metal liner along the vessel edge (figures 4.2.11 and 4.2.12). The liner — often made with silver, cuprous alloy or white metal (a typically tin-based light industrial alloy used after the mid-nineteenth century) — can feature simple line-beading, engraving and jewels or, in more recent examples, a line of skeletal faces. Elements on the rim can be more or less decorative than structural, however, for example with figures or other projections above the edge of the vessel (figures 4.2.13 and 4.2.14). These two examples from UK museums — each with a round-shaped copper base incised with lotus petals — were likely produced for a speculative market as commodities before being collected in the Himalayas in the early twentieth century but this formal motif on the rim may have its origins in non-Tibetan workmanship as suggested, for example, in fig. 4.2.15 by

Figure 4.2.15: Painted *thang ka* (Np. *paubha*) with Vajravārāhī holding a skull with gold-colored rim with four projections in the left hand at center, 14th century from Nepal and now at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2018.102).

the skull in the left hand of Vajravārāhī in this fourteenth century painting.[21]

At the same time, these supplemental features support a versatility of ritual functions for skulls in Tibetan material religion, including the preparation of empowered comestible substances in the tradition of *bcud len* (Skt. *rasayāna*), for example as accomplished medicine (*sman sgrub*).[22] This medicine is often created as a subsidiary ritual within larger, often public, major practice session (s*grub chen*) where the skull is instrumentalized as a

[21] In Kathmandu, it was observed that these projections and their position around the edge — one in front with another three figures distributed around the circumference — are similar to a form of metal lamp used in Newar Buddhism dated to the seventeenth century or before, June and July 2018. Note as well, however, the three projections on the rim of the skull in the hand of Guru Rinpoche from a thirteenth century image at Tabo, fig. 2.29.

[22] See chapter 2 on the relation of Tibetan practices to non-Buddhist and *kāpālika* sources as well as Cantwell, “Reflections on rasayāna,” 183 especially for the cultivation of these applications for skulls in the rNying ma corpus.

Figures 4.2.16 and 4.2.17: Interior and profile of a skull within a monastic collection lined with a light-colored cuprous alloy. Images by Christian Luczanits.

vessel for the combination and empowerment of the ingredients.[23] James Gentry describes the capacity of the skull in this function as part of a "catalyst continuum" — an activated network of ontological and relational efficacy — which is established through the ritual and material process of *sman sgrub* and *bcud len* as ritual methodologies, including the eventual distribution and consumption of substances by participants.[24] The addition of a metal liner protects the edge and interior of the skull from structural damage and abrasions or accretions which might result from this type of use (figures 4.2.16 and 4.2.17, see also figs. 4.2.6, 4.2.8 and 4.2.37).

In addition to the types of structural support described above, skulls can also be modified with surface decoration. In an example from Ladakh, colored butter is periodically renewed on a skull — likely sourced from within the monastic community — which is made publicly accessible at the new year (*lo gsar*) to receive offerings from visitors (figures 4.2.18 and 4.2.19).[25] Many other

[23] See, for example, Cathy Cantwell, "The medicinal accomplishment (sman sgrub) in the Dudjom Meteoric Iron Razor (gnam lcag spu gri) tradition: Reflections on the ritual and meditative practice at a monastery in Southern Bhutan", *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* no. 8 (2015), 49-95 as well as Frances Garrett, "The alchemy of accomplishing medicine (sman sgrub): Situating the Yuthok Heart Essence (g.Yu thog snying thig) in Literature and History," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37 (2009). Malville also mentions the use of a skull in the preparation of *sman sgrub* during Mani Rimdu, *op.cit.,* 201.

[24] Gentry, *op.cit.,* 327. A tantric practitioner and translator in Sikkim likewise described the function of the skull as similar to a fermentation agent which catalyzes the formation of the medicine from its constituent parts, July 2018. This emphasis on fermentation and material continuity (*phab gta'*) for the production of *sman sgrub* is also observed by Cantwell (*ibid.,* 65) who also sees the skull used as a unit of measure for the combination of ingredients (p.73).

[25] This object was stored with other liturgical and ritual implements in a cupboard within the '*du khang* and was interpreted for me by monastic material specialists from this community in Ladakh, April 2018.

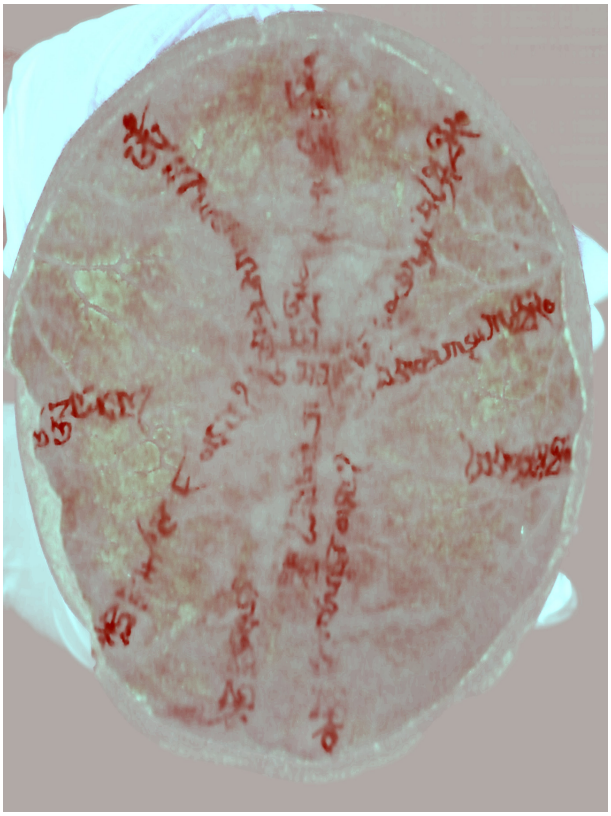
Figure 4.2.18 and 4.2.19: Interior and exterior of a skull lined and decorated with colored butter and used to collect offerings at the new year; Ladakh, April 2018.

skulls are painted red on the interior, which may indicate their use in the presentation or collection of *bdud rtsi*, for example at monthly *mkha' 'gro tshogs,* an often-public gathering made according to the lunar calendar where, under the supervision of monastic and liturgical authorities, offerings are made to ḍākinīs in a practice derived from the *kāpālika* tradition of *gaṇacakra*.[26] Surface decoration through low-relief carving and the addition of deity iconography to the exterior of the vessel is relatively recent innovation oriented towards the commercial market, with little evidence for any historical or liturgical precedents.[27]

Surface treatments can be more or less specialized and an inscribed skull at the British Museum — acquired abroad by a British collector before 1883 — exhibits evidence of ritual activation through the application of written text (figures 4.2.20 and 4.2.21). A series of mantras have been added to the interior surface in a red, likely cinnabar-based paint and while the central text — *oṃ ya man ta ka huṃ* — is legible, the other lines are only partially preserved;

[26] See chapter 2 for a history of *tshogs* in sources for Buddhist tantra. This is most often on the 25th day of the lunar month though the date can vary between lineages, based on participation and observations made in Ladakh, Kathmandu, West Bengal and Sikkim, April - August 2018. The charnel character of these practices has been significantly reduced with offerings made of alcohol or fruit juice and packaged snacks, as well as specific types of *gtor ma*. The suggestion that the red interior of these skulls is related to the collection of *bdud rtsi* came from a dGe lugs *sprul sku* in West Bengal, August 2018.

[27] This was repeated by Newar carvers who produce these objects and specialize in bone, shell and stone currently working in the Kathmandu valley, June 2018. These craftspeople often use electric hand tools (see fig. 4.3.23) and apply motor oil or a solution of potassium permanganate in order to create an artificial patina on commercial products.



Figures 4.2.20 and 4.2.21: The interior of a skull inscribed in red ink with the names of deities and/or mantras, possibly related to a practice wherein the vessel was ritually and physically sealed. Photographed in white light (left) and using ImageJ software with D-Stretch add-in (right, filter: YRD): The central mantra — *oṃ ya man ta ka huṃ* — runs vertically at the center with *oṃ a huṃ* written once each on the front, back and on both sides; the five other mantras are given here as (clockwise from the top): *oṃ mud ga ra dza huṃ*, *oṃ dza na dza ka huṃ*, *oṃ […] di hra huṃ, oṃ a ro li ka huṃ, oṃ bra dza […] da ha ka huṃ.*

Figure 4.2.22: Exterior of the same skull in the British Museum (1883, 1027.1) with incised *oṃ a huṃ* and a sharp groove running parallel to the edge; note the damage just above the inscription, August 2017.

these are Tibetan transliterations of Sanskrit names or syllables and difficult to contextualize without knowledge of the specific ritual methodology of which this skull was part.[28] Furthermore, the generic mantra *oṃ a huṃ* — often used for purification — is written here four times and carved once on the exterior (fig 4.2.22), suggesting that this object's ritual function was activated through the preparation of both the interior and exterior surfaces of the skull.

There are other indications of this skull's ritual use and history as a cultural object evident in mechanical damage along the object rim: In fig. 4.2.22, there is a chisel-shaped wedge between a sharply carved line approximately one centimeter below the rim of the vessel, just above the inscribed mantra *oṃ a huṃ,* as well as a six centimeter loss along one long side, visible in figs. 4.2.20 and 4.2.21. Consultations about the type of ritual for which this object was inscribed have produced inconclusive results though practices of gathering (*g.yang 'gugs*) or suppression *(mnan pa*) — in which skulls with suitable features (as determined by an informed ritual specialist) are prepared, activated and ritually sealed for storage — are not incompatible with this object's features.[29] Moreover, this skull's condition and modifications — particularly the breakage and carved groove along the rim — support the suggestion that an additional element was previously secured to the top of the vessel and removed forcibly before its acquisition by the British Museum, though this remains a speculative interpretation.

A number of alternative materials are also utilized in Tibetan and tantric material religion where skulls are inaccessible or unavailable. Coconut shells have been used historically for *kāpālika* methodologies since the spread and reform of yoginī tantra after the tenth century, as well as at present in Buddhist and tantric communities of the southern Himalayas (figure 4.2.23).[30] Plastic bowls (see fig. 4.1.3) and resin (fig. 4.2.24) are also popular substitutes, often with surface decoration that reinforces its identification as a charnel vessel. Moreover, both resin and plaster

---

[28] The central deity of this specific practice is ostensibly Yamāntaka. My thanks to curator Dr. Imma Ramos and imaging scientist Joanne Dyer at the British Museum for facilitating the study of these transcriptions and this object.

[29] Thanks to Dr. Cathy Cantwell and Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin, as well as Dr. James Gentry for these suggestions (personal correspondence, 3 June and 25 July 2019, respectively). Another suggestion is that this skull was inscribed for use to prepare or cultivate *sman sgrub* in an empowerment dedicated to Yamāntaka; as told by a rNying ma *bla ma* in Kathmandu, June 2018. Most of the practitioners and specialists I consulted on fieldwork had never encountered this type of object. On evidence for *mnan pa* as ritual suppression and evidence for the use of human as well as animal skulls in this tradition of mahāyoga tantra, see Cantwell and Mayer, *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa,* 20; see also Cantwell, "The Action Phurpa", 20 on the use and burial of skulls in suppression rituals in the rNying ma corpus.

[30] Sanderson relates this recommended us of coconut shells to the tenth-eleventh century author Abhinavagupta, "Śaivism and the tantric traditions," 149. A non-Buddhist tantric specialist at Paśupatināth in Kathmandu described using a coconut shell instead of a skull in response to the increasing police enforcement of regulations against the circulation of human remains, June 2018.

Figure 4.2.23: Coconut shell painted red and white to resemble other types of *thod pa*, rNying ma *lha khang* in Sikkim, August 2018.

Figure 4.2.24: Slightly downscale skull replicas painted red and gold with tripod base in resin, for sale in a Chinese Tibetan neighborhood, September 2017.

can be cast in molds shaped from a human cranium in order to create suitable alternatives.[31] Metal — often a cuprous alloy, see fig. 4.2.8 on the altar at left — is also a common substrate for *thod pa*, valued for its durability and capacity for ornamentation.[32] These substitutions can facilitate the mobility and formal variation of ritual objects as well as participation by a larger community of non-specialist users.

However, vessels made from human crania are found in a diversity of settings and ritual arenas, used for individual and household practice as well as within institutions and monasteries for restricted audiences or during public events. This represents a significant expansion of methods and applications from the earliest *kāpālika* models of ritualized charnel asceticism explored in chapter 2 of this dissertation, though the use of human remains in yogic observance has been maintained and adapted through the Tibetan traditions of *brtul zhugs spyod pa,* for example, and by ritual specialists (*sngags pa*) and Buddhist tantric yogins (*rnal ‘byor pa*) in a variety of teaching lineages (see fig. 1.2, for example).[33] Domestic practitioners may keep skulls for

[31] One elderly scholar and lay practitioner in Khams reports that, although he owns a human skull, he uses a plaster copy to travel because it is easier to transport, November 2018.

[32] Metal skull-shaped vessels may be used as substitutes for human remains but can also have a separate liturgical utility; Sa skya lineage holder and monastic scholar in Sikkim, July 2018.

[33] See chapters 2 and 3 on historical sources for the use of these objects in ascetic practice and Divalerio, *op.cit., passim* for the cultivation of *brtul zhugs spoyd pa* traditions by monastic communities, particularly in bKa’ brgyud lineages.

Figure 4.2.25: Skull with interior darkening from regular use in domestic rituals at a home in Khams, November 2017. In the photo, the *sprul sku* ‘Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse chos kyi blo gros (1893-1959) has a skull with metal stand and *rdo rje* handle in his array of implements, farthest right.

Figure 4.2.26: dGe lugs *bla ma* performing an offering to the deity Yamāntaka with a skull in the right hand in a charnel setting (see bound corpse and vulture at bottom right); another skull holds red *gtor ma,* offerings to the wrathful deity, at the *bla ma*’s right, 18th century *thang ka* from Tibet now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (06.1900).

personal use or to facilitate the rituals of visiting religious authorities and specialists (figure 4.2.25).[34] Skulls are moreover used for individual practices within an institutional rubric, for example as seen in an eighteenth century *thang ka* featuring a dGe lugs lineage holder using the vessel to make an offering to Yamāntaka (gShin rje gshed) during the performance of deity yoga (*yi dam*) in a charnel setting (figure 4.2.26).[35] Thus depending on the practitioner, their skills, religious education and social setting, a skull may be used daily or infrequently, and for general applications or a highly formalized, ritually-specified use.

[34] I have encountered skulls in the homes of a number of domestic and lay practitioners as well as artists and crafts people in Khams, Dharamsala area, Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, November 2017 - August 2018.

[35] The iconography of this painting is treated more thoroughly in Ayesha Fuentes, “Utilizing terror: On the adoption and refinement of skull cups in Tibetan Buddhism,” (MA thesis, Tufts University, 2011).

Figure 4.2.27: A monk uses a long-handled spoon to activate and distribute liquid from a skull with metal liner and triangular base, placed in an array of offerings during a publicly accessible *lo gsar* ritual in Khams. Image by Eleanor Moseman.

Skulls are also used within monastic communities for rituals which facilitate public or collective engagement, including major practice sessions (*sgrub chen*), as part of various empowerments (*dbang chen*), or at gatherings (*tshogs*) where the vessels are used to collect, present or distribute offerings and/or *bdud rtsi* (figure 4.2.27).[36] The occasions for these communal practices may be specific to local traditions, protectors, lineages, institutions or political authorities; they may also be funerary or commemorative.[37] Moreover, in these public settings

[36] Based on observations made in Khams (September 2017), Ladakh, Kathmandu, West Bengal and Sikkim (April - August 2018) as well as anecdotal evidence from informants across the region. Participating in public rituals — including non-tantric practices like *bskor ba* (circumambulation) or daily protector observances — was a key strategy of my fieldwork methodology.

[37] These types of periodic rituals — including the performance of *'chams*, ḍākinī *tshogs*, Mahākāla and protector *pujas* — were directly observed or described within monasteries, *lha khang*, and national or regional governmental institutions in Khams, Ladakh, Kathmandu, West Bengal and Sikkim, November 2017, April - August 2018 as well as multiple locations in Bhutan between August 2013 and January 2015. Moreover at one site in Ladakh, a skull and mummified arm have been incorporated into the display of the main figure of the monastery's protector in the *mgon khang;* according to local sources, the skull and arm were taken from a defeated military leader after a failed invasion of the region during the sixteenth century; see article by students of the Government Degree College in a publication by the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation in Leh: *Heritage Himalaya* 2, no. 1 (January - June 2017), 26.

Figures 4.2.28-31: A set of *bandha* at the Wellcome Collection (A20948 A-D) exhibiting accumulated grime, mechanical damage, topical polishing and other signs of use in z*hva nag 'chams.*

and displays, vessels made from skulls donated by members of a community reinforce continuities between its ritual specialists and the lay practitioners who support them and by whom they are supported, as well as the efficacy and accessibility of that institution's teachings and methodologies.

One of these public ritual performances involves a technically and formally specific type of skull-based object shaped into a shallow vessel to which are attached tassels of human hair and/or

Figure 4.2.32: Detail of a 17th century painting of ‘Jam dbyangs mthu stobs dbang phyug (b. 1588) as a *zhva nag* performer holding a skull *bandha* in his left hand with a curved knife or chopper (*gri gug*) in his right. In many of the surrounding illustrations, he is using the same implements to perform the black hat ritual for gathered audiences.

Figure 4.2.33: Black hat performers under the Potala in Lhasa, date unknown. The figure in the foreground holds a *bandha* in his left hand opposite a brass vessel in his right. Image courtesy the Tibet Museum Archives, Dharamsala.

silk pennants (figure 4.2.28-4.2.31). These objects, called *bandha* (or *bhandha*), are used in *zhva nag ‘chams* (black hat dance) as well as related practices of *sgrol ba* to invite, subdue and maintain a beneficial relationship with protectors and local deities.[38] Drawing on the rNying ma mahāyoga scholarship of the twelfth century Nyang ral nyi ma ‘od zer, the fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617-1682) would describe the origins of *‘chams* with

[38] See chapter 2 on the Tibetan expansion of *sgrol ba* and *phur pa*, especially within the rNying ma traditions. On the origins of *‘chams* and its relationship to sources for mahāyoga tantra, see Cantwell, “A black hat ritual dance,” 16ff.

Padmasambhava's performance of *sgrol ba* and *Vajrakīla* (*rDo rje phur pa*) at bSam yas.[39] This type of *'chams* is distinguished by the large black lacquered hat worn by the primary ritual actor(s) as well as that performer's frequent paired use of *phur pa* and *bandha* (figures 4.2.32 and 4.2.33).[40] Though handled primarily by institutional specialists in a highly formalized setting, *zhva nag 'chams* is one of the most visibly accessible ways in which skulls are regularly instrumentalized as ritual objects in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist communities.

At the same time, as this dissertation explored more extensively in its second and third chapters, skulls have been a consistent feature of Tibetan visual culture since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through the iconography of wrathful deities, protectors, intermediaries (*e.g. mkha' 'gro ma*) and accomplished practitioners of Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra (*e.g.* siddhas). These vessels have also often been used to illustrate the expertise of lineage founders and various teachers like Padmasambhava and Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas as authorities in tantric methodologies of ritualized charnel asceticism. Moreover, as liturgical objects, skulls are depicted in maṇḍala and paintings of gathered offerings (*rgyan tshogs*) presented to wrathful deities and protectors (see figs. 2.41, 4.2.9 and 4.2.10).

In the proliferation of iconographies for Buddhist tantra and which have been expanded and historically cultivated especially in Tibet and its neighboring regions, skulls exhibit a variety of idiosyncratic forms and renderings, including the concave, inward-curving shape of Kashmiri depictions from Alchi and the inclusion of an upper jaw for images of the four-armed protector Mahākāla from southeastern China (figs. 4.2.34 and 4.2.25, respectively). In Tibetan images, skulls are nearly always filled, emphasizing their use as a vessel for the collection, empowerment and/or transformation of materials in a tantric setting.

---

[39] This manual and study of *'chams i*s translated in René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, "The Black Hat Dancers," in *Tibetan Religious Dances,* 93-98. See also Mona Schrempf, "Tibetan ritual dances and the transformation of space," *The Tibet Journal* 19, no. 2 (1994): 95-120. As noted by Schrempf, there are two primary liturgical dance traditions in Tibetan monasticism, '*chams* and *gur*, though the former is more often made public — and thus accessible for study and documentation by a non-practitioner — while the latter is performed within the institution. Cantwell and Mayer moreover find that the *Phur bu ngan las 'das pa'i rgyud chen po* is considered a canonical source for both rNying ma and Sa skya *phur pa* traditions of Vajrakīla practice, and represents an integration of Tibetan and Indian charnel ritual methodologies recorded before the late eleventh century, *idem.*, "The Bon Ka ba nag po and the Rnying ma phur pa tradition", 45.

[40] See Cantwell, "A black hat ritual dance," 23 for an illustration and discussion of this hat and other aspects of the costume and *ibid.,* 16 for an explanation of the implements. See also Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *ibid,* 94-95. Note that the fifth Dalai Lama's seventeenth century ritual manual translated here does not describe the black hat which is characteristically worn by performers of this tradition's *rtsa 'chams*, or root practice of liturgical dance, and who are often the most advanced or senior practitioners in the monastic community. See fig. 2.28 for a figure wearing this hat and holding a *phur pa* on the lower right side of a thirteenth century painting featuring the Sa skya protector Mahākāla Pañjaranātha.

Figure 4.2.34 (above): Detail of the protector Mahākāla over the door to the Alchi gSum brtsegs, c. 1220. Note the concave, almost hooked rim shape of the skull characteristic to Kashmiri renderings.

Figure 4.2.35 (right): Mahākāla holding a skull in the front left hand with the top jaw intact and upper teeth visible, 12th century, likely from Dali (Yunnan) and now in a private collection; see also fig. 2.24.

In addition to their illustrated contextualization, these objects are subject to specific strategies for care and handling: Where they are on display or stored as vessels — *i.e.* open and resting on the crown — practitioners and local custodians often place seeds, flowers, grains or other small offerings in order to maintain the object's efficacy and demonstrate or acknowledge its value, a dynamic which is common to other forms of Buddhist liturgical vessels (figure 4.2.36).[41] Other recommendations may be more specialized to the modes of tantra in which they are used: Loseries-Leick, for example, has described using human fat and saffron to condition and polish the exterior surface of her own instrument.[42] These strategies for maintenance might also

[41] If the skull is turned down — *i.e.* resting on the rim with the crown up — or covered, this is also an acceptable position for storage. This has been explained or demonstrated by numerous informants (lay and monastic practitioners of various lineages) in Khams, Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, November 2017 - August 2018.

[42] Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.*, 95.

Figure 4.2.36: Skulls on display at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim with seeds from the *Oroxylum indicum*, or 'sword of Damocles', a common ornamental offering in Buddhist communities of the Himalayas, July 2018.

Figure 4.2.37: Skull in a monastic collection with accumulated and multi-colored deposits resulting from periodic use as a liturgical vessel. Image by Christian Luczanits.

be conditioned by tantric pedagogy, initiation and oral instructions which are inaccessible to a non-practitioner. Furthermore, the regular use of skulls as ritual objects may contribute to an accumulation of unspecified grime and/or deposits (fig.4.2.37). Other common evidence of wear includes breakage along the rim, the loss of supplementary and ornamental materials and alterations made to facilitate sale or trade amongst practitioners, and/or acquisition by museums or collectors (*e.g.* fig. 4.2.22).

In summary, this section has described a number of generalized applications for skulls in Tibetan material religion as well as a selection of their forms and technologies. This work has moreover used these objects and their materials in order to engage with a variety of informants across the Himalayan region and its diverse communities of practitioners. Finally, this section has sought to connect present cultural and religious historical narratives on the use of skulls as ritual objects in Tibet and Buddhist tantra to sources introduced in the previous chapters.

Figure 4.3.1 (left): Central detail from a painting of the siddha Jñānatapa wearing ornaments on his head, hips, chest and limbs, from 14th century Khams and now at Metropolitan Museum of Art (1987.144).

Figure 4.3.2: The *sprul sku* Dil mgo mkhyen brtse bkra shis dpal ‘byor (1910-1991) wearing the ornaments of a Heruka yogin, late 20th century. Photo of unknown origin, shared via social media.

4.3 Bone ornaments*, rus rgyan*

Where skulls are the most versatile ritual object made from human remains in Tibetan material religion, ornaments made from bone — *rus pa’i rgyan*, often abbreviated to *rus rgyan* — are the most complex, with a number of elements making a complete set (figures 4.3.1 and 4.3.2). In the Tibetan tradition of Buddhist tantra, these components are most often a crown, earrings, neck or chest ornament, apron or belt, and bands around the upper arms, wrists and ankles. This assembly corresponds to a description based on the *Hevajra* corpus and repeated by the thirteenth century scholar Grags pa rgyal mtshan describing this ensemble as a set of mudrā worn by a practitioner of Heruka yoga and wherein these body ornaments (*lus rgyan*) are used

Figures 4.3.3 (left) and 4.3.4 (right): Detail of central deities from figs. 2.32 (11th century, Ratnagiri) and 3.4 (13th century, central Tibet) showing a *mekhalā* (Tbt. *ska rags*) of alternating loops and tassels around the hips; note the bells at the ends of the tassels.

in the specialized observances of tantric deity yoga.[1] These ornaments may also include a wig or top-knot which can facilitate the appearance of a non-monastic yogin/ī (see 4.3.19, below).

Historical representations of *rus rgyan* in the visual culture of Buddhist tantra show a changing shape and increasing formal complexity, most notably in the apron or belt (*ska rags,* Skt. *mekhalā*). Early Tibetan images maintain the illustrated convention of Indian Buddhist precedents, with alternating long tassels and loops around the hips (figures 4.3.3 and 4.3.4).[2]

---

[1] Grags pa rgyal mtshan, “He ru ka’i chas drug”, 266. See chapter 2 on the historical innovation of charnel ornaments and the *pañcamudrā* within sources for Buddhist tantra.

[2] See eleventh to early thirteenth century examples of this loop-and-tassel style of *mekhalā* in figs. 2.1 (Tilopa and Nāropa at Alchi Chos ‘khor), 2.5 (central deities of a twelfth century yoginī maṇḍala), 2.33 and 2.35 (two-armed Heruka at Ratnagiri and Nālandā), 2.38 (12-armed Saṃvara from Bengal) as well as thirteenth to fifteenth century images of Vajravārāhī and Ma gcig Lab sgron in chapter 3.

Figure 4.3.5: A *yab yum* red-bodied form of the deity Yamāntaka as Rakta Yamāri (Tbt. gShin rje gshed dmar) and consort wearing a lattice-shaped apron with multiple registers of beads and plaques hanging from the waist. At the top of the apron, five longer plaques have been ornamented with *rdo rje;* 15th century, central Tibet and now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (67.829).

However, the fourteenth century rendering of Jñānatapa in fig. 4.3.1 shows the *ska rags* as a short girdle formed from a network of beaded cords with multiple tassels at crossing points, a design repeated in the four bands around the siddha's arms. Around the fifteenth century, this lattice was expanded into a longer apron shape which could support more complex ornamentation, including variously sized plaques on which iconographic programs could be cultivated (figure 4.3.5). Surviving, accessible examples of *ska rags* is most often square and fixed at the waist; it is occasionally triangular, tapering to a point towards the feet (see figs. 4.3.29 and 4.3.31, below).

Existing aprons preserve the longevity and refinement of charnel ritual methodologies in Tibetan material religion, not only in the use of human bone as a substrate but also through an iconographic emphasis on the deities and assemblies of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra. The plaque in fig. 4.3.6 has been carved with a six-pointed maṇḍala unique to the deity Vajravārāhī — in *ardhaparyaṅka* on a corpse at center — which is formed of two crossing triangles in the shape of a six-pointed wheel with one yoginī from the assembly of six within each point. This

composition is also seen in the thirteenth century *thang ka* in fig. 4.3.7 and is derived from later, *śākti*-centered modes of non-Buddhist yoginī tantra.[3] This fragmentary object was acquired in Khotan in 1896 by the Swedish collector Dr. Sven Hedin; described as ivory by earlier scholars, the depth and detail of the carving and a series of holes along its sides as well as the shape and size of the substrate and its iconography indicate that it was likely worn as a charnel ornament.[4]

Figure 4.3.6 (left): Bone ornament with a six-pointed maṇḍala of Vajravārāhī, from the Hedin Collection at the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm (group no. 1903.11). Image from Montell 1938.

Figure 4.3.7 (right): Six-pointed maṇḍala of Vajravārāhī from a central Tibetan bKa' brgyud tradition,13th century, now in a private collection.

[3] Alexis Sanderson explores the significance of this tripartite symmetry to the eleventh century Trika Kaula whose materials and practices were re-contextualized in the Vajrayāna tradition of Vajravārāhī; *idem.,* "Saivism and the tantric traditions," 140ff. The geometry of this six-pointed maṇḍala is implied but not explicitly described in no. 217 of the *Sādhanamālā, c.f.* De Mallmann, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique*, 76. See also Stoddard, "Dynamic structures in Buddhist mandalas", figs. 28-30.

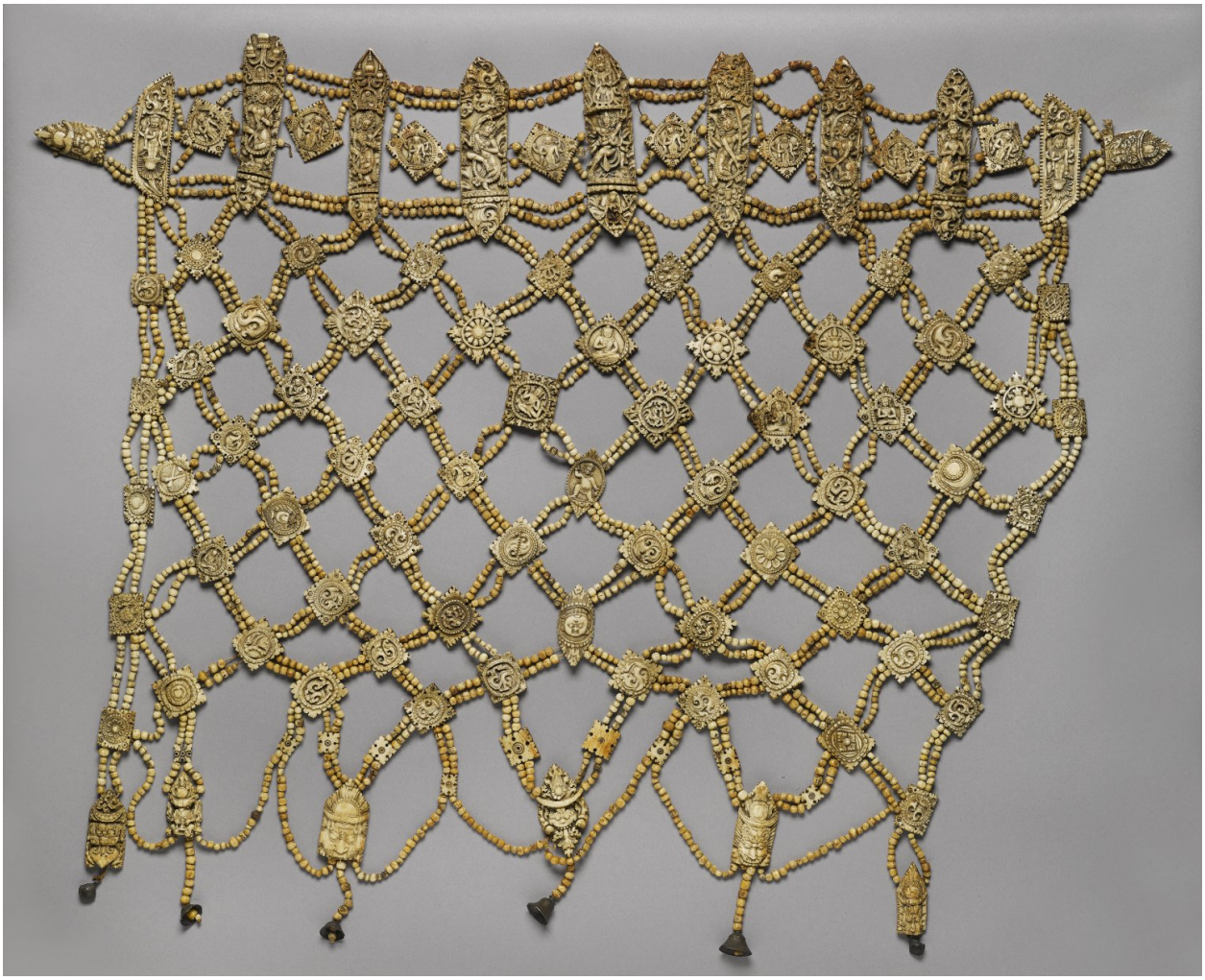
[4] My thanks to Håkan Wahlquist at the Sven Hedin Foundation for helping me track this object down and referring me to essential sources on its history. The resemblance of this fragment to other tantric Buddhist bone ornaments is noted in Gösta Montell, "Sven Hedin's archaeological collections from Khotan, part II" *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 10 (1938), 83-100. Fig. 4.3.6 is taken from this article, pl. III, no. 6.

However, while images carved on individual plaques often support historical, material and liturgical associations with mahāyoga and (especially) yoginī tantra, the replacement, repair, loss or reorganization of carved elements within these aprons means that many objects are a pastiche, complicating their interpretation as a comprehensive iconographic program. An example at the Brooklyn Museum — collected from the Himalayas on an expedition funded by the institution in 1923 — exhibits no fewer than four different carving campaigns (figures 4.2.8 and 4.2.9). The central deity is a twelve-armed form of Cakrasaṃvara in union with Vajravārāhī, framed within the top register by an assembly of six yoginī — five are two-armed while the plaque to the right of center is four-armed — and ten six-armed standing male figures, including the two flat, trapezoidal plaques at either end. While the figures in this apron are thematically related to the practice of yoginī tantra and its ritually-assembled network of ḍākinīs and protectors, they do not necessarily correspond to the iconography or sādhana of a specific practice or maṇḍala.[5]

At the monastery of Hemis in Ladakh, another apron demonstrates a thematic emphasis on yoginī iconography in *rus rgyan* as well as the re-use or reassembly of individual carved pieces (figure 4.3.10). Here, a central *yab yum* of Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī in the top register (fig. 4.3.13) is accompanied by a two-armed Vajravārāhī on a corpse on either side of center as well as four four-armed ḍākinīs with their smaller-sized consorts or protectors positioned between them and at least one protector (left of center) with two skeletal figures — likely lords of the charnel ground (*dur khrod bdag po*) — at the far ends (figs. 4.3.11 and 4.3.12). These plaques are fairly consistent in their color and condition though they exhibit at least three different carving campaigns; the oldest amongst these — the large plaque at center, for example — may date from the fifteenth century or earlier based on its style of rendering, though this estimate cannot be applied to its textile supports or the object in general. This suggests how *rus rgyan* illustrate continuity in the methods and materials of Buddhist tantra while also accommodating their revision and restoration. Two small nails to the left of center on the central *yab yum* figure (fig. 4.3.13) are further evidence of repair and preservation for the valued individual carvings.

These two examples of *ska rags* from the Brooklyn Museum and Hemis monastic collection (figs. 4.3.8 - 4.3.13) also exhibit a variety of supplementary figures and iconographic motifs common to these objects and supporting the primary deities of the top register. These include the eight auspicious signs (*bkra shis rtags brgyad*), floral and foliage forms, astral bodies, a double *vajra*, and skeletal faces. Many of these figures are historically Buddhist and not

[5] One monastic scholar and holder of various tantric lineages observed that the specific iconography on an apron is less important than its effective ritual activation by a skilled practitioner; the object is meant to facilitate the embodiment of the deity through yoga, not visual content or analogy; Sikkim, August 2018.



Figures 4.3.8 (above) and 4.3.9 (left): Apron of human and animal bone with metal bells along the bottom, at the Brooklyn Museum (23.289.27201) with detail of multiple carving campaigns from the upper register, proper left. Note the inconsistencies in rendering of the lotus platforms under each figure in the three large plaques seen here.

Figure 4.3.10: An apron made from human bone in the collection of Hemis Monastery in Ladakh and on display in its museum; with central 12-armed Cakrasamvara and Vajravārāhī, framed and supplemented by yoginī assembly and Buddhist iconography, with bells and yarn tassels along the bottom. Images by Christian Luczanits.

specifically tantric, for example *gandharva*, or celestial beings, as well as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (fig. 4.3.14) and other non-wrathful buddhas and apotropaic figures such as the sea monster *makara,* frequently positioned along the bottom and/or on either side of the assembly in the top register of the apron. Carvings and representations of deities are most often featured on on this top register of the *ska rags* but can also be found on chest ornaments (see

Figures 4.3.11-4.3.13: The top register of yoginī deities and central plaque with Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī in *yab yum* (left) from the apron in fig. 4.3.10. Images by Christian Luczanits.

fig. 1.1), arm bands, and in the crown as the five buddhas and/or five skeletal faces (see figs. 4.3.2 and 4.3.18, below).[6]

By embodying the form of Heruka through deity yoga and the use of *rus rgyan*, practitioners are able to perform a variety of liturgical roles and functions, including various types of *'chams* or

[6] See chapter 2 on the five-skull crown as a mudrā and iconographic feature of Buddhist yoginī tantra.

Figure 4.3.14: Four-armed sPyan ras gzigs (Avalokiteśvara) in a British Museum apron (2003, 0929.1) in the second register of plaques at center, August 2017. The primary figures on this object are otherwise yoginī deities.

masked religious dance (fig. 4.3.15, see also figs. 4.3.26 and 4.3.27).[7] *Rus rgyan* are also worn by the principal ritual actor during major practice sessions (*sgrub chen)* or public empowerments (*dbang chen;* see figure 4.3.16). Moreover, photographs and portraits of accomplished teachers or lineage holders wearing *rus rgyan* (*i.e.* in the form of Heruka) also illustrate their prestige as a visual and material demonstration of ritual skill and religious authority (figures 4.3.17 and 4.3.18). In the fourteenth century example in fig. 4.3.1, this prestige for the ornaments of Heruka yoga are further associated with the historical foundations of Vajrayāna and tantric expertise of the *mahasiddha* Jñānatapa. In figs. 4.3.17 and 4.3.18, these cultural historical and social values for *rus rgyan* have been applied to a series of twentieth century votive images and portraits of dGe lugs leaders including the tenth Pan chen bla ma (1938-1989) and sixth Gung thang of La

[7] See the section 4.2 in this chapter, as well as chapter 2. See Cantwell and Mayer, “Representations of Padmasambhava”, 28ff on the cultivation of rNying ma narratives relating Guru Rinpoche to the formalization and expansion of mahāyoga tantra in the Tibetan cultural region, the performance of Heruka deity yoga and *‘chams* as ritual subjugation.

Figure 4.3.15: Bone ornaments worn on the chest, arms and lower body of a *chos skyong* as part of masked dance (‘*cham*s) in Khams. Image from a local source, November 2017.

Figure 4.3.16: Dil mgo mkhyen brtse bkra shis dpal ‘byor (see also fig. 4.3.2) wearing *rus rgyan* on his chest while performing deity yoga and acting as the ritual leader during a major practice session (*sgrub chen*). Image courtesy the Tibet Museum Archives, Dharamsala.

Figure 4.3.17: Two small-sized votive photographs of dGe lugs leaders and *sprul sku* (emanation bodies) wearing the six ornaments of a Heruka yogin, purchased at a pilgrimage site in A mdo, December 2017. These images might be placed on home altars, given as offerings or shared as gifts for individual use.

Figure 4.3.18: Self-portrait of the tenth De mo *sprul sku* (d.1973) in the ornaments of a Heruka yogin, printed from negatives preserved by his son and first published in *Photographers International* (Taiwan), August 1998.

brang monastery in A mdo (d. 2000).[8]

Figure 4.3.19: The current (twelfth) rGyal dbang ‘brug pa (b.1963) wearing the bone ornaments of Nāropa at Hemis in 2016, photographer unknown.

However, not all bone ornaments are used with the same regularity and while one set may be worn in an annual *‘chams* performance, another may be used only periodically: The six ornaments of Nāropa (*na ro rgyan ‘drug tshogs pa*), for example, are worn once every twelve years for an empowerment administered by the rGyal dbang ‘brug pa, leader of the ‘Brug pa bKa’ brgyud lineage (figure 4.3.19). According to sources within this community, these *rus rgyan* were gifted to the second rGyal dbang ‘brug pa in the fifteenth century, having been acquired from Nāropa by his eleventh century Tibetan student Mar pa whose translations of Indian Buddhist tantra would be cultivated in various bKa’ brgyud lineages and teachings.[9] These ornaments are valued as an indication of the longevity of this religious community and the continuity of its lineages with its tantric sources, as well as an accumulation of merit and potency which has been acquired through use by previous ‘Brug pa bKa’ brgyud religious authorities. The prestige of these charnel ornaments is demonstrated through its restricted use as well as the inclusion of precious or costly supplementary materials including pearls and turquoise.

[8] On the image of Demo Rinpoche here, see also Clare E. Harris, *Photography and Tibet* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 136-138 and Delphine Gao, “The eye of the living Buddha, the first photographer of Tibet: Lopsang Jampal Loodjor Tenzin Gyatso Demo,” *Photographers International* 39 (1998): 16-89.

[9] Loseries-Leick gives a description of this public empowerment based on her observations of the current (twelfth) rGyal dbang ‘brug pa in 1992 (seen in fig. 4.3.19) and cites a text distributed by Hemis at the event titled “dPal rgyal dbang ‘brug pa na rim gyi rnam thar ngo sprod dad pa’i sa bon”; *op.cit.,* 126-130.

Like skulls (see previous section) the use of these ornaments for specific ritual performances may also be related to the relative value of their materials, with those made from human remains used more selectively than those from alternative substrates.[10] Animal bone and plastic are used frequently in *rus rgyan* constructed after the early twentieth century, a technical innovation resulting from the restricted circulation of human bone as well as the valorization of these objects as cultural properties (figures 4.3.20-4.3.22; see also section 4.1). The use of animal bone in combination with the integration of motorized tools — in fig. 4.3.23, by a fabricator who specializes in shell and bone presently working in the Kathmandu valley — has generated designs for *rus rgyan* with shallow, less volumetric carvings and more emphasis on piercing. The use of larger animal bones as a substrate (*e.g.* flatter, longer, potentially greater than eight centimeters in width) also facilitates an expansion of the scale on which a carver might work, as in the chest ornament in fig. 4.3.22, with similar examples in fig. 4.3.15 and on the apron in fig. 4.3.18.[11]

Complex sets of bone ornaments with developed iconographic programs which may be used in the performance of public rituals are more often associated with the material resources of

Figures 4.3.20 and 4.3.21: This object is a pastiche of plaques and beads attached to a silk-fabric support and purchased by National Museums Liverpool (1973.81) from an auction house. The largest figure is a two-armed form of Heruka with yoginī consort on human bone; the detail (right) indicates the depth of carving possible on human bone, as well as its characteristic density, opacity, polish and morphology as a substrate.

[10] This was observed in practice at performance of *zhva nag 'chams* in Khams (December 2017) and also suggested by monastic informants and lay practitioners of various rNying ma and gSar ma lineages in Ladakh, West Bengal and Sikkim (April and July-August 2018) as well as vendors and fabricators in the Kathmandu valley (May-June 2018).

[11] These three ornaments moreover show evidence of Chinese or Mongolian workmanship in their style and iconography, Dr. John Clarke, personal communication, 10 January 2019.

Figure 4.3.22: Detail of a chest ornament in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.1:5.2007) made by laterally adhering two flat sections of animal bone, each approximately 6 cm wide and 12 cm long, with shallow relief carvings and piercing; donated as part of a full set of *rus rgyan* in 1932 by a former escort at the British trade agency in Gyantse (rGyal rtse), March 2017.

Figure 4.3.23: A Newar carver making a buffalo bone knife sheath using electric hand-tools, June 2018.

Figure 4.3.24: Simplified human bone ornament for sale in Khams, November 2017.

monastic institutions, within which they are handled by specialists.[12] Individual tantric practitioners have also been known to wear and fabricate simplified *rus rgyan*.[13] The color of a simple ornament for sale on consignment in Khams in a shop which serves the community of local practitioners may be related to the diet of the donor, the methods of its fabrication, storage conditions, age or its unique setting for ritual use (figure 4.3.24). However, the density, shape and size of this single ornament — as well as the caution of the local vendor-practitioner in sharing it after removing it from hidden storage — suggest that it is human, though the shallow, simplified carving exhibits less material and technical investment than other examples given above (*e.g.* fig. 4.3.13).

Carved plaques and ornaments are supported by a variety of supplemental materials, including textiles, cords, and tassels in cotton, silk and hemp, metal bells and bangles, and occasionally

[12] One non-Buddhist vendor in Kathmandu noted that monastic representatives who commission bone ornaments might have iconographic requirements specific to their lineage or local traditions, or make their own adjustments to the carved elements after they've acquired them, June 2018.

[13] Tantric yogin and *gcod* specialist, Kathmandu, July 2018. These objects are rare and/or unidentified in museum collections.

Figure 4.3.25: This apron was donated to the British Museum by a collector in the early twentieth century (1930,0306.1) and exhibits a wide variety of materials including human and/or animal bone, silk, glass beads, tassels and bells, August 2017.

red lac or paint.[14] An apron at the British Museum — donated by a collector in 1930 — incorporates a diversity of these materials including a backing cloth of combined silk sections with glass beads, tassels and small bells along the bottom, and a line of tapered beads colored red with lac in the second, third and fifth registers (figure 4.3.25).[15] These refinements may be related to the specific ritual function of the apron or its setting: The dark background and wrathful visage of a supporting textile in an apron used for *zhva nag 'chams* or to embody a protector (*chos skyong*) (figs. 4.3.26 and 4.3.27, see also fig. 4.2.33) is not necessarily used for the performance of ḍākinī *'chams*, with its characteristic screen-like mask (fig. 4.3.27).

[14] Bells, or their sound, are a consistent feature of *mekhalā* in the sources and iconography for Samvara tantra, for example, in the ornaments of the principle deity Heruka in the *Laghusamvara* (chapter 51, ln. 13), and see figs. 4.3.3 and 4.3.4, above. On the identification of lac dye on *rus rgyan*, see Fuentes, "Technical examination of a bone ornament ensemble", appendix G.

[15] This apron is described as part of the British Museum collection in Braunholtz's 1930 article "A necromancer's bone apron from Tibet", *op.cit.,* 29-30.

Figure 4.3.26: Bone apron attached to a dark-colored backing cloth with the painted face of a protector, used in *'chams*, photographed in storage of the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena (acc. no. unknown), January 2013.

Supports, ornaments and supplementary materials may also be related to regional material religious traditions and other speculative modes of ritual engagement, as in two sets of bone ornaments with a helmet-shaped textile crown and triangular apron (figures 4.3.28 - 4.3.31). There is evidence of pastiche in each — for example in the top register in fig. 4.3.31 where the plaques are inconsistent in size, content and rendering — though there is a thematic iconographic emphasis on Buddhist yoginī tantra. Both of these sets — now in UK collections, acquired in the early twentieth century — feature glass beads and *rudrākṣa* seeds, which are grown on species of the tree *Elaeocarpus* native to the southern Himalayas and south Asia.[16] On the crown or head piece of each set, there is a cuprous metal peak attached at

Figure 4.3.27: Performers on the right are wearing bone ornaments and the geometric, flat cut-away masks used for ḍākinī *'chams*, here in front of the Potala in Lhasa, date unknown. Image courtesy the Tibet Museum Archives, Dharamsala.

[16] Many thanks to Lauren Burleson — conservation postgraduate student working with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge — for sharing her work with me in documenting and treating these objects. This set (figures 4.3.28 and 4.3.29) was donated by "Lady Schuster" in 1947; the Wellcome set (figures 4.3.30 and 4.3.31) was likely acquired by Henry Wellcome (d. 1936). See also Lauren Burleson, "Rus rgyan bone ornaments ensemble: Research and analysis" (MA thesis, Durham University, 2020).

Figures 4.3.28 and 4.3.29: Helmet-shaped crown and triangular apron with yoginī iconography, pink-colored *sindur* deposits and textile supports, presently in the collection of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (1947.762 A and B). Images by Lauren Burleson.

the top, as well as a tuft of hair and beaded loops across the face. In fig. 4.3.30, the relatively consistent series of carved plaques on the crown feature five seated buddhas with a skeletal face under each.

More remarkable, however, is that the plaques and deity images in each of these sets also exhibit accumulations of *sindur* (Tbt. *li khri*), powdered pigment used both historically and at present in the material religion of the southern Himalayas and India — as well as in Newar

Figure 4.3.30 and 4.3.31: Crown and apron similar in shape to figs. 4.3.28 and 4.3.29, presently in the Wellcome Collection (A161208 and A161210), photographed in storage with the National Science Museum, February 2017.

Buddhist communities — and which is deposited on surfaces as a devotional gesture.[17] This powder — often red, pink, orange or yellow — is moreover valued in Tibetan material religion as one of the eight auspicious materials (*bkra shis rdzas brgyad*).[18] These accumulations have been observed on another Wellcome acquisition, a damaged apron from Nepal now in the collection of the Fowler Museum at UCLA (figure 4.3.32). The condition of these objects suggests a possible origin or use outside Tibetan monastic institutions — where a clean, white surface for *rus rgyan* is especially valued — and the triangular shape is distinct from the square examples more commonly illustrated in images of Tibetan *'chams* and visual culture, as

[17] The identification of this material as *sindur* is a combined result of its analysis in Fuentes, "Technical examination of a bone ornament ensemble", appendix D; and Burleson's findings (via scanning-electron microscopy with energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy [SEM-EDS]) on similar deposits on the Cambridge objects (personal communication, 17 May 2020). In both cases, these accumulations were found to be friable and powdery with no discernible binder present. Material analysis suggests the use of lead oxide pigments — which are pink, orange, yellow and/or red — in the *sindur*, an imitation derived from the historical use of cinnabar (mercuric sulfide). This has been noted as a lead poisoning threat in a number of currently available commercially-produced brands of *sindur: c.f.* Manthan P. Shah, *et al.,* "Lead content of sindoor, a Hindu religious powder and cosmetic: New Jersey and India, 2014-2015", *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 10 (October 2017), 1630-1632. Fuentes, *ibid.,* also records calcium oxide and barium oxide in these deposits, which may have been added to the *sindur* as fillers or bulking agents.

[18] Find these listed in Dorje, "A rare series of Tibetan banners," 176n4.

Figures 4.3.32 and 4.3.33: Detail (left) of an orange-colored *sindur* deposit on a small plaque of a damaged apron (right) from Nepal, originally part of the Wellcome Collection but later gifted to the Fowler Museum at UCLA (X69.300 A); blue tape indicates where cords are broken. Images from Fuentes 2014.

above.[19] In addition to the surface discolorations and detachment or breakage of cords seen here in fig. 4.3.33, damage to individual plaques and evidence of re-drilling and re-stringing are common condition issues for *rus rgyan,* with this set absent of large figural carvings in the top register, suggesting a local variation or that they have been removed and/or re-integrated into another object.

This section has described the range of materials, forms and applications for *rus rgyan* in Tibetan and Vajrayāna ritual methodologies, and related these observations to the cultural historical narratives and liturgical modes explored in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, particularly those derived from the charnel ascetic modes of Buddhist yoginī tantra and its iconography. Here, the continued use and innovation of bone ornaments has been tied to the diverse settings and functions for Heruka deity yoga, the performance of public rituals of subjugation and empowerment, representations of religious authority, and the relative social and economic value for human remains in Tibetan material culture and global museum collections.

[19] See also Loseries-Leick *op.cit.,* 177. This criteria for whiteness was repeated by Buddhist and non-Buddhist vendors in Kathmandu whose clients included monastic communities in Tibet, Bhutan and elsewhere in Nepal, May and June 2018.

Figure 4.4.1: Screenshot from a video made by a tourist to Larung Gar and made public online, 2014. A lay practitioner plays his *rkang gling* and *ḍamaru* during *bya gtor* where vultures, like the demons and ḍākinī of *gcod,* are invited to a feast offering of the body (*lus sbyin*).

4.4 Thighbone trumpets, *rkang gling*

The *rkang gling* is a trumpet or horn made from a human femur with a limited range of tonal modulation and often played in a short series of sustained blasts.[1] As the third chapter of this dissertation has explored through a study of Tibetan iconography, this instrument is primarily — though not exclusively — associated with the tradition of *gcod* and its characteristic sādhana of *lus sbyin* as well as the observances and implements of *brtul zhugs spyod pa*, or practice of the oath-holder (figure 4.4.1; see also chapter 3). The thighbone trumpet is often, as in *gcod*, paired with a double-sided hand drum or *ḍamaru* (see the following section 4.5 on the skull *ḍamaru*, or *thod rnga*).

---

[1] In his study of Tibetan musical traditions, Ter Ellingson has observed that this instrument is more accurately a trumpet or horn (Tbt. *dung*) than a flute (*gling bu*), given its “limited melodic repertoire”; “Mandala of Sound”, 564 and 656. Note that these instruments can be called *rkang dung* as well. Musical notation for use of the *rkang gling* is given in Helffer, *Mchod-rol*, 273 as well as Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the secret gcod da ma ru: An exploration of musical instrument symbolism,” *Asian Music* 10, no.2 (1979), 70. This notation may also correspond to the syllabary of mantras (*ibid.,* 71).

The criteria for selecting and sourcing a femur suitable for use as a religious object are conditioned by specific bodies of ritual knowledge: Considerations include color, size and shape, but may also rely on the donor's age, gender and manner of death. Working in Sikkim in the mid-twentieth century, for example, Nebesky-Wojkowitz describes the valorization of bones whose donors

> Belonged either to a very high or to a very low social class, who died from a contagious disease, who were killed in an accident, or who were murdered. The best kinds of thighbone trumpets are supposed to be those which have been made of the thighbones of Brahmins, and a *rkang gling* made of the left thighbone of a sixteen-year-old Brahmin girl is valued highest.[2]

However, these technical specificities cannot be generalized to all *rkang gling* in Tibetan material religion but rather represent an historical and social localization of the antinomian rhetoric which is characteristically instrumentalized in the practices of Buddhist tantra explored throughout this dissertation.[3]

Alternatively, in the *gcod* corpus, Ma gcig's explanation to her disciple and descendant Thod smyon bsam grub in the fifth chapter of the *Phung po gzan gyur rnam bshad* states of the bone to be used in a *rkang gling* that:

> White is best, brown is mediocre, and mottled is least best. Gray and other sordid ones will cause problems, so they are inappropriate. The shape should be somewhat curved, and the bone front ridged [*i.e.* with a pronounced *linea aspera*], with the inside front smoothed out and slightly concave. It is improper to carry a thighbone that curves to the left or the right, is crooked in its sections, has a dented sheath, has cracks and such, has many clefts in the inside structure, is really thick and hunchbacked, is not bent but very straight, is much too fat, has a tight sound without sharpness that goes flat, is deformed with holes in the bottom part being too small, has many overlapping cracks along its length, looks engraved, is rough and gritty, has many ridges, is flat, or is just plain ugly and unpleasant. […]

---

[2] Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, 398.

[3] Bon and rNying ma sources — with uses extending beyond the practice of *gcod* — presented by Helffer offer narratives about the origins of the *rkang gling* which similarly emphasize violent and/or accidental death (*e.g.* homicide, lightning strike)*, op.cit.,* 254 and 256.

> What you should have is a quality thighbone, one without those faults that make it inappropriate to carry, [for example, a bone belonging to] an infuriated man whose voracious rage at another had no change to subside [before he died], who had no time for any other thought to arise in that voracious mind and who attacked and killed that person with a weapon. It could be the bone of a qualified woman, or a monastic whose sacred pledge is unbroken, or a man of sincere faith who has avoided sin, or someone belonging to the family of bodhisattvas, and so on. Any of those should be someone between the ages of sixteen and sixty. In particular, the right leg of someone who died in his or her prime with an impaired intellect is the instrument of heroes [*dpa' bo*] and the left leg is the instrument of heroines [*dpa' mo*].[4]

In this source for the teachings of Ma gcig, there is a diversity of technical and material criteria which might be met in the selection of a substrate specific to the performance of *gcod*. At the same time, in many contemporary narratives encountered across the region female donors are valued for complex historical and social associations, including the perceived impurities and/or potency of bodies capable of reproductive processes such as menstruation and childbirth.[5]

Ma gcig's instructions further indicate how a femur should be harvested and sourced by the practitioner, and that the condyle end (*i.e.* knee-joint) is retained, with two holes drilled into the far end to form the bell of the instrument.[6] Loseries-Leick describes how the bone should be trimmed according to the width and breadth of the practitioner's hand, with the result of a trumpet which produces the correct sound and is approximately 25-30 cm long.[7] Another

---

[4] *Phung po gzan gyur rnam bshad*, *op.cit.,* fl. 144ff.; translated in Harding, *Machik's Complete Explanation,* 142-3.

[5] This preference for a female donor — particularly one of child-bearing age — has been confirmed by practitioners from both monastic and lay backgrounds in various lineages, as well as Buddhist observers and vendors, in Khams, Dharamsala and Kathmandu, November- December 2017, February-May 2018. This is also repeated by Loseries-Leick's sources, *op.cit.,* 78. Regarding cultural attitudes on gender and purity in the global Tibetan community, see Losong Choden Rabgey, "En-gendering Tibet: Nation, narration and the woman's body in diaspora," (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2006). For a historical discussion of the same and the religious use of the "special efficacy" of female bodies through the "strategic reversal" of their social status, see Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havenik, "Introduction", in *Women in Tibet*, eds. J. Gyatso and H. Havenik (London: Hurst and Company, 2005), 1-25.

[6] Harding, *op.cit,* 143. Harding notes on that the language of these instructions is "extremely obscure", with translation requiring further oral instruction from an informed *gcod* practitioner (p. 310n7). Ma gcig states that "*ro de'i 'og tu ma song zhing steng du gang du gug pa de 'brog par bya'o*", or "without going beneath the corpse, hook what is accessible from above [to make it?]". Ma gcig compares the shape of the condyle bell to a lion's nose (Harding, *op.cit.,* 143) while other informants have described the correct shape as similar to the Tibetan letter *cha* (ཅ), Kathmandu, May 2018.

[7] Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 74-5.

practitioner suggests that a smaller bone — for example a finger — might be inserted into the shaft of the instrument in order to refine its sound.[8] Other adjustments to the substrate include a removal of the interior, cortical material from the bell and shaft. Furthermore, the interpretation of the specific morphological features of the femur — the significance of the *linea aspera;* the flat, triangular space above the projections of the condyle knobs; the cavity where the tendons of the femur previously attached to the bone along its shaft — vary according to the traditions or teaching lineages in which the object is being used or activated.[9]

While an unadorned *rkang gling* is considered appropriate to the practice of *gcod,* there are nevertheless a variety of material refinements and ornamental strategies found on these

Figure 4.4.2: *rKang gling* in a monastic collection wrapped in thin, damaged hide or leather and hand-stitched onto the object with evidence of a previous mouthpiece element, now missing. The ends of the epiphyseal knobs have had material removed to resemble the Tibetan letter *cha*, or “the nose of a lion”. Image courtesy of Christian Luczanits.

[8] Senior non-monastic *gcod* practitioner in Kathmandu, May 2018.

[9] These features can be understood, for example, as accommodations for ḍākinī assembled by the sound of the instrument (*i.e.* a cave in which to hide, a platform on which to dance) or illustrations of Buddhist or yogic concepts (*i.e.* the sword of Mañjuśrī); *c.f.* Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 77 and Chaoul, *Chöd Practice in the Bön Tradition*, 56. Alternative yet similar explanations of the features of the bone used in *rkang gling* were provided by lay practitioners, material specialists and Buddhist observers in Khams and Kathmandu, November 2017 and May 2018.

Figure 4.4.3: A selection of *rkang gling* on display at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, July 2018. From left to right: an un-ornamented femur, an example of post-20th century manufacture with the bell and mouthpiece dipped in resin, and an historic example with a hand-stitched skin-wrapped bell, ferrous ring and plaited tassel. The metal trumpets to the right of the three human femurs are not *rkang gling.*

instruments, reflecting their broader application in Tibetan material religion and ritual practice.[10] Some of these amendments are practical: Wrapping the bone entirely or partially in leather or hide protects the relatively valuable substrate from damage during use or travel; these coverings can be replaced as needed while the bone instrument is preserved (fig. 4.4.2).[11] This hide is often goat skin — human skin is potentially used as well, though this is unconfirmed by comparative analysis — and attached with hand-stitching while wet and flexible and dried in place. On the *rkang gling* in the far right of fig. 4.4.3, there is a leather or hide plait attached to the covering on the bell which can be used as a handle but is also interpreted as a binding

[10] Ma gcig instructs that a *rkang gling* should not be covered with iron, copper, wood or horn (Harding, *op.cit.,* 143). This preference for an un-ornamented *rkang gling* for the practice of Ma gcig's teachings was repeated by sources in note 5, above, and suggested by Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 75.

[11] As explained by lay *gcod* practitioners and monastic scholars in Kathmandu and Sikkim, May and August 2018. See also Loseries-Leick, *ibid.*

Figure 4.4.4: A *rkang gling* at National Museums Liverpool (56.27.811) with dark-colored fabric tape covering the bell and mouthpiece, to which is fixed a handle running parallel to the instrument shaft.

implement for the demons (*bdud*) and intermediaries engaged or subjugated through the use of the instrument.[12] In fig. 4.4.4 — an object collected in Sikkim before 1873 — these practical amendments have been achieved with the use of painted or dyed strips of material resembling fabric tape. In recent examples, as in the central *rkang gling* in fig. 4.4.3, the bell and/or mouthpiece might be covered in a red, likely thermoplastic resin.

These instruments can be further elaborated or tailored to specific ritual methodologies with decorative elements added to the mouthpiece, around the shaft or on the bell. In an example now at the British Museum, the leather hand-stitched onto the bell has a differently-colored leather appliqué *rdo rje* on its face (*gdong*), the top side of the instrument at the condyle end between the epiphyseal knobs and shaft of the bone (figures 4.4.5 and 4.4.6). Further investment into the material prestige of the instrument might be made through the addition of metallic elements or precious stones, sometimes with the removal or obscuration of the femur's

[12] This tassel has been explained as both a practical and liturgical feature of *rkang gling* by a number of informants in Khams, A mdo, Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, November - December 2017; March, May and August 2018. See also Chaoul, *op.cit.,* 56.

Figures 4.4.5 and 4.4.6 (above and right): This instrument — purchased by the British Museum from an early 20th century collector who acquired it in the Himalayas (1913,0718.1) — has leather or hide wrapped around the bell and mouthpiece, September 2017. A *rdo rje* decorates the bell while the detail (at right) shows evidence of a previously-attached plait.

Figures 4.4.7 and 4.4.8 (left and right): A *rkang gling* inherited by a local practitioner from a family member who had been part of a bKa' brgyud monastic community in Ladakh. The decorative bands, setting for a three round stones (now missing) and mouthpiece are made from silver or white metal.

Figure 4.4.9 (above): Ornate *rkang gling* at the British Museum (2016,3040.2) with precious stones on silver fittings exhibiting Buddhist motifs in repoussé, including a *garuḍa* on the side of the bell.

Figure 4.4.10 (below): A pair of *rkang gling* at the Wellcome Collection (A 15408/1 and 2) produced as a set with red and green tassels, silver and brass ornamentation. Decorative motifs include flames and skeletal faces in bands around the shaft and mouthpieces; at the top of each bell there is a cluster of three small heads as well. In these two instruments the epiphyseal end has been trimmed off, complicating efforts to determine a species of origin.

Figure 4.4.11: Archival photograph of pairs of *rkang gling* in the collection of the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art; the largest of these sets — none of which appears to incorporate human remains — has a bell shaped into a *makara* in place of the condyle morphology of the femur.

morphological features (figures 4.4.7 and 4.4.8). These types of modifications are facilitated by institutional access to resources and patronage in contrast to the solitary, ascetic specializations of certain individual *gcod* and yoga tantra practitioners.[13] *rKang gling* can also be used and produced in pairs, again more often in institutional settings, and with decorative elements which partially or completely replace the bone substrate with cuprous alloy or silver (figures 4.4.9-4.4.11).[14] The ornamental vocabulary of these instruments includes Buddhist symbols like *makara* and the triple jewel, or tantric motifs like skeletal faces and flames.

In Tibetan visual culture, *rkang gling* are most often seen as instruments held by teachers and intermediaries associated with lineages of the *gcod* tradition (*e.g.* ḍākinīs), latter-day siddhas such as the rNying ma yogin Lha brtsun nam mkha' 'jigs med, and deities in the form of a charnel ascetic yogin, such as Mahākāla Brahmanarupa (see chapter 3). As objects illustrating a sound offering to wrathful deities or protectors, they are also represented in painted

[13] Institutional, monastic and/or public ritual use in local liturgical traditions may include some forms of *'chams* or, for example, a regional historical practice from Sikkim where the *rkang gling* is used annually by rNying ma monastic communities to make offerings and maintain relations with local protectors and deities; via personal communication with Dr. Anna Balicki-Demjongpa at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, July 2018.

[14] Helffer, *op.cit.,* 261-4. Helffer finds that, whatever their decorative iconography, those made with bone are exclusively used for offerings or rituals addressed to wrathful deities and protectors. Metal *rkang gling* may have a more varied liturgical application.

Figures 4.4.12 and 4.4.13 (detail, above): *rGyan tshogs* of charnel offerings for the deity and protector Brahma with a pair of *rkang gling* at center, 18-19th century Tibet and now at the Wellcome Library (47071i).

collections of *rgyan tshogs* as in this gathering of charnel implements suited to Brahma — a subjugated non-Buddhist deity and Tibetan *chos skyong* — where a pair of *rkang gling* are featured at center, framing the flames beneath two rows of skulls filled with offerings, with red textile banners or pennants attached to the shaft of an otherwise unadorned femur (figures 4.4.12 and 4.4.13).[15]

[15] This painting is from the same series of *rgyan tshogs* as fig. 4.5.6, currently at the Wellcome Library and published in Dorje, “A rare series of Tibetan banners”, 160-168. Where *rkang gling* are illustrated as offerings in this series, they are always in pairs.

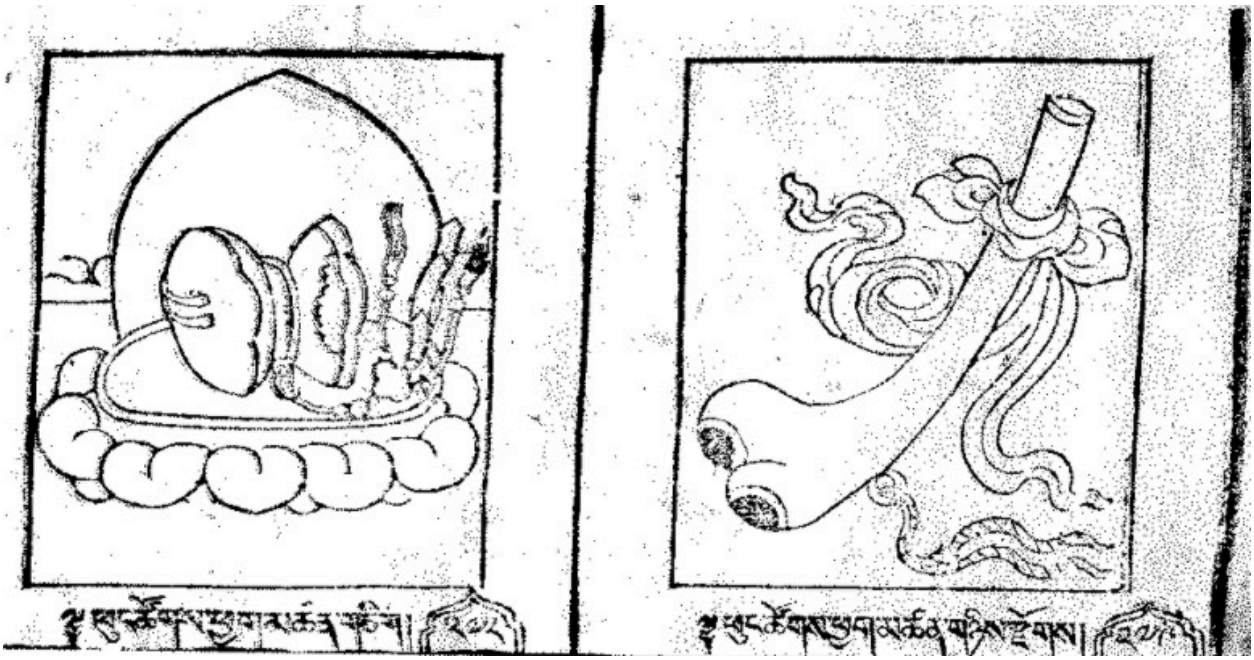


Figure 4.4.14 (above): A *thod rnga* and *rkang gling* as the first and second implements (*phyag mtshan*) of *phung tshogs*, or a feast of aggregates, from a *gcod* manuscript collection of *tsak li* which illustrate empowerments, deities, lineage holders and ritual objects.

Figure 4.4.15 (below): Another, ornamented *rkang gling* from the same text as fig. 4.4.14, illustrating an implement for a related but distinct practice of enrichment (*g.yang 'gyed*) related to the *gcod* tradition.

While some formal variations may be conditioned by local material knowledge, social setting and/or available resources, other illustrations indicate the ways in which an ornamental strategy may reflect the diversity of teachings or ritual settings in which the object might be used. Figures 4.4.14 and 4.4.15 are taken from a manuscript collection of *tsak li*, or miniature ritual images, used to illustrate various empowerments, lineages and teachings of the *gcod* tradition (see also fig. 4.5.4 in the next section).[16] The former image shows a relatively unadorned *rkang gling* — with tassel at the base of the condyle bell and a loosely-tied pennant — paired with a skull *ḍamaru* or *thod rnga* as the two instruments appropriate to *phung tshogs,* or feast of the aggregates, a version of the characteristic

[16] This undated manuscript is titled "gCod dbang brgya rtsa'i dbang gi tsak li"; see chapter 3 note 39.

Figure 4.4.16: A selection of *rkang gling* with wire, cords or yarn and metal bands wrapped around the shaft of the instrument, on display in a monastic collection in Ladakh, April 2018. The drumheads are missing from the *thod rnga* at left.

Figure 4.4.17: *rKang gling* for sale in Dharamsala, fabricated for commercial trade in the Kathmandu valley, January 2017. This is made with two pieces of animal bone joined midway down the shaft; the join is disguised with a band of white metal, the same material used to form an approximately condyle-shaped bell.

Figures 4.4.18 and 4.4.19: Two possible examples of *stag gling*, an instrument made from a tiger femur, distinct from yet similar to human *rkang gling*. On the left, with a *makara*-shaped copper repoussé bell, handle and jeweled mouthpiece at the Pitt Rivers Museum (1954.6.89) from the collection of H.G. Beasley (d. 1939); on the right, a leather-wrapped example with plaited tassel at the Victoria and Albert Museum (IM 250.1916), collected in the early 20th century in Gyantse by Capt. A.O. Creagh between 1909 and 1911.

sādhana of *lus sbyin.* Fig. 4.4.15 shows a *rkang gling* which has been refined with a jewel on the face of the bell, a pennant, and bands around the bone shaft. This wrapped design for the instrument is suggested by examples in fig. 4.4.16 as well.

The technology of these objects is often related to the practice or setting for which they are intended, where tantric specialists or ascetic practitioners (*e.g. gcod pa, brtul zhugs pa, sngag pa, etc*.) are more likely to use human remains. However, the commodification of these instruments in the past century and increasing restrictions on the trade, possession or transport of human remains have encouraged the adoption of alternative substrates by many practitioners with *rkang gling* at present made from animal bone, ceramic and/or resin (fig. 4.4.17). Certain of these form another category of instrument: Figs. 4.4.18 and 4.4.19, for example, may be *stag gling,* or trumpets made from the femur of a tiger, which have their own unique function and prestige.[17] They are nevertheless similar in construction to forms of human *rkang gling*, though smaller in size.

In summary, this section has sought to illustrate a documented variety of forms for *rkang gling* in Tibetan religious life, in which they are primarily and most consistently associated with the practice of *gcod* and the sādhana of *lus sbyin.* However, the diversity of compositions, techniques and material refinements for these instruments indicate the expansion and variation of ritual methodologies, teachings and observances which utilize them and how they have been historically cultivated in Tibetan and Himalayan communities and/or religious institutions, many of which remain active at present.

[17] The use of *stag gling* is described by Nebesky-Wojkowitz in the context of offerings made to protectors of Buddhism; *idem., Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, 398.

Figure 4.5.1 (above): *Thod rnga* currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (89.4.213) and formerly part of US-based investment banker Crosby Brown's collection of musical instruments, acquired in 1889.

Figure 4.5.2 (right): The charnel deity Cāmuṇḍā from a 10th century Śaiva site in Orissa with *ḍamaru* at top left. Image from Donaldson 2002.

4.5 Skull *ḍamaru, thod rnga*

The skull drum or *thod pa'i rnga* (abbreviated as *thod rnga*) is a type of double-sided hand drum called *ḍamaru* in Sanskrit, *da ma ru* or *cang (r)te'u* in Tibetan and which is specialized to the charnel methodologies of Buddhist tantra, including the practice of yoga in the form of Heruka and the *gcod* sādhana of *lus sbyin* (figure 4.5.1; see chapters 2 and 3, respectively, on the historical formalization of these traditions). While the *cang te'u* is found in Tibetan sources by the seventh century, and the *ḍamaru* is included as one of the implements for the performance of post-initiatory *vrata* in sources for Buddhist tantra — as well as the iconography of its sources and deities (figure 4.5.2) — it is the cultivation of ritualized charnel asceticism in Tibet which

would refine and expand the forms and functions of the *thod rnga* in the region's material religion and visual culture.[1]

While the drum identified as *ḍamaru* or *cang te'u* has been a consistent feature of the iconographies and practices explored in this dissertation — see, for example, the eleventh century image of Saṃvara from Ratnagiri in fig. 2.32; the thirteenth century representation of the siddha Nāropa at Alchi gSum brtsegs in fig. 2.1; and Ma gcig as the founder of *gcod* throughout chapter 3 — the use of skulls as a substrate for this instrument represents a ritual and technical specification. For example, while the implements for yogic observances in the *Laghusaṃvara* and *Hevajra* tantras include the use of a *ḍamaru,* in neither text is it specified that these are made from skulls.[2] And though the *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* each describe the *ḍamaru* as an attribute for wrathful deities — including the twelve-armed form of Saṃvara preserved in the Phyang Guru Lhakhang in fig. 4.5.3 — it is not specified in these twelfth century Vajryāna iconographic sources that this drum should be

Figure 4.5.3: Detail of a skull *ḍamaru* in an upper right hand of twelve-armed Cakrasaṃvara in union with Vajravārāhī, from a damaged image in the 15th century Guru Lhakhang at Phyang in Ladakh. Image by Christian Luczanits.

[1] Ellingson, "Mandala of Sound"*,* 74. The drum — spelled *cang rte'u* — is mentioned in an inscription documenting the use of drums at the founding of 'Phrul snang temple in Lhasa. See also Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism,* 141 on the implements required for the observances of various tantras dated previous to the eleventh century.

[2] *C.f. Hevajra*, chapter 6 and *Laghusaṃvara* (root tantra of the Tibetan Cakrasaṃvara corpus), chapter 27.

made of skulls.[3]

Some of the oldest descriptions of *thod rnga* are preserved in the *Saṃputa* tantric corpus where it is identified as *rnge'u chung* in an eleventh century Tibetan translation.[4] This tantra describes the construction and preparation of this instrument as a form of *cang te'u* made with two human skulls, using monkey skin for the drumheads and bones from the feet of an aquatic bird as beaters.[5] In the thirteenth century, the Sa skya scholar Grags pa rgyal mtshan elaborates on these technical details from the *Saṃputa* tantra — drawing in part from commentarial work by the Indian Buddhist tantric scholar Abhayākaragupta — by identifying this type of drum as the *gsang ba'i rnge'u chung,* or secret skull *ḍamaru*, and one of the six implements and musical instruments of a Heruka yogin.[6] He notes that the alternative is to make a wooden *cang te'u* from species of acacia tree (*rdo rje'i shing ngam seng ldeng gi shing*).

Cultivated as an object for the practice or observance of ritualized charnel asceticism, the *thod rnga* — like the *rkang gling* — is constructed with materials appropriate to an instrument which is especially suited to the ritual purposes of tantric traditions like mahāyoga or yoginī tantra and *gcod*, *e.g.* subjugation, making offering and/or empowerment through engagement with volatile deities, intermediaries, obstacles and adversaries (figure 4.5.4). However, in Ma gcig's explanation of *gcod* in the *Phung po gzan gyur rnam bshad,* she praises a disciple's wooden drum but makes no mention of its use for the sādhana of *lus sbyin.*[7] In the oldest surviving representations of her teachings from the fourteenth century, Ma gcig is nonetheless illustrated as a ḍākinī with *ḍamaru* in the right hand, emphasizing the historical and liturgical relationship of the *gcod* sādhana of *lus sbyin* to the charnel methodologies of yoginī tantra (see chapter 3, figs. 3.2 and 3.3).[8] Moreover, with increasing frequency after the fifteenth century, where Ma gcig and

---

[3] de Mallmann, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique*, 188. De Mallmann translates *ḍamaru* as the French *tambourin*, which should not be interpreted as equivalent to the modern English *tambourine*.

[4] "Yang dag par sbyor ba'i rgyud chen po" in *sDe dge bKa' 'gyur,* vol. 79 (ga), fl. 154, available on BDRC, no. W22084, accessed 28 June 2019. This text was translated by 'Brog mi shā kya ye shes (992-1072) and in the Tibetan bKa' 'gyur it is classified as an ordinary explanatory tantra (*bshad rgyud thun mong ba*) of Cakrasaṃvara; see George Elder, "The Saṃpuṭa tantra: Edition and translation, chapters I-IV", (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1978), 14.

[5] This same passage — accessed in the Peking bKa' 'gyur — is also cited by Helffer as the basis of her musicological typology for the *ḍamaru* in *idem., Mchod-rol*, 238.

[6] Grags pa rgyal mtshan, "He ru ka'i chas drug"*,* 269 (fl.193).

[7] See Harding, *Machik's Complete Explanation*, 209-210.

[8] Working from a diversity of Tibetan historical sources, Helffer finds that the skull drum is more often associated with *gcod* than other types of *ḍamaru*, *idem., op.cit.,* 235.

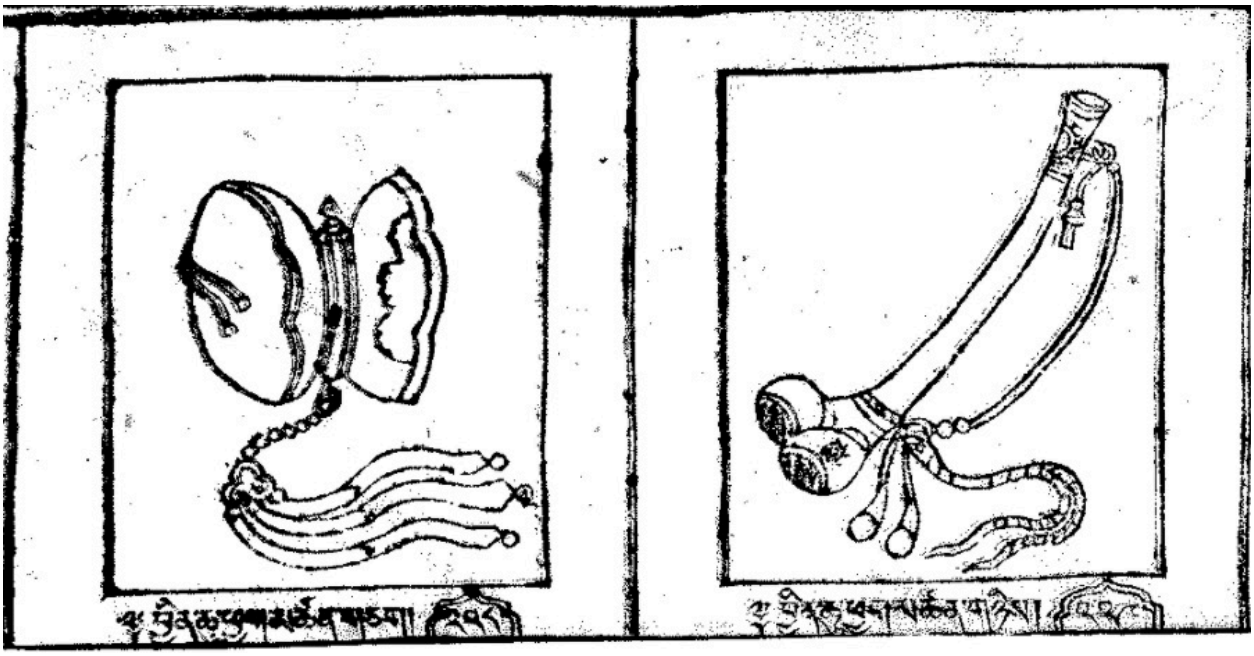


Figure 4.5.4: *Thod rnga* and *rkang gling* used for an offering of *byin chu* to Ma gcig and a retinue of four ḍākinī, from the “gCod dbang gi tsak li” manuscript (see chapter 3, note 39).

yoginī tantra deities like Cakrasaṃvara (see fig. 4.5.3) are represented with a *ḍamaru,* it is rendered as a *thod rnga*.

While the *thod rnga* was specialized to charnel methodologies like *gcod*, the *ḍamaru* or *cang te’u* was more broadly adopted into Tibetan material religion as a sound offering and liturgical instrument used to replicate the syllabary of mantras or mark intervals.[9] The musical historian Ter Ellingson has elsewhere explored how drums and other musical instruments have been used by Tibetan political and religious institutions — especially in Bon rituals — from their earliest records of the sixth and seventh centuries, yet he finds that those made with human remains gain prominence only through the later spread of Buddhist tantra.[10] In a liturgical function similar to the *ḍamaru* or *cang te’u* as a form of musical or sound offering (fig. 4.5.5), the *thod rnga* is primarily used to engage with protectors and other wrathful deities, and depicted as such in a *rgyan tshogs* for example in figs. 4.5.6 and 4.5.7.[11]

[9] Helffer, *op.cit.,* 247.

[10] Ellingson, “The maṇḍala of sound,” 222.

[11] This type of ritual application for *thod rnga* was observed in Ladakh, Kathmandu and Sikkim, April, May and July 2018. Deities addressed through the use of the skull *ḍamaru* included Mahākāla and local protectors; see also Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, 399.

Figure 4.5.5: Detail of fig. 3.24, Vajradhatu maṇḍala from the *Sarvadurgatiparaśodhana* tantra with musical offerings framing the central assembly including a double-sided hand drum, indicated with the black square at top center, 14th century Alchi Lha khang Soma.

Figures 4.5.6 and 4.5.7: *rGyan tshog* with offerings to Mahākāla Pañjaranātha (Gur gyi mgon po) and detail of a *thod rnga* with green skins, 18-19th century Tibet and now at the Wellcome Library (47089i).

Figure 4.5.8 (above): *Thod rnga* at the British Museum (1934,0314.1), acquired from a collector/donor in 1934. The sutures and orientation of these two skulls are mirrored, though they are different colors.

Figure 4.5.9 (below): *Thod rnga* at the Pitt Rivers Museum (1938.34.47) which was purchased at an auction by curator Henry Balfour, as suggested by the accession record applied directly to the side of the instrument. The morphology and orientation of the two skulls are positioned symmetrically.

Documented and surviving examples of skull *ḍamaru* exhibit a diversity of forms and techniques and, as with other objects examined in this dissertation, many of these material variations are derived from idiosyncratic, local ritual traditions and bodies of knowledge or conditioned by access to material resources (figures 4.5.8-4.5.10). The selection of two skulls to be used for *thod rnga* is governed by these contingencies as well as the expertise and religious education of the practitioner, though the symmetrical shape of the drum and its historical development as a tantric ritual object suggest thematic specifications like the pairing or juxtaposition of opposites (*e.g.* different genders) and/or the utilization of antinomian social values and narratives (*i.e.* donors who are victims of violent or premature death).[12]

In the tantric iconographies discussed in the preceding chapters, this instrument is consistently shown held by a

[12] These criteria vary depending on the source: Nebesky-Wojkowitz records that *thod rnga* should be made from donors who suffered an accidental death or illegitimate birth (*ibid.*) while Loseries-Leick emphasizes that different genders should be used (*op.cit.,* 82). Helffer follows an eighteenth century dGe lugs commentator who specifies one each of a male and female donor and that they should be adolescent or young adults (*op.cit.,* 238). These narratives resonate with information gathered on fieldwork, for example as told by an accomplished *gcod* pa and lay practitioner and yogin in Kathmandu, May 2018.

Figure 4.5.10: Skull *ḍamaru* on display at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim, July 2018. The central object is made from two human crania with silk pennants ornamented by pieces of turquoise and coral; to the right is a smaller drum with similar shape made from resin.

handle attached to the belt at center with the implication that it is played by ringing or rattling it (*'khrol ba*) with a turning movement of the wrist.[13] This ringing undermines the two-part opposition of the drum's construction through continuous sound produced on both drumheads, with interpretive significances to structure and efficacy of the ritual — determined by the specific teaching being practiced and the religious knowledge, capacity or education of the performer — as well as the historically established dynamics of tantric yoga.[14]

The construction of this instrument moreover facilitates resonance between the two chambers of the drum: As in fig. 4.5.11 — collected at Drepung ('Bras spungs) before 1904 — damage has revealed that the crown of each skull was removed before the two halves were joined by cords threaded through holes drilled into the bone on either side. Yet in figs. 4.5.12-4.5.14 — acquired by the British Museum in 1880 — similar damage reveals that the two crania are complete, with a slightly abraded, flattened cortical surface on the

[13] The rNying ma musical scholar 'Gyur med blo gsal (n.d.) classifies the *ḍamaru* — like the bell, which is also used in *gcod* — as a rung instrument, and also struck (*brdung ba*) in the manner of a drum and cause and effect (*rgyu rkyen*) in the manner of a cymbal resonating: see Dorje and Ellingson, "Explanation of the secret gcod da ma ru", 74. In the *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos*, on the other hand, the *ḍamaru* is classified as a rung instrument distinct from other drums which are struck, *op.cit.,* 131. See also Cantwell, "The Action Phurpa", 71 on *'khrol ba* meaning rattling as well as ringing.

[14] For a discussion of the yogic significance of the *ḍamaru* as the unification of complementary halves or properties — including male and female, upper and lower body, etc. — and its historical relation to tantric alchemy, see White, *The Alchemical Body*, 248 and 250-1. Dorje and Ellingson (*ibid.,* p. 76) present an alternative interpretation of the drum's sound and significance according to an undated rNying ma *gcod* text but concede that this is one among a "large number of possible meanings" for Tibetan authors and practitioners. For another practitioner perspective on the ritual use of the *ḍamaru* relative to religious education and the experience of skill, see Jeffrey W. Cupchik, "The Tibetan gcod damaru - A reprise: Symbolism, function, and difference in a Tibetan adept's interpretive community", *Asian Music* 44, no. 1 (2013), 113-139.

Figure 4.5.11: A damaged *thod rnga* at National Museums Liverpool (56.27.281) reveals the removal of the crown from the crania in joining the two halves, July 2017.

Figures 4.5.12 and 4.5.13: Damaged *thod rnga* at the British Museum (1880.2776) with human crania that have been abraded at the crown and joined with cords; the skin of this drum is a species of python native to the southern Himalayas, September 2017.

Figure 4.5.14: Detail of abrasions on the surface of the crown for figs. 4.5.12 and 4.5.13.

crown where they are joined mechanically with cords. Like the selection of crania used as a substrate, this technical variation may be ritual, practical or shaped by the individual material cultural knowledge and skill of the maker.

Drumheads are fixed in place by adhering them directly to the cranium edge, which is often incised or roughened; after drying, the hide can be trimmed to size in place, as indicated in figs. 4.5.15 and 4.5.16 by blade marks in the surface of the skull and along the edge of the skin. The type of hide varies according to the requirements of the ritual practitioner or methodology and/or access to material resources: Goat is most common but snake (figs. 4.5.12 and 4.5.13) and human are also possible, though rare, and highly valued for specialized use.[15] In figs. 4.5.17 and 4.5.18, the use of human skin is suggested by the remarkable smoothness and delicacy of the drumhead and its lack of diagnostic follicle patterning in comparison with other types of skin or hide to which this community has had access historically; the identification of human skin is further supported by the use of two human skulls for the drum body, indicating — as this dissertation has demonstrated — an historical and social value for using human remains in ritual and cultural objects. Alternative to these anecdotal, textual, and cultural historic evidences and observations, confirming the species of this hide is not possible at present without chemical

[15] Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 81-2. A *gcod* lay practitioner in Kathmandu also noted that snake skin on the *thod rnga* produces an excellent sound, May 2018. In the same monastery where the object in figs. 4.5.17 and 4.5.18 was documented, there was another, similar *thod rnga* with drumheads easily recognized as goat skin; the local community of caretakers explained that the drum with human skin was more valuable and therefore used more selectively; Ladakh, April 2018.

Figure 4.5.15 (above): Damage to the edge of this drum at the Wellcome Collection (A4737) reveals how the skin was attached to a cross-hatched surface. Cut marks around the edge of the drumhead show where it was trimmed down after being fixed in place, February 2017.

Figure 4.5.16 (below): Detail of the edge of the drumhead from fig. 4.5.9 showing characteristic follicle patterns and local preparation for goat skin as well as possible evidence of repair or mechanical stabilization by lacing the skin in place as it dried through a series of small holes along the edge, later trimmed down.

Figures 4.5.17 and 4.5.18: Two angles of a *thod rnga* made with human skulls and (potentially) human skin, indicated by its relatively smooth surface and delicacy (see note 16), as well as its selective use by its monastic custodians, Ladakh, April 2018.

analysis and a larger range of documented comparative material.[16]

Hides might be treated in order to retain their elasticity using, again, a variety of techniques according to the source of material knowledge and available resources of the fabricators: This process may include the use of alkaline chemicals or organic tanning agents.[17] One informant suggested that copper compounds are increasingly used to treat the skins and that these are furthermore responsible for the green hues common to the drumheads of both wooden and skull *ḍamaru*, a trend which is integrated into visual representations of the drum after the eighteenth

[16] Thanks to Megan Rosenbloom and Harvard University Library conservator Alan Puglia for their guidance on the diagnosis of human skin in cultural objects. See Megan Rosenbloom, "A book by its cover: Identifying and scientifically testing the world's books bound in human skin," *Watermark: Newsletter of the Archivists and Librarians in the History of the Health Sciences* 39, no. 3, (2016): 20-22. See also the Anthropodermic Book Project, https://anthropodermicbooks.org/ (accessed 2 August 2017).

[17] According to one of Loseries-Leick's informants, the hide is treated with calcium hydroxide and buried (*op.cit.,* p.82). Another text of unknown date from the *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos* recommends the removal of flesh and epidermis, as well as the use of pigeon dung and sheep or goat brains in the treatment of goat and other animal skins used in drumheads; *c.f.* "rNga pags g.yogs thabs*",* in *op.cit.*, 196.

Figure 4.5.19 (left): *Thod rnga* at National Museums Liverpool (56.26.305) with green painted skins (likely goat), multi-colored pennants and a section of conch shell, July 2017.

Figure 4.5.20 (right): Detail of the 19th century *thang ka* in fig. 3.1 showing green drumheads on the *thod rnga* in Ma gcig's right hand as well as that of Pha dam pa in the upper left.

century (figures 4.5.19 and 4.5.20).[18] These green drumheads have a multivalent significance in documented sources: While some informants describe it as purely ornamental, Nebesky-Wojkowitz records that a green-skinned *cang te'u* is associated with ascetic or itinerant ritual specialists (*i.e. sngags pa, gcod pa* or *brtul zhugs pa*) while Loseries-Leick relates the color to the decay of human skin, reinforcing the Tibetan cultural historical association between the *ḍamaru* and the charnel origins of the region's most specialized tantric ritual methodologies.[19]

Other additions include textiles and metallic elements or precious stones attached at the waist of the drum where the beaters and handle are also secured. Though the illustration in fig. 4.5.21 provides a useful vocabulary for describing or identifying these components, surviving examples and documented evidence for the formal variations of *ḍamaru* — such as the objects included in this study — present a range of material standards.[20] In figs. 4.5.10 and 4.5.19, as well as the paintings in figs. 4.5.7 and 4.5.20, there are a number of combinations for these individual pieces, including various shapes for the five-colored pennant (*cod pan sna lnga*). Textiles most often used to supplement and ornament these drum include silk, cotton and occasionally hemp,

[18] Tantric lay practitioner and translator, Sikkim, July 2018. I was however unable to organize any material analysis with museum objects that might allow me to verify this claim.

[19] Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *op.cit.,* 399. Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 82.

[20] See also Helffer, *op.cit.,* 244 for a compendium of related Tibetan sources and their various recommendations for material, size, proportions, *etc*. of *ḍamaru,* including the *thod rnga*.

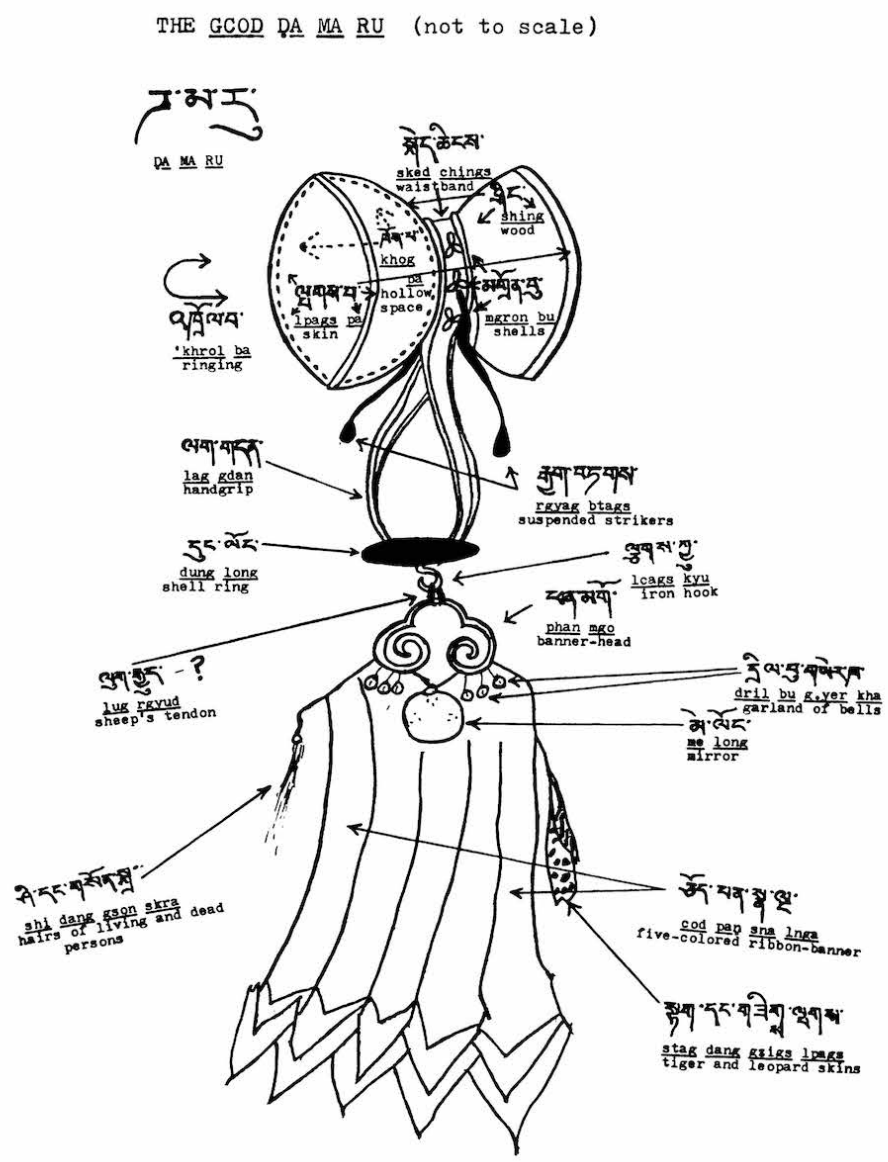


Figure 4.5.21: Illustration of the many components and ornaments for a *ḍamaru* from a description by ‘Gyur med blo gsal (n.d.) and reproduced in Dorje and Ellingson 1979.

as well as the red wool characteristic to monastic dress and certain lay specialists and which is seen on the belt of the objects in figs. 4.5.9, 4.5.27 and 4.5.28.

Text and inscription can also be added to *thod rnga,* either visibly as a decorated surface or in a manner integral to the object’s construction and activation. One of Loseries-Leick’s sources describes inserting mantra or *dhāraṇī* — for a male and female deity each — into either half of the drum, creating a rattle when it is turned.[21] Alternatively, an example in fig. 4.5.22 from the Victoria and Albert Museum — acquired by the institution in 1922 from a British collector — exhibits an alternating program of crudely (*viz.* illegibly) executed syllables or letters in Rañjanā script and

[21] Loseries-Leick, *op.cit.,* 81. In fig. 4.4.16, the *thod rnga* on the left has a single line of inscription on the interior; I was unable to access better documentation of this text. A version of this rattle may be evident in the Pitt Rivers Museum object from fig. 4.5.27, below. Cantwell notes a similar use of text and gender opposition in skulls used for the preparation of *sman sgrub*, though as vessels rather than a drum in *idem.,* “The medicinal accomplishment”, 74.

skeletal faces cut into the exterior cortical layer of the skulls.[22] Occasionally, *thod rnga* are further refined with iconographic programs and tantric visual motifs, as in an example from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in figs. 4.5.23 and 4.5.24 with a large knife or *gri gug* on one

Figure 4.5.22: *Thod rnga* with carvings of text and skeletal faces on the exterior surface of the crania, with glass bead eyes, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum (IM.13-1922).

Figures 4.5.23 (left) and 4.5.24 (right): Two views of a *thod rnga* with painted drumheads, showing a ritual knife (*gri gug*) opposite a filled skull vessel on the opposite side, donated to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (AC1998.34.1) in the late 20th century.

[22] This object was explored in a 2015 blog post by V&A conservator Johanna Puisto in “The curious case of the Tibetan skull drum”, *V&A Blog,* https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/caring-for-our-collections/the-curious-case-of-the-tibetan-skull-drum, (accessed 20 November 2019). This text explores the *thod rnga*’s cleaning, handling and preparation for loan to the Wellcome Collection for the exhibition “Tibet’s Secret Temple: Body, Mind and Meditation in Tantric Buddhism”, 15 November 2015 - 28 February 2016.

Figures 4.5.25 and 4.5.26: A bKa' brgyud monk demonstrates the position of the hand during play (left) and the resulting wear in the surface of the skull (right), April 2018. This type of damage and polish is relatively uncommon on objects in museum collections.

side, paired with a full skull vessel on the opposite, each supported by a lotus pedestal. As a set, these two objects are found in the iconographies of charnel figures and practices in Buddhist tantra, for example as implements of a yoginī or forms of the protector Mahākāla (see chapter 2).[23]

Because these are composite objects, constructed with largely organic materials and a variety of joining techniques, they are subject to a number of structural issues and deteriorations (figures 4.5.25-4.5.28). Use as a musical instrument during rituals produces characteristic patterns of wear and grime on the body and handle, as well as mechanical stress which can lead to detached drumheads, broken cords on beaters and the destabilization of the connection between the two crania. These objects are also prone to pest activity and damage to their

[23] Dorje and Ellingson (*op.cit.,* 67) reproduce another image on a *ḍamaru* which they describe as part of the collection of the Field Museum in Chicago though it is not accessible online: The painting on the drum shows a siddha with *yogapaṭṭa, ḍamaru* and *rkang gling* in a charnel landscape, further reinforcing the cultural historical associations between the use of human remains and the origins and specialization of Buddhist tantric methodologies.

Figure 4.5.27 (above): *Thod rnga* at the Pitt Rivers Museum (1938.34.48) — donated by Balfour with the object in fig. 4.5.9 — showing a detached beater, as well as previous pest damage in the red wool on the waist of the drum, September 2017.

Figure 4.5.28 (below): *Thod rnga* at the Pitt Rivers Museum (1941.8.199) — likely acquired in Sikkim by the archaeologist A.J. Evans — with selective pest damage in the red wool on the waist and handle of the drum.

Figure 4.5.29: A skull *ḍamaru* for sale by a non-Buddhist vendor near a pilgrimage site in A mdo, with large plastic “coral” decorations in a setting of white metal, December 2017. This drum is resting against a *rkang gling* in the same case, to the right, and both are for sale on consignment. There is also a false skull mālā made of animal bone, the right.

proteinaceous and other organic materials.[24] In storage in settings with fluctuating humidity and temperature, these objects are moreover subject to fluctuations which can also create mechanical stress and/or contribute to the embrittlement of the drumheads, significantly affecting the sound and therefore efficacy of the instrument.

These highly valued and specialized ritual objects are infrequently encountered outside museum, monastic or private collections (figure 4.5.29). Due to restrictions on the circulation and sale of human remains and their economic valorization, these objects are increasingly made from white resin (see fig. 4.5.10, on the left), the shape and color of which indicate that they are used as *thod rnga*. While this section has sought to explore the diverse bodies of knowledge and techniques used to construct skull *ḍamaru,* the present reliance on commercial production and industrial materials means that, where they are seen and used, the shape of these instruments is increasingly standardized through the use of non-charnel substrates.[25]

---

[24] Of the objects examined here, at least two have been treated for pest damage in museum collections; see also Matthew Simkin, “The conservation of a thöd rnga (cranium drum),” *Journal of Museum Ethnography* no. 10 (1998), 125-130.

[25] In my fieldwork, *thod rnga* were the least frequently encountered type of ritual object made from human remains; as one non-monastic tantric specialist in Kathmandu suggested, at present it requires a substantial investment to acquire one human skull, let alone two, May 2018.

5 Conclusion: Human remains in Tibetan material religion

This dissertation has described the cultural technology of Tibetan ritual objects made from human remains by means of material-centered analyses in the examination of accessible examples in museum collections, an iconographic study of Buddhist and tantric visual culture, interviews with living practitioners and fabricators, and the historical formation of liturgical and textual sources. The resulting discussion of these objects as vessels, instruments and implements is intended to suggest a technical vocabulary for their interpretation by non-practitioners which has been synthesized from diverse bodies of knowledge and documented ritual practices, as well as local traditions or narratives. This research has moreover sought to indicate the social, historical and soteriological value of human remains to the practice, material culture and illustration of tantra and Buddhism in Tibet.

While the skilled ritual use of these objects is conditioned by advanced religious training and specialized instruction, there are many ways in which skulls, carved bone ornaments, thighbone trumpets and double-sided skull drums have been made accessible and socially legible in the Tibetan cultural landscape and its historical narratives. In the second and third chapters of this dissertation, representations of charnel ascetic ritual methodologies are explored through preserved sources and descriptions of teachers, observances, deities, protectors and intermediaries (*e.g.* ḍākinīs) that together indicate how objects made with human remains have been valorized within the iconography and practice of Buddhist yoga tantra since the eighth century. The fourth chapter in five parts puts these historical narratives in perspective with present evidence for the sourcing, preparation, fabrication and circulation of these objects. The result aims to demonstrate a continuous tradition of cultural and ritual technologies, material skill, and dynamic social values that suggest the various ways in which the body is instrumentalized through Buddhist tantra and Tibetan material religion.

As this work has explored, skulls can be used as liturgical vessels to collect, contain, prepare or distribute offerings made to protectors and wrathful deities; at monthly or annual communal observances (*i.e.* at the new year); at periodic, often public empowerments (*e.g. sgrub chen*) performed by ritual specialists on behalf of the community in order to facilitate religious education and contribute to practitioners' accumulation of beneficial action or merit; and in deity yoga and/or tantric practices which accomplish the nondual and/or the transformation and subjugation of adversities. Iconographically, the skull demonstrates tantric expertise, the observance of an oath, and/or an association with a mode of practice which utilizes, purifies or undermines antinomian narratives and social values. Skulls can moreover be used for individual

practice but also by institutional specialists on behalf of the public, local or monastic community wherein the vessel is used as a point of engagement to transform, empower or accumulate. This represents a diversity of historically innovated functions derived from the earliest material expressions of the *kāpālika* vow.

Likewise, *rus rgyan* were formalized through the expansion of Buddhist mahāyoga and yoginī tantra in the eighth to eleventh centuries before they were adopted and refined by Tibetan practitioners and illustrators following the *phyi dar*. The ornaments can be worn by specialists for individual practice but often they are integrated into public empowerments, representations of religious authority and ritual performances. The ensemble of six components most commonly includes an apron, crown, chest piece or necklace, and bands for the upper arms, hands and feet, and are meant to facilitate the yogin's identification with a wrathful deity (*e.g.* Heruka). In assuming this form through the use of ornaments, a ritual performer can be empowered to cultivate religious insight, subjugate local deities or transform adversities, and other actions which are interpreted as beneficial to the well-being and stability of the community. At the same time, in public displays like *'chams* for example*,* bone ornaments are used as instruments for religious education, an expression of shared cultural historical narratives and the accomplishment of Buddhist soteriological goals such as liberation or an auspicious rebirth.

Thighbone trumpets are most consistently and prominently associated with the Tibetan tradition of *gcod* and ritual specializations of ascetic yoga practitioners (*e.g. brtul zhugs spyod pa*) where they are often used to engage, subdue or neutralize adversities which can be characterized as obstacles to enlightenment and the realization of Buddhist religious knowledge. Moreover, this ritual instrument has a practical application to public well-being as a form of offering to local or wrathful protectors and through the control of disease, weather and a seismically-unstable geographical region. The skull *ḍamaru* has also been used by yogins as well as lay and monastic practitioners as an instrument specialized to the charnel methodologies of Buddhist tantra, use, like the *rkang gling* for example, as a sound offering to guardians and other wrathful deities. Both of these instruments can be applied in forms of mahāyoga and yoginī tantra — including the practice of *gcod* — though there is thus far very little evidence for their use beyond Tibetan sources dated after the eleventh century.

The ritual traditions and practices summarized here are generalizations drawn from the inter-related teachings, oral transmissions, regional variations, cultural historical narratives and social contexts described throughout this dissertation. Yet for every object explored in this research, there are a number of exceptions to be found as idiosyncratic liturgical functions, local

interpretations and formal variations based on unique technical skills or an availability/dearth of resources. Some of this complexity reflects the diversity of settings or modes of use, where an ascetic yogin is more likely to have a simple implement than a monastic institution with access to the wealth and skilled craftspeople needed to execute complex ornamentation. Likewise, individual objects exhibit a potentially infinite variety of shapes and levels of technical refinement, with human remains having been purchased, inherited or gifted and subsequently altered through ritual criteria and supplementary materials.

Within communities of practitioners, attitudes to human remains vary according to the religious education, interests, experiences, location and unique identity of the individual, making it impossible to articulate an essentially “Tibetan” or Himalayan Buddhist interpretation for these objects and their use. Handling strategies vary between people and settings from casual or indifferent to highly formalized and restricted, and where objects have been made accessible through public display — for example in local religious institutions or monastic museums — they are presented in a manner appropriate to their ritual and social function, as determined by an informed specialist from within the community. Moreover, at present and across the region, the handling and interpretation of ritual objects made from human remains is increasingly conditioned by the active enforcement of restrictions on their sale, transport or possession through political and legal control, as well as their high economic value to an expanding group of global and regional practitioners and collectors, resulting in a relative scarcity of materials available to local religious communities and increasingly restricted access to these objects in ritual settings.

However, a number of technical innovations and alternatives have been cultivated by ritual users and fabricators in response to the challenges and risks of acquiring human remains. This change is especially evident after the mid-nineteenth century when these objects were introduced to the global market for cultural properties through acquisition and display by non-practitioner communities (*e.g.* British colonial institutions and collectors). At the same time, these substitutions and alterations have facilitated the continuity and expansion of this tradition of object-making and a broader, global accessibility to its ritual applications. Though recorded evidence emphasizes a material specificity which is characteristic to the tantric methodologies explored here, it has been suggested by many local informants that efficacy is primarily determined by the skill and religious education of the practitioners, observers and other participants, rather than the technical details of the instrument.

Furthermore, human remains have been valued and venerated as relics in Buddhist communities since the construction of their earliest monuments in the third century before the Common Era. Relics, however, are not fabricated or constructed through technology or skill, nor are they exclusively made of human remains, being also identified as texts, teachings, physical impressions, textiles and other materials which originate or have been in contact with an accomplished practitioner recognized as an embodiment of a buddha. This represents an alternative, yet tangentially related category of Buddhist material cultural history. At the same time, where a donor and/or their family have consented to the use of remains as ritual objects, the social value of this instrumentalization for the corpse is informed by historically Buddhist cultural narratives on the soteriological benefit of donative gestures made with one's body and as a demonstration of accumulated merit and religious understanding.

In this study, rather than individual corpses, human remains can be understood as having the potential to demonstrate fundamental Buddhist doctrines of interdependent origination and impermanence, to undermine the ontological relationship between the perceived self and its body through tantric action or yoga, and to cultivate religious insight, knowledge or merit. The human body is moreover valued in cultural and soteriological narratives as an accumulation of past positive actions which have resulted in the practitioner's capacity to hear, teach and do Buddhism, by which they may be liberated from rebirth. The objects studied here are thus conditioned by these treatments and strategies for handling the human dead, and while charnel materials may be interpreted as volatile, but they are not invisible nor lacking a discernible cultural history and social value. Though death is nevertheless treated as a dangerous occasion in Tibetan communities and charnel materials can be regarded as a source of pollution or impurity, the skulls, femurs and other remains used in these ritual objects demonstrate the transformative capacity of Buddhist tantra and its methods.

Finally, within this conservation-led investigation into visual and technological history, there have been a number of opportunities for critical engagement with the interpretation and display of Tibetan material religion and human remains in cultural institutions both globally and within the Himalayan region. In both museums and religious communities, these objects are treated as a protected category and subject to restrictions in handling and access though where the former qualify a corpse through its association with an unique individual, group or cultural identity, the latter do so primarily according to the ritual and educational utility of human remains for the realization of Buddhist or tantric goals. For one group of specialists, restrictions address issues of liability, proprietary or political control and the historical displacement of funerary materials, yet for ritual users — in addition to protecting the objects from theft, confiscation or sale —

access and interpretation is controlled through the gradual acquisition of religious and cultural knowledge. For many practitioners consulted in this research, where someone is disturbed by human remains, from the perspective of Buddhism and tantra, they have failed to realize the nature of the self and its material existence.

These hermeneutical intersections can be understood as an opportunity for growth and revision in historical and present museological discourse and conservation practice: How can other definitions or cultural narratives on the death of the body be engaged through display and handling? How, when and by whom can human remains be interpreted as cultural objects? Moreover, how can global circulation work to support, rather than threaten or sequester, the continuity of Tibetan material religion and this traditions of object-making? Finally, how can these objects be made accessible to informed users from the global Tibetan community and other practitioners of Buddhist tantra with the capacity to reactivate a broader range of their publicly beneficial and educational functions and resolve their de-contextualization or misinterpretation? The preceding dissertation had aimed to provide an interpretive platform and technical vocabulary towards a model of responsible custodianship for these objects which addresses these concerns and is qualified by the complex, dynamic and irreducible diversity of perspectives in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist communities.

This dissertation has intended to contribute to the disciplines of material culture studies, technical art history, and Buddhist studies, and as a supplement to the ongoing technical and intellectual discourse of religious scholars, authors, practitioners and institutions. Using conservation as a research methodology, this project hopes to frame an object-based discussion of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist material religion as an opportunity to explore specific ritual traditions, teaching lineages, or regional bodies of knowledge in relation to cultural objects and their diverse histories. This work has also re-evaluated the formation of characteristically Tibetan iconographies for siddhas, ḍākinīs and the wrathful deities of Buddhist tantra in its visual culture.

Building on the historical and liturgical relationships introduced here, future investigations might be shaped around the material traditions and observances of *brtul zhugs spyod pa* and other ascetic practitioners, for example, or a comparative study of the implements and methodologies of ritualized charnel asceticism in rNying ma, gSar ma and even Bon sources. Further yet, this work might inform an investigation of how the interpretation and presentation of these objects by various colonial administrations have been (and are still) used to limit Tibetan or practitioner

communities' capacity for self-determination through active custodianship of their material heritage or the articulation of local histories, shared narratives and social values.

This project is perhaps too ambitious for one document and many alternate versions of the cultural history of human remains in Tibetan ritual objects can and should be written: What has been presented here is a structured consolidation of what was most accessible and relevant to material and technical research. This dissertation has moreover sought to investigate and document surviving evidence for the continuity of this tradition of material knowledge transfer and its ritual applications, and to cultivate technology — both historical and present — as a point of engagement for connecting cultural objects with a diversity of dynamic sources, narratives and values.

Appendix: Museum objects accessed for this research

Institution	Date of exam	Number	Object type	Human?	Place or date of acquisition	Notes	Figure no.
Objects examined in UK collections							
National Science Museum (NSM)	28 Feb 17	1987-716 pt3	prayer beads (*phreng ba, mālā*)	yes	Bhaktapur, Nepal 1986	112 cranial discs, acquired with *rkang gling* (1987-716 pt 11)	1.6
Wellcome (NSM)	9 Feb 17	A27550	apron on polyester backing	no	n/a (“Tibetan”)	two rows of large, flat plaques; approximately 12 with standing two-armed figures in robes, also *rdo rje,* secondary plaques are foliage, bell-shaped bangles	
Wellcome (NSM)	9 Feb 17	A161208	crown, carved plaques on silk backing	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	five plaques with buddha figure over a skeletal face; see also 4.3.28, accumulation of sindur; goes with A161210	4.3.30
Wellcome (NSM)	9 Feb 17	A161209	apron on belt	yes, mixed	n/a (“Tibetan”)	six large plaques in top register attached to woven cloth belt; 5-6 yoginī with smaller figures/ messengers in between; secondary plaques are *makara* along the bottom, foliage patterns; *rudrākṣa* seeds; light accumulation of *sindur*	
Wellcome (NSM)	9 Feb 17	A161210	triangular apron on silk backing	yes, mixed	n/a (“Tibetan”)	eleven plaques of varied size in top register; no fewer than five different carving campaigns evident; one multi-limbed figure off center, standing male figures and two seated buddhas(?) over skeletal faces; supplementary plaques are *rdo rje,* 8 auspicious signs, *rudrākṣa* seeds; see A161208, same silk, was on perm display (w/o crown) in the years 1996-2005; see also 4.3.29	4.3.31
Wellcome (NSM)	9 Feb 17	A161211	ornaments (fragments)	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	assorted small and large plaques, beads; three yoginī, 8 auspicious signs	
Wellcome (NSM)	9 Feb 17	A639104	apron (partial)	no (with a few possible exceptions)	n/a (“Tibetan”)	missing large plaques on top, with one piece ivory and industrial produced bells at bottom, a few tapered and lac-colored beads; 8 auspicious signs, royal emblems	
Wellcome (NSM)	16 Feb 17	A4737	ḍ*amaru*	uncertain	n/a (“Tibetan”)	damaged, revealing thin (2-3mm) cross section; previously treated for pests with methyl Br, no cranial sutures	4.5.15
Wellcome (NSM)	16 Feb 17	A5408/1 and 2	pair of *rkang gling*	not femur, uncertain	n/a (“Tibetan”)	with silver and cuprous alloy chasing; previously on display twice; motifs are flames, skeletal faces, three heads as triple jewel	4.4.10
Wellcome (NSM)	16 Feb 17	A161269	prayer beads (*mālā*)	likely, not cranial	n/a (“Tibetan”)	106 beads plus large turquoise and leather thong (108); described in record as (lan ch’en grod pa) or bones? from stomach of elephant (*glang chen grod pa*), which has vegetarian diet	
Wellcome (NSM)	16 Feb 17	A635129	prayer wheel	uncertain	n/a (“Tibetan”)	like A4737 has no evidence of cranial sutures, texture is like bone	
Wellcome (NSM)	28 Feb 17	A20948 A	*bandha*	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	set of four with hair, pennants, grime and thongs; for use in performance of *‘chams*	4.2.28-4.2.31
Wellcome (NSM)	28 Feb 17	A20948 B	*bandha*	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	set of four with hair, pennants, grime and thongs; for use in performance of *‘chams*	4.2.28-4.2.31
Wellcome (NSM)	28 Feb 17	A20948 C	*bandha*	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	set of four with hair, pennants, grime and thongs; for use in performance of *‘chams*	4.2.28-4.2.31

Institution	Date of exam	Number	Object type	Human?	Place or date of acquisition	Notes	Figure no.
Objects examined in UK collections							
Wellcome (NSM)	28 Feb 17	A20948 D	*bandha*	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	set of four with hair, pennants, grime and thongs; for use in performance of *‘chams*	4.2.28-4.2.31
Wellcome (NSM)	28 Feb 17	A106716	*ḍamaru*	uncertain	n/a (“Tibetan”)	no cranial sutures, bone texture; see Dorje and Ellingson (1979)	
Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)	30 Mar 17	IM.13-1922	skull *ḍamaru* (*thod rnga*) with carvings	yes	Tibetan, 19th century, donated 1922 by O. Marriage, Esq	large with carved skeletal faces and two letters or syllables in Rañjanā script (illegible)	4.5.22
V&A	30 Mar 17	IM.21-1928	skull with stand	yes	Tibetan, acquired in 1928	copper stand with repousse three heads and round lotus petal base, see BM As1979,16.24a	4.2.14
V&A	30 Mar 17	IM.250-1916	trumpet (*stag gling*?)	no (tiger?)	previously owned by Capt. A.O. Greagh, former agent at Gyantse	wrapped in (goat?) leather (not hide) with tassel; small with no condyle knobs; see *stag gling,* PRM 1954.6.89 (fig. 4.4.18)	4.4.19
V&A	30 Mar 17	IS.1:1-12.2007	complete set of bone ornaments	no	loaned by Capt. Fletcher in 1932, acquired in 2007	very consistent rendering; five large yoginī in top register, framed by two more figures; secondary plaques are 8 auspicious signs, guardians at bottom; five skull crown; see image of Demo Rinpoche in similar (4.3.18) and ‘chams dancer from dKar mdze in same (4.3.15)	4.3.22
V&A	30 Mar 17	IS.30-1965	prayer wheel	mixed animal with human possible	Tibetan, before 1965	see PRM 1991.17.25; see also NML 53.87.216 for similar wood and carving/mark-making	
National Museums Liverpool (NML)	6 Jul 17	53.87.216	*ḍamaru*	no	collected by J.M. Ward in India/Burma in 1914-1916	carved wooden double-sided hand drum with bone handle and snake skin drumheads; carved motif is skeletal faces and two letters/syllables in Rañjanā, see V&A IM.13-1922	
NML	6 Jul 17	54.85.125	*rkang gling*	yes	collected by H.G. Beasley before 1938	red and green leather or hide with copper mouthpiece	
NML	6 Jul 17	56.85.127 and 128	bone trumpet	uncertain	collected by H.G. Beasley before 1938	bones might be human but condyle bell end has been replaced with copper fitting; shaft wrapped in copper wire	
NML	6 Jul 17	56.26.305	*thod rnga*	yes	collected in Darjeeling before 1907	green skins, pennants with conch, red belt	4.5.19
NML	6 Jul 17	56.27.281	*thod rnga*	yes	collected by J.C. White in 1904 at Drepung	green skins, red belt; in two pieces separated at center	4.5.11
NML	6 Jul 17	56.27.811	*rkang gling*	yes	collected in Darjeeling before 1873	painted strips of textile as covering of bell end and handle	4.4.4
NML	6 Jul 17	1973.81	bone ornaments	yes, mixed	purchased from Christie’s?	assembly of beads with central plaque showing two-armed Samvara in *yab yum* (18th c?), mounted on fabric for resale	4.3.20 and 4.3.21
British Museum (BM)	4 Aug 17	1880.2476	*thod rnga*	yes	n/a (“Tibetan”)	in two halves with snake skin (python) drum heads	4.5.12 and 4.5.13
BM	4 Aug 17	As1979,16.24 a-c	skull with stand and lid	yes	donated by L. McMorran (collector) 1979, Tibetan?	three heads on rim, lid (?), tall, round base with lotus petals in copper, see V&A IM.21-1928; accessioned with group of Tibetan objects	4.2.13
BM	4 Aug 17	1933,0315.104 a-h	set of eight rings	uncertain	acquired by W.L Stevenson Loat archaeologist, from Tibetan area	undetermined function or composition	

Institution	Date of exam	Number	Object type	Human?	Place or date of acquisition	Notes	Figure no.
Objects examined in UK collections							
BM	4 Aug 17	2003,0929.1	apron, two limb ornaments and neck ornament	uncertain	donated after bequeathed by A.A. Goulden who was likely with Gurkhas (Nepal?)	six large plaques on top register with three protectors, one yoginī and two skeletal figures; secondary plaques are foliage, astral bodies and 8 auspicious signs, *makara* and bells along the bottom; high quality carving on mixed substrate with no polish, has sPyan ras gzigs at center in second register	4.3.14 (detail)
BM	4 Aug 17	1934,0314.1	*thod rnga*	yes	donated by Sister E. Archer, 1934	rough make with two different colored skulls, treated for mold and frass	4.5.8
BM	4 Aug 17	1930,0306.1	apron with silk backing cloth and glass beads	yes, mixed	donated by Sir Robert Greg (collector) 1930	top register has six dakini, multiple carving campaigns (up to six); secondary plaques are foliage, astral bodies and protectors, small buddha figures; tapered red with lac beads, glass beads, *makara* and bells at bottom; see Braunholtz 1934, was on display at Wellcome with A5408 1 and 2;	4.3.25
BM	4 Aug 17	1913,0718.1	*rkang gling*	yes	purchased from “Miss Shervinton” in 1913, Tibet/Nepal	goat (?) hide wrapped around bell with contrasting color *rdo rje* appliqué, evidence where tassel was previously attached	4.4.5 and 4.4.6
BM	4 Aug 17	1883,1027.1	inscribed skull	yes	acquired with numismatic collection from Edward Gilbertson (collector)	inscribed with mantras in red (cinnabar?) paint, will be on display for Tantra show at BM (2020)	4.4.20-4.4.22
BM	4 Aug 17	1894,0310.40	prayer beads (*mālā*)	no	acquired by A.W. Franks, former curator at BM, collector for V&A, etc.	shell with beads, possibly human	
Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM)	11 Sep 17	1890.34.2	skull	yes	acquired before 1890	no ornamentation, uneven rim; see Balfour 1897	
PRM	11 Sep 17	1916.34.17	prayer beads (*phreng ba, mālā*)	no	donated by E.B Taylor, anthropologist in 1916	two *mālā* connected, wood and one with discs of shell or bone (not human, 1-2 mm thickness)	
PRM	11 Sep 17	1938.34.47	*thod rnga*	yes	purchased at Stevens Auction Rooms in 1927, bequeathed by Henry Balfour (PRM curator) in 1939	red cloth belt, plain colored hides	4.5.9
PRM	11 Sep 17	1938.34.48	*thod rnga*	yes	bequeathed by Balfour in 1939	red cloth belt, greenish brown hides, possible rattle?	4.5.27
PRM	11 Sep 17	1941.8.199	*thod rnga*	yes	acquired by A.J. Evans, archaeologist	red cloth belt and handle, plain colored hides; likely Lepcha	4.5.28
PRM	11 Sep 17	1954.6.88	apron	yes, mixed	acquired in the field in 1905? by A.C. Rigo de Righi; donated by Beasley	on display on the second floor of museum, five deity plaques with two skeletons at either end: Vajravārāhī, two-armed deities in *yab yum*, male, multi-limbed deity alone, two (?) yoginī; secondary plaques are 8 auspicious signs, foliage; *makara* and bells along the bottom	
PRM	11 Sep 17	1954.6.89	bone trumpet (*stag gling*?)	no	donated by Beasley, collected before 1925	tiger femur? with copper repoussé bell in shape of makara and mouthpiece, see V&A 250.1916	4.4.18
PRM	11 Sep 17	1964.12.4	apron	no	purchased in Bombay by P. Wengraf (London-based dealer) before 1964	translucent, flat bones with brown surface sewn onto green velvet circle; 9 large standing deities in top register, 8 auspicious signs below; triangular composition	

Institution	Date of exam	Number	Object type	Human?	Place or date of acquisition	Notes	Figure no.
Objects examined in UK collections							
PRM	11 Sep 17	1991.17.25	prayer wheel	no	collected in field by C.M.L.R Allen, donated 1991	carved animal bone wheel with wooden handle and dharani inside	
Objects documented or examined in previous research (Fuentes 2014)							
Brooklyn Museum	27 Dec 12	23.289.27201	apron	yes	Acquired with on museum expedition by F. Pratt and F. Babbott, 1923	multiple carving campaigns, central yab-yum with six yoginis, below central top plaque is an image of historical Buddha, see BM 1930,0306.1; secondary plaques include 8 auspicious signs, *gandharva*, fpliage; *makara* and bells at bottom	4.3.8 and 4.3.9
Rubin Museum of Art	27 Dec 12	n/a	apron	yes	incomplete documentation	central plaque is yab yum, framed by two ḍākinī; no online record	
Pacific Asia Museum	15 Jan 13	1984.28.1	apron on belt	yes, mixed	donated in 1984 by B. Coburn	7 large plaques in top register with figures of yoginī, protectors; at least 5 different carving campaigns; grid-like configuration with *rudrākṣa* seeds, attached to red cloth belt	
Pacific Asia Museum	15 Jan 13	n/a	apron on painted backing cloth	yes, mixed	incomplete documentation	five deities on first register, multi-limbed central figure with two yoginī; protectors at far ends; secondary plaques are 8 auspicious signs, *makara* at bottom; attached to dark-colored cloth with face of *chos skyong* painted on	4.3.26
Pacific Asia Museum	15 Jan 13	2002.8.1	chest ornament	uncertain, mixed	gift of C.L. Ahmanson, 2002	central chest ornament is femur plaque with yoginī, not wheel (see fig. 1.1 [V&A IM.293.1916])	
Fowler Museum at UCLA	8 Feb 13	X69.300 A-J	ornament ensemble	yes	Originally owned by Henry Wellcome, likely from Nepal	plaques are missing on apron, five skull crown and other ornaments made from cranial pieces, accumulations of *sindur*	4.1.4; 4.3.32 and 4.3.33
Santa Barbara Museum of Art	11 May 13	1954.15.2	apron on leather belt	yes	gifted by Mrs. Wilbur L. Cummings in 1954; Wilbur L. Cummings probably acquired during or after a photo expedition in Himalayas for MFA, Boston during 1937-38 (see Life Magazine 12 Jun 39)	multiple carving campaigns, five yoginī across the top, multi-colored tassels; plaque with buddha in bhumisparśa mudrā (see BM 1930,0306.1 and Brooklyn Museum ex), bells and *makara* along the bottom; secondary plaques mostly foliage	

Bibliography

“Ā rya de was mdzad pa'i shes rab kyi pha rol du phyin pa'i tshigs su bcad pa chen mo*”* in *gCod kyi Chos skor,* 1-9. New Delhi: Tibet House, 1974.

Abhayadatta. *Masters of Mahāmudrā: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*. Translated by Keith Dowman. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985.

Aldenderfer, Mark. “Variation in mortuary practice on the early Tibetan Plateau and the high Himalayas.” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1, no. 1 (2013): 293–318.

Alexander, André. “Alchi Tsatsapuri: Notes on the history of an early but little-known monument.” Leh, 2009. (Based on a paper presented at the 14th Colloquium of the International Association for Ladakh Studies).

———. “Alchi Tsatsapuri Preliminary Report.” Leh Beijing and Berlin: Tibet Heritage Fund International, 2005.

Andrews, Fred H. *Wall Paintings from Ancient Shrines in Central Asia*. SDI Publications, 1998.

Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Asad, Talal. “Toward a genealogy of the concept of ritual.” In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 55–79. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Aziz, Barbara Nimri, ed. *The Tradition of Pha Dampa Sangyas: A Treasured Collection of His Teachings Transmitted by T[h]ug[s] sras Kun dga’*. 5 vols. Thimphu: Druk Sherik Parkhang, 1979.

Bakker, Hans. *The World of the Skandapurāṇa: Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries*. Groningen Oriental Studies. Leiden Boston: Brill, 2014.

Balfour, Henry. “Life history of an Aghori fakir; with exhibition of the human skull used by him as a drinking vessel, and notes on the similar use of skulls by other races.” *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 26 (1897): 340–57.

Bandyopadhyay, Bimal. *Buddhist Centres of Orissa: Lalitagiri, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri*. Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 2004.

Beer, Robert. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. London: Serindia Publications, 1999.

Behrendt, Kurt. *Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014.

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Bellezza, John Vincent. *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*. Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013.

Belting, Hans. “Iconic presence. Images in religious traditions.” *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 12, no. 2 (2016): 235–37.

Bentor, Yael. *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Bhattacharya, Benoytosh, ed. *Nispannayogāvalī of Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayākaragupta*. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1949.

———. *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968.

Bisschop, Peter, and Arlo Griffiths. “The Pāśupata observance (Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 40).” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 46, no. 4 (2003): 315–48.

Bjerken, Zeff. “Exorcisng the illusion of Bon ‘shamans’: A critical genealogy of shamanism in Tibetan religions.” *Révue d’etudes tibetaines*, no. 6 (2004): 4–59.

———. “On mandalas, monarchs, and mortuary magic: Siting the Sarvadurgatiparaśodhana Tantra in Tibet.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 813–42.

bKra shig rgya mtsho, ed. *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo’i bstan bcos*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skyun khang, 1996.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

Braunholtz, H.J. “A necromancer’s bone apron from Tibet.” *The British Museum Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1930): 29–30.

Brekke, Torkel. “Bones of contention: Buddhist relics, nationalism and the politics of archaeology.” *Numen* 54, no. 3 (2007): 270–303.

Briet, Suzanne. *What Is Documentation?* Translated by Ronald E. Day, Laurent Martinet, and Hermina G. B. Anghelescu. Paris: Editions Documentaires, 1951.

Briggs, Charles L. “The politics of discursive authority in research on the ‘invention of tradition.’” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 4 (1996): 435–69.

Brown, Robert. “The four stone façades of Monastery 1 at Ratnagiri.” *Artibus Asiae* 40, no. 1 (1978): 5–28.

brTson ’grus sengge. “Ma gcig lab kyi sgron ma’i rnam thar dang gcod kyi chos skor ma ’ongs lung bstan bcas pa.” National Library of Mongolia, n.d. [13th century] W1KG1646. Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed 16 May 2019.

———. “Phuṅ po zan du bskyur ba’i rnam par bśad pa las ma cig lab sgron ma’i rnam par thar pa mdor bsdus tsam źig bźugs so.” University of Washington, n.d. [13th century]. BQ7950.L377 B78 1900z. East Asia Library Special Collections, University of Washington. Accessed 30 August 2019.

Bryson, Megan. “Mahākāla worship in the Dali kingdom (937-1253): A study and translation of the Dahei Tianshen Daochang Yi.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 35, no. 1–2 (2012-2013): 3–70.

Bu ston rin chen grub. *Butön's History of Buddhism in India and Its Spread to Tibet: A Treasury of Priceless Scripture*. Translated by Ngawang Zangpo and Lisa Stein. Boston and London: Snow Lion Publications, 2013.

Buddhist Architecture in the Western Himalaya. "Saspol Cave Temples - FWF Research Project P22857," n.d. https://archresearch.tugraz.at/results/Saspol/saspol3.html. (Accessed 9 April 2020).

Buggeln, Gretchen T. "Museum space and the experience of the sacred." *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 8, no. 1 (2012): 30–50.

Bühunemann, Gudrun. "Buddhist deities and mantras in the Hindu Tantras: I The Tantrasārasaṃgraha and the Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 42 (1999): 303–34.

———. "Buddhist deities and mantras in the Hindu Tantras: II The Śrīvidyārṇavatantra and the Tantrasāra." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 43 (2000): 27–48.

Burleson, Lauren. "Rus rgyan Bone ornaments ensemble: Research and analysis." MA thesis, Durham University, 2020.

Cabezón, José Ignacio. "Introduction." In *Tibetan Ritual,* edited by José Ignacio Cabezón, 1-34. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Cantwell, Cathy. "A Black Hat Ritual Dance." *Bulletin of Tibetology* 1 (1992): 12–23.

———. "The Dance of the Guru's Eight Aspects." *The Tibet Journal* 20, no. 4 (1995): 47–63.

———. "The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism. By Jacob P. Dalton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. x+311." *History of Religions* 54, no. 1 (2104): 106-111.

———. "The medicinal accomplishment (sman sgrub) in the Dudjom Meteoric Iron Razor (gNam lcag spu gri) tradition: Reflections on the ritual and meditative practice at a monastery in southern Bhutan." *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, no. 8 (2015): 49–95.

———. "Reflections on rasayāna, bcud len and related practices in Nyingma (rNying ma) tantric ritual." *History of Science in South Asia* 5, no. 2 (2017): 181–203.

———. "The Action phurpa ('Phrin las phur pa) from the Eightfold Buddha Word, Embodying the Sugatas (bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa), revealed by Nyang-Rel Nyima Özer (1124-1192, Tib. Myang ral nyi ma 'od zer)." *BuddhistRoad Paper* 7, no. 2 (2020): 3–137.

Cantwell, Cathy, and Robert Mayer. *The Kīlaya Nirvāna Tantra and the Vajra Wrath Tantra: Two Texts from the Ancient Tantra Collection.* Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007.

———. *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur Pa from Dunhuang*. Wien, 2008.

———. "Enduring Myths: sMrang, rabs and ritual in the Dunhuang texts on Padmasambhava." In *Tibetan Studies in Honor of Samten Karmay*, edited by Françoise Pommaret and Jean-Luc Achard, 289–312. Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, 2009.

———. “The Dunhuang phur pa corpus: A survey.” In *Contributions to Tibetan Buddhist Literature, PIATS 2006: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, edited by Olga Almogi, 248–76. Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2009.

———. *A Noble Noose of Methods, The Lotus Garland Synopsis: A Mahāyoga Tantra and its Commentary. Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften,* 2012.

———. *“*The Bon Ka ba Nag po and the rNying ma Phur pa tradition.” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research, New Horizons in Bon Series,* 1, no. 1 (2013): 37–53.

———. “Representations of Padmasambhava in early post-imperial Tibet.” In *Tibet after Empire: Culture, Society and Religion between 850-1000*, edited by Christoph Cüppers, Robert Mayer, and Michael Walter, 19–50. Lumbini International Research Institute Seminar Proceedings Series. Kathmandu: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2013.

———. “Restoring the text of a mahāyoga tantra witnessed in early Tibet: An early version of the ’Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa pad ma ’phreng gi don bsdud pa.” *The Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1, no. 1 (2013): 319–32.

Chandra, Pramod. “The Kaula -Kāpālika Cults at Khajuraho.” *Lalit Kala* 1/2 (56 1955): 98–108.

Chaoul, Alejandro. *Chöd Practice in the Bön Tradition*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2009.

Chapin, Helen B., and Alexander C. Soper. “A Long Roll of Buddhist Images I.” *Artibus Asiae* 32, no. 1 (1970): 5–41.

———. “A Long Roll of Buddhist Images II.” *Artibus Asiae* 32, no. 2/3 (1970): 157–99.

———. “A Long Roll of Buddhist Images III.” *Artibus Asiae* 32, no. 4 (1970): 259-289 + 291-306.

———. “A Long Roll of Buddhist Images IV.” *Artibus Asiae* 33, no. 1/2 (1971): 75–140.

Childs, Geoff. “Culture change in the name of cultural preservation.” *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004): 31–42.

———. “Methods, meanings, and representations in the study of past Tibetan societies.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1 (2005): 1–11.

Chou, Yi Liang. “Tantrism in China.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 3/4 (1945): 241–332.

Clarke, John. “A history of iron working in Tibet: Centers of production, styles and techniques.” In *Warriors of the Himalayas, Rediscovering the Arms and Armor of Tibet*, edited by Daniel LaRocca, 20–33. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.

———. “Ga’u: The Tibetan amulet box.” *Arts of Asia* 31, no. 3 (2001): 45–67.

Clifford, James. “Introduction.” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1–26. Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1986.

Collins, Charles Dillard. *The Iconography and Ritual of Śiva at Elephanta*. First Indian edition. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.

Corlin, Claes. “The journey through the Bardo: Notes on the symbolism of Tibetan mortuary rites and the Tibetan Book of the Dead.” In *On the Meaning of Death: Essays on Mortuary Rituals and Eschatological Beliefs*, edited by Sven Cederroth, Claes Corlin, and Jan Lindström, 63–75. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988.

Cort, John E. “Art, religion and material culture: Some reflections on method.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 3 (1996): 613–32.

Cort, Louise Allison. “Disposable but indispensable: The earthenware vessel as a vehicle of meaning in Japan.” In *What Is the Use of Art: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, 46–73. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008.

Cozort, Daniel. “Sādhana (sGrub thabs): Means of achievement for deity yoga.” In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger Jackson. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.

Cuevas, Brian J. “From death to disposal.” In *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 69–77. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

———. “To hell and back.” In *Travels in the Netherworld: Buddhist Popular Narratives of Death and the Afterlife In Tibet*, 3–15. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Cuevas, Brian J., and Jacqueline I. Stone. “Introduction.” In *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representation*, edited by Brian J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone, 1–31. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007.

Cupchik, Jeffrey, W. “Buddhism as performing art: Visualizing music in the Tibetan sacred ritual music liturgies.” *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 1, no. 1 (2015): 31–62.

———. “The Tibetan gCod damaru - A reprise: Symbolism, function, and difference in a Tibetan adept’s interpretive community.” *Asian Music* 44, no. 1 (2013): 113–39.

Curtis, Neil G.W. “Human remains: The sacred, museums and archaeology.” *Public Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2003): 21–32.

Dalton, Jacob. “The early development of the Padmasambhava legend in Tibet: A study of IOL Tib J 644 and Pelliot tibétain 307.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124, no. 4 (2004): 759–72.

———. “A crisis of doxography: How Tibetans organized tantra during the 8-12th centuries.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 115–81.

———. *The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011.

Das, Sarat Chandra, and Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal ’byor. *History of Buddhism by Sum.Pa.Mkhan.Po*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2016.

David-Neél, Alexandra. *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1965.

Davidson, Ronald M. “Reflections on the Maheśvara subjugation myth: Indic materials, Sa-skya-pa apologetics, and the birth of Heruka.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no. 2 (1991): 197–235.

———. *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Buddhism Movement.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

———. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

de Mallmann, Marie-Thérèse. *Introduction à l’iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique*. Paris: Librarie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1986.

Deepak, B.R. “India, China and Tibet: Fundamental perceptions from Dharamsala, Beijing and New Delhi.” *Asian Ethnicity* 12, no. 3 (2011): 301–21.

Dehejia, Vidya. *Yoginī Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition*. New Delhi: National Museum, 1986.

———. “On modes of visual narration in early Buddhist art.” *The Art Bulletin* 72, no. 3 (September 1990): 374–92.

———. *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries Between Sacred and Profane in India’s Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Denwood, Philip. “The artist’s treatise of sMan bla don drub.” *The Tibet Journal* 21, no. 2 (1996): 24–30.

Divalerio, David M. *The Holy Madmen of Tibet*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Dolce, Lucia. “Reconsidering the taxonomy of the esoteric: Hermeneutical and ritual practices of the Lotus Sutra.” In *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, edited by Bernhard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen, 130–71. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

Donaldson, Thomas E. “Bhikṣāṭanamūrti Images from Orissa.” *Artibus Asiae* 47, no. 1 (1986): 51–66.

———. *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*. 2 vols. Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2001.

———. *Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa*. 3 vols. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2002.

Dorje, Gyurme. “A rare series of Tibetan banners.” In *Pearls of the Orient: Asian Treasures from the Wellcome Library*, edited by Nigel Allan, 161–77. London and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003.

Dorje, Rinjing, and Ter Ellingson. “‘Explanation of the secret gcod da ma ru’ An exploration of musical instrument symbolism.” *Asian Music* 10, no. 2 (1979): 63–91.

Duckworth, Douglas. “Echoes of Tsultrim Lodro: An indigenous voice from contemporary Tibet on the ‘Buddhism and science dialogue.’” *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 2 (2015): 267–77.

Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Eck, Diana L. *Banaras: City of Light.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Edou, Jérôme. *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chöd*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.

Elder, George Robert. “The Saṃpuṭa Tantra: Edition and translation, chapters I-IV.” PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1978.

Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Translated by Williard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964.

Ellingson, Ter (Terry Jay). “The mandala of sound: Concepts and sound structures in Tibetan ritual music.” PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979.

———. “Ancient Indian drum syllables and Bu ston’s Sham pa ta ritual.” *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 3 (1980): 431–52.

Elliott, Mark. “Side effects: Looking, touching, and interacting in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.” *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 18 (2006): 63–75.

Elverskog, Johan. “A Buddhist origin for Islamic blockprinting?” *The Muslim World* 100, no. 2–3 (2010): 287–301.

———. “An early seventeenth-century Tibeto-Mongolian ceremonial staff.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 3 (2007): 1–24.

English, Elizabeth. *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals and Forms: A Study of the Cult of Vajrayoginī in India*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

Facchini, Massimo. “The spiritual heritage of Ma gcig lab sgron.” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 3 (1983): 21–26.

Fletcher, Alexandra, Daniel Antoine, and JD Hill, eds. *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*. London: The British Museum, 2015. https://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/Regarding-the-Dead_02102015.pdf. (Accessed 1 February 2017).

Flood, Gavin. “The purification of the body in tantric ritual representation.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 45, no. 1 (2002): 25–43.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1973.

Fremantle, Francesca. “A critical study of the Guhyasamaja Tantra.” PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1971.

Fuentes, Ayesha. “Interpreting human remains in Tibetan ritual objects.” *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 13, no. 3 (2017): 397-398.

———. “Technical examination of a bone ornament ensemble from the Himalayan region with comments on handling, treatment, storage and display.” MA thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2014.

———. “Utilizing terror: On the adoption and refinement of skull cups in Tibetan Buddhism.” MA thesis, Tufts University, 2011.

Gao, Delphine. “The eye of the living Buddha, the first photographer of Tibet: Lopsang Jampal Loodjor Tenzin Gyatso Demo.” *Photographers International* 39 (August 1998): 16–89.

Garrett, Frances. “Tapping the body’s nectar: Gastronomy and incorporation in Tibetan literature.” *History of Religions*, 2010, 300–326.

———. “The alchemy of accomplishing medicine (sman sgrub): Situating the Yuthok Heart Essence (g.Yu thog snying thig) in literature and history.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37 (2009): 207–30.

Gayley, Holly. “Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism.” *Numen* 54 (2007): 459–99.

“gCod dbang brgya rtsa’i dbang gi tsak li,” n.d. W3JT13604. Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed 30 July 2019.

Geary, Patrick. “Sacred commodities: The circulation of medieval relics.” In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 169–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Gentry, James Duncan. *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism: The Life, Writings and Legacy of Sokdokpa Lodro Gyeltsen*. Leiden Boston: Brill, 2017.

———. “Substance and Sense: Objects of power in the life, writings, and legacy of the Tibetan ritual master Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan.” PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2013.

Gerke, Barbara. “The poison of touch: Tracing mercurial treatments of venereal diseases in Tibet.” *Social History of Medicine* 28, no. 3 (2015): 532–54.

Germano, David. “Re-membering the dismembered body of Tibet: Contemporary Tibetan visionary movements in the People’s Republic of China.” In *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, edited by Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein, 53–94. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999.

———. “The funerary transformation of the Great Perfection (rDzogs chen).” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1 (2005): 1–54.

Gibson, Todd. “dGra lha: A re-examination.” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 5 (1985): 67–72.

———. “Notes on the history of the shamanic in Tibet and Inner Asia.” *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 39–59.

Gillet, Valérie. *La création d’une iconographie Śivaïte narrative: Incarnations du dieu dans les temples pallava construits*. Pondicherry: École Française d’Extrême Orient, 2010.

Goepper, Roger. *Alchi: Ladakh’s Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary*. London: Serindia Publications, 1996.

———. “Dressing the temple: Textile representations in the frescoes at Alchi.” In *Asian Art, The Second Hali Annual*, edited by Patricia L. Baker and Jill Tilden, 100–117. London: Worldwide Hali Publications, 1995.

———. “More evidence for dating the Sumtsek in Alchi and its relations with Kashmir.” In *Dating Tibetan Art: Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium, Cologne*, edited by Ingrid Kriede-Damani, 15–24. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003.

Goldstein, Melvyn C. “Tibetan Buddhism and mass monasticism.” In *Des moines et des moniales dans le monde. La vie monastique dans le miroir de la parenté.*, edited by Adeline Herrou and Gisele Krauskopff, 1–16. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires de Toulouse le Mirail, 2010.

Gombo, Ugen. “Belief in karma and its social ramifications in saṃsāra.” In *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, edited by Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew T. Kapstein, 233–44. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985.

Gombrich, Richard. “The consecration of a Buddhist image.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1966): 23–36.

Gorakshar, Sadashiv, and Kalpana Desai. “An illustrated manuscript of Ashtasāharsrikā Prajñāpāramitā in the Asiatic Society of Bombay.” In *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*, edited by G Gnoli and L Lanciotti, 561–68. Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1987.

Gordon, Antoinette K. *The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1939.

’Gos lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal. *The Blue Annals (Deb ther ngon po)*. Translated by George Roerich. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1949.

Gouin, Margaret. *Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist Funerary Practices*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

Graeber, David. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004.

Grags pa rgyal mtshan. *Arga’i cho ga dang rab tu gnas pa don gsal ba (Clarifying the Meaning of the Arga and Consecration Rituals)*. Translated by Yael Bentor. Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2015.

———. “gSang sngags nang gi lhung bzed brtag pa.” In *Grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi bKa’ ’bum* vol. 4, edited by bSod nams rgya mtsho, 100-104. Tokyo: Thō-yō sBuṅ-kho, 1968.

———. “He ru ka’i chas drug.” In *Grags pa rgyal mtshan gyi bKa’ ’bum* vol. 3, edited by bSod nams rgya mtsho, 266-278. Tokyo: Thō-yō sBuṅ-kho, 1968

Granoff, Phyllis. “Maheśvara/Mahākāla: A unique Buddhist image from Kaśmir.” *Artibus Asiae* 41, no. 1 (1979): 64–82.

———. “Other people’s rituals: Ritual eclecticism in early medieval Indian religions.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28 (2000): 399–424.

Gray, David B. “Disclosing the empty secret: Textuality and embodiment in the Cakrasamvara Tantra.” *Numen* 52, no. 4 (2005): 417–44.

———. “Eating the heart of the brahmin: Representations of alterity and the formation of identity in tantric Buddhist discourse.” *History of Religions* 45, no. 1 (2005): 45–69.

———. “Mandala of the self: Embodiment, practice, and identity construction in the Cakrasamvara tradition.” *Journal of Religious History* 30, no. 3 (2006): 294–310.

———. “On the very idea of a tantric canon: Myth, politics, and the formation of the bKa’ ’gyur.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 5 (2009): 1–37.

———. “Skull imagery and skull magic in the Yoginī Tantras.” *Pacific World*, 3rd, 3, no. 8 (2006): 21–39.

———. *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: The Discourse of Śrī Heruka (Śrīherukābhidhāna)*. New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University in New York, 2007.

Greene, Eric M. “Death in a cave: Meditation, deathbed ritual, and skeletal imagery at Tape Shotor.” *Artibus Asiae* 73, no. 2 (2013): 265–94.

Grenet, Frantz. *Les pratiques funéraires de l’Asie centrale sédentaire: De la conquête grecque à l’islamisation*. Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1984.

gShong chen ri khrod pa. “Ma gcig gi rnam thar mdzad par bco lnga ma” in *Thang stong rgyal po gsung ‘bum* vol 1., 23-43. W23919, Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed 25 March 2020.

“Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums.” Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2005. http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/publications/3720.aspx. (Accessed 26 December 2016.)

Gyatso, Janet. “Discipline and resistance on the Tibetan Plateau.” Cultural Anthropology, April 8, 2012. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/96-discipline-and-resistance-on-the-tibetan-plateau. (Accessed 13 January 2017.)

———. “Healing burns with fire: The facilitations of experience in Tibetan Buddhism.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1999): 113–47.

———. “Image as presence.” In *From the Sacred Realm: Treasures of Tibetan Art from the Newark Museum*, edited by Valrae Reynolds, 171–76. Munich: Prestel, 1999.

———. “One plus one makes three: Buddhist gender, monasticism, and the law of the non-excluded middle.” *History of Religions* 43, no. 2 (2003): 89–115.

———. “Signs, memory and history: A tantric Buddhist theory of scriptural transmission.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 9, no. 2 (1986): 7–36.

———. “The authority of empiricism and the empiricism of authority: Medicine and Buddhism in Tibet on the eve of modernity.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 83–96.

———. “The development of the gCod tradition.” In *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, edited by Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew T. Kapstein, 320–41. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985.

———. “The logic of legitimation in the Tibetan treasure tradition.” *History of Religions* 33, no. 2 (1993): 97–134.

———. “The teachings of Thang stong rgyal po.” In *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies Oxford 1979*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi, 111–19. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1980.

Gyatso, Janet, and Hanna Havnevik. “Introduction.” In *Women in Tibet*, edited by Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik, 1–25. London: Hurst and Company, 2005.

Halling, Christine L., and Ryan M. Seidemann. “They sell skulls online?! A review of internet sales of human skulls on eBay and the laws in place to restrict sales.” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 61, no. 5 (2016): 1–5.

Handler, Richard. “On dialogue and destructive analysis: Problems in narrating nationalism and ethnicity.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41, no. 2 (1985): 171–82.

Hanker, Martin. “Thod brtags: Tibetan craniological manuals.” MA thesis, Charles University, 2018.

Harding, Sarah. *Machik’s Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd*. Ithaca and Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2003.

Harris, Clare E. *Photography and Tibet*. London: Reaktion Books, 2016.

———. “The Buddha goes global: Some thoughts towards a transnational art history.” *Art History* 29, no. 4 (2006): 698–720.

———. *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Hatley, Shaman. “Goddesses in text and stone: Temples of the yoginīs in light of tantric and purāṇic literature.” In *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, edited by Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann, 195–255. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

———. “The Brahmayāmalatantra and Early Śaiva Cult of Yoginīs.” PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2007.

Heessels, Meike, Fleur Poots, and Eric Venbrux. “In touch with the deceased: Animate objects and human ashes.” *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 8, no. 4 (2012): 466–88.

Helffer, Mireille. “A typology of the Tibetan bell.” In *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, edited by Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew T. Kapstein, 37–41. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985.

———. *Mchod-rol: Les instruments de la musique tibétaine*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994.

Heller, Amy. “An early Tibetan ritual: rKyal ’bud.” In *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, edited by Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew T. Kapstein, 257–67. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985.

Henss, Michael. “Buddhist metal images of western Tibet, ca. 1000-1500 A.D.: Historical evidence, stylistic consideration and modern myths.” *The Tibet Journal* 27, no. 3/4 (2002): 25–84.

Hock, Nancy. “Buddhist ideology and the sculpture of Ratnagiri, seventh through thirteenth centuries.” PhD Dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 1987.

Hodge, Stephen. *The Maha-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra: With Buddhaguhya’s Commentary*. New York and London: Curzon, 2003.

Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, Amy. “Sacred economies of Kalimpong: The eastern Himalayas in the global production and circulation of Buddhist material culture.” In *Transcultural Encounters in the Himalayan Borderlands: Kalimpong as a “Contact Zone,”* edited by Markus Viehbeck, 223–41. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2017.

Hornborg, Anne-Christine. “Visiting the six worlds: Shamanistic journeys in Canadian Mi’kmaq cosmology.” *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 473 (2006): 312–36.

Hou, Haoran. “Notes on the translation and transmission of the Saṃputa and Cakrasaṃvara tantras in the Xixia period (1038-1227).” In *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, edited by Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar, 355–76. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Huber, Toni. “From death to new life: An 11-12th century cycle of existence from southernmost Tibet - Analysis of rNel dri ’dul ba, sTe’u and Sha lungs rites, with notes on manuscript provenance.” In *Tibetan Geneologies: Studies in Memorium of Guge Tsering Gyalpo (1961-2015)*, edited by Guntram Hazod and Weirong Shen, 251–350. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 2018.

———. “The sKor lam and the Long March: Notes on the transformation of Tibetan ritual territory in southern A mdo in the context of Chinese developments.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 2 (2006): 1–42.

Huntington, John C. “Appendix II: The iconography of Cakrasamvara and the deities of his mandala.” In *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*, 535–40. Dayton: Dayton Art Institute/University of Washington Press, 1990.

———. “The origin of the Buddha image: Early image traditions and the concept of buddhadarśanapunyā.” In *Studies in Buddhist Art of South Asia*, edited by A.K. Narain, 23–58. Delhi: Kanak, 1985.

———. “The phur-pa, Tibetan ritual daggers.” *Artibus Asiae, Supplementum* 33 (1975): III–IV, 1–76, I–LXIII.

Huntington, John C., and Dina Bangdel. *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003.

Huntington, John C., and Susan L. Huntington. *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*. Dayton: Dayton Art Institute/University of Washington Press, 1990.

Huntington, Susan L. “Buddhist art through a modern lens: A case of mistaken scholarly trajectory.” In *In the Shadow of the Golden Age: Art and Identity in Asia from Gandhara to the Modern Age*, edited by Julia A.B. Hegewald, 79–114. Berlin: EB Verlag, 2014.

Iphofen, Ron. “Research ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology.” European Commission, DG Research and Innovation. https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/ethics-guide-ethnog-anthrop_en.pdf. (Accessed 29 September 2017.)

Jackson, David P. “Lineage and structure in Tibetan Buddhist painting: Principles and practice of an ancient sacred choreography.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1 (2005): 1–40.

———*,* ed. *Painting Traditions of the Drigung Kagyu School*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014.

Jackson, David P., and Janice A. Jackson. *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*. London: Serindia Publications, 1984.

Jackson, Roger. “The Religions of Tibet by Giuseppi Tucci.” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 4, no. 1 (1981): 119–22.

James, Luke, and Tim Winter. “Expertise and the making of world heritage policy.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23, no. 1 (2017): 36–51.

Jing, Anning. “Financial and material aspects of Tibetan art under the Yuan Dynasty.” *Artibus Asiae* 64, no. 2 (2004): 213–41.

Jolly, Pieter. “On the definition of shamanism.” *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 1 (February 2005): 127–28.

Juneja, Monica. “Global art history and the burden of representation.” In *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, 274–97, 2011. http://archive.summeracademy.at/media/pdf/pdf789.pdf. (Accessed 31 January 2017.)

Kaminishi, Ikumi. “Dead beautiful: Visualizing the decaying corpse in nine stages as skillful means of Buddhism.” In *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, edited by Deborah S. Hutton and Rebecca M. Brown, 513–36. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011.

Kanda, Fusae. “Behind the sensationalism: Images of a decaying corpse in Japanese Buddhist art.” *The Art Bulletin* 87, no. 1 (2005): 24–49.

Kapstein, Matthew T. “An inexhaustible treasury of verse: The literary legacy of the mahāsiddhas.” In *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, edited by Rob Linrothe, 22–35. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006.

———. “Between Na rak and a hard place: Evil rebirth and the violation of vows in early rNying ma pa sources and their Dunhuang antecedents.” In *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond*, edited by Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam Van Schaik, 159–200. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

———. “The Shangs-pa bKa’-brgyud: An unknown tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.” In *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies Oxford 1979*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi, 138–44. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1980.

———. *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. *The Tibetans*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006.

———. “Weaving the world: The ritual art of the ‘paṭa’ in Pala Buddhism and its legacy in Tibet.” *History of Religions* 34, no. 3 (February 1995): 241–62.

Kapstein, Matthew T., and Sam Van Schaik, eds. *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond*, Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Karmay, Samten G. “Concepts of territorial organisation and their transformation into Buddhist sacred sites.” In *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, 31–52. Kathmandu: Mandala Publications, 2005.

———. “The ordinance of lHa bla-ma ye-shes-’od.” In *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies Oxford 1979*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi, 150–62. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1980.

———. “Tibetan indigenous myths and rituals with reference to the ancient Bon text the Nyenbum (gNyan ’bum).” In *Tibetan Ritual*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón, 53–68. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Kinnard, Jacob N. *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Kirby, Daniel P. “Anthropodermic book testing information.” The Anthropodermic Book Project, August 2017. https://anthropodermicbooks.org/about/the-science/. (Accessed 24 January 2019.)

Klein, Cecelia F., Eulogio Guzmán, Elisa C. Mandell, and Maya Stanfield-Mazzi. “The role of shamanism in Mesoamerican art.” *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 3 (June 2002): 383–419.

Kopytoff, Igor. “The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as a process.” In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 64–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Kossak, Steven M. “Pāla painting and the Tibetan variant of the Pāla style.” *The Tibet Journal* 27, no. 3/4 (2002): 3–22.

Kossak, Steven M., and Jane Casey Singer. *Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998.

Kragh, Ulrich Timmich. *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism: A Textual Study of the Yogas of Nāropa and Mahāmudrā Meditation in the Medieval Tradition of Dags Po*. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 2015.

Kramrisch, Stella. *The Presence of Śiva*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988.

Kriede-Damani, Ingrid, ed. *Dating Tibetan Art: Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium, Cologne*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003.

Kruse, Colton. “Kapala: The Tibetan skull bowl.” Ripley’s Believe it or Not, April 24, 2018. https://www.ripleys.com/weird-news/tibetan-skull-bowl-kapala/. (Accessed 16 March 2020.)

Kuijp, Leonard W. J. van der. “The Dalai Lamas and the origins of reincarnate lamas.” In *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, edited by Martin Brauen, 15–31. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2005.

———. “Tibetan historiography.” In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger Jackson, 39–57. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.

Kværne, Per. “Aspects of the origin of the Buddhist tradition in Tibet.” *Numen* 19, no. 1 (1972): 22–40.

———. “The Bon religion of Tibet: A historical enigma.” In *Facets of Tibetan Religious Tradition and Contacts with Neighbouring Cultural Areas*, edited by Alfredo Cadonna and Ester Bianchi, Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2002.

———. “Tibet: The rise and fall of a monastic tradition.” In *Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*, edited by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, 253–70. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Kwon, Do-Kyun. “Sarva Tathāgata Tattva Saṃgraha: Compendium of All the Tathāgatas, a study of its origin, structure and teachings.” PhD Dissertation, SOAS University of London, 2002.

Lamotte, Etienne. “Religious suicide in early Buddhism.” *Buddhist Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (1987): 105–18.

Laufer, Berthold. “Use of Human Skulls and Bones in Tibet.” Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 1923. https://archive.org/details/useofhumanskulls10lauf. (Accessed 19 November 2019.)

Lerche, Alexander. “The Vulture Restaurant.” *Al Jazeera*. December 23, 2017. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/vulture-restaurant-171221084051492.html. (Accessed 24 December 2017.)

Lha btsun nam mkha’ ’jigs med. “He ru ka’i chas kyi rnam bshad.” Translated by Westin Harris. unpublished, 2018.

Linda, Mary F. “Nārāyanapuram: A tenth century site in Kalinga.” *Artibus Asiae* 50, no. 3/4 (1990): 232–62.

Linrothe, Rob. “Conservation projects in Ladakh, Summer 2008.” *Orientations* 40, no. 8 (2009): 91–99.

———. “Group portrait: Mahāsiddhas in the Alchi Sumtsek.” In *Embodying Wisdom: Art, Text and Interpretation in the History of Esoteric Buddhism*, edited by Rob Linrothe and Henrik H. Sørensen, 185–208. SBS Monographs 6. Copenhagen: The Seminar for Buddhist Studies, 2001.

———, ed. *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006.

———. “Origins of the Kashmiri style in the western Himalayas: Sculpture of the 7th-11th centuries.” In *Transfer of Buddhism across Central Asian Networks (7th-13th Centuries)*, edited by Carmen Meinert, Leiden: Brill, 2016.

———. “‘Paradise and plumage’: Chinese connections in Tibetan Arhat painting.” *Orientations* 35, no. 3 (2004): 54–61.

———. *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art*. London: Serindia Publications, 1999.

———. “Strengthening the roots: An Indian yogi in early Drigung paintings of Ladakh and Zangskar.” *Orientations* 38, no. 4 (2007): 65–71.

———. “Subject, object and agent: Parsing the syntax of Tibetan mahasiddha art.” *Orientations* 37, no. 2 (2006): 82–90.

Linrothe, Rob, and Melissa Kerin. “Deconsecration and discovery: The art of Karsha’s Kadampa Chorten revealed.” *Orientations* 32, no. 10 (2001): 52–63.

Linrothe, Rob, and Jeff Watt. *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2004.

Lippard, Lucy, and John Chandler. “The dematerialization of art.” *Art International* 12, no. 2 (1968): 46–50.

Liu, Shufen. “Death and the degeneration of life exposure of the corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism.” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28, no. 1 (2000): 1–30.

Lo bue, Erberto. “Giuseppi Tucci’s remarks on the state of preservation and conservation of Tibetan monasteries in the 1930s and 1940s.” *Asianart.com*, October 19, 2015. http://asianart.com/articles/lobue/index.html. (Accessed 1 February 2017.)

———. “Newar sculptors and Tibetan patrons in the 20th century.” *The Tibet Journal* 27, no. 3/4 (2002): 121–70.

———. “The Gu ru lha khang at Phyi dbang: A mid-15th century temple in central Ladakh.” In *Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS, 2003. Volume 8: Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas*, edited by Amy Heller and Giacomella Orofino, 175–96. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

———. “Yama’s judgement in the Bar do thos grol chen mo: An Indic mystery play in Tibet.” *The Tibet Journal* 30, no. 2 (2005): 11–26.

Lopez, Jr., Donald S., ed. *Buddhist Hermeneutics*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1988.

———. “Chapter Five: The Art.” In *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 135–55. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Lorenzen, David N. *The Kāpalikas and Kālāmukhas*. New Delhi: Thomson Press, 1972.

Loseries-Leick, Andrea. *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra: An Ethno-Historical Study of Skulls, Bones and Relics*. Delhi: B.R. Publication Corporation, 2008.

Luczanits, Christian. “Art-historical aspects of dating Tibetan art.” In *Dating Tibetan Art: Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium, Cologne*, edited by Ingrid Kriede-Damani, 25–57. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003.

———. “‘Beneficial to see’ Early Drigung painting.” In *Painting Traditions of the Drigung Kagyu School*, edited by David P. Jackson, 214–59. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014.

———. “Early Buddhist wood carvings from Himachal Pradesh.” *Orientations* 6, no. 27 (1996): 67–75.

———. “Infinite variety: Form and appearance in Tibetan Buddhist art part I.” *Lotus Leaves* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 1–17.

———. “Infinite variety: Form and appearance in Tibetan Buddhist art part II.” *Lotus Leaves* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 1–13.

———. “Mirror of the Buddha: An early Tibetan portrait.” In *Elegant Gathering in a Scholar’s Garden: Studies in East Asian Art in Honor of Jeong-Hee Lee-Kalisch*, edited by Annegret Bergmann, Shao-Lan Hertel, Juliane Noth, Antje Papist-Matsuo, and Wibke Schrape, 56–62. Weimar: VDG, 2016.

———. “On the earliest mandalas in a Buddhist context.” In *Mahayana Buddhism: History and Culture*, edited by Darrol Bryant and Susan Bryant, 111–36. New Delhi: Tibet House, 2008.

———. “Palden Drepung Chörten.” In *Alchi, Ladakh’s Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary.* 2 vols. London: Serindia Publications, *forthcoming*.

———. “Ritual, instruction and experiment: Esoteric drawings from Dunhuang.” In *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross Culture Perspective*, edited by Anupa Pande and Mandira Sharma, 140–49. New Delhi: National Museum Institute-Aryan Books International, 2009.

———. “The early Buddhist heritage of Ladakh reconsidered.” In *Ladakhi Histories. Local and Regional Perspectives*, edited by John Bray, 65–96. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

———. “The eight great siddhas in early Tibetan painting.” In *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, edited by Rob Linrothe, 77–91. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006.

Luczanits, Christian, and Holger Neuwirth. “The development of the Alchi temple complex. An interdisciplinary approach.” In *Heritage Conservation and Research in India: 60 Years of Indo-Austrian Collaboration*, edited by Kathrin Schmidt, 79–84. Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2010.

MacDonald, Corina. “Scoring the work: Documenting practice and performance in variable media art.” *Leonardo* 42, no. 1 (2009): 59–63.

Makley, Charlene. “The political lives of dead bodies.” *Cultural Anthropology*, April 8, 2012. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/95-the-political-lives-of-dead-bodies. (Accessed 13 January 2017.)

Makransky, John. “Offering (mchod pa) in Tibetan ritual literature.” In *Tibetan Literature Studies in Genre*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger Jackson, 312–30. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.

Malville, Nancy J. “Mortuary practices and ritual use of human bone in Tibet.” In *Interacting with the Dead: Perspectives on Mortuary Archeology for the New Millennium*, edited by Gordon F.M. Rakita, Jane E. Buikstra, Lane A. Beck, and Sloan R. Williams, 190–204. Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 2005.

Martin, Dan. “Crazy wisdom in moderation: Padampa Sangye’s use of counterintuitive methods in dealing with negative mental states.” In *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, edited by Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar, 193–214. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

———. *Mandala Cosmogony: Human Body Good Thought and the Revelation of the Secret Mother Tantras of Bon*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994.

———. “On the cultural ecology of sky burial on the Himalayan Plateau.” *East and West* 46, no. 3/4 (1996): 353–70.

———. “On the origin and significance of the prayer wheel according to two nineteenth-century Tibetan literary sources.” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 7 (1987): 13–29.

———. “Padampa Sangye: A history of representation of a south Indian siddha in Tibet.” In *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, edited by Rob Linrothe, 108–23. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006.

———. “Pearls from bones: Relics, chortens, tertons and the signs of saintly death in Tibet.” *Numen* 41 (1994): 273–324.

———. “The woman illusion? Research into the lives of spiritually accomplished women leaders of the 11th and 12th centuries.” In *Women In Tibet*, edited by Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik, 49–82. London: Hurst and Company, 2005.

———. *Tibetan Histories: A Bibliography of Tibetan-Language Historical Works*. London: Serindia Publications, 1997.

———. *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

Martin du Gard, Irène. “Une peinture d’offrandes à dPal-ldan dmag-zor rgyal-ma.” *Arts Asiatiques* 40 (1985): 68–82.

Martin, Emma. “Charles Bell’s collection of ‘curios’: Acquisitions and encounters during a Himalayan journey.” In *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories: Essays in Honour of Professor Susan M. Pearce*, edited by Sandra Dudley, Amy Jane Barnes, Jennifer Binnie, Julia Petrov, and Jennifer Walklate, 167–83. London: Routledge, 2012.

Mauss, Marcel. “Techniques and technology.” In *Techniques, Technology and Civilisation,* edited by Nathan Schlanger, translated by J.R. Redding, 147–53. New York and Oxford: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books, 2006 [1948].

———. “The technology of the body.” In *Techniques, Technology and Civilisation*, edited by Nathan Schlanger, translated by Ben Brewster, 77–95. New York and Oxford: Durkheim Press/ Berghahn Books, 2006 [1935].

Mayer, Robert. “The Figure of Maheśvara/Rudra in the rÑyiṅ-ma-pa Tantric tradition.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 271–310.

McGowan, Dianne. “Consuming the devil’s idols: (Re)presenting Tibetan art in the United States.” PhD Dissertation, Australian National University, 2010.

McGranahan, Carole. “Narrative dispossession: Tibet and the gendered logics of historical possibility.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 4 (2010): 768–97.

McKay, Alex. *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre, 1904-1947*. Richmond: Curzon, 1997.

———. “Truth, perception and politics: The British construction of an image of Tibet.” In *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies*, edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, 67–89. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001.

Meinert, Carmen. “Between the profane and the sacred? On the context of the rite of ‘liberation’ (sgrol ba).” In *Buddhism and Violence*, edited by Michael Zimmermann, 99–130. Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006.

———, ed. *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th Centuries)*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Meister, Michael W. “Regional variations in mātṛkā conventions.” *Artibus Asiae* 46, no. 3/4 (1986): 233–62.

Micheaels, Axel, and Anand Mishra, eds. *Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practice in Asia (Section I)*. Wisebaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010.

Miller, Daniel. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1987.

———. “Materiality: An introduction.” In *Materiality*, edited by Daniel Miller, 1–50. London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

———. “Things ain’t what they used to be.” In *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, edited by Susan M. Pearce, 13–18. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Mitra, Debala. *Ratnagiri (1958-1961)*. 2 vols. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1983.

mKhas grub rje. *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*. Translated by F.D. Lessing and Alex Wayman. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968.

Mohapatra, Ramesh Prasad. *Archaeology in Orissa (Sites and Monuments)*. 2 vols. Delhi: B.R. Publication Corporation, 1986.

Molk, David. *Lion of Siddhas: The Life and Teachings of Padampa Sangye*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

Montell, Gösta. “Sven Hedin’s archaeological collections from Khotan, part II.” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 1938, 83–100.

Morant, G.M. “A first study of the Tibetan skull.” *Biometrika* 14, no. 3 (1923): 193–260.

Morton, Timothy. “Thinking the charnel ground (the Charnel Ground Thinking): Auto-commentary and death in esoteric Buddhism.” *Glossator* 7 (2013): 73–94.

Nam mkha’i rgyal mtshan/Gang bdag. “Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod kyi don gsal byed.” In g*Cod kyi Chos skor*, 10–410. New Delhi: Tibet House, 1974.

Namgyal, Takpo Tashi. *Mahāmudrā The Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*. Translated by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1986.

Nawang Tsering. *Alchi: The Living Heritage of Ladakh*. Leh: Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2009.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

———. *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan Text and Annotated Translation of the 'Chams Yig*. Edited by Christoph von Fürur-Haimendorf. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1976.

"Nepal: The great plunder." *Al Jazeera*, July 19, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0yKxj3KS3E&vl=en. (Accessed 22 November 2019.)

Neumann, Helmut F. "Cremation grounds in early Tibetan mandalas." *Orientations* 33, no. 10 (2002): 42–50.

Newman, John. "Vajrayāna deities in an illustrated Indian manuscript of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1990): 117–32.

"Nominal File: Mrs Dora Creagh," 1917-1916. MA/1/C3162, Victoria and Albert Museum Archive. Accessed 5 December 2018.

Norbu, Jamyang. "Behind the lost horizon: Demystifying Tibet." In *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies*, edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, 373–78. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001.

Ohnuma, Reiko. "The gift of the body and the gift of dharma." *History of Religions* 37, no. 4 (1998): 323–59.

Oliphant, Jamyang. "Extracting the essence: Bcud len in the Tibetan literary tradition." DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2015.

Olivieri, Luca Maria. "Guru Padmasambhava in context: Archaeological and historical evidence from Swat/Uddiyana (c. 8th Century CE)." *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 34 (2016): 20–42.

O'Neill, Mark. "Museums and mortality." *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 8, no. 1 (2012): 52–75.

Orofino, Giacomella. "The Great Wisdom Mother and the gCod tradition." In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 396–416. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Pal, Pratyapaditya. "Arhats and mahasiddhas in Himalayan art." *Arts of Asia* 20, no. 1 (1990): 66–78.

———. *Bronzes of Kashmir*. Graz: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975.

———. *Tibetan Paintings: A Study of Tibetan Thankas, Eleventh to Nineteenth Centuries*. London: Sotheby Publications, 1984.

Pallis, Marco. *Peaks and Lamas*. Washington DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1949.

Parry, Jonathan P. *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Pearce, Nick. "From relic to relic: A brief history of the Skull of Confucius." *Journal of the History of Collections* 26, no. 2 (2014): 207–22.

Pearce, Susan M., ed. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Perrierra, Todd Leroy. "'Die before you die': Death meditation as spiritual technology of the self in Islam and Buddhism." *The Muslim World* 100, no. 2–3 (2010): 247–67.

Plate, S. Brent, ed. *Key Terms in Material Religion*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Pommaret, Françoise. "On local and mountain deities in Bhutan." In *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*, edited by Anne-Marie Blondeau and Ernst Steinkellner, 39–56. Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996.

Puisto, Johanna. "The curious case of the Tibetan skull drum." *V&A Blog*, November 18, 2015. https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/caring-for-our-collections/the-curious-case-of-the-tibetan-skull-drum. (Accessed 20 November 2019.)

Rabgey, Losang Choden. "En-gendering Tibet: Nation, narration and the woman's body in diaspora." SOAS University of London, 2006. SOAS University of London.

Ramble, Charles. "Status and death: Mortuary rites and attitudes to the body in a Tibetan village." *Kailash* 9 (1982): 333.

Rāṇā, Ācārya Śrīdhar. "Practice of Buddhist tantra in Nepal." In *Historical Context of Newār Buddhism: The Vajrayāna Tradition of Nepāl*, edited by Shanker Thapa, 89–111. Lalitpur: Nagarjuna Publication, 2005.

Rang byung rdo rje. "bKa' tshoms chen mo'i sa bcad/gCod kyi tikka bcas," in *Rang byung rdo rje gsung 'bum,* vol. 11. n.d. [14th century] W30541. Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed June 18, 2019.

———. *"*Zab mo bdud kyi gcod yul gyi khrid yig," in *Rang byung rdo rje gsung 'bum,* vol. 11. n.d. [14th century] W30541. Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed 18 June 2019.

Ratsch, Christian, Claudia Muller-Ebeling, and Surendra Bahadur Shahi. *Shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas*. Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2000.

Ray, Himanshu Prabha. *Buddhism and Gandhara: An Archaeology of Museum Collections*. London: Routledge, 2017.

"Redundant loans dress, carved human bone and a sword, scabbard and sword belt from Captain E W Fletcher to be written on - Untraceable owner." n.d., 2001/74, Victoria & Albert Museum Archive. Accessed 5 December 2018.

Reedy, Chandra. *Himalayan Bronzes*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997.

———. "Religious and ethical issues in the study and conservation of Tibetan sculpture." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 31, no. 1 (1992): 41–50.

Reichle, Natasha. "Imagery, ritual and ideology: Examining the Mahāvihāra at Ratnagiri." In *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, edited by Andrea Acri, 211–35. Singapore: ISEAS- Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017.

Rhie, Marilyn M. “Mahakala: Some tangkas and sculptures from the Rubin Museum of Art.” In *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond*, edited by Rob Linrothe, 44–98. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004.

Rockhill, W.W. “On the use of skulls in Lamaist ceremonies.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 14 (1890): xxiv–xxxi.

Rosenbloom, Megan. “A book by its cover: Identifying and scientifically testing the world’s books bound in human skin.” *Watermark: Newsletter of the Archivists and Librarians in the History of the Health Sciences* 39, no. 3 (2016): 20–22.

Rossi, Donatella. “An introduction to the ‘mKha’ 'gro gsang gcod’ teachings of Bon.” *East and West* 58, no. 1/4 (2008): 213–33.

Samuel, Geoffrey. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

———. “Early Buddhism in Tibet: Some anthropological perspectives.” In *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, edited by Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew T. Kapstein, 383–97. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985.

———. *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

———. “The siddha as a cultural category.” In *Holy Madness: Portraits of Tantric Siddhas*, edited by Rob Linrothe, 37–47. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006.

Sanderson, Alexis. “History through textual criticism in the study of Śaivism, the Pañcarātra and the Buddhist Yoginītantras.” In *Les sources et le temps: A colloquium, Pondicherry, 11-13 January*, edited by François Grimal, 1–47. Pondicherry: École française d’Extrême Orient, 2001.

———. “Maṇḍala and Āgamic identity in the Trika of Kashmir.” In *Mantras et diagrammes rituels dans l’hindouisme: Table ronde, Paris 21-22 Juin 1984*, 169–214. Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1986.

———. “Purity and power among the Brahmans of Kashmir.” In *The Category of the Person*, edited by Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, 190–216. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. “Śaivism and the tantric traditions.” In *The World’s Religions: The Religions of Asia*, edited by Friedhelm Hardy, 128–72. London: Routledge, 1988.

———. “The Śaiva age - The rise of dominance of Śaivism during the early medieval period.” In *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, edited by Shingo Einoo, 41–351. Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009.

———. “Vajrayāna: Origin and function.” In *Buddhism into the Year 2000: International Conference Proceedings*, 87–102. Bangkok and Los Angeles: Dhammakāya Foundation, 1994.

“Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor mkha’ ’gro sgyu ma bde mchog gi rgyud phyi ma.” In s*De dge bKa’ ’gyur*, vol. 77 (ka), 304–87, n.d. W4CZ5369. Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed 11 July 2019.

*"*Sangs rgyas ston pa'i rnam thar." In *bKa' rgyud pa'i bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar khag cig dang khrid yig sogs,* 173-206, n.d. W1KG1286, Buddhist Digital Resource Center. accessed 10 June 2019.

Saraogi, Olga Serbaeva. "When to kill means to liberate: Structure and meaning of two types of ritual actions in vidyāpīṭha texts." In *Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia (Section I)*, edited by Axel Michaels and Anand Mishra, 65–84. Wisebaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010.

Schlieter, Jens. "Compassionate killing or conflict resolution? The murder of King Langdarma according to Tibetan Buddhist sources." In *Buddhism and Violence*, edited by Michael Zimmermann, 131–57. Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006.

Schopen, Gregory. "On avoiding ghosts and social censure: monastic funerals in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya." In *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, 205–37. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.

———. "Stūpa and tīrtha: Tibetan mortuary practices and an unrecognized form of burial ad sanctos at Buddhist sites in India." *The Buddhist Forum* 3 (1994): 273–93.

———. "The suppression of nuns and the ritual murder of their special dead in two Buddhist monastic texts." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24, no. 6 (1996): 563–92.

Schrempf, Mona. "Tibetan ritual dances and the transformation of space." *The Tibet Journal* 19, no. 2 (1994): 95–120.

Schwieger, Peter. "History as myth: On the appropriation of the past in Tibetan culture an essay in cultural studies." In *The Tibetan History Reader*, edited by Gray Tuttle and Kurtis R. Schaeffer, 64–85. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Seidemann, Ryan M. "Bones of contention: A comparative examination of law governing human remains from archaeological contexts in formerly colonial countries." *Louisiana Law Review* 64, no. 3 (2004): 546–88.

Shah, Manthan P., Derek G. Shendell, Pamela Strickland, John D. Bogden, Francis Kemp, and Willliam Halperin. "Lead content of sindoor, a Hindu religious powder and cosmetic: New Jersey and India 2014-2015." *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 10 (2017): 1630–1632.

Sheehy, Michael R. "Severing the source of fear: Contemplative dynamics of the Tibetan Buddhist gCod tradition." *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, no. 1 (2005): 37–52.

Sihlé, Nicholas. "Written texts at the juncture of the local and the global: Some anthropological considerations on a local corpus of tantric ritual manuals (Lower Mustang, Nepal)." In *Tibetan Ritual*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón, 35–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Simkin, Matthew. "The conservation of a thöd rnga (cranium drum)." *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 10 (1998): 125–30.

Simmer-Brown, Judith. *Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001.

Singer, Jane Casey. "A Tibetan painting of Chemchok Heruka's mandala in the McCormick Collection, revisited." In *Dating Tibetan Art: Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of*

Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium, Cologne, edited by Ingrid Kriede-Damani, 113–32. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003.

Singer, Jane Casey, and Philip Denwood, eds. *Tibetan Art: Towards a Definition of Style*. London: Lawrence King, 1997.

Singh, Bhagawan. "149. Disposal of the dead by mutilation in Spiti (W. Tibet)." *Man* 33 (1933): 141–43.

Siudmak, John. *The Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Ancient Kashmir and Its Influences*. Handbook of Oriental Studies. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013.

Skorupski, Tadeusz. *The Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.

———. "Tibetan homa rites according to the gTer ma tradition." *The Tibet Journal* 20, no. 4 (1995): 2–46.

"Sky Burial/Enterrement traditionnel Tibétain/Traditional Tibetan burial/Larung Gar". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUp4jUMIy68. Accessed 24 January 2019.

Smith, Walter. "Images of divine kings from the Mukteśvara temple, Bhubaneswar." *Artibus Asiae* 51, no. 1/2 (1991): 90–106.

Snellgrove, David L. "Buddha Families and Mandalas." In *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors*, 189–213. London: Serindia Publications, 1987.

———. *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*. 2 vols. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

———. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002.

———. "Rulers of Western Tibet." In *The Tibetan History Reader*, edited by Kurtis R. Schaeffer and Gray Tuttle, 166–82. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Snellgrove, David L., and Tadeusz Skorupski. *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1980.

Soon, Simon. "Rethinking curatorial colonialism." *Obieg* 2 (2016). http://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/azja/rethinking-curatorial-colonialism. (Accessed 10 April 2017.)

Sopa, Geshe. "The Tibetan 'wheel of life': Iconography and doxography." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, no. 1 (1984): 125–46.

Sperling, Eliot. "'Orientalism' and aspects of violence in the Tibetan tradition." In *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, 317–29. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001.

Stablein, William. "The Mahākālatantra: A theory of ritual blessings and tantric medicine." PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1976.

Stein, Rolf A. *Tibetan Civilization*. Translated by J.E. Stapleton Driver. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972.

Stengs, Irene. “Sacred Waste.” *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects and Belief* 10, no. 2 (2014): 235–38.

Stoddard, Heather. “Dynamic structures in Buddhist maṇḍalas: Apradakṣina and mystic heat in the Mother tantra section of the Anuttarayoga tantras.” *Artibus Asiae* 58, no. 3/4 (1999): 169–213.

———. “Early Tibetan paintings: Sources and styles (eleventh-fourteenth centuries AD).” *Archives of Asian Art* 49 (1996): 26–50.

———. “Eat it up or throw it to the dogs? dGe ’dun chos ’phel (1903-1951), Ma gcig lab sgron (1055-1153), and Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (d.1117): A ramble through the burial grounds of ordinary and ‘holy’ beings in Tibet.” In *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and Their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas*, edited by Sarah Jacoby and Antonio Terrone, 9–36. Leiden Boston: Brill, 2009.

Tāranātha. *History of Buddhism in India,* edited by Debiprasad Chattopadkhyaya. Translated by Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadkhyaya. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990.

Thekchok Dorje, The Fourteenth Karmapa, and Jamgön Kongtrül Lodö Taye. *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary*. Translated by V.V. Lama Lodö Rinpoche. Ithaca and Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2007.

Thompson, Ashley. “In the absence of the Buddha: ‘Aniconism’ and the contentions of Buddhist art history.” In *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, edited by Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton, 298–420. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011.

Thompson, Lawrence. “Tanned human skin.” *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 34, no. 2 (1946): 93–102.

Thurman, Robert A.F. “Buddhist Hermeneutics.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 (March 1978): 19–39.

Tilley, Christopher. “Interpreting material culture.” In *The Meaning of Things*, edited by Susan M. Pearce, 185–94. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

———. “Objectification.” In *Handbook of Material Culture*, edited by Christopher Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer, 60–73. London: SAGE Publications, 2006.

Törzsök, Judit. “Kapalikas.” In *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, 355–61. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Tshomo, Karma Lekshe. *Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethics and Death*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Tsuda, Shinichi. “A critical tantrism.” *The Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 36 (1978): 167–231.

———. “The Saṃvarodaya tantra: Selected chapters.” PhD Dissertation, Australian National University, 1970.

Tucci, Giuseppe. *The Religions of Tibet*. Translated by Geoffrey Samuel. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980.

———. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*. 3 vols. Rome: La Libraria dello Stato, 1949.

Urban, Hugh B. “Elitism and esotericism: Strategies of secrecy and power in south Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry.” *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 1–38.

———. “The cult of ecstasy: Tantrism, the new age, and the spiritual logic of late capitalism.” *History of Religions* 39, no. 3 (2000): 268–304.

———. “The remnants of desire: Sacrificial violence and sexual transgression in the cult of the Kāpālikas and in the writings of Georges Bataille.” *Religion* 25 (1995): 67–90.

Van Schaik, Sam. “Magic, healing, and ethics in Tibetan Buddhism.” Aris Lecture in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at Wolfson College, Oxford, 6 December 2018. https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/magic-healing-and-ethics-tibetan-buddhism. Accessed December 6, 2019.

———. “The limits of transgression: The samaya vows of mahāyoga.” In *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang*, edited by Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam Van Schaik, 61–84. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

———. “Tibetan Buddhism in Central Asia: Geopolitics and group dynamics.” In *Transfer of Buddhism across Central Asian Networks (8th-13th Centuries)*, edited by Carmen Meinert, 57–85. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Waddell, Laurence A. *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism*. Second edition. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd, 1958 [1895].

Walter, Michael. “The tantra ‘A vessel of bdud tsi,’ a Bon text.” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 6 (1986): 25–72.

Wedemeyer, Christian K. *Āryadeva’s Lamp that Integrates the Practices (Caryāmelāpaka-pradīpa*). New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

———. “Beef, dog and other mythologies: Connotative semiotics in mahāyoga tantra ritual and scripture.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 2 (2007): 383–417.

———. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

———. “Tropes, typologies, and turnarounds: A brief genealogy of the historiography of tantric Buddhism.” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 223–59.

Weinberger, Steven. “The significance of yoga tantra and the Compendium of Principles (Tattvasaṃgraha Tantra) within tantric Buddhism in India and Tibet.” PhD Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2003.

Wessels-Mevissen, Corinna. *The Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2001.

Wharton, Glenn. “The challenges of conserving contemporary art.” In *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*, edited by Bruce Altshuler, 164–78. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

White, David Gordon. “Ashes to nectar: Death and regeneration among the Rasa Siddhas and Nāth Siddhas.” In *Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions*, edited by Liz Wilson, 13–28. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

———. *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in Its South Asian Contexts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

———. "Mountains of wisdom: On the interface between siddha and vidyādhara cults and the siddha orders in medieval India." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 1, no. 1 (1997): 73–95.

———. *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Williams, Joanna. "The iconography of Khotanese painting." *East and West* 23, no. 1/2 (1973): 109–54.

Williams, Paul. "Some Mahāyāna Buddhist perspectives on the body." In *Religion and the Body*, edited by Sarah Coakley, 205–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Willis, Janice D. "On the nature of rnams-thar: Early dGe-lugs-pa siddha biographies." In *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, 304–19. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985.

Wilson, Liz. *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

———. "Human torches of enlightenment: Autocremation and spontaneous combustion as marks of sanctity in south Asian Buddhism." In *Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions,* edited by Liz Wilson. State University of New York Press, 2003.

Winter, Tim. "Beyond eurocentrism? Heritage conservation and the politics of difference." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20, no. 2 (2014): 123–37.

Wylie, Turrell. "Mortuary customs at Sa-skya, Tibet." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25 (1964): 229–42.

Xuanzang. *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*. Translated by Li Rongxi. BDK English Tripiṭaka 79. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996.

"Yang dag par sbyor ba'i rgyud chen po." In s*De dge bKa' 'gyur*, vol. 79 (ga), 148–318, n.d. W22084. Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Accessed 28 June 2019.

Yeh, Emily T., and Mark Henderson. "Interpreting urbanization in Tibet: Administrative scales and discourses of modernization." *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 4 (2008): 1–44.

Yonan, Michael. "Toward a fusion of art history and material culture studies." *West 86th : A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 1–15.