

# Human bones as ritual objects in Tibetan Buddhism

*by* Nisa Ferrari

---

**Submission date:** 01-Jul-2019 05:42PM (UTC+0200)

**Submission ID:** 1148441104

**File name:** N.\_Ferrari\_2089904\_MA\_Thesis\_19.pdf (44.2M)

**Word count:** 17017

**Character count:** 87853

# Human Bones as Ritual Objects in Tibetan Buddhism.



**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
Geesteswetenschappen

Nisa Ferrari

**The pre-Buddhist heritage enclosed in Tibetan Buddhism:**

A study on the possible Tibetan influences of the human bone-made ritual objects; including rituals, a focus on the symbology of the skull-cup and on the thighbone trumpet in the art of Tibetan Buddhism with a final comparison with the pre-buddhist religion.

Student: Nisa Ferrari s2089904

MA Asian Studies: History, art and cultures of Asia.

Supervisor: Professor P.C. Verhagen

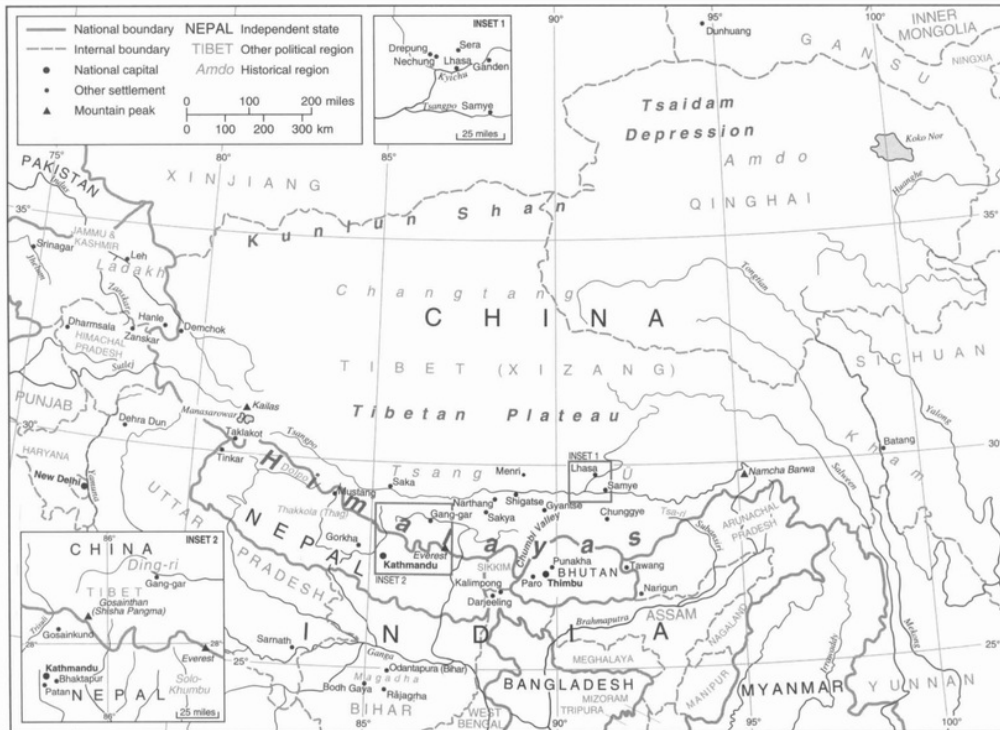
University of Leiden, Faculty of Humanities

Leiden; 1-07-2019

## Index

Introduction	... 4
1. The religions of Tibet	... 6
2. Human bones as ritual objects	... 18
3. Skull-cup and the thighbone trumpet as deities' attributes	... 30
Conclusion	... 46
Bibliography	... 48
List of images	... 51

# Introduction



Img 1. Map of Ancient Tibet.

The Tibetan plateau is at 4900 meters, surrounded on three sides by the tallest mountain ranges of the world: Himalaya (south), Karakoram (west) and Kunlun Range (north); furthermore the north barrier is completed with the desert. From Tibet depart few of the most important rivers of Asia such as the Mekong and Salween (south-east) and others toward India and Pakistan.

(Harley: 1994, 608).

Nowadays, Tibet (Image 1) is known as a buddhist country, with its smiling monks wrapped in dark-red robes, dwelling in isolated monasteries, chanting mantras and praying in open air, even under a snow-storm. However, the predominance of Tibetan buddhist is non-monastic. The lay population, under the guidance of *lamas* contributes to maintain the lore of spirits and indigenous gods alive; whose were shaped from the Tibetan harsh climate conditions and environments (Image 2).

Before the initial Tibetan exposure to Buddhism in the seventh century, Tibetans were devoted to the pre-buddhist religion, (called by some scholars Ancient<sup>1</sup> or Primitive<sup>2</sup> Bön). Therefore, it is important to point out that what is considered Ancient Bön is different from New Bön, which is practiced in modern times.

<sup>1</sup> "Bön Antico" Namkhai: 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds: 1989 ; Loseries-Leick 2008.



Img. 2. Tibetan panorama.

Panorama of the Valley of the Garuda from the Silver Valley.

(Namkhai: 2010, 53)

Moreover, the follower of Bön, believed that the Ancient Bön<sup>3</sup>, which had a shamanic-like<sup>4</sup> structure and it is described as being similar to the pan-Asiatic shamanism, is the starting point of the development of Bön. However, there are still some uncertainties concerning the origins of the Bön religion, especially regarding its formations which can be grouped in three main hypotheses<sup>5</sup>:

- Bön is the ancient religion of Tibet as is reported in the historical tradition of Tibet; although it was not organised and was a mix of beliefs.
- The term *bon* was associated with an organised religion after the royal period while before that period only a category of priest, called bonpo, existed.
- The Bön religion became an organised religion only after the eleventh century.

The issue is delicate and it would take a long time to discuss it properly, however, in this thesis I have decided to follow the first hypothesis, because it does not deny the Bön evolution into a structured religion and it is aware of the conditions of the past.

The relevant point to this thesis is that since Buddhism reached the Land of Snow in the seventh century, all the concepts of the pre-buddhist religion (mythology, rituals, beliefs, deities and spirits) were shifted into Buddhism<sup>6</sup>. Throughout ancient Bön, mountain peaks and lakes were divinised into deities and supernatural beings: even after the establishment of Buddhism, these beings never left the Tibetan lore and they are still venerated nowadays.

<sup>3</sup> There is a debate of whether Bön derives from the 'folk religion' or is a separate but alike religion which has the same approach to beliefs. For example, Tucci (Tucci: 1976) consider the 'folk religion' as a faith that goes beyond religion and is still present in every Tibetan.

<sup>4</sup> There is a debate among scholars of whether or not define the pre-buddhist religion, together with some buddhicised practices performed nowadays under the term shamanism. Per Kvaerne (Kvaerne 2009) do not recognise any Bön phase as shamanic. On the other hand, Samuels (Samuels 1993) incorporates them under a broader meaning of shamanism which covers also the possession of the medium (*lha pa*). Furthermore, Tibetan "shamanism", could be included under the definition given by Descola of animism (Descola: 2013), where nature is humanised. For example, tibetans believes that spirits dwell in trees and rocks and by destroying their habitat the spirits could revolt against humans causing illness. In addition, it could also be arranged under Descola definition of analogy, since the deities have a small hierarchic organisation. On the other hand, to what regards the spirit possession, To clarify my position, whenever I use the term shaman in this thesis, I do intend to do it following the broader term, as described by Samuels.

<sup>5</sup> Karmay: 1998,157.

<sup>6</sup> Tucci 1976, 214.

Before the first diffusion of Buddhism the Bön religion was well established in Tibet and it included both the royalty with its court and the commoners<sup>7</sup>. This branch of esoteric Buddhism, also known as Tantrism, born in India during the Medieval period. Differently from the Old Buddhism, Tantrism offers the “short path” promising the attainment of enlightenment in one single life. Needless to say, it is impossible to deny the connection between Tantric Buddhism and Tantric Hinduism. Also, Tibetan Buddhism, in its Vajrayāna form inherited many aspects of Tantric Hinduism due to the shared environment in India. In fact, the deities of the highest Anuttarayoga tantra (see chapter 3), hold the Śaiva attributes among which there are the skull-cup and other bone-made ritual objects. Furthermore, the use of human bones as meditation’s support in tantric Buddhism have a tight connection with the Kāpālika<sup>8</sup>, a Śaiva religious group. To some extent, Śaivism influenced also the pre-buddhist religion of Tibet, shaping its rituals, which are included by the buddhist historian Dingungpa<sup>9</sup> as part of ‘Deviated Bön’<sup>10</sup>.

Bön blossomed in the kingdom of Zhang Zhung (Image 3), which had the sacred mountain Ti Se at its centre. This mountain known as Meru or Kailash, was sacred also for buddhist and hindu.

In the tenth century, with the second diffusion of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism reached the commoners and its monastic community was divided into different schools which, to some degree, adopted Tantric rituals or practices.

This preamble, very relevant in order to introduce my research questions since they aim to find the connection between Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan pre-buddhist religion.

Without neglecting the tantric Indian origin of the use of human bones as ritual objects, is it possible to demonstrate to what extent this custom was influenced by Ancient Bön? Which common traits does the Tibetan buddhist tantric tradition of the skull-cup and the thighbone trumpet as deities attributes share with the representation of bonpo deities?

Tantric Buddhism is considered a branch of Mahayāna but unlike the latter, it emphasises the mental transformation through symbols, rituals, mantras and visualisation. Similarly, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet shared a close ritual approach such as the substantial use of mantras, magic rituals, and the capacity to communicate with spirits. The ability to communicate with the non-human spheres is probably one of the reasons why tantric Buddhism rooted in Tibet. The employment of human bones during religious practices seems to be a common characteristic of the shamanic cultures. In fact, since many sources on the ancient religion of Tibet are not yet available, a lot of comparisons are made with the Siberian and central Asian shamanic communities.

In order to answer my queries, I have divided the thesis into three main chapters:

- The first chapter it defines the doctrinal and religious aspects of the two religions.
- The second chapter describes the rites and the use of human bones as ritual objects of Tibetan Buddhism finding the connection with the pre-buddhist religion when required.

---

<sup>7</sup> Due to the strong power of bonpo minister, the previous king tried to discard the religion with an unsuccessful result; which was probably because he could not count on the support of another religious substitute.

<sup>8</sup> The *kāpālika*, were adepts of the god Śiva in his form of ‘Great Destroyer’.

<sup>9</sup> Stein: 1986, 203.

<sup>10</sup> Deviated Bön is the intermediate phase of the evolution of Bön. It is preceded by ‘Revealed Bön’ (dated around the fifth century b.c.) and it is followed by ‘Transformed Bön’ (eleventh century) which encompass many aspects of Buddhism of the seventh century. The first two phases belongs to the primitive Bön.

- The third chapter, finally, compares the implication of human bones in the buddhist and bonpo visual art and it defines the symbolic meaning of the human bones.

I have based my research on the Western and Tibetan scholars' contents of the last century, for this reason, the limit of my research might be the lack of Tibetan sources, due to my linguistic barriers. Furthermore I believe it is important to underline that I was able to work only with the texts available in the catalogue of the Leiden University Library. Lastly, the Bön religion is still understudied and many theories still need to be confirmed.



Img. 9. The Zhang Zhung kingdom.

The area in yellow indicates the expansion of the kingdom of Zhang Zhung before its annexation in the Tibetan Empire.

(after Harley: 1994, 608)



## 1. The religions of Tibet

The historical background, the doctrinal circumstances and the influences regarding the use of human bones as ritual objects

In Tibet and in the Tibetan refugees areas in India and Nepal coexist two religions, almost identical to each other: Buddhism and Bön. Both these religions fall under the general term Lamaism, since the Dalai Lama included Bön as the fifth tradition of Tibetan buddhism<sup>11</sup>. The two religions share the same doctrinal aspect<sup>12</sup> and the fundamental distinction is a mere fact of lineage<sup>13</sup>. On one hand the buddhist follows the teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni, originally from India; on the other hand, the bonpo follow the Buddha<sup>14</sup> Shenrab Miwoche (gshen rab mi bo che, 'the great supreme human shaman'<sup>15</sup>) (Image 4) native of the Kingdom of Zhang Zhung, an external kingdom located in the northwest of Tibet.



Img. 4. Tonpa Shenrab with episodes from his life; 1800-1899; pigment on cloth; 78,74x 50,8 cm; Amdo province, Tibet; Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.66.610.

At the centre of the image, Shenrab, who resemble the image of Buddha Śākyamuni. The main figure is encircled with a specific scene from his life. He is travelling on a chariot carried by a couple of white elephants accompanied by his family with the purpose to visit different populations. At each location he is greeted with offerings.

(<https://rubinmuseum.org/collection/artwork/tonpa-shenrab-with-episodes-from-his-life>)

<sup>11</sup> Reynolds: 1991, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Kvaerne: 1972, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds: 1991, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Buddha is intended as someone who is fully illuminate.

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds: 1989.

Tibetan buddhists (*chos-pa*) and bonpo classify themselves with the term *nang-pa* (insiders)<sup>16</sup> to distinguish themselves from the “outsiders” (*phyi pa*; term that includes all the Tibet's foreigners and the external religions such as Christianity and Islam)<sup>17</sup>. However, bonpos manifest a difference from buddhist, since they deny any traditional relation (regarding practices or lineages) with India<sup>18</sup>.

This chapter outlines the possible connections between Bön and Buddhism regarding the use of human bones as ritual objects. The first part is on the contemporary form of Bön known as ‘New Bön’ (*bon gсар ma*) with the purpose of evaluating any similarities with Buddhism in the use of human bones and going historically backwards to look for some evidence concerning a possible religious development. The second part of the chapter deals with Tibetan Buddhism and the Buddhist aspects and influences associated with the employment of human bones as ritual objects.

### 1.1 The Bön religion and its evolution

The Bön religion underwent through three different phases, namely: Ancient Bön, Everlasting Bön and New Bön, all of them contributed to shape Bön actual and recent outlook. Bön is considered the native religion of Tibet, although Bön considers itself an external religion coming from the kingdom of Zhang Zhung; which was totally independent from the Tibetan empire until the seventh or probably eighth century<sup>19</sup>. The Bön religion claims to be older than Buddhism, furthermore its teacher, Shenrab Miwoche whose life resemble the lives of Buddha Śākyamuni and Padmasambhava<sup>20</sup> is said to be born 3900 years ago<sup>21</sup>. The sources of the Primitive Bön up to the seventh century were all based on the oral transmission, and their transcription happened only after the arrival of buddhism. For this reasons it is hard to certify with historical precision any fact described in later texts wether buddhist or bonpo. The religious practices are narrated in the hagiographies regarding the life of Shenrab which are divided in three different texts, namely the *mdo ‘dus* (a *terma*<sup>22</sup> of the tenth century), the *Zermig* (also a *terma* and probably belonging to the eleventh century) and the *Zijid* (part of the oral transmission of the fourteen century)<sup>23</sup>.

The bonpo canon was written after the buddhist exposure, as a result it corresponds very closely to the Kanjur (*bka’ gyur*) and Tenjur (*bstan gyur*) of Tibetan Buddhism<sup>24</sup>; furthermore, all the ritual aspects and the beliefs of the previous era that were transmitted orally have been codified<sup>25</sup> and enclosed in the ‘Nine ways

---

<sup>16</sup> The term is commonly used by westerns as a synonymous of buddhist.

<sup>17</sup> Kvaerne: 1972, 23. Reynolds: 1991, 10.

<sup>18</sup> As Ermakov points out, any similarities Bön has with the Indian religion, must come from a shared background during the prehistorical period. Ermakov: 2008, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Blezer, Gurung, Rath: 2011, 101.

<sup>20</sup> His life is blended with Buddhist mythology: Shenrab left his royal privilege in the seek of enlightenment; once in Tibet, he subdued the local spirit with the vow to protect his teachings as guardians. Namkhai: 2004, 28; Karmay: 1998, 108-109.

<sup>21</sup> Namkhai: 2009, 91.

<sup>22</sup> *gterma*, the revealed texts.

<sup>23</sup> Karmay: 1998, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Martin 2003, introduction.

<sup>25</sup> Tucci: 1976, 262.

of Bön<sup>26</sup> of the Everlasting Bön'. The nine ways of Bön are divided in three categories: the way of cause (first four, which includes the rituals of ancient Bön), the way of result (the second four, which are close to the buddhist tantric system) and the system of *dzogchen* (*rdzog chen*)<sup>27</sup>.

#### 1.1.1 New Bön

New Bön is a form of "corrected" *bon*, shaped around the eleventh century, under the influences of the second diffusion of Buddhism, maintaining the connection with its past. New Bön is the result of a conscious integration of the Everlasting Bön with buddhism<sup>28</sup>, especially the Tibetan Nyingmapa tradition, which was established by Drenpa Namkha (dran pa nam mkha') and Vairocana in the seventh century<sup>29</sup>. Similarly to the Nyingma, New Bön include the practice of *terma*, and venerate the figure of the Mahāsiddha Padmasambhava as well as the bonpo masters<sup>30</sup>. To what concerns the use of human bones as ritual objects, their employment is similar to the rituals which characterised the Tibetan Buddhism. For example they could be engaged in the ritual dances<sup>31</sup> aiming to call the deities or in order to resemble the bonpo tantric deity invoked. However, it is the Chöd (*gcod*) (chapter 2) practice that could be seen as the connection among Tibetan buddhism and Bön. Chöd is the only religious tradition that originated in Tibet in the eleventh century, through the teaching lineage of Machig Labdron (1055-1149 ma gcig labs sgron) (see image 12). The purpose of Chöd is to cut one's own ego, by creating fear which is then transformed in the path of enlightenment<sup>32</sup>. Traditionally, for the execution of Chöd, a practitioner should wear animal skin and employ instruments such as the thighbone trumpet (*rkang gling*) made by human bones. Chöd could be considered the example of a buddhist reinterpretation of pre-buddhist ideas<sup>33</sup>, but it is impossible to certainly define it in this terms, since archeological evidences of the preceding period is not available yet. In fact, the deities native of Zhang Zhung such as Ge Khod and Me Ri, have been cleaned from any bone attribute. Furthermore, the practitioners initiated in their circle should avoid the consumption of human flesh and are forbidden to touch corpses and human bone-made objects<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, the deities belonging to the highest tantras (chapter 3) appear with the same attributes of bone-made objects as the highest buddhist tantric deities.

---

<sup>26</sup> Namkhai: 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Karmay: 1998, 112.

<sup>28</sup> For this reason buddhist define this final development as 'White Bon'

<sup>29</sup> Ermakov: 2008, 144.

<sup>30</sup> Reynolds: 1989, <http://www.vajranatha.com/articles/traditions/bonpo.html>

<sup>31</sup> It is still unknown if the ritual dances ensued from Ancient Bön. From the point of views of the oral tradition it is likely to be true, however, it is probably more correct to link the bonpo ritual dances with buddhism rather than with Ancient Bön. Nebesky-Wojkovitz: 1976, 9-11.

<sup>32</sup> Chaoul: 2009, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Chaoul: 2009, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, introduction.

### 1.1.2 Everlasting Bön

The origin of the term Bön is usually traced back to the teaching of Shenrab Miwoche. This origin is, however, only partially true as the term *bon* defines different aspects and various traditions, while Shenrab has only had the merit of uniting different traditions by starting a new charismatic religion called Everlasting Bön. This new religion, therefore, includes all those traditions that were defined by the term *bon*<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, Shenrab cleaned all the ceremonies from any bloody rituals of human and animal sacrifices introducing effigies and sacrificial cakes or *torma* (*gtorma*). The Everlasting Bön is the religion of Zhang Zhung, which was spread in Tibet not by Shenrab himself but by his relatives and other disciples<sup>36</sup>. The doctrines of Shenrab include: esoteric and exoteric teachings, rituals, and *dzogchen*.

Archaeological evidence dated to the kingdom of Songtsen Gampo, prove that kings and ministers were buried with horses and humans, sacrificed on the altar as part of the long and complex rite. The sacrifices were considered a payment to the malignant spirit that could otherwise kidnap the spirit of the deceased<sup>37</sup>, and as Stein<sup>38</sup> reports they were practices up to our days.

### 1.1.3 Ancient Bön

Ancient Bön corresponds to the pre-buddhist religion and it might be connected with the folk or nameless religion (*mi chos*) of Tibet. Scholars are not certain about the historical period, but probably the 'Bön of Causality' appeared before the kingdom of Nyatri Tsembo (*gnya' khri btsan po* 1136 B.C.)<sup>39</sup>.

The spirits of this ancient belief were organised in a tripartite world, although they have the capability to move anywhere without any bond with their original sphere:

- the higher sphere corresponded with the sky or the atmosphere (*lha yul*);
- the middle sphere (*mi yul*) corresponded with the human world;
- the lowest sphere was the underworld (*'og yul*), corresponding to the sub-terrestrial layer.

All the spirits were dreadful and if irritated by the human activities such as digging and cutting trees, they could harm humans by causing plagues and other catastrophes. For this reason, when Buddhism confirmed its presence in Tibet by "taming" the previous religion by establishing the first monastery at Samye (*bsam yas*), the terrifying spirits were defeated by the highest buddhist *dharma*. The "taming" consisted in the influence of buddhism together with the reinterpretation of the rituals along with the spirits and deities.

The beliefs of ancient Bön were constituted by astrology, divination, medicine, apotropaic rituals and narrations. During the first two developments of ancient Bön which included the 'Bön of Fruition' and 'Bön of Causality' are said to be completed with rites dealing with human and animal sacrifices, described by Buddhist with a negative interpretation<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, during the first phase, it is believed that cruel rituals

---

<sup>35</sup> Namkhai: 2009, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Karmay: 1998, 119.

<sup>37</sup> Kvaerne: 1985 6-10.

<sup>38</sup> Stein: 1986, 205.

<sup>39</sup> Namkhai: 2004, 31. Ermakov: 2008, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Buddhism follows the percepts of non-violence.

could contribute to please the spirits, while during the second phase the blood rituals were needed to harmonise the energies<sup>41</sup>. The use of blood is used in the 'Rites of 'To' included in the 'Bön that liberate from curse' as an offering, along with cereal meat and white offers. Humans are subjected to curses by the non-human classes of spirits and through offers and recitations of black mantras the spirits dismiss their maledictions<sup>42</sup>. Another *bon* which is said to contain cruel rites is the 'Bön of deer' which includes 'rites of liberation' to heal the king and against illness and misfortune<sup>43</sup>; although, the only attested practice was scalpulimancy which was employed as a method of divination through a sheep's shoulder-blade<sup>44</sup>. Andrea Loseries-Leick assumes that probably the use of a human shoulder-blade was a possibility<sup>45</sup>, but she does not state the circumstances of the divination. The employment of sacrifice belonged to the 'Deviated Bön' ('*khyar bon*'), and it included theories of the "extremists", right after the death of Trigum Tsem-po<sup>46</sup>. In particular the 'Deviated Bön' was influenced by the Śaiva cult which included practices such as the conquest of wild spirits, the capacity to handle red-hot metal, cut iron with a bird feather, oracular trance and scalpulimancy. Finally, the sacrifices of sheep and horses were held to please the deities. During this phase, Bön was added to the cult of deities and it was established as a philosophical system<sup>47</sup>.

The ancient form of Bön, prior its contact with Buddhism, was classified as a shamanic religion mostly for the capacity of the bonpo magician to communicate with the spirits while the other aspects such as the ability to fly in the sky using the tambourine, the employment of bone ornaments, costumes and masks, were very closed to the Siberian shamanism<sup>48</sup>. For this reason, there is no evidence, but only suppositions on the role of human bones are held in comparison to the Siberian and central Asian shamanic cultures.

#### 1.1.4 The origin of the term *bon*

The term *bon* had different meanings over the centuries. Nowadays *bon* is identified with the Everlasting Bön and its successor new Bön which indicates an organised and fully recognised religion<sup>49</sup>. Evidence can be found in Dunhuang texts<sup>50</sup> which stated that *bon* was associated with a religious system during the royal period when Buddhism was already instituted. In fact, in PT 972, Pt 1284 and PT 239/II, the disciple of the non-buddhist religion are encouraged to follow Buddhism. Furthermore, in these documents the term *mo bon* is used to define a category of priests as rival to the Buddhist community (*saṅgha*) and it included

---

<sup>41</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Namkhai: 1996, 215-224

<sup>43</sup> Namkhai: 1996, 301.

<sup>44</sup> Namkhai: 2009, 200.

<sup>45</sup> Loseries-Leick: *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Namkhai:1996: 87-90.

<sup>47</sup> Stein: 1986, 203.

<sup>48</sup> Gibson: 1997, 42.

<sup>49</sup> Karmay: 1998, 161.

<sup>50</sup> The manuscripts are determined to be from the tenth century, but it is very likely that the original texts describe an older period.

different types of practitioner such as 'diviner'<sup>51</sup>, 'magician'<sup>52</sup>, priest or shaman<sup>53</sup>. A *bonpo* was also someone who excelled in mantras recitation, intended as a magical invocation<sup>54</sup>. During the time of the Zhang Zhung kingdom, the faculty and practices of a Shen or a bonpo were transmitted through members of the same family, as a consequence the term began to designate the name of a clan or a specific lineage<sup>55</sup>. In the historiographic texts that describe the period of the Yarlung dynasty, the term *bonpo* is used as a synonym of *shen* (*gshen*). The *shen* was a category of priest that officiated sacrifices with the help of other subordinate categories<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, different titles for the 'sacrificer' existed according to the class of spirits the sacrifice was dedicated<sup>57</sup>. Furthermore, bonpo teachings started to be associated with the cult of the king in the sixth-seventh centuries<sup>58</sup>.

## 1.2 Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is divided into four main schools that formed during the two diffusions of Buddhism: in the sixth century and in the eleventh century. The Nyingmapa tradition ('Old school') is connected to the teachings of Padmasambhava and it is the first Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is followed by the Sarma (*gsar ma*, 'new schools') traditions formed after the second spread of Buddhism. The main difference among the old school and the Sarma tradition is that the first one is closer to the experience of the master to enlightenment and the second one concerns mostly on technical reliability<sup>59</sup>. The first diffusion brought tantric practices which dealt mainly with 'magic' and yogic practices which were perfectly fixed in the preceding bonpo environment. The second diffusion was set with the purpose of establishing the Old form of Buddhism, which was believed to be the correct form over tantrism. New monks were ordained following the Vinaya rules. However, the Tibetan community was still divided into two distinct categories: the monastic tradition and the laic tradition constituted by a "magical interpretation"<sup>60</sup>, in between of the ancient bonpo tradition and Indian Tantrism. Although the three main Sarma traditions such as the Gelukpa, Sakyapa and Kagyupa have a more strict organisation, to some extent the monks still practice Tantrism<sup>61</sup>. For example, the Gelugpa order, which has a monastic system characterised by the presence of celibate monks, does not reject completely some tantric actions as, for example, the sexual practice to reach Buddhahood. Furthermore, this tradition fits tantric practices into a scholastic system with rigid supervision; in fact, the students are supposed to spend twenty years practicing the sutra before entering the tantric

---

<sup>51</sup> Karmay: 1998, 158-160.

<sup>52</sup> Stein: 1986, 201.

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds: *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds: *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Reynolds: *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Tucci: 1976, 284.

<sup>57</sup> Ermakov: 2008, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Karmay: 1998, 116.

<sup>59</sup> Powers 1995, 319.

<sup>60</sup> Tucci: 1976, 39-40.

<sup>61</sup> Samuels: 1993, 272.

path<sup>62</sup>. On the other hand, the Nyingmapa are closed to what Samuels calls 'shamanic buddhism', arranged as a non-celibate monks. In between, the Sakyapa and Kagyupa have a system in between the two extremist, with the possibility to choose to be a celibate monk or a lay practitioner. Finally, even if they belong to the Sarma tradition, they might apply also old tantras and *termas*<sup>63</sup>.

### 1.2.1 The influences on human bone ritual objects employed in Tibetan Buddhism

#### 1.2.1.1. The Indian origin of Tantrism

Any type of Tantrism, whether it is buddhist, Jains or Hindu originated in India from tantric Hinduism, which was prevalently organised by lower or out cast, uncultured people, scholastically far away from the Sanskrit environment. To what regards tantric Hinduism, it is difficult to determine its chronological history, although the first signs of the movement are dated around the fifth sixth century C.E., it might be possible to include several hymns of the first millennium B.C.E. belonging to the R̥g Veda and Upaniṣād<sup>64</sup> which deal with magic and yogic powers. However, the Indian tantric movement is usually dated around the fifth/sixth century c.e. up to the eighteenth century, since it is possible to find datable textual explanations of practices and religious communities such as the Kaulas, the Kāpālikas, and the Nāths<sup>65</sup> which dwelled as ascetics. Tantric literature of the seventh century regards the narration of the ascetics' rituals which had a magical and yogic component, including the revival of corpses in charnel grounds. The Kāpālikas are the skull bearers ascetics who venerate the god Śiva in his wrathful form as Bhairava<sup>66</sup> and from whom the tantric buddhists inherited some of their characteristics such as the skull-cup and the *khaṭvāṅga*<sup>67</sup> (Image 5) along with the dwelling in isolated palaces<sup>68</sup>. Regarding tantric Buddhism, its early shreds of evidences are found in sculptured portraying fierce male and female deities united with their companions in the sexual union. Tantric Buddhism developed under the Pāla kingdom in the North-east of India, especially in the monasteries of Nalanda and Vikramasila from the fifth centuries to the twelfth when the muslim invaders destroyed the religious places. By that time tantric Buddhism had already migrate into the adjacent countries such as Tibet and Nepal, were it remained up to the current times.

Tantrism was less restrictive than the orthodox Brahmanism, in fact it was open to everyone, beside their native caste<sup>69</sup> which included also women. The buddhist tantric teachings and lineages were diffused and

---

<sup>62</sup> Blofeld: 1970:36.

<sup>63</sup> Samuels: 1993, 274-75.

<sup>64</sup> The R̥g Veda's hymn is the 10.136, 'wild seer' which describe the magical abilities of the seers (*muni*) such as flying by following the wind and ecstatic state of consciousness. The Chāndogya and Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣād describe the mythical human anatomy through the description of *nadis* (channels) as veins or neerves and the correct meditative postures. Lorenzen: 2002, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Lorenzen: 2002, 26.

<sup>66</sup> Śiva as Mahākāla or Kāpālabhrt (skull-carrier).

<sup>67</sup> Known also as the tantric staff which consists of a three human heads (one fresh, one decomposing and one skull) mounted on the top of a staff.

<sup>68</sup> Lorenzen: 1972, 75-76.

<sup>69</sup> This is true also for the Buddha's teachings.



Img. 5. Khatvāṅga.

(Beer: 2004. detail plate 115)

established by the eighty-four<sup>70</sup> Indian *mahāsiddhas*<sup>71</sup>, which were a religious figures rather than historical, represented as *yogin*<sup>72</sup>, gifted with “magical powers” very close to the Indian tribal tradition<sup>73</sup> which might be considered a sort of shamanism. Nevertheless their hagiographies are framed in a quite precise description of the social condition of the eight/eleventh centuries<sup>74</sup>. Particularly linked to my research question, there are two *mahāsiddhas* who had meditated over human bones to overcome ignorance and obtained siddhi. Kaṅkaripa (number 7)<sup>75</sup> and Kapalapa (number 72)<sup>76</sup> (Images 6-7), both with a low cast provenience, met their *guru*, who was a tantric yogi, on charnel grounds while mourning the death bodies of their beloved. Kaṅkaripa meditated for six years over the skeleton of his wife who was ‘without self as the non-duality of bliss<sup>77</sup>’; while Kapalapa was initiated to the mandala of Hevajra and created bone ornaments and a skull-cup from the bodies of his children and wife. Cemeteries<sup>78</sup> and charnel grounds are the place where the majority of tantric practices are held and it is possible to find the tantric ritual object made with

<sup>70</sup> The number eighty-four might be important unit for religion and astrology.

<sup>71</sup> A person with particular capacities to develop siddhi, which are the goal of tantric practice and can be of two kinds: extramundane (enlightenment itself) and mundane (invisibility, walking on water...)

<sup>72</sup> begging for food, dwelling in cemeteries (which are the preferred location because isolated from the crowd), dress with rag clothes

<sup>73</sup> It is very likely that Indian tantrism developed closed to tribal society and from whom has borrowed some practices.

<sup>74</sup> Robinson 1977.

<sup>75</sup> Robinson: 1977, 145-146.

<sup>76</sup> Robinson: 1977, 281-282.

<sup>77</sup> Robinson: 1977, 145.

<sup>78</sup> Cemeteries are aboded by spirits, furthermore, are the connection among Śaivism (Śiva is the lord of ghouls) and Tantric Buddhism.



human bones already there. Being aware of the impermanence of life is the first element to address one's mind toward Buddhahood, for this reason there are methods of meditation on charnel grounds and cemetery.

To experience disgust<sup>79</sup> one should meditate in front of a rotten corpse: this exercise focus on the sufferings of life and its inevitable end<sup>80</sup>. However, this kind of meditation was not innovative since even Buddha himself suggested to meditate in charnel grounds to keep awareness on the impermanence of life<sup>81</sup>. There are Indian texts<sup>82</sup> from the fifth to the twelfth centuries, belonging to the practices of Buddhism asceticism that describe the meditation on charnel grounds, decayed bodies and skeletons as a way to mortify passions<sup>83</sup>, and as a way to obtain a non-dual state of mind, so that it is impossible to distinguish between an object of appeal and one of repulsion, instead everything become the manifestation of void<sup>84</sup>.



Img. 6. Indian adept Kaṅkaripa. HAR 52548467.

The figure of the mahāsiddha is painted while meditating in front of the wife's skeleton.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/52548467>

<sup>79</sup> To then learn to overcome it

<sup>80</sup> Robinson: 1977:49.

<sup>81</sup> Mullin: 2009, 68-70

<sup>82</sup> Pali Satipatthana-Sutra (5th century); Visuddhi-Magga

<sup>83</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Blofeld: 1970, 192



Img. 7. Indian adept Kapalapa. Ground mineral pigment on silk; American museum of natural history; 70.2/ 3486 L.

HAR 94066. <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/94066>

#### 1.2.1.2 Tantric Tibetan Buddhism

Tantric Buddhism, also known as Vajrayāna, aims to the obtainment of enlightenment as reaching the state of a Buddha which can be obtained in a lifetime. To reach its aim, Tantrism uses different methods which can fall in the four different classifications of its teachings:

- action or ritual tantra (*kriyā-tantra*);
- performance tantra (*caryā-tantra*);
- yoga tantra (*yoga tantra*);
- the supreme yoga tantra (*anuttarayoga-tantra*) (the Nyingmapa divided the supreme yoga tantra in two more categories: *Anuyoga* and *Atiyoga*).

Each one of this category is explicitly designed to improve the capacity of the practitioner who is supposed to develop his abilities in order to reach the enlightenment; the higher is the tantra the faster is possible to attain it. The first two categories *kriyā-tantra* and *caryā-tantra* examine the correct use of mantras and worshipping in order to obtain merits. Together with the third category, which concerns the inner realisation expressed through rituals, they are considered the lower tantra teachings. The latter group is the highest, and it leads to instant supreme realisation involving sexual symbolism (IMG 7) as a union of mental and physical nature<sup>85</sup>.

The most important tantras in Tibet are included in the *anuttarayoga-tantra* which are: the Guhyasamāja, the Cakrasamvara and the Hevajra tantra.

One of the main peculiarities of the tantric method is the idea that there is no difference between good or bad. For example, in the context of the use of human bones, powerful types are those belonging to

<sup>85</sup> Snellgrove 2011, 202-203.

somebody who died for a dangerous illness or had a brutal accident. The idea is to transform the negative (the death through illness or accident) into positive (the use of bones as ritual objects that will overcome impermanence). Furthermore, Tantrism engages also with magic or shamanic rituals. In the buddhist context of Tibet, only the lama<sup>86</sup> has the authorisation to interact with the *buddhacised* local spirits to ask for a worldly aid<sup>87</sup>. This is true not only for the less monastic Nyingmapa who practice Tantrism to a greater extent, but also for the Sarma communities<sup>88</sup>. Furthermore, the *tantrika* by using his powers and his capacity to control mantras, can instructs spirits to obey accordingly to his will<sup>89</sup>. We can conclude that the pre-buddhist religion was not eliminated but was *buddhacised* in all of his aspects and conceptions.

#### 1.2.2.1 The influences on human bone ritual objects employed in Tibetan Buddhism

It seems that the employments of human bone as rituals objects was brought to Tibet under a Buddhist influence from the seventh century onwards affecting also the pre-buddhist religion<sup>90</sup>. On one hand, there is the idea that in the pre-buddhist religion existed such a practice, but it is very likely to have started after the seventh century<sup>91</sup>. In fact, if they might have used bones as ritual objects the purpose was different from Tantrism<sup>92</sup>: in the 'Bön of Causality' bones might have been used to please and pacify spirits, together with animal sacrifices. In the 'Bön of Fruition' their employment was connected probably for harmonising the energies, similarly to other shamanic and animistic cultures in Central Asia. On the other hand, Tibet is the only buddhist country that employs the so called 'Sky Burial' (*bya gtor*) from which a great number of bones are taken to be carved as ritual objects. 'Sky burial' consists on chopping and throwing pieces of human body to wild animals such as jackals and vultures (sometimes the head is previously removed from the body and prepared for the creation of a skull-cup). Moreover, 'Sky Burial' seems to be derived from Zoroastrian and Iranian customs<sup>93</sup>, although bonpo did not practice such a burial<sup>94</sup>. One of the main causes of the 'Sky Burial' lies in the Buddhist concept of one's body and compassion. According to Buddhism, the human body has two main representations: as an object of analysis and contemplation<sup>95</sup> which can be see as the perfect example of impermanence; and, as the only vehicle available to attain *Buddhahood*, which is described in Vajrayāna as 'an unique vessel for attaining Enlightenment in a single lifetime'<sup>96</sup>. Once life

<sup>86</sup> (*bla ma*) is a general term to identify a guru or a master; the name is used indiscriminately for both Buddhist and bonpo.

<sup>87</sup> Samuel: 1993, 31.

<sup>88</sup> See the role of a Gelukpa monk in chapter 2.

<sup>89</sup> Reynolds: 1989.

<sup>90</sup> Personal correspondence with Reynold.

<sup>91</sup> There are unfortunately no textual evidences prior the seventh century, since the pre-Buddhist religion was mainly based on oral traditions.

<sup>92</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, introduction.

<sup>93</sup> The 'Everlasting Bön' thought by Shenrab Miwoche was not Tibetan but was coming from the independent kingdom of Zhang Zhung. This religion is believed to originate in the mythical land of Tagzig which correspond to the Iranian region. The Zoroastrians used to remove the meat from the bones and then place them in little coffins.

<sup>94</sup> To what is known, bonpo preferred sepulture either to digging in the ground or by covering the mummified body with stones. Gouin: 2010, 48. The rituals were long and complexed involving the participation of bonpo priests,

<sup>95</sup> Stoddard: 2003, 11.

<sup>96</sup> Stoddard: *ibid*.

abandons the body, it became an empty container but still useful to feed other beings. A further reasons is linked to the harsh climate condition: the ground at the high of the Himalayan plateau is very difficult to dig and there is lack of propellant for cremation<sup>97</sup>. During the eleventh century, with the emergence of the Chöd practice<sup>98</sup> in both Bön and Tibetan Buddhism, the first explanations on the use and symbolism of the thighbone trumpet begins. However, there was not any instruction for the creation, since this type of texts appeared in the following century<sup>99</sup>. The siddha of the seventh century onwards, propagated the *sādhana*<sup>100</sup> that broke with the precedent tradition. In fact, they established the *samsara*<sup>101</sup> as being equal to enlightenment, beside other method of practices such as: rituals, mandalas, mantras, vow and austerity<sup>102</sup>. Siddhas shared charnel grounds as favourite meditational places with Hindu tantric practitioners from which inherit the use of human bones as ritual objects. These type of ritual objects together with *sādhana*s were the expression of a reaction against the Brahmanical world of that time<sup>103</sup>. In Tibet, the skull-cup and the thighbone trumpet, beside their use in tantric rituals, are employed in a series of magic and shamanic performances which involve the untameable spirits of the pre-buddhist religion.

---

<sup>97</sup> Which is the favourite buddhist disposal for dead bodies, but especially for high lamas and masters.

<sup>98</sup> See chapter 2 for the ritual description.

<sup>99</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, 24.

<sup>100</sup> A form of tantric meditation during which the practitioner focus on the attainment the unity with a deity of his choice using visualisation and dissolution of emptiness. The practices are based on liturgical texts.

<sup>101</sup> Phenomenal world

<sup>102</sup> Naik: 2009, 27.

<sup>103</sup> Loseries-leick: 2008, 21.

## 2. HUMAN BONES AS RITUAL OBJECTS

The employment of the skull-cup and the thighbone trumpet in the Tibetan rituals

This chapter outlines two of the several ritual objects found in Tibetan tantric Buddhism: the skull-cup and the thighbone trumpet. The choice to focus only on these two objects was led by the knowledge that the skull-cup belongs to indo-tantric-Buddhism, it is one of the main attributes of wrathful tantric deities, and it is very important in several tantric rituals. While the thighbone trumpet is considered the connection between Buddhism and ancient Bön.

The previous chapter underlined that Tantrism is practiced by all the Tibetan schools, even the monks. What it needs to be specified is that the Vinaya rules that regulate the monk's life, forbid the employment of the bone-made objects due to their belonging into 'degenerative sects'<sup>104</sup> such as the outcast *siddhas*.

The bone-made objects have spread in Tantric Buddhism due to the actions of *mahāsiddhas* who borrowed this practice from Śaivism. Furthermore, some of the aspects and spirits of the pre-buddhist religion were included in Buddhism and numerous animistic and shamanic rituals have been incorporated and adapted into Tibetan Buddhism. On the other hand, the bonpo rituals became less shamanic and more ritualistic<sup>105</sup>.

Regarding the use of skull-cup and thighbone trumpet, apart from their use in tantric-Buddhist rituals, it is important to underline that they belong to the magical-religious world, to which the layman appeals to have protection from local divinities (*yul lha*) through lamas help. This type of approach is called by Samuels "pragmatic orientation"<sup>106</sup> and it is defined as "the religious power that is applied to deal with the contingencies of everyday life in the world"<sup>107</sup>. The local deities have a secondary - but still important - role in Tibetan Buddhism, in the sense that they are not appealed to start on the path of liberation but they are appealed in order to be able to have temporary well-being through daily rituals. These daily rituals are essential because they are considered more important than the ones that lead to liberation. For this reason, daily rituals are among the most practiced religious rites and are considered the rites par excellence. This tradition was so well rooted in the pre-Buddhist religion that Buddhism only succeeded in reshaping it within Tantrism. In fact, the pre-Buddhist religion and tantric Buddhism share several common aspects. It is very likely that the "bone lore" actually has simply adapted perfectly to the Tibetan environment. It would seem that, at the time the "Bone lore" was introduced in Tibet, it underwent improvements since in India they were probably less interested in the outward appearance and in the organisational aspect. On the contrary, in Tibet they have immediately established very precise rules on the appearance and on the mode of production of the objects<sup>108</sup>.

Given the lack of Tibetan sources, for this tradition many comparisons are made with other shamanic religions of Central Asia, which use human bones as they were considered rich in magical powers. As for Tibet, the only known divination of the past is the scapulimancy. During the ancient Bön, which is equivalent

---

<sup>104</sup> Laufer: 1923, 18.

<sup>105</sup> Reynolds 1989.

<sup>106</sup> Samuels: 1993.

<sup>107</sup> Samuels: 1993, 176.

<sup>108</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, 34.

to the Bön of the cause, the "energies" of both the individual and the external were exploited. The main purpose of the "sorcerers" was to cure the people<sup>109</sup>. The cure was seen as a way to fix the disharmonies between man and nature<sup>110</sup>. Moreover, through instruments created with human or animal bones, it was believed that it was possible to communicate with superior spirits and make divinations. The practice of Chöd, which includes many elements of shamanic cultures, developed in the eleventh century, in addition to its religious use, was also practiced for healing purposes. The Chöd is perhaps the only practice that contains different elements of shamanic cultures: the use of drums and dances is combined with the presence of wild animal skins and musical instruments, such as the thighbone trumpet used to recall spirits<sup>111</sup>.

The employment of the bone-made objects in tantric rituals take advantages of the three-partite spirits organisation of the ancient Bön. The spirits who answer to the call of priests are always the manifestation of the highest spirits who dwell in the middle world<sup>112</sup>.

The bones that constitutes the tantric objects is always considered alive, which means that the karmic essence of the deceased remains in the bone; thus, the tantric adept must have the capacity to control and direct their positive or negative energy<sup>113</sup>. Bone ritual objects are the adversary part of the pacific ritual objects and they are used as their substitute in tantric rituals. Moreover, they are the same objects held as attributes by the highest wrathful deities to whom the tantric ritual is direct to. By means of the practice of transformation, the tantric adept wearing and holding these tantric objects identify him-self with the tantric deity<sup>114</sup>.

As a buddhist ritual object, there are some essential qualities that make a piece of bone the perfect specimen: firstly the social origin. This tradition has tantric hinduism as a source and it considers the bones of a Brahmin or a Bodhisattva the perfect choice. Since tantrism is not averse to any negative experience such as suicide, abortion, death caused by an illness, murder or a violent accident, the bones of a deceased from one of these causes are also suitable. However, a bone object should match with the rite in which it is employed; for example, if the bones derived from a brutal passing they are more likely to be suitable for black magic.

## 2.1 The skull-cup and thighbone trumpet within their ceremonial context

### 2.1.1 The skull cup

The origin of the skull-cup (Image 8-9) can be found in the Hindu-tantric sect of the Kāpālika, a group of hermits who embodies both sanctity and sinfulness. As described in the *Āpastambīya Dharmasūtra*, the person who bring death to a learned Brāhmana is ordered to take the deceased skull and used it as a

---

<sup>109</sup> These diseases were identified by checking which spirit influenced the individual's pain.

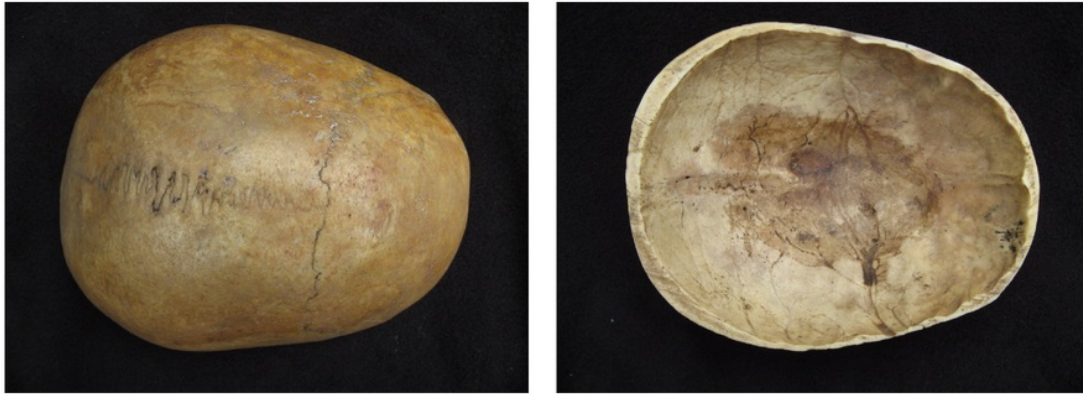
<sup>110</sup> Reynolds: 1989.

<sup>111</sup> Chaoul: 2009, 50.

<sup>112</sup> F. Sanders lecture on 'Tibetan oracles' at Shang Shung Institute of London UK. 20-03-2018.

<sup>113</sup> One of the foremost conception of tantrism is the competence to manipulate bad and good factors as a path to reach enlightenment.

<sup>114</sup> Pott: 1951,115-116.



Img. 8. Skull cup. 1800-1899; human skull; Tibet; Private Collection; HAR 81605.

The image show the internal and external surface of a skull cup.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/81605>

begging bowl. Furthermore, he is banished from the city and exiled to live in a shelter in the forest. The Kāpālikas adopted this penalty because causing a learned Brāhmana's death was considered the most terrible of the crimes; however, in case of innocence, by experiencing this punishment will allow them to accumulate religious merits and magical powers<sup>115</sup>.

In the context of Tantric Buddhism, the skull cup is perhaps one of the most important tantric ritual objects; beside its role as skull-cup, the human cranium is also used to produce other tantric objects such as the bone-made prayer bead and the hourglass drum. Within the Tibetan context, the use of the skull-cup is employed inside the highest secret teachings of Anuttaratantra. Usually, a skull-cup is procured in conjunction with the 'Sky burial', in that case the head is the first part to be removed from the corpse and it is treated separately<sup>116</sup>. The skull-cup, can have three different employments as a result of its shape or positive marks<sup>117</sup>:

1. jewel bowl;
2. ceremonial utensil;
3. support of visualisation.

The skull-cup is recognised as a '**Jewel Bowl**' only if it bears distinct marks and it is discovered in favourable conditions. First, the direction of the head<sup>118</sup> if it is found still attached to the body; second, when and where the head is found<sup>119</sup>; third, if the head is either attached or not to the body<sup>120</sup>; fourth, the

<sup>115</sup> Lorenzen: 1972, 75-77.

<sup>116</sup> Gouin: 2010, 67.

<sup>117</sup> Loseries-Leick: 1992, 59.

<sup>118</sup> To every direction there is a specific purpose or power. For instance, if the head is turned backwards, it will produce power.

<sup>119</sup> For example, on a mountain peak it will give dominance; found during summertime will give wealth.

<sup>120</sup> A detached head will bring good luck.

'feeling-it'<sup>121</sup>; fifth, the shape and the colour<sup>122</sup>; and last, the number of sections<sup>123</sup>. Subsequently to the physical analysis the skull-cup is then consecrated. The consecration's day is decided through astrological calculation and it should coincide with an auspicious day. When the skull-cup is recognised as a 'Jewel Bowl', it becomes the object of meditation<sup>124</sup>.



Img. 9. Skull cup; metal and human skull; HAR 31477.

The skull cup is placed over a tripod which symbolises the sacrificial fire. On the top of the elaborate lid a half vajra can be seen.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/31477>

As a **ceremonial utensil**, the skull-cup is employed in various tantric rituals and in rituals dealing with destructive magic. A tantric practitioner, before being allowed to execute the rites, need to be initiated to them. For example, Andrea Loseries Leick mentions two specific Vajrayāna rituals of the series of Mahayoga tantra that pertain to wrathful deities namely Yamantaka and Hevajra which involve the use of the skull-cup as a drinking cup together with other bone-made objects such as the *mālā* and the thighbone trumpet. A similar approach occurs during the empowerment's rites: the adept holds the skull-cup and other bone-made objects while receiving a direct empowerment from the master. The skull-cup is filled with alcohol as a nectar, which removes all the obstacles to enlightenment.

<sup>121</sup> It should be examined if the bearer feels any emotive changes while holding it or it seems too heavy than it looks.

<sup>122</sup> A triangular shape is for harmful rites; an oval shape is for pacifying rituals. The colour scale can vary from blue to yellow: yet, a suitable skull will shine from distance.

<sup>123</sup> The most precious has only one section, corresponding to a Bodhisattva; a skull with more than six sections must be abandoned or used for destructive rites.

<sup>124</sup> Loseries-Leick: 1992, 159-167.



In the rituals of the lower tantras<sup>125</sup>, it represents the offering bowl for wrathful deities, especially the *dharmapālas*; yet, wrathful offerings are also represented as 'secret offering' in worships dedicated to peaceful deities and they are represented with a *torma*<sup>126</sup> shaped as a skull-cup containing flesh, heart, blood, brain and intestines<sup>127</sup>. *Dharmapālas* are pleased with the taste of repellent flavour; therefore, the skull-cup should contain the wrathful libation of blood<sup>128</sup> and bile, accompanied with the *torma* (Image 10) created by combining together meat and bones<sup>129</sup>. The skull-cup could also be filled with human flesh, which is said to be the preferred of the wrathful deities, also known as 'great meat'; similarly to blood, human flesh is represented symbolically<sup>130</sup>.



Img. 10. Shri Devi; 1800-1899; ground mineral pigment on cotton; Rubin museum of art; F1998.10.2. HAR 639.

The image represents the offerings for the wrathful deities Shri Devi of flesh and bones.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/639>

<sup>125</sup> Kriyātantra and Caryātantra.

<sup>126</sup> Tib: *gtor ma*. A *torma* created for fierce *dharmapāla* can be in 108 forms, with decorations of clouds, smoke and flames. The *torma*'s colour should match the deity's colour, but the two most common colours are black and red. Sometimes a human head or a demon head is sculptured out of its form. It is believed that the deity takes a sit in the *torma* during the worshipping. The *torma* is paired with the *zor*, a triangular magic weapon belonging to the deity made by mixing different typologies of flour. Once the rite is completed, the deity is let go by destroying the *torma* and the *zor*.

<sup>127</sup> Snellgrove: 2011, 246.

<sup>128</sup> Usually, real blood is substituted with other liquids such as red-coloured water or beer. In this case the offering is performed on a symbolical level. Blood, associated with nectar and medicine, also represents the supreme offering which represent the seeking of buddhahood. Snellgrove: 2011, 247.

<sup>129</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956, 343.

<sup>130</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956, 345.

When it comes to the employment of the skull-cup in rituals dealing with magic, Nebesky<sup>131</sup> reports that in the past it was filled with real blood<sup>132</sup>, nowadays human blood is still preferred, but often substitute with symbolic liquids such as Tibetan beer and Chinese tea. Black magic is practices mostly by bonpos who are dedicated to black Bön, but is not excluded its use by others Tibetans, especially by the Nyingmapa<sup>133</sup>. Destructive magic is performed by directing the power of *dharmapālas* toward enemies with the purpose to create harm and pain and to destroy what is in their possession. In this case the skull-cup is filled with evil objects and is paired with the magic dagger (Image 11). Beside the use of real blood, human or animal internal organs are offered to the deity.



Img. 11. Ritual peg, Kila; Iron and gilt brass; 33x5x5 cm; Rubin museum of Art; C2005.16.66.

The dagger has a three-sided blade. Used in esoteric practices, it has the power to extinguish any negative energies, obstacles and the ego's attachment.

<https://rubinmuseum.org/collection/artwork/ritual-peg-kila->

Finally, the last employment of the skull-cup occurs through the means of **visualisation** and it is connected with the rites of the highest tantras<sup>134</sup>. One example is the rite of Chöd (*gcod*, 'cutting off'). Chöd is performed by all the school of Tibetan Buddhism and also by bonpos. Furthermore, according to Machig Labdron (Image 12) Chöd buddhist outlook may come from the pre-buddhist rites of demon sacrifice<sup>135</sup> and from the Mahayāna buddhist idea of *marā* as the symbol of evil<sup>136</sup>. The essence of Machig's teaching advises that the origin of all demons<sup>137</sup> is one's own mind, in the form of the ego<sup>138</sup>. The complex form of Chöd involve the use of musical instruments, dances and visualisation. The first action is the *ḍākiṇī*'s dance, which is supposed to destroy the fallacious believes. Second, on a mental level, the practitioner invite the

<sup>131</sup> nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956.

<sup>132</sup> In this case, there are some categories from which the blood is preferred: as for human blood, it should derivate either from an ill corpse or from the menstruations of a widow or of a prostitute. Furthermore, even today Tibetan medicine reports thirteen different types of blood as a curative method.

<sup>133</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956, 483

<sup>134</sup> Mahāyoga and Anuttarayoga tantra.

<sup>135</sup> Blofeld: 1970, 189.

<sup>136</sup> Orofino: 1987, 8.

<sup>137</sup> As a personification of all human limits;

<sup>138</sup> Orofino: 1992, 397

*dākiṇīs* to consume his/her body as a libation. With the following visualisation, the practitioner's head is transmuted into a skull-cup where the flesh and bones of his body are cooked. Together with the *dākiṇīs* also other classes of wrathful deities participate at the feast. In the past, the skull-cup was one of the ritual objects carried by a Chöd-pa (image 13) together with a *ḍāmaru*, thighbone trumpet, ritual bell, a predatory animal's skin, a trident, a banner made with tiger and leopard's skin, a human hair's cord and a rectangular red hat.

Beside Chöd, the skull-cup is visualised as the instrument of high tantric wrathful deities as a vessel containing the offering of the five organ senses<sup>139</sup>.

The patterns and precious stones added to the external surface of the skull-cup (Image 14) are irrelevant to the employment of this ritual object, that should be valued for the characteristic described above such as, to name a few, shapes colour and emotive reactions. It seems that the embellishment of the external surface was possible thanks to with the increase of monastic power during the seventeenth century<sup>140</sup>.

Furthermore, a plain human cranium is also an instrument for divination. Divination is an established custom among tibetans, also because it can be performed by investing a small sum of money, therefore is achievable almost by everyone. Through the contemplation of the marks of the cranium, it is possible to find answers to questions. In this case a trained tantric yogi guides the rite. Similarly to the Tibetan employment, divination through human bones is shared among the different nomadic culture of Central Asia<sup>141</sup>.



Img. 12. Machig Labdron; 1800-1899; Mineral pigment on cotton; Private collection; HAR 8363.

Here Machig is represented as a *dākiṇī*, naked and in the dancing position. She holds a hand drum (right) and a bell (left). Her figure is adorned with precious ornaments.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/8363>

<sup>139</sup> Loseries-Leick: 1992, 170.

<sup>140</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008,

<sup>141</sup> Nebesky-Wojkovitz: 1956, 455.



Img. 13. Bonpo Chödpa.  
(Chaoul: 2009, cover)



Img. 14. Skull cup; 1800-1930; human skull, turquoise, red coral; 7,3 x 12,5 x 18,3 cm; Volkenkunde museum; RV-2220-1.

The external surface of the skull cup is decorated with skull and flowers carving and it is inlaid with precious stones.

<https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/fe845b36-2195-44cf-bc45-7efbae4dad4a>

### 2.1.2. Thighbone trumpet

The thighbone trumpet (img 15) is manufactured from a human leg bone, cut nearly 30 centimetres from the knee. Subsequently two holes are made on the bone protrusions of the knee joint with a sharp instrument, which will produce a sonorous reverberation when the air is expelled. The two holes remind the nostrils of the mythical horse who carries the spirits of the faithfuls to paradise after their death<sup>142</sup>. According to the Chöd tradition, ornaments were not necessary, but there were recommendations regarding its protection<sup>143</sup>. Metal, copper or silver could be applied to strengthen the openings. The metal cover is placed around the

<sup>142</sup> Laufer: 1923, 10.

<sup>143</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, 72-78.

fragile parts and it can be shaped in the form of a *Makara*<sup>144</sup> or it can be left plain. This tradition culminated with the ceremonial *Kangling* made completely of bronze (image 16), used specifically for rituals in monasteries<sup>145</sup>.



Img. 15. Thighbone trumpet; 1800-1943; Human thighbone and metal; 6,8 x 30,6 x 7,5; Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden; RV-2739-31.

<https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/3d9dd308-0849-4e53-a016-441002204033>



Img. 16. Trumpet; 1800-1899; copper; 9,53 cm; The Nelson-Atkins museum of art; 34-237/62, 63. HAR 74822.

The trumpet is shaped in the form of a *makara*.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/74822>

---

<sup>144</sup> The *makara* is a mythical aquatic animal, often associated with crocodiles.

<sup>145</sup> Beer: 2004, 259.

Similarly to the other tantric bone objects, the bone is taken either from the higher social status or from the lowest even if the preferred bone belonged to a Bodhisattva. Female bones are estimated to be the finest, since women's bones are lighter and smaller. Furthermore, Laufer reports that for the consecration, a lama should bite off with his mouth a piece of bone-skin, otherwise the power of the thighbone trumpet would be less efficient<sup>146</sup>.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the thighbone trumpet is employed in:

1. tantric rituals;
2. Chöd.

### Tantric rituals

It is believed that, to please the ears of the wrathful high tantric deities, a bone *ḍāmaru* and the thighbone trumpet must be played. Bone musical instruments, especially the thighbone trumpet, are essential for the invocation of *dharmapālas*: their sound must awake the selected deity to whom is later requested to sit and participate in the rite. The first sound comes from the thighbone trumpet, later followed by the beating of a bone *ḍāmaru* and the tinkle of a bell<sup>147</sup>. The human thighbone can be substitute with a tiger thighbone, which is considered equally powerful<sup>148</sup>.

### Chöd

As mentioned before in this paragraph, the practice of Chöd could be considered a connection between the pre-buddhist religion and Tibetan Buddhism. Although being of Tibetan origin, Chöd was practiced also in old Buddhism in the context of the *Prajñāpāramitā*<sup>149</sup>. Machig Labdron received many teachings about the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and from her master and consort Padampa Sanggye (*pha dam pa sangs rgyas*) (Image 17),



Img. 17. Indian adept Padampa Sangye; paper; Sechen Archives photography. HAR 53050551.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/53050551>

<sup>147</sup> Loseries: 2008, 44.

<sup>148</sup> Nebesky-Wojokovitz: 1956, 398.

<sup>149</sup> In this context the term Chöd has been substituted with *spyod*, having the same pronunciation but which means 'spiritual exercise'. Orofino: 1992, 400.

an Indian yogi, she received the practice of pacification called *Shije (zhi byed)*<sup>150</sup> from which she developed the Chöd practice<sup>151</sup>. The use of the thighbone trumpet is a characteristic of Chöd-pa and all of those who frequented charnel grounds such as *siddhas* and *yogins* of Tantric Buddhism. However, beside the Buddhist implication, the tradition of Chöd is enriched with several pre-buddhist elements<sup>152</sup>:

- During the Chöd initiation, is often recited the expression 'opening the door of the sky', to designate a state of higher awareness which is the attainment of the state of transcendent consciousness. The same sentence was used in the pre-Buddhist religion to indicate the access to the sky through a rainbow by means of a magical rope. The same magical rope is described in the narrative describing the early kings, who were said to descend and ascend earth after their dead from the sky through the same magical rope.
- Similarly to the Chöd offering of the body, shamans of Central Asia had as initiation ritual the offering of the body of a future shaman by demons and ancestors.
- The use of the thighbone trumpet and other musical instrument is closed to the pre-buddhist for contact the supreme world of spirits. Very similarly to the shaman, the *Chöd-pa* have even today a similar role to the exorcist.
- The cry of higher spirits is one of the shamanic features of the pre-buddhist religion<sup>153</sup>; furthermore is connected not only with the role of the exorcist, but also with the weather-maker and the oracle. The spirits dwell in a tripartite world, namely: the sky, the middle world and the underworld. At this point, it is important to clearly understand what is intended with the word "exorcist", "weather-maker" and "oracle". The **exorcist** is in charge of healing<sup>154</sup>. At the break of epidemics, the exorcist must carry the corpse to the cemetery and with the aid of a *ḍāmaru*, a thighbone trumpet and the recitation of mantras he defeats the illness. The most renowned exorcists belong to the Kagyu tradition as *Chöd-pa*. In order to be exorcist the selected people must pass the tantric examination and then are regarded as 'master of Chöd'. Furthermore, their role is also as aid for the spirit of a deceased who is restrain on its way to the sky by a demon<sup>155</sup>.

The **weather-maker** has the ability to influence the atmospheric conditions and is the responsible for the suitable weather. For example he must be able to protect the fields by preventing the fall of hail; to stop or call rain especially for religious dances. Both the Buddhist and Bonpo traditions had a weather-makers, who communicate with the *lu (klu)*, the spirits who dwell in water. The sound of a thighbone trumpet is supposed to scare the spirit and to chase them away. In addition the priest employs other ritual objects such as a vajra and a bell, a drum and a Magic dragger (*phur bu*)<sup>156</sup>.

The employment of **oracles** was still practiced at the time of Nebesky research, although it was a

---

<sup>150</sup> The principle of this practice is to calm the mind and to pacify all the tensions.

<sup>151</sup> Namkhai: 2001, 8.

<sup>152</sup> Orofino: 2000, 406-407.

<sup>153</sup> There are no certain sources about the rites in the pre-buddhist religion, but many comparisons have been made with the shamanic culture of Central Asia.

<sup>154</sup> The most common illness that the exorcist must dominate is plague.

<sup>155</sup> Tucci: 1976, 127.

<sup>156</sup> Nebesky-Wojkovitz: 1956, 467-471.

prerogative for the wealthy families; nowadays the oracle is hired mostly in the exile areas. Similarly to divination, a question is posed and the oracle gives the response. Nevertheless, in the case of oracles the rite is more complicated. Although the performance is conducted by a lama, it is the closest rite to pre-buddhist shamanism since it embraces the ability of trance while being possessed by the spirit. The deity is supposed to take possession of the medium after being invoked with the sound of a thighbone trumpet. Subsequently, offers and prayers are made, followed by the query to which the oracle will give an answer. The rite terminates with the final prayers to thank the divine being.



### 3. SKULL CUP AND THIGHBONE TRUMPET AS DEITIES' ATTRIBUTES

A comparison among Tibetan Buddhism and Bön

This chapter discusses the symbolical meaning of the skull-cup and the thighbone trumpet in art, contextualising their employment as deities' attributes of the highest tantras in the two Tibetan religions Buddhism and Bön, furthermore it outlines the possible differences and similarities.

The production of art in Tibet is still engaged to the concept of sacred art which might appear not only in temple and private shrine but even on daily objects (Image 18). Moreover, Buddhist used the sacred art as a tool for conversion<sup>157</sup>. In addition, the artistic style followed the expansion of the Tibetan Empire, being influenced by China, Central Asia and Nepal during the first period and by Kashmir in later times. However, according to Tucci<sup>158</sup>, visual art existed before the arrival of Buddhism, since several paintings of bonpo art are known from the time of Songtsen Gampo. It is important to underline that, however, Tucci does not refer to any particular location or painting.



Img. 18. Cabinet; 19th century; painted wood; 123 x 102 x 30; Museum der Kulturen, Basel.

The cabinet is depicted with two adepts blowing a thighbone trumpet. Under each figure, there are two skull cups filled with blood (left) and the offerings of the five senses). The cabinet contained *tormas*.

(Karmay: 2002, fig. 162)

To what concerns the pre-Shenrab art, several rock paintings have been discovered in the Zhang Zhung region, probably dealing with religious matters and belonging to the period of ancient Bön<sup>159</sup>. Bonpo art has

<sup>157</sup> Tucci: 1967,98.

<sup>158</sup> Tucci: *ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Namkhai: 2009, 175-176. Professor Namkhai is quite sure that the animals represented are not from hunting scenes but but they symbolise the different attributes of nature.

reached its current appearance only with the emergence and contact with Buddhism; furthermore, the iconography of this ancient belief has been integrated and expressed by bonpo and buddhist art<sup>160</sup>.

The purpose of Tibetan art, whether is Buddhist or bonpo<sup>161</sup>, is to represent the enlightened world which can be reached with contemplation<sup>162</sup>. This world is represented by buddhas, bodhisattvas, siddhas and mahāsiddhas and pacific and wrathful deities. The unknown artist, who was a talented and dedicated monk, had the duty of reproducing the enlightened world through murals and *thankas* (*tang ka*) paintings and sculptures. From the 11th century, both Buddhism and Bön have undergone a religious revival which culminated in a mutual influence of the doctrine, rituals and sacred art. In some isolated regions such as Amdo, the two religions developed in a close contact for several centuries; therefore as a result, the artistic discipline was conceived by monks who developed them for both religions<sup>163</sup> creating similar masterpieces. This is the main reason why the Bön religion and art have always been classified as a copy of Buddhism. However, the main differences can be seen firstly in symmetry, having bonpo preferring asymmetrical presentation, secondly, bonpos express their theories based on the early Bön literature of the tenth to fourteenth centuries through a symbolism which is completely different to the Buddhist and Hindu ones<sup>164</sup>. For example, regarding the image of Shenrab, he might hold a sceptre with a *svastika* and his throne surrounded by mythical animals (Image 19). Animals and nature are two important elements in bonpo art, so peaceful and wrathful deities' thrones are supported by Himalaya's native animals, while the tantric



Img. 19. Tonpa Shenrab, Trisung Gyalwa; Early 19th century; pigments on cloths; Private collection. HAR 81499.

Here Shenrab is depicted with monastic robes as Buddha Śakyamuni. In his right hand he holds a *svastika* sceptre (above). Above and underneath his throne, there are respectively a Khyung and dragons.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/81499>

<sup>162</sup> Thurman: 1996, 17.

<sup>163</sup> Watt: 2007, 19.

<sup>164</sup> Watt:2007, 20.

deities are usually supported by all those animals which are symbolical important to Buddhism and Hinduism, such as, lions, elephants, horses and the horned bird Garuda (which the bonpos refer to as Khyung).

Concerning the depiction of the skull cup as a deities' libation receptacle or as a offering bowl and the thigh bone trumpet as a musical instrument in Tibetan Buddhism, they appear in the sphere of the *anuttarayoga* tantra images. The explanation of their symbolism is included in several *sādhana*s dedicated to the highest tantras such as Guhyasamaja, Cakrasaṃvara and others<sup>165</sup>. As a symbol, the skull cup and the thighbone trumpet are held by a series of deities performing tantric practices.

Some western scholars of the past have misunderstood the meaning of the highest tantra gods, as well as the meaning of tantric objects, describing them as belonging to demonic cults. In reality, tantric ritual objects are nothing but tools to make the practitioner identify himself with the invoked divinity<sup>166</sup>. Regarding the ferocious aspect of the tantric deities, it is just the union of compassion and power. This aspect was compared by Watt to the strength and love of a mother who saves her child from a car that is about to invest him: as brutal and ferocious as the gesture may be, there is nothing evil in it<sup>167</sup>.

### 3.1 Symbolic interpretation of the skull cup and thighbone trumpet

The symbolic description finds a wider space in this chapter, although, as a general remark, an actual ritual object and its pictorial representation shares the same meaning in matters of symbolism. In art, in the case of the skull-cup, the representation is more explicit since the offering of blood and the five senses are depicted without using any substitutions. Unfortunately, during the research on bonpo art for this thesis, any symbolical description of the tantric ritual object in the bonpo context was encountered. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose that since the art of the two religions was probably created by the same authors, bonpos applied the same buddhist meaning to the skull-cup and thighbone trumpet when hold by several masters and deities.

#### 3.1.1 Skull-cup

##### 3.1.1.1 Skull-cup as a libation vessel

The skull cup (Image 20) can be either filled with a red blood or a blue *amṛta*<sup>168</sup>, which represent respectively the Mother tantra and Father tantra<sup>169</sup>. The red blood (Mother tantra) symbolises the *bodhicitta*<sup>170</sup> of wisdom, while the *amṛta* (father tantra symbolises) the *bodhicitta* of method. Whether the

---

<sup>165</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, 22.

<sup>166</sup> Pott: 1951, 115-116.

<sup>167</sup> Watt-Linrothe: 2004, 4.

<sup>168</sup> The immortal nectar drank by the Hindu gods.

<sup>169</sup> The texts of Mother and Father tantras, both using visualisation of a deity but with the purpose to develop respectively emptiness and transformation into the deity worshipped.

<sup>170</sup> *Bodhicitta* indicates the bodhisattva's state of mind.



Img. 20. Skull cup.

Here the skull cup is depicted on a tripod having three skulls, which symbolises the three buddha's bodies: *Nirmāṇakāya*, *Saṃbhogakāya* and *Dharmakāya*.

(Beer: 2004, detail of plate 119)

skull cup is carved from flesh and bone of an actual human or it is a simply depiction, it has a primary meaning of being a reminder about death, therefore impermanence. Expert Loseries-Leick, emphasises the impermanence to be the most accurate meaning for a skull cup<sup>171</sup>. Similarly to tantric rituals of empowerments and initiation when the skull cup is accompanied by other ritual objects such as the hand drum, the curved knife or the bell, in artistic depiction is accompanied by a *khaṭvāṅga* a hand drum and a curved knife. The triad of *khaṭvāṅga*, hand drum and skull cup are equivalent to the body, speech and mind of a deity portrayed with them<sup>172</sup>; on the other hand, when the skull cup is paired with the curved knife, they became the main attribute of a *ḍākiṇī*.

### 3.1.1.2 Skull cup as a offering vessel

The skull cup employed as an offering vessel (Images 21-22) is represented in two manners: one is identical to the libation vessel, the second is the representation of a full human skull without the skull vault. Both the representations contain 'the wrathful offering of the five senses' carrying namely a tongue, a couple of eyes and ears, a nose and a heart; therefore they represent the senses of taste, sight, hearing, smell and touch. 'The wrathful offering of the five senses' is depicted as a 'flower offering' being the counterpart of the pacific offering of 'the five qualities that delight the senses'<sup>173</sup> which includes a fruit, a mirror, a lute, a incense burner and silk<sup>174</sup>.

<sup>171</sup> Loseries-Leick: 2008, 96.

<sup>172</sup> Beer: 2004, 263-266.

<sup>173</sup> Beer: 2004, 325-327.

<sup>174</sup> Dagyab Rimpoche: 1992, 111.



Img. 21. Offering of the five sense.

The skull cup is filled with the human organs corresponding to the five senses. At the centre, there is the arrow with the ribbons of the five colours. The arrow is surmounted with a feather and a mirror.

(Beer: 2004, detail of plate 140)



Img. 22. Offering of the five senses.

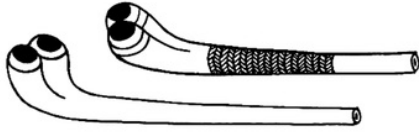
The skull cup is represented as a full human head containing the five human organs with the arrow plunged in the centre.

(Beer: 2004, detail of plate 140)

### 3.1.2 The thighbone trumpet

The thighbone trumpet (Image 23) is connected with *mahāsiddhas* and *yogis* who attended ceremony on charnel grounds, moreover is strictly linked with the Chöd practice. As an attribute of a deity, the thighbone trumpet is held only by few deities beside the master of Chöd: one example is the wrathful form of Vajrayogini as Khroda Kali (Image 24), connected with the teaching of Phadampa Sangye; this deity is venerated by both buddhist and bonpo. The thighbone trumpet, whose shape is a white stick ending with

two knobs, when held by a deity in the wisdom (left) hand symbolises the victory over the three realms<sup>175</sup> and, similarly to rituals, it is paired with the hand drum.



Img. 23. Thighbone trumpet.

The top thighbone trumpet is depicted with a silk handle; the bottom trumpet is simple and unadorned.

(Beer: 2004, detail plate 117)



Img. 24. Mandala of Vajrayogini - Khroda Kali; 1800-1899; Mineral pigment on cotton; Rubin museum of art; F1998.10.1. HAR 638.

Khroda Kali belongs to the lineage on Padampa Sangye and she is worshipped by all the Tibetan traditions.

The central figure holds a thighbone trumpet in her left hand, surrounded in the mandala by four manifestations of herself belonging to the four buddha families.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/638>

### 3.2 The classes of deities bearing the skull cup and the thighbone trumpet in Tibetan Buddhism and Bön

In the previous chapters it has been said that Tibetan Buddhism own its final outlook to the pre-buddhist religion of Tibet whose wrathful deities where readapted by means of an oath (*dam can*)<sup>176</sup> to a Buddhist context entering the Buddhist pantheon as protector of the faith (*dharmapāla*). However, deities such as Dorje Legpa<sup>177</sup> and Pehar (Image 25- 26) belong to the lowest position within the context of the

<sup>175</sup> Beer: 2004, 259.

The three realms are: the 'desire realm', the 'form realm' and the 'formless realm'.

<sup>176</sup> Pal: 1969, 23.

<sup>177</sup> Dorje Legpa is the protector of the Nyigmapa school. He was in the pre-buddhist religion a *tser* spirit. His buddhisation included also few changes of his biography.

*dharma*pāla's ranking being described as 'Dangerous Protectors', which are followed by other two higher grades such as 'Enlightened Protectors' (Image 27) and 'Enlightened Buddhas'<sup>178</sup>. Although all the three categories are wrathful in appearance, and all of them share the same iconography of the India Rakṣa and Rakṣasi, there is a slight difference in their representation. The first category is represented by warrior-like deities depicted with short bodies and big bellies, holding weapons and wearing boots and armour. Furthermore they ride a warrior-like animal as a horse, a goat or a lion. They are the buddhist representation of the ancient spirits of the environment as mountains or lakes and, therefore, they are linked with the worldly desires. The last two categories are reserved to Indian deities who have been absorbed into the Buddhist tantric pantheon during the Vajrayāna's first stage of development. The second group is often barefoot, their outfit consist in the Indian dhoti made with animal skin. Their task is to protect a specific teaching, *terma* or lineage.



Img. 25. Dorje Legpa; 1700-1799; Mineral pigment; Private Collection. HAR 73269.

Dorje Legpa is depicted while riding a goat; in his hands he holds a vajra (right) and a prayer beads (left). The figure is enclosed in dark clouds and fire. At the bottom of the painting some offerings dedicated to the him.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/73269>



Img. 26. Peihar; 1800-1899; Mineral pigment on cotton; 96,52 x 71,76 cm; Rubin museum of art; P1996.16.7 HAR 283.

The painting represents the Five Peihar kings of the *terma* lineage.

The central figure represents the wrathful form of Peihar with six arms, each one holding a weapon, while riding a snow lion. Above Peihar there is Padmasambhava, who bound the deity by an oath to protect all the buddhist centre in Tibet.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/283>



Img. 27. Mahākāla Chaturbhuja; 1400-1499; Mineral pigment on cotton; Rubin museum of art; F1997.8.1 HAR 104.

Mahākāla is represented with four hands: she is the principal protector of the Cakrasaṃvara tantra.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/104>

The final group, the highest of all, belongs to the *anuttarayoga* tantra and it regards the meditation deities (*heruka*) who can also be tutelary deities (*yidam*). Their bodies, tall and athletic which might have more than one head, arm or feet, are naked and adorned only with garments made with human bones<sup>179</sup>. The religious idea of karma, is applicable also to the deities beside those who reached buddhahood, which means that, according to their behaviour the deities could reach or lose an elevated position<sup>180</sup>. Comparably, Bön has a series of wrathful doctrine-protectors (*srung ma*) (image 28) who function as the buddhist *dharmapālas*. Usually the favourite outfit, as describe by Nebesky, consist of a thousand human hearts or with the *khyung*'s wings. In addition their head is covered with a turban<sup>181</sup>. Similarly to the buddhist *dharmapālas*, they do not hold any tantric attribute, although Sipai Gyalmo (image 29) is an exception, in fact it can be a figure in between of the buddhist worldly protectors and the 'enlightened protectors'. In the tantra dealing with her invocation, she is said to be adorned with the terrifying attributes<sup>182</sup>. To what concern the bonpo tantric deities, they are conformed to the typical iconographic of the Tibetan buddhist depiction and role; thus they have a wrathful appearance, they are ornate with human bones but, as it shown by the majority of them the preferred attributes are weapons. Some tantric deities, and protectors have origin in the ancient kingdom of Zhang Zhung. Furthermore, those deities which are linked with the 'Everlasting Bön' are usually without any human-made attributes (Image 30). Among the most obvious differences between the good-

<sup>179</sup> Linrothe-Watt: *ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956, 5.

<sup>181</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956, 7-12.

<sup>182</sup> Kvaerne: 1995, 107-108.



nature and Buddhist divinities there is the relationship with natural elements. In fact, Watt highlights that the bonpo divinity figures can be surrounded by natural elements such as water, fire, clouds, rainbows used as clothing<sup>183</sup> (Image 31).



Img. 28. Machen Pomra, worldly protector; 1960; Mineral pigment on cotton; private collection; HAR 73250.

This deity represents a bonpo mountain deity as a protector of Bön.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/73250>



Img. 29. Sipai Gyälmo; 1900-1959; mineral pigment on cotton; Ligmincha Institute - photographs; HAR 85547.

The deity is depicted riding a black mule. Her appearance is wrathful; she has three heads, six hands holding weapons, some religious symbols such as the skull cup full of blood and the *svastika*.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/85547>

<sup>183</sup> Watt: 2007, 39.



Img. 30. Meri; 1960; Ground mineral pigment on cotton; private collection; HAR 31505

Meri, the mountain of fire is here represented as a warrior wearing a helmet, a golden armour and a variety of weapons are held in his multiple hands. This deity is associated with the kingdom of Zhang Zhung.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/31505>



Img. 31. Flaming Tiger-God Tagla Membar; 18th-19th century; pigment on cloth; 99,1 x 65,4 cm; Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.66.618; HAR 200041

Tagla Mambar is the wrathful form of a direct disciple of Shenrab. The deity wears ornaments made with human heads and a crown of five skulls. In his hands holds bonpo attributes, a wheel and nine swords. A detail of the painting show the goddess on his left having a rainbow shawl around the shoulders.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/200041>

### 3.2.1 Heruka

*Heruka* is a Sanskrit term translated as 'Blood Drinker' (Image 32); it indicates a tantric male deity in the wrathful aspect<sup>184</sup> of the highest tantras, usually represented coupled with a consort (*yogini*) in the sexual union (*yab-yum*)<sup>185</sup> (Images 33-34). His body is mostly coloured with blue, being compared with the tone of the clouds or to precious stones<sup>186</sup>. Usually it is represented with three eyes having the third narrowed in vertically, while the other two are round and bulges. A couple of wings might be shown behind his shoulders and the entire figure is usually surrounded by flames. The figure is always naked covered only with the whole set of wrathful ornaments made with human bones.

The *heruka*, can be worshipped as a tutelary deity for both Buddhism and Bön; the purpose might be also connected with worldly rewards, however his main purpose is to receive awakening through divine manifestation. The skull-cup as an offering vase with the offering of the five sense or with a *torma*<sup>187</sup>, is often placed at the feet level, while the skull is held in one of his arms as libation cup.



Img. 32. Yamari, Manjushri (eight pronouncements); 1700-1799; mineral pigment on cotton; 66,4 x 44,45 cm; Erie Art Museum; HAR 91095.

Known also as Jampal Ku, Heruka represents the body aspect of the eight sections of the mahayoga tantra belonging to the Nyingma school.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/91095>

<sup>184</sup> In the Tibetan buddhist iconography its meaning can vary accordingly with the order referring to them. For the Nyingmapa is any male-meditation deity, but it usually refers to the one with a wrathful appearance; for the Sarma tradition with the exception of Gelukpa is any elaborated anuttarayoga male deity represented in a simplified form with one head, two arms and two legs plus the consort. On the other hand for the Gelukpa the term refers only to Cakrasamvara in all his aspects. <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=2261>

<sup>185</sup> The father-mother union; the male is the embodiment of compassion and skilful means, while the female is wisdom and insight.

<sup>186</sup> nebesky-Wojkowitz: 1956, 6.

<sup>187</sup> Bonpo images prefer the employment of the *torma* rather than human organs.



Img. 33 Cakrasaṃvara; 1700-1799; Ground mineral pigment, fine gold line on cotton; 32,39 x 22,23 cm; Rubin Museum of Art; F1997.3.4; HAR 69.

Cakrasaṃvara is the principal tutelary deity of the Anuttarayoga tantra. Here is depicted with his consort Decen Wangmo who embrace his figure.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/69>



Img. 34. Magyü Sangchog Tartug; Ground mineral on cloth; private collection; HAR 4119.

This bonpo deity belongs to the early teaching of Zhang Zhung. His iconography is similar to the tantric buddhist deities such as Hevajra. Here he is depicted with his consort who has the right leg embracing the partner's body, while the other leg is touching the bodies crashed by the deities.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/4119>

### 3.2.2 Dākiṇī

The *dākiṇīs* or 'sky walkers' (see image 12), due to their ability to travel through air<sup>188</sup>, are regarded as the Tibetan 'Fairies'. *Dākiṇī* is a Sanskrit term, therefore in Tibet are known also as *khadroma* (*mka' 'gro ma*) which is the preferred title by the bonpos. These deities play an essential role in Tibetan esoteric Buddhism; in fact, they are connected with the teaching of the great *mahāsiddhas*: the words of the master are introduced to humans through *dākiṇīs*<sup>189</sup> (image 35). Moreover, the term *dākiṇī* is used to describe a female role as tutelary deities, as a synonym of *yogini*. In Tibetan Buddhism, the meaning varies according to the school it is applied to. For example, the Nyingma is the only school to give a *dākiṇī* the importance of an enlightened being or an enlightened female teacher such as Machig Labdron. While whether the Sarma tradition use this term to indicate the female entourage of a main deity<sup>190</sup>. Her body is completely naked, adorned with the wrathful ornaments holding several attributes including the skull cup, *khaṭvāṅga*, and curved knife. The posture is the *ardhaparyanka* dance position, a standing posture with her right leg bent and the left extended.

Similarly, the bonpo *khadroma* (image 36), has the same role as the Buddhist *dākiṇī*: she is the figure that transmits secret doctrines through dreams or visions and her figure is often connected with the sacred teaching of *terma*, which is a tantric teaching in the bonpo canon. Therefore the iconography is exactly as in Tibetan Buddhism<sup>191</sup>.



Img. 35. Padmasambhava in *dākiṇīs* company; 1700; tempera on canvas; 54 x 37 cm; Collection Gérard Labre.

Here the figure of Padmasambhava is depicted encircled by a group of *dākiṇīs*. The *mahāsiddha* sits on a human skin placed on a cliff.

(Karmay: 2002, fig. 3)

<sup>188</sup> Watt: 2015 <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=2603>

<sup>189</sup> Uhlig: 1995, 30-31.

<sup>190</sup> <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=2603>

<sup>191</sup> Kvaerne: 1995, 116.



Img. 36. Nine magical Ladies who enjoy space and the nine great subjugators who subdue border; National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.

This thangka depicts in its centre a bonpo *dākiṇī*, who has the same iconography as the buddhist *dākiṇī*. She holds a skull cup filled with blood in her left hand and a curved knife in her right hand.

(Tsumagari: 2011, No 34)

### 3.2.3 Mahāsiddhas

The tradition of *mahāsiddhas* (image 37), developed in India during the medieval period, is perhaps the most important element for the development of Buddhism in Tibet<sup>192</sup>, and therefore their figure is venerated and invoked in various rituals, since every Tibetan Buddhist tradition has its own mahāsiddha of reference (excluding the Gelupa because their school was founded by the monk Tsongkhapa (tsong kha pa 1357-1419) Iconographically represented as yogis, they live isolated, begging and wearing simple clothes. Moreover, they are described while practicing esoteric cults of which the skull-cup is, in this case, the symbol.

Once more, bonpo *siddhas* (image 38) cover a similar role and have an identical representation, despite using a different term to describe them and tracing their homeland in the kingdom of Zhang Zhung. In fact, these figures are called *drubtob shen* (*grub thob gshen*) which means 'priests who have attained spiritual perfection'<sup>193</sup>. In their biographies, a blend of myth and history, is said that during their era they transmitted the bonpo tantra teachings to the humans.

The skull-cup also reveals the religious and political legitimacy of a certain school. According to Fuentes, the presence of the skull-cup in a *thangka* representing Tsongkhapa (image 39) must be interpreted as an integration of the tantric teachings within the Tibetan buddhist system, in order to fill institutional gaps as the monastic system<sup>194</sup>. For this reasons, the skull-cup can be considered the emblem of the centrality of

<sup>192</sup> Reynolds: <http://www.vajranatha.com/articles/traditions/bonpo.html>

<sup>193</sup> Kvaerne: 1995, 116.

<sup>194</sup> Fuentes: 2011, 15.

the tantric system in Tibetan - buddhist doctrines: It can also be concluded that, given the artistic bond between the two religions, the skull-cup is represented in bonpo works with this meaning.



Img. 37. Mahāsiddha Naropa; 1800-1899; Ground mineral pigment on cotton; Private collection; HAR 32529

The mahāsiddha Naropa is depicted while meditating in an isolated location. In his left hand he holds a skull cup filled with *amrita*.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/32529>



Img. 38. Drenpa Namkha; 1800- 1899; Ground mineral pigment on cotton; Tibet House NY; HAR 90757.

The founder of New Bön is here depicted holding a sword (right hand) and a skull cup with blood (left hand). He is adorned with precious jewellery and he has a tiger skin around his waist.

<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/90757>



Img. 39. Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelugpa Lama; 1700; Distemper on cotton; Museum of fine arts, Boston; 06.1900.

The image represents a Gelugpa lama holding a skull cup. From the cup the two deities Yama and Yamantaka are raising.

(Fuentes: 2011, fig. 2)



## CONCLUSION

The role of human bones as ritual objects in Tibet, beside their Indian provenience is difficult to determine, in spite of the fact that during the two waves of diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet many aspect of the pre-buddhist credo have been incorporated into its multiple facets. The main reason for this difficulty is the lack of information and archaeological evidence of their employment in ancient times. What is known about the pre-buddhist religion, in fact, is found in the bonpo texts which describe the life of the master Shenrab Miwoche and expound the bonpo doctrine, and may thus be a source enriched with mythical and unrealistic elements. Buddhist texts of later realisation are a further source of our knowledge. A further explanation is the misunderstanding and denigration of Bön and bonpos by Buddhists.

In a shamanic-like culture it is legitimate to suppose the existence of sacrifice. Although the actual buddhist tantric rituals involving the pre-buddhist classes of spirits employ human bones as ritual objects, it is possible that this custom was introduced in Tibet by the Indian mahāsiddhas and that it received a significant importance only after the seventh century. However, if the shamanic role of human bones is compared to other similar cultures in the ancient Tibet, it can be notices that their employment is linked to the role of the shaman in the community.

Firstly, the shaman (a Shen or a bonpo) was involved especially in the rituals of exorcism, divination and healing. With the *buddhisiation* of the pre-buddhist creeds, the shamanic role of the pre-buddhist priests shifted to the hands of the buddhist lama. As a result, the different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism maintained aspects of the pre-buddhist creed for the sake of the lay population.

Secondly, the shamanic role of the buddhist lama consists in calling the local deities as a support for the daily activities of the devotees. Beside the daily worships, such support includes, the control of the weather (in order to avoid hail which might destroy the harvest), divination, black magic (which can also be executed without external help), and the spirit possession during the oracle sessions. Yet, in Tibetan Buddhism, which is influenced by tantrism, human bones are largely employed in tantric rituals such as empowerments and initiation.

Thirdly, Tibet knows the unique practice of Chöd, which has root both in Bön and Buddhism. The chöd practice is used mainly as a personal rite to cut away the ego, but in some circumstances it can be employed with the scope of healing. For example, a Kagyupa becomes a 'master of Chöd' only after he passes several examination, and his presence as a 'master of Chöd' is required during a plague, so that he might chase it away by correctly blowing the thighbone trumpet. Another tantric buddhist reason for the employment of human bones as ritual objects is connected with the practice of transformation. Since the highest tantric deities wear human bones and hold a skull-cup filled with blood or *amṛta*, in order to identify with them, the devotees wear the same attributes and ornaments. Of course, the use of blood and the offering of the five senses are only symbolical, and other substances are employed instead of human organs and blood.

With the establishment of the 'Everlasting bon', the bonpo eliminated all cruel practices, including sacrifices and the employment of human bones as ritual objects. As a result even the deities of the highest tantras, unlike the buddhist, are represented without bone attributes, although occasionally the *terton* and master Drepma Namkha and some other Zhang Zhung deities may be depicted holding the skull-cup or other bone attributes.

The pre-buddhist deities do not occupy high ranking places in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. They function as dharma's protectors, and therefore share only the wrathful appearance with the tantric Indian buddhist deities functioning as tutelary deities. As tutelary deities, they are the representation of enlightenment and are depicted naked, covered only with the bones ornaments and are often coupled with a female partner in the sexual union.

To conclude, it would seem that the use of human bones as ritual objects is of Indian origins that found in Tibet the perfect setting to bloom. However, a further research linked to the practice of Chöd in the Bön tradition to confirm or deny this conclusion.

## Bibliography

- Beer, Robert. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. 2nd Rev. ed. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004
- Blezer, Hank, Grung, Kalsang Norbu, Rath Saraju. "Where to Look For the Origins of Zhang zhung-related Scripts?" *The journal of the international association for Bon research* 1, no 1 (December 2013): 99-174.
- Blofeld, John Eaton Calthorpe. *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet : A Practical Guide*. Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1982.
- Chaoul, Alejandro. *Chod practice in the Bon tradition*. New York: Snow Lion Publication, 2009.
- Dagyab Rimpoche. *Simboli buddhisti e cultura tibetana*. Translated by Pasquale Faccia. Roma: Edizioni Arkeios, 2003.
- Davidson, Ronald M. *Tibetan Renaissance : Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. New York Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Fuentes, Ayesha, Kaminishi, Ikumi, Probst, Peter, and Walsler, Joseph. "Utilizing Terror: On the Adoption and Refinement of Skull Cups in Tibetan Buddhism," Ma Thesis Tufts University 2011.
- Gouin, Margaret. *Tibetan rituals of death. Buddhist funerary practices*. London: Routleg, 2019. Print. Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism.
- Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen. *The Arrow and the Spindle : Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998.
- Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen, and Watt, Jeff J. *Bon, the Magic Word : The Indigenous Religion of Tibet*. New York, NY : London: Rubin Museum of Art ; Philip Wilson, 2007.
- Kvæerne, Per. "Aspects of the Origin of the Buddhist Tradition in Tibet." *Numen* 19, no. 1-3 (1972): 22-40.
- Kvaerne, Per, and Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. *Tibet Bon Religion : A Death Ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Iconography of Religions. Section 12, East- and Central Asia ; Fasc. 13. 851171354. Leiden: Brill, 1985.
- Kvaerne, Per. *The Bon Religion of Tibet : The Iconography of a Living Tradition*. London: Serindia, 1995
- Landaw, Jonathan, and Andy Weber. *Images of Enlightenment : Tibetan Art in Practice*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1993.
- Laufer, Berthold. *Use of human skulls and bones in Tibet*. Chicago: 1923.
- Linrothe, Robert, Watt, Jeff. *Demonic devine: Himalayan art and beyond*. New York: Rubin Museum of art, 2004.
- Lokeśa Candra. *Tibetan Art*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2008.
- Lorenzen, David N. *The Kāpālikas and Kālāmukhas : Two Lost Śaivite Sects*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Lorenzen, David N. "Early evidence for tantric religion". In *The roots of tantra*, edited by Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown, 25- 34. Albany: State University of New York, 2002.
- Loseries-Leick, Andrea. "Charnel grounds traditions in Tibet: some remarks and observations" in *Universität Zürich, and International Seminar on the Anthropology of Tibet the Himalaya. Proceedings of the International Seminar on the Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya, September 21-28, 1990, at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich. Ethnologische Schriften Zürich ; ESZ 12 049102664. Zürich]: Ethnological Museum of the University of Zurich, 1993.*

- Loseries-Leick, Andrea. *On the use of skulls in Tibetan rituals*. In: *Tibetan studies, proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, Narita 1989. Narita, 1992 (159-173).
- Loseries-Leick, Andrea. *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra : An Ethno-historical Study of Skulls, Bones and Relics*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 2008.
- Martin, Kvaerne, Martin, Dan, Kvaerne, Per, and Nagano Yasuhiko. *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*. Senri Ethnological Reports, 40. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003.
- Mullin, Glenn H. *The Tibetan book of the dead*. New Delhi: Roli books, 2009.
- Namkhai, Norbu. *Drung, Deu e Bön. Le narrazioni, I linguaggi simbolici e il Bön nell'antico Tibet*. Arcidosso: ShangShung Edizioni, 1996.
- Namkhai, Norbu. *Chöd*. Arcidosso: Shang Shung Edizioni, 2001.
- Namkhai, Norbu. *The necklace of gzi. On the history and culture of Tibet*. Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications 2004.
- Namkhai, Norbu, and Donatella Rossi. *The Light of Kailash : A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet. Vol. 1: The Early Period*. Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 2009.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René Von. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet : The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. 's-Gravenhage [etc.]: Mouten & [etc.], 1956.
- Orofino, and Ma Gcig Lab Sgron Ma. *Contributo Allo Studio Dell'insegnamento Di Ma Gcig Lab Sgron*. Supplemento No. 53 Agli Annali Vol. 47 (1987), Fasc. 4. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1989.
- Orofino, Giacomella. "The great wisdom mother and the gcod tradition." In *Tantra in Practice*. Edited by David Gordon White, 320-341. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Pratāpāditya Pāla, Olson, Eleanor, Asia House Gallery, National Collection of Fine Arts, and Seattle Art Museum. *The Art of Tibet*. New York]: Asia Society; Distributed by New York Graphic Society [Greenwich, Conn, 1969.
- Pott, P.H. *Introduction to the Tibetan Collection of the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden*. Leiden: Brill, 1951.
- Powers, John. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995.
- Reynolds, John Myrdhin. "Ancient Tibetan bonpo shamanism". Berkley, Vidhyadara Institute, 1989.
- Reynolds, John Myrdhin. *Yungdrung Bön, the eternal tradition : the ancient pre-Buddhist religion of Central Asia and Tibet : its history, teachings and literature*. Bonpo translate project, 1991.
- Rhie, Thurman, Moore, Thurman, Robert A.F., Moore, Julia, Asian Art Museum, and Tibet House. *Wisdom and Compassion : The Sacred Art of Tibet*. Expanded ed. New York: Abrams, 1996.
- Robinson, James. "The eighty-four siddhas." Phd diss. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. *Civilized Shamans : Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1993.
- Sanders, Fabian. "Tibetan Oracles". April 29, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/fabianoracles>
- Snellgrove, David. *Buddhist Himalaya : Travels and Studies in Quest of the Origins and Nature of Tibetan Religion*. Third ed. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2011.
- Stein, R. A. *La civiltà Tibetana*. Milano: Edizione CDE spa, 1986.

Stoddard, Heather. "Eat it up or throw it to the dogs? Dge 'dun chos 'phel (1903-1951), Ma cig 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*, 9-36. Vol. 10/12. Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS, 2003.

*Tucci, Swaan, and Swaan, Wim. Tibet : Land of Snows. New York: Stein and Day, 1967.*

*Tucci, Giuseppe. Le religioni del Tibet. Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1976.*

Uhlig, Helmut, and Museum Rietberg. *On the Path to Enlightenment : The Berti Aschmann Foundation of Tibetan Art at the Museum Rietberg Zürich.* Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 1995.

## List of images

1. Map of Tibet (Harley: 1994, 608)
2. Tibetan panorama (Namkhai: 2010, 53)
3. Map of Zhang Zhung (after Harley: 1994, 608)
4. Tonpa Shenrab (Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.66.610)
5. Khaṭvāṅga; (Beer: 2004, detail of plate 115)
6. Indian Adept Kaṅkaripa (HAR 52548467 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/52548467>)
7. Indian adept Kapalapa (HAR 94066 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/94066>)
8. Skull cup (HAR 81605 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/81605>)
9. Skull cup (HAR 31477 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/31477>)
10. Shri Devi (HAR 639 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/639>)
11. Ritual peg, Kila (Rubin Museum of Art; C2005.16.66 <https://rubinmuseum.org/collection/artwork/ritual-peg-kila-F2005-16-66>)
12. Machig Labdron (HAR 8363 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/8363>)
13. Bonpo Chödpa (Chaoul: 2009, cover image)
14. Skull cup (Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden, RV-2220-1 <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/fe845b36-2195-44cf-bc45-7efbae4dad4a>)
15. Thighbone trumpet (Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden, RV-2739-31 <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/3d9dd308-0849-4e53-a016-441002204033>)
16. Trumpet (HAR 74822 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/74822>)
17. Indian adept padampa Sangye (HAR 53050551 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/53050551> )
18. Cabinet (Karmay: 2002, fig. 162)
19. Tonpa Shenrab, Trisung Gyalwa (HAR 81499 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/81499>)
20. Skull cup (Beer: 2004, detail of plate 119)
21. Offering of the five senses (Beer: 2004, detail of plate 140)
22. Offering of the five senses (Beer: 2004, detail of plate 140)
23. Thighbone trumpet (Beer: 2004, detail plate 117)
24. Mandala of Vajrayogini - Khroda Kali (HAR 638 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/638>)
25. Dorje Legpa (HAR 73269 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/73269>)
26. Pehar (HAR 283 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/283>)
27. Mahākāla Chaturbhuja (HAR <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/104>)
28. Machen Pomra (HAR 73250 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/73250>)
29. Sipai Gyalmo (HAR 85547 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/85547>)
30. Meri (HAR 31505 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/31505>)
31. Flaming Tiger-God Tagla Membar (HAR 200041 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/200041>)
32. Yamari, Manjushri (eight pronouncements) (HAR 91095 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/91095>)
33. Cakrasaṁvara (HAR 69 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/69>)
34. Magyü Sanchog Tartug (HAR 4119 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/4119>)
35. Padmasambhava in dākiṅīs company (Karmay: 2002, Fig. 3)
36. Nine magical Ladies who enjoy space and the nine great subjugators who subdue border (Tsumagari: 2011, No 34)
37. Naropa (HAR 32529 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/32529>)
38. Drempa Namkha (HAR 90757 <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/90757>)
39. Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelugpa Lama (Fuentes: 2011, fig. 2)