AYESHA FUENTES

Establishing Context and Continuity for the Use of Human Remains in Tibetan Ritual Objects: Conservation as Research Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This paper will describe the methods and findings of a material and technical study of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist ritual objects made with human remains. This work combines the technical examination and documentation of objects in museum collections with fieldwork amongst practitioner communities, a study of the region's iconographic traditions, and a historical reading of religious texts and commentaries. This examination of Buddhist and tantric ritual instruments includes skulls used as vessels, a horn or trumpet made from a human femur, a double-sided hand drum made with skulls, and carved ornaments worn on the waist, chest, head, arms, and legs that are made of human bone and facilitate the practitioner's ritual embodiment of certain types of deities.

This work is partially framed in response to a legacy of colonial knowledge production in historical anglophone sources on Tibetan religious life, where early museum expertise and a substantial amount of the collections were derived either directly or indirectly through the British imperial activity in south and central Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries (Harris 2012). Historical sources often repeat the language of scholars such as former colonial officer Laurence Waddell, for example, a key consultant on Tibetan culture for several UK institutions who referred to contexts for the use of human remains as "devil dance," "necromancy," and "sorcery" (Waddell 1895, 4). This project has sought to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of these older vocabularies and further, to put this information into a global, postcolonial perspective (Note 1).

At the same time, firsthand experience in the region has indicated how visible these objects are within daily religious life, recognized—if not always well-known—by a broad diversity of practitioners as well as observers from neighboring religious communities (Note 2). Furthermore, though the mastery of these instruments is cultivated within some of Buddhism and tantra's most volatile and specialized practices, this research has been guided by scholar Hugh Urban, who engages with esoteric traditions through their public forms, strategies, or tactics for the expression of shared values, rather than the content of their secrets (Urban 1997, 3). This kind of data is publicly accessible both globally and within the Tibetan cultural region via libraries, online repositories of religious texts, ritual performance, wall paintings, and material culture.

This object-focused research hopes to clarify the relationship between these instruments and other ways in which human remains are used as part of Buddhist and tantric material religion: because the skull, drum, trumpet, and regalia studied here are almost always designed and fabricated to perform a repeatable function, they cannot be understood as technically equivalent to bodily relics (Sanskrit *śarīra*, Tibetan *ring bsrel*). Relics are a much larger category of Buddhist material culture including not only human remains but also some texts, clothing, and impressions (Martin 1994). Moreover, this work engages with how the use of human bone as a substrate for cultural objects—here, predominantly crania and femurs—represents a technical choice requiring specific material knowledge for effective production, activation, and maintenance.

This paper introduces this multidisciplinary project and describes how it has been shaped by these objects' diverse contexts. Furthermore, this work explores how conservation's goals and methodologies might be applied not only to a study of specific objects and museum collections, but also to greater traditions of object-making and knowledge production.

METHODOLOGY

This research is the subject of a 2021 PhD dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; it grew from previous work undertaken as a graduate student in history of art at Tufts University (2011) and also at the UCLA/Getty MA Program in the Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic Materials (2014, now Conservation of Material Heritage).

Presented in the Concurrent General Session "Interdisciplinary Research Methods to (Re-)Establish Object Histories and Provenance for Material Culture" on May 16, 2022.

Fig. 1. Reverse of a bone ornament (Fowler Museum at UCLA, X69. 300 C) in raking white light, made from a section of human cranium with evidence of a refined technique and control of the substrate's workability. Author's photo used with permission of the museum.

From 2010 to 2015, previous to doctoral study, this research was largely conducted through secondary sources in European languages and visits to US institutions with collections of Tibetan and Himalayan material (fig. 1). This included the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Field Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Pacific Asia Museum, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Rubin Museum of Art, American Museum of Natural History, and—after moving to the UK in 2016—the British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, Wellcome Collection/National Science Museum (UK), and National Museums Liverpool. At each site, the materials, construction, and condition of objects were documented using digital photography, a Colorite ColorChecker Passport, a small handheld flashlight, and written proforma in Microsoft Word for noting evidence of use or repair as well as provenance and collection history.

The technical examination of museum objects cultivated familiarity with their materials, and digital images made during these examinations became essential for facilitating conversation during fieldwork since the sale and trade of human remains is illegal in each of the countries visited. Over a period of 11 months in 2017 and 2018, 140 sites were visited in eastern Tibet (China), the Kathmandu valley (Nepal), Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Sikkim (India); 102 informants of various religious and educational backgrounds consented to anonymously share their knowledge and experience by answering a series of simple questions about the function of these objects, their fabrication, and the source of human remains as raw material. No recordings or images of living people were made and objects in practitioner settings were photographed only with the permission of local custodians in a way that obscures their location for their security and privacy. There was also a substantial amount of participant observation during rituals, even as a nonpractitioner, and a number of craftspeople and material specialists were observed in their workshops.

Supplementary to this intraregional survey, specific iconographic traditions were examined in order to historically contextualize the information provided by practitioners and ritual users. This work relied on guidance from specialists in the region's visual culture as well as surviving and/or published examples of Himalayan sculpture, wall paintings, manuscripts, and *thang ka* (painted hanging scrolls). By relating images of teachers, deities, protectors, ritual intermediaries, and celebrated yoga practitioners through their visual representation with charnel implements—ritual objects made with human remains—it has been possible to articulate and reinforce dynamic continuities between the oldest extant records for the use of these materials and the region's active religious traditions, some 2000 years of cultural history.

Finally, in order to further substantiate narratives suggested through iconographic study and information shared amongst practitioners, a number of religious texts were also consulted with both ritual instructions and commentarial literature describing human remains used as Buddhist ritual objects going back to at least the eighth century (Wedemeyer 2013). Much of this textual corpus is still being printed in the Himalayan region, with historical materials both preserved and practiced within a diversity of religious institutions formed around specific teachings and pedagogical lineages (i.e. dGe lugs, rNying ma, Sa skya, and bKa' brgyud). A large amount of this written material is also freely accessible and searchable via online repositories like the Buddhist Digital Resource Center.

RESULTS

While many of the visual, textual, and narrative sources described above resist a literal reading, they nevertheless present evidence for an increasingly formal and expanded function for these objects over a period of centuries. At the same time, this interdisciplinary methodology has facilitated an object-centered discussion that combines material, technical, and historical documentation shaped by different forms of knowledge and which is informative to practitioners and craftspeople as well as museum professionals. The findings of this research—including over 200 images—are given in full in the author's doctoral dissertation (Fuentes 2021); the following section presents a selection of summaries or case studies that illustrate relationships between the material histories of specific instruments and their social, cultural, and ritual contexts.

In February 2017, a set of four shallow skull bowls decorated with plaits of long black hair and colored textile pennants were

seen in storage at the Wellcome Collection/National Science Museum's Blythe House site (accession number A20948 A-D). A small section of cranium forming the base of each object exhibited dark grime with areas of polish and smoothing along the edges indicating significant amounts of handling and use previous to collection. The museum's records contained little information about their function or provenance but this well-established—and well-preserved—pattern of wear indicated that these objects were held in the hand.

During fieldwork, images of these materials and details of their condition were shared with monastic practitioners, householders, ritual specialists, craftspeople, vendors, students, and museum colleagues within the region. It was suggested by several individuals that they are used in masked ritual dance called *'chams,* a tradition connecting implements made with human remains to written sources dated to the 13th century at the latest (Cantwell 1992). Invitations to observe the black hat *'chams,* as well as later iconographic and textual study, confirmed that these objects—called *bandha* in Tibetan and Sanskrit—are historically associated with liturgical performances often observed around major festivals or the Tibetan new year. It was moreover found that the use of human remains for these implements was increasingly rare due to the availability of relatively inexpensive substitute materials like plaster or plastic.

Some findings were less consistent than the Wellcome *bandha:* for example, it was observed that human bone ornaments—called *rus rgyan* in Tibetan and worn to facilitate taking the form of the deity Heruka through ritual practice—frequently exhibit evidence of re-stringing, repair, and replacement with as many as four to five distinct carving campaigns per object. This type of pastiche was observed in sets of bone ornaments in the care of the Brooklyn Museum (23.289.27201) and British Museum (2003,0929.1) as well as those maintained within practitioner communities, for example, at the museum of Hemis Monastery in Ladakh (Note 3). Though these ornaments are represented in religious sources as having five or six components, it is most likely the apron or girdle (*ska rags*) that has significant carvings and ornamental materials, and it is this section that is most often exhibited in global museums and collections.

The diversity of conditions, forms, and construction techniques evident in these objects is indicative of the dynamic materiality of their contexts for use as well as this project's individual sources and informants. The *rkang gling* is a horn or trumpet made from a human femur and most often associated with the practice of *gcod,* or cutting, where it is played to invite specific types of ritual intermediaries. This can be practiced by lay specialists or monastics, though descriptions of the features of this characteristic instrument can provoke a variety of interpretations, each dependent on an individual's unique religious education, background, and experience: to some, for example, a protective covering over the trumpet's bell—the condyle or knee end of the femur—is meant to demonstrate the value of the instrument, to others it is a sacrificial layer to be replaced when damaged, and yet others described its function in relation to deities engaged through ritual practice.

Like the thighbone trumpet, the double-sided hand drum known in both Sanskrit and Tibetan as *ḍamaru* is often associated with the tradition of *gcod,* as well as the use of musical instruments to make sound offerings to deities and protectors. Here, the material of the drum body—and by extension, its sound—is specific to the type of deity to which the offering is being made, where those made of skulls are most often used for wrathful or volatile entities. *Ḍamaru* can also be made of wood and plastic, with drumheads that are likely goat skin and frequently painted or dyed green. Where skulls are used for these instruments, the two crania are often joined symmetrically so that any sutures or characteristic markings mirror one another.

For skull *ḍamaru* as well as the other objects discussed here, the specific requirements for human remains used as a substrate for ritual objects can vary between individual teachings or practitioners, and according to access to material resources as well as the social setting for use (e.g. in a monastery, at a local temple, at home, in retreat, etc.). The criteria for an appropriate skull, for example, depends on its intended use as a vessel in the preparation of medicine, for divination, and/or as a platform for the transformation and purification of ritual substances. Factors to consider in the selection of materials may include color, patterns exhibited in the surface or structure, and the donor's gender, social status, or health.

However, during fieldwork it was found that a direct donation of human remains from the deceased or their family is more likely in historically embedded practitioner communities, where consent is given to a local religious authority. Moreover, it was observed that the recovery of raw materials is possible regardless of the form of disposal, whether it is cremation, burial, or exposure and scattering to the birds (Tibetan *bya gtor*, translated from Chinese as "sky burial") (fig. 2). In urban communities, it was seen that human remains are more often sourced via an informal trade network, and across the region, where practitioners had specific requirements related to their ritual purposes, they were required to invest additional time, expertise, and/or money in order to confirm the origins of their materials.

Finally, it was observed that increasing restrictions on the trade of human remains in combination with a global interest in these ritual objects—as cultural properties or through the growth of Buddhist communities as well as the Tibetan diaspora—has cultivated a series of innovations in their production. Animal bone is frequently used as a substitute for human bone in ornaments, for example, though its relative lack of density and lamellar structure have inspired craftspeople to make adjustments in their tool use and rendering, with fewer volumetric forms and more pierce-work or low relief carving (fig. 3). In terms of the integrity of these materials, it was explained that the efficacy of ritual objects depends on the setting for practice

Fig. 2. A bleached and embrittled skull fragment at an exposure burial site in eastern Tibet.

Fig. 3. A carver specializing in bone and shell in his studio in the Kathmandu valley, here using an electrical tool and buffalo bone to produce a knife sheath for commercial sale.

as well as the interest, education, and knowledge of the participants. For this reason, a coconut shell or plastic bowl painted to resemble a skull can have the same capacity as a human cranium when it is activated with appropriate skill.

CONCLUSIONS

By applying conservation methodologies as research practice, this interdisciplinary study has articulated new relationships between cultural objects and evidence for their use and valorization that emphasize the complexity of their technology as well as the longevity and dynamism of their contexts. This research seeks to apply its findings to the care, handling, and display of Tibetan and Himalayan material religion and to further facilitate an exchange of knowledge and expertise between museums and religious custodians. Moreover, this work hopes to demonstrate that the care and interpretation of these objects should rely on their ritual functions as well as the cultural narratives that support them historically and at present.

A skull, for example, can be understood as a type of liturgical vessel that—like other Buddhist vessels in metal, ceramic, glass, etc.—should be stored either turned down or, if turned up, with grain, seeds, flowers, or some other auspicious material within it in order to preserve its capacity to transmit positive influence. While this is common practice for storage in a practitioner setting, it has also been easily adapted at both the museum at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in the predominantly Buddhist region of Sikkimand for the recent British Museum exhibition *Tantra: From Enlightenment to Revolution* (2020–2021). In many practitioner communities, it was observed that these objects are often on display as vessels for the collection or distribution of offerings, as part of ritual assemblages, or through liturgical performance.

At the same time, throughout these objects' visual, material, and textual record, it can be seen that the use of human remains in ritual instruments is meant to challenge perceptions of purity and transgression and to undermine the relationship between the self and the body. Where many standards of museum practice are derived from a Cartesian paradigm wherein the experience of one's body is related to the identity of an individual, in many Buddhist teachings the temporary experience of a human body is presented as a vehicle that enables education, liberation, and the accumulation of merit. Similarly, the concept of personhood is misleading and neither the self nor its body have any reality. For many of the practitioners and teachings encountered throughout this study, anxieties around human remains and the death of the body are considered indicative of a lack of Buddhist religious knowledge, and yet for others, these materials can be dangerous and should be left in the care of specialists who can manage their volatility.

Throughout this study, it has been seen that the skulls, instruments, and bone ornaments discussed here as ritual objects have the capacity to educate, transform, pacify, bind, and empower. As cultural objects these materials have the potential to cultivate space for epistemological diversity in museum practice and to facilitate complexity and nuance in the handling of human remains in museums. In conclusion, this project hopes to suggest a larger and more inclusive scope for the application of conservation's methods, priorities, and documentary language.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank her informants, colleagues and friends within the Himalayan region for their curiosity, generosity and support. She also wishes to thank her teachers, colleagues, and supervisors at SOAS. This project was funded through a SOAS Overseas Research Studentship, a SOAS Neil Krietman Scholarship, and a grant from Khyentse Foundation. Additional thanks to Chris DeBrer and Marci Burton for including this paper in their panel *Interdisciplinary Research Methods to (Re-)establish Object Histories and Provenance for Material Culture* at the 2022 AIC General Meeting in Los Angeles.

NOTES

1. This is a technical study and does not attempt to represent a Tibetan curatorial perspective on these materials; for this, see the forthcoming research of Thubten Kelsang, doctoral candidate at University of Oxford.
2. The author completed a series of conservation internships and volunteer projects at the Department of Culture in Thimphu, Bhutan previous to doctoral study, between 2013 and 2015.
3. The author most recently visited the museum at Hemis Monastery in April of 2018.

REFERENCES

Cantwell, Cathy. 1992. "A black hat ritual dance." *Bulletin of Tibetology* 28 (1): 12–23.

Fuentes, Ayesha. 2021. "On the Use of Human Remains in Tibetan Ritual Objects." PhD dissertation, SOAS University of London.

Harris, Clare E. 2012. *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Martin, Dan. 1994. "Pearls from Bones: Relics, Chortens, Tertons and the Signs of Saintly Death in Tibet." *Numen* 41: 273–324.

Urban, Hugh B. 1997. "Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry." *Numen* 44 (1): 1–38.

Waddell, Laurence A. 1958 [1895]. *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism*. Second. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd.

Wedemeyer, Christian K. 2013. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. New York: Columbia University Press.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

AYESHA FUENTES is a graduate of the UCLA/Getty MA Program in the Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic Materials (2014) and has a PhD from SOAS University of London (2021). She is currently the Isaac Newton Trust Research Associate in Conservation at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Downing Street, Cambridge UK CB2 3DZ; acvf2@cam.ac.uk.