

the art of BONE

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Introduces the use
of Human Bone
in Tibetan Ritual



There have been many cultures that have used human bones in some form of ritual way. Close to home, the ancient Celts placed human heads and skulls into special carved niches, and even today Catholics preserve the bones of saints. But perhaps no culture

has developed the practice with such artistry as the Tibetans.

Tibetan tantric Buddhist practice uses a wide range of human body parts (either actual parts or symbolic representations of them) in its rituals and ritual equipment - especially those practices connected to the wrathful protector beings of Buddhism.

If you read the book 'Oracles and Demons of Tibet' by Rene De Nebesky-Wojkowitz, you will - to quote one Tibetologist - be introduced to 'spooky Buddhism' rather than 'Californian Buddhism.'

And you will probably find the list of ingredients used in wrathful practice and traditional Tibetan protective magic a little on the unsavoury side; including as it does such things as clarified corpse fat, the menstrual blood of widows, hearts of children born out of an incestuous unions, and flayed skin altar cloths.

However, leaving the more squidgy bits of people aside, the main human remains used in tantra are bones, which are used to fashion a variety of ritual objects.

SKULL OFFERING BOWLS

The Sanskrit word *kapala* (Tib: *thod-pa*) denotes a skull bowl or cup, sometimes made from metal, sometimes a monkey skull, but very

often made from a human skull.

In the West it used to be fashionable to have a human skull *memento mori* to serve as a reminder of life's impermanence, and although this is not the main symbolic reason for using a skull bowl in Tibetan practice; it also serves as that - as there can be perhaps no greater symbol of our own mortality.

For use as a *kapala*, a skull has to be carefully sourced. They are often described as 'jewel bowls' (Tib: *rin chen thod pa*) or 'wish fulfilling gems' (Tib: *yid bzhin norbu*), but only if found with the right characteristics and in the right circumstances.

Although the skull that is used can be of either sex, it is considered important to know whether it is male or female, and there are traditional tests to identify the sex which include listening to the quality of the sound made when the finder urinates into the skull - a technique no doubt lacking in modern forensic departments.

If the head is still on the corpse, Tibetan lore says that where it was found is important, as is the direction it faced. If found upon a mountain, for instance, the new owner of the *kapala* will obtain dominance over others; if found close to a village, the owner will gain followers; if found in the springtime, they will be cured of



Top: Tibetan *tsam* mask worn during ritual dances

Inset: carved human bone decorations from *tsam* dancer's ornaments

Left: human skull *kapala* offering bowl



illness; if found in the summer, they will gain great riches. A head already detached from the body is said to give great luck and freedom from enemies.

The finder is also encouraged to be fully aware when they find a skull. Do they feel an overwhelming sense of compassion and love? Do they feel heavy or anxious? Do their 'life burdens' feel reduced by finding it? Also the colour and texture of the bone are important, as are the shape of the sections of the skull, and the overall shape as a whole.

If the skull passes all of these tests and is deemed to be favourable, it may be used as a kapala. It will be cleaned of any remaining flesh, bathed in saffron water and polished (some traditions advise using clarified corpse fat as an ideal polish).

It may be used whole, or more often the top of the cranium will be removed and turned upside down to form a bowl. This bowl may have a triangular stand made for it and a metal cover fashioned - a little like a lid. The skull may be lined with silver inside, and sometimes may be beautifully carved on the outside.

A kapala should be consecrated on an astrologically auspicious day, washed in fragrant smoke (smudge smoke - which the Tibetans call *sang*), while specific mantras are recited. The Kapala is then filled with small images of deities of wealth or of protection, then pieces of gold, silver, precious stones, medical ingredients are placed inside, such as camphor, nutmeg, sandalwood and musk, wheat, fruits, flowers, pieces of tiger or leopard skin, and silk, as well as Buddhist texts. It is then wrapped in cloth. It is important to handle kapalas with great care and respect, and upon no

circumstances should they be left empty, or lying upside down, as the beneficial qualities of the skull will diminish.

Kapalas are used as aids in visualisation practice. The contents visualised may include elixir or nectar - to bring about spiritual realisation and longevity - from which the practitioner 'drinks,' or offerings of body parts, such as one's sense organs, a mix of blood and semen, or even one's whole body (in which case the kapala is visualised as a kind of cooking pot - ego stew anyone?)

They are also sometimes used as bowls for actual food during special ritual meals called *tsog*, where food is shared and also offered to the Buddhas, the protectors and the local land spirits.

DRUMS MADE FROM SKULLS

In Tibet, a special, small, hour-glass shaped drum is used for many ceremonies. Called a *damaru* in Sanskrit (Tib: *mga*), these are often made of wood, but special ones are made of the tops of two skulls.

These skull damaru (*thod mga*) are ideally made from the skull of a 16 year old boy and a 16 year old girl, and the use of skulls from both sexes symbolises the male and female aspects important in tantra. They are sometimes skinned with human skin, but more often than not the skin is from a goat.

Damaru, whether made from wood or skulls, are played in the right (male) hand, and represent form and compassion (the female left hand representing emptiness, and wisdom). They are hung with a silk tail, often in the colours of the five elements, which are also the four directions and centre.

HUMAN BONE PRAYER BEADS

Tibetan Buddhists and also Mongolian shamans use prayer beads. Known in Sanskrit as a mala (Tib: *tenga*), they are used for counting mantras and as a means of divination [see Sacred Hoop Issue 56]

Malas can be made from many

things, some are silver or gold, others lotus seeds, or stones like turquoise or agate, but especially prized are ones of human bone.

The beads in these are in the form of flat discs, and they are cut from either 108 skulls - one bead being taken from the third eye of each skull - or from 100 skulls, or just 8 skulls where a lot of the cranium will be cut to produce the 108 beads used on a mala. It is said a virgin girl should string the beads for a practitioner to use.

Sometimes malas are made from finger bones (Tib: *tsigs gu'i 'phreng ba*), in which case only ten corpses are required.

Human bone malas (and bone malas in general) are traditionally used for wrathful practice, although nowadays animal bone malas are used for many practices including peaceful ones.

THIGHBONE TRUMPETS

The use of human thighbones for the making of trumpets is covered in a separate article in this issue of Sacred Hoop, but it might be good to add a few extra points here.

Kanglings (Tib: *rkang gling*) are often made from the left leg of a 16 year old girl, although some Chöd traditions suggest a bone taken from someone who has died from a contagious disease - such as leprosy - is useful if chöd is practiced to bring healing; or from a woman who has died in childbirth if the chöd is performed for curing infertility and protection against infant death. For control of the weather a thighbone from someone who has been killed in a fight where there were no survivors is best. This last form of kangling is called an 'enemy flute' (Tib: *dgra gling*) and they are supposed to be so filled with angry hate they are ideal for controlling thunder and hail. The skin covering at the joint end of a kangling should be human skin, but generally is made from goat.

Tiger bones are

Left: beautifully carved human skull kapala

Below: very fine human skull damaru drum

Bottom of Page: Human bone prayer beads





Above: detail of an old carved human bone dancer's breast ornament

Right: Tibetan monastic dancer wearing rich brocade robes and bone ornament set

Below: carved bone dancer's apron with fabric patterned with the face of a wrathful being beneath it

Right: Mongolian tsam dancer's costume showing the bone ornaments

when you wear a set of dancer's bone ornaments you understand the weight you carry around in your body without realising it

considered good for use as trumpets (*stak kling*) for wrathful practice, and are also sometimes used in

Nepali shamanism, as are human arm bones, which should be stolen from a grave at night. Tiger bones are no longer taken, but old ones are still used.

BONE DANCER'S ORNAMENTS

Perhaps the most beautifully fashioned form of human bones used in Tibetan Buddhism are those worn in ritual dances.

In these, human bones are expertly carved and made into a series of plaques and beads which are strung together to form a set of ornaments (Tib: *rus rgyan*). These sets are comprised of an apron, necklace, wrist and ankle bands and a hat. They are said to be the armour of the dakini and wrathful beings, and are often worn by performers taking on these roles in ritual dances. For a full set the corpses of five people are required, and when you wear them you understand the weight of bone you carry around in



your body without realising it, as a whole set has a surprising weight.

These are always carved and decorated with great care, bone plaques have images of Buddhist beings and small beads may be carved like flowers. Silk brocade (or tiger skin) is used as a backing for the apron and a whole set is stunning. Such items are very rare, although I have been lucky enough to have owned two sets in my life.

OBTAINING AND WORKING BONE

Bone, if it is to be carved, is best worked with when it is fresh, as it soon ages, dries and gets more brittle. In ancient Tibet and the surrounding countries, bones were once fairly easy to get due to the practice of sky burial - where corpses are cut up and fed to vultures and wild animals on desolate hillsides. Nowadays this practice still occurs, but less so, and laws governing the sale of human bones have tightened up - it is now prohibited to export

human bone artifacts from Nepal.

In the light of this, animal bones are more and more being used instead of human bones. Also in the past Buddhist practitioners who required a specific bone might well be able to obtain it from the family of the deceased, who would consider it an honour that it was to be used for the benefit of other sentient beings.

IN FEAR OF THE DEAD

Tibet is a wild landscape, and despite all the use of human bones in ritual ways, its traditional culture is filled with many stories of spirits, sorcery and the perils of dealing with the dead.

One of the main ways of dealing with restless spirits is the performing of the chöd ritual. Writing in 1981, Andrea Loseries-Leick describes a performance of chöd done for a suicide.

'I woke up and looked out of



the window, and was confronted with a shocking sight; a naked man hanging from the branch of a tree in front of the monastery. His clothes and an empty bottle of brandy were lying nearby.

Following the discovery of the body, the monastery appointed an old and experienced lama as the head of the ceremony, and the preparation for the ritual started immediately. Only five specific specially qualified lamas, including the old master, worked to perform it, other monks and spectators being ordered to retreat as far as possible so as not to disturb the ceremony. Nobody yet had approached the corpse.

The old master started the ceremony by blowing hard into his kangling to summon the spirit of the dead man. The neighing sound of his kangling, the rhythm of the drums and the shrill ringing of the bells played by the lamas echoed over the hills. Then a melodious song was sung repeatedly for several hours, only interrupted by sudden shrieks of the mantra 'phat!'

A large number of people had gathered and were watching the performance from a safe distance, although some curious foreigners tried to approach the tree in order to take photographs, but the local police and the much-feared monastery guards swiftly drove them away with wooden clubs.

It was an unforgettable and bizarre sight, the naked corpse still suspended on the tree, and before it, lamas in their heavy brocade robes of maroon and gold, the sunlight gleaming on the polished skull crowns and bone aprons they wore, all faintly veiled by juniper 'sang' smoke.

Eventually, one of the lamas rose and cut the corpse from its string, and the body was then cleaned, dressed and brought into a room outside the monastic boundaries, where further ceremonies continued for five more days.'

Another spirit manifestation many Tibetans are fearful of are *ro langs* (risen corpses). These are zombies who are said to roam the wild lands. It is said there are two types of *ro langs*, 'tantric' and 'demonic'. A tantric *ro langs* is a corpse activated through ritual, and a 'demonic' *ro langs* is a corpse activated by harmful spirits in order for them to bring misery and destruction.

The method of creating *ro langs* (Tib: *ro langs kyi dngos grub*) is said to involve performing a

ceremony which semi animates the corpse so that it sticks out its tongue, which the practitioner grabs hold of - failure to do so will result in the practitioners destruction at the hands of the *ro langs*.

Demonic *ro langs* are said to be animated by passing harmful spirits who chance upon a corpse they can use, which they re-animate. Here is a story recorded from a Tibetan man concerning his encounter with such a *ro langs*.

When I was a young boy and my grandfather was still alive, he used to carve mantras onto stones as did many of our neighbours. A man in the neighbourhood had just died, and the dead man was lying near where we cut the stones. When we began to cut, I saw the corpse move. I wondered how it could move and stared at it. Then someone told me to get a stone to carve, but I said: "The corpse is moving," but the others said that there must be something wrong with my eyes. But I saw that it was trying to rise and I told them this again.

Just when I said that, the corpse fell on its left side. Then it pressed its hands and forehead against the ground and tried to rise. I again begged them to look. My grandfather then did. He immediately ran for his phurba (ritual dagger), which he always brought with him. Now the corpse had knees, hands and forehead on the ground, but had raised its body. My grandfather struck the corpse three times with his phurba and cried "phat!" My grandfather defeated it.

FINDING RITUAL OBJECTS

Chances are you are not going to find your own source of fresh bones - and if you do, I suspect the police will quickly come knocking on your door. So if you feel drawn to learning about these ways I advise you to do so properly - out of respect to the tradition and the objects.

There are many Buddhist lamas and rinpoches in the West now, although not all of them will teach about these ways or even use them.

Human bone objects hold a fascination for many, and fine art auction houses sell them on a fairly regular basis - but often at very high prices.

Ritual objects are alive, and will seek you out if you are lucky and have the karma that attracts



Above: Tibetan sky burial. The photograph was taken with direct permission from the dead person's family, who were at the ceremony

them to you - and if you do not have the karma you may never come across them. Also be aware of fakes, eBay is awash with skull damaru, many of which are monkey skulls sold as human skulls to unknowledgeable buyers. Some kapalas are now being made out of resin and these can look very real unless you are used to holding real skulls. There is nothing wrong with using a resin skull as a visualisation aid - but if you are paying a high price for a bit of plastic - thinking it is real, you are probably going to experience suffering.

Also ox and yak bones are being carved nowadays too and passed off as human. I have also seen kanglings sold as human, that actually are made from camel bones, and are unplayable as the central sound hole is blocked.

My advice is - it is better to learn the authentic practice with a metal or wooden version of the object, and so gain merit, and perhaps attract a bone object to you because of the merit, than hold out for the 'real McCoy' simply because you want it.

It would seem that cultures the world over have both a fear and fascination with death, and the Tibetans have taken both of these aspects and made the use of human bones and the magical lore of corpses a rich part of their sacred traditions.

We are all on the path from cradle to grave, and when I hold a kapala or blow down my kangling - sounding a blast to address the spirits - I always wonder who this guest in my home once was, and I know I too am only passing through, and only a guest in the world.



Below: old, well polished skull kapala lined with silver and set with silver deaths-heads all around the lip of the bowl

Further Reading:
'Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra: an Ethno-Historical Study of Skulls, Bones and Relics.' Andrea Loserere-Leick (This is the definitive book on the ritual use of Bones in Tibetan tantric Buddhism).

'Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities.' Rene De Nebesky-Wojtkowitz.

'Shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas' Claudia Müller-Ebeling and Christian Ratsch

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