



TIGER

BELLS

Nicholas Breeze Wood
looks at an important
item used by many
traditional shamans

on the iron chains that shamans wear around their necks. In Tibet they are used in shamanism and in the folk Buddhism of the people. Up into Mongolia and Siberia they are an essential part of every shaman's costume and equipment, tied onto clothes, drums, drum beaters and many other ritual objects.

In some parts of Siberia they are said not to be a tiger, but to represent a frog, as frogs are important in the shamanic creation myths. Frog brought up silt from the ocean bottom to form the land, but a hostile spirit shot arrows at frog to stop it; so frog dived under the earth and now supports it, and when frog moves earthquakes happen. In Yakut mythology the first shaman was so powerful he denied the help of any other spirit, using only his own power. The creator was insulted and burnt the shaman, who filled his own body with frogs and other amphibians to keep him cool, only the frogs survived the inferno, and the most powerful shamans are said to be the descendents of these frog spirits.

Tiger bells are still made today, but it is hard to find hand-made bronze ones with good casting detail. Most of them nowadays are brass, and are mass produced.

Old bells come up for sale from time to time, but can reach prices of up to £20 (\$30) per bell, making it expensive to collect and use lots of them, and even the new bells are fairly expensive. There are also new bells available now, aged to make them appear more valuable.

But despite their cost, and whether they represent tigers or frogs, they are special bells and are worth seeking out.

Further information: <http://bit.ly/yqGmfY>

Tiger bells are a form of small bronze bell, found all over Asia. They are an important part of many shamanic traditions, but also have non-sacred uses. They are a kind of bell called a 'pellet' or 'crotal' bell - a cast, hollow, round metal shape with either a small lump of metal or a small stone inside, which bangs against the bell as it is shaken to make it ring.

Old bells were all made using the 'lost wax' casting method, a wax bell was hand-made, then wrapped in clay. The clay was heated and the wax ran out of a hole left for the purpose, and then liquid bronze poured in through the same hole. This makes every single old bell a unique one-of-a-kind object.

Tiger bells occur all over Asia, from the very south to the very north, and despite the wide

distribution range appear much the same throughout. They vary in size from over 10cm (4 inches) across, down to tiny ones just a few millimetres across; but generally they are between about 18 - 30mm across (0.6 - 1.3 inches). They are made

of bronze, although some modern ones are made of brass.

What sets them apart from other bells is their decoration.

Tiger bells have a stylised tiger's face on both sides, with protruding eyes and even teeth on larger bells. Some tiger bells do not have the tiger's face however, but instead have a tiger-striped, fur pattern all over them.

The original home of the bells is probably China, but no one appears to know for sure. It would seem logical that they were used as a trade item, as beads and bells have been for thousands of years, and the bells found their way gradually along trade routes, spreading right across Asia. It is very hard to say when they first started to be made, but their history does not seem to go back more than 1400 years, with popular use mostly over the past five or six centuries.

With a few exceptions, most peoples use them as protective amulets of one kind or another. Single bells may be worn around the neck or the ankle, especially the ankles of children. Bells are also tied to animals, including dogs, cats and horses. Traditionally they have been included as elements in jewellery, tied to clothes, hung on keyrings, used as door knobs, and used as musical instruments - where they are often used in groups, or tied to other instruments as jingling decoration.

Their main use however is in shamanism, and they are the bell of choice for shamans right across Asia. In Nepal they are often found

Bottom left:
objects on a
Siberian shaman's
ritual coat

Bottom centre:
very large tiger
bell, over 4 inches
across, hanging
outside

Bottom right:
tiger bell with
stone clapper in
its mouth

