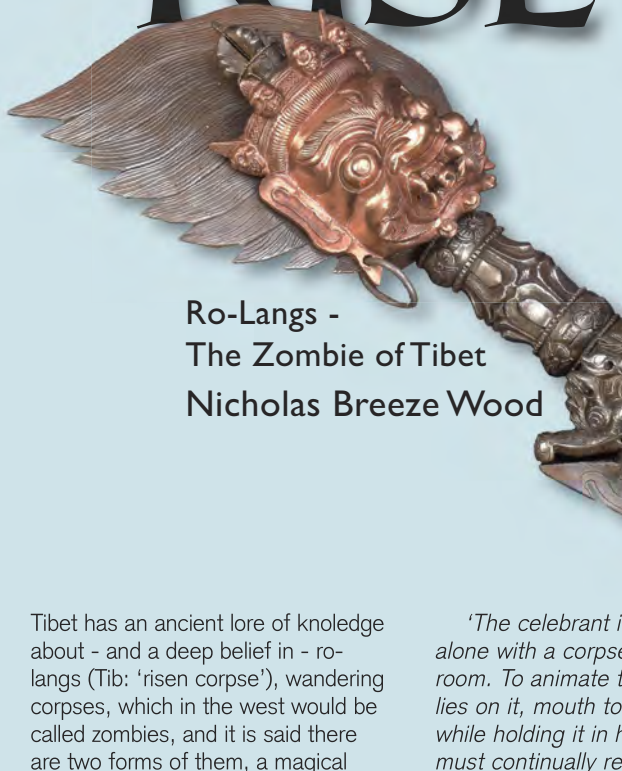


WHEN CORPSES RISE



Ro-Langs -
The Zombie of Tibet
Nicholas Breeze Wood



Above: a detail
of a charnel
ground from a
Tibetan thangka
painting

Left: an ornate
Tibetan phurba
ritual dagger

Below: a detail
of a demon
from a Tibetan
thangka painting

Tibet has an ancient lore of knowledge about - and a deep belief in - ro-langs (Tib: 'risen corpse'), wandering corpses, which in the west would be called zombies, and it is said there are two forms of them, a magical one - created by a practitioner skilled in magical arts - and an accidental demonic one, who are said to rise because the soul of the person has left the body, and a demonic spirit has quickly made a home in it, and reanimates the corpse.

Ro-langs probably first came to the attention of the west with the C20th French writer Alexandra David-Neel in her book 'Magic and Mystery in Tibet.' David-Neel was a doggedly determined French woman who, disguised as a Tibetan, managed to get herself into the country - which was closed to Westerners at the time - learned the language and studied in Tibetan Buddhism, including undertaking long retreats in caves in the mountains, suffering deep snow and other privations.

In her book, she describes meeting a ngakpa, who told her he rose a corpse...

'The celebrant is shut up alone with a corpse in a dark room. To animate the body, he lies on it, mouth to mouth, and while holding it in his arms, he must continually repeat mentally the same magic formula, excluding all other thoughts.

After a certain time, the corpse begins to move. It stands up and tries to escape; the sorcerer, firmly clinging to it, prevents it from freeing itself. Now the body struggles more fiercely. It leaps and bounds to extraordinary heights, dragging with it the man who must hold on, keeping his lips upon the mouth of the monster, and continue mentally repeating the magic words.

At last the tongue of the corpse protrudes from its mouth. The critical moment has arrived. The sorcerer seizes the tongue with his teeth and bites it off.

The corpse at once collapses. Failure in controlling the body after having awakened it, means certain death for the sorcerer.

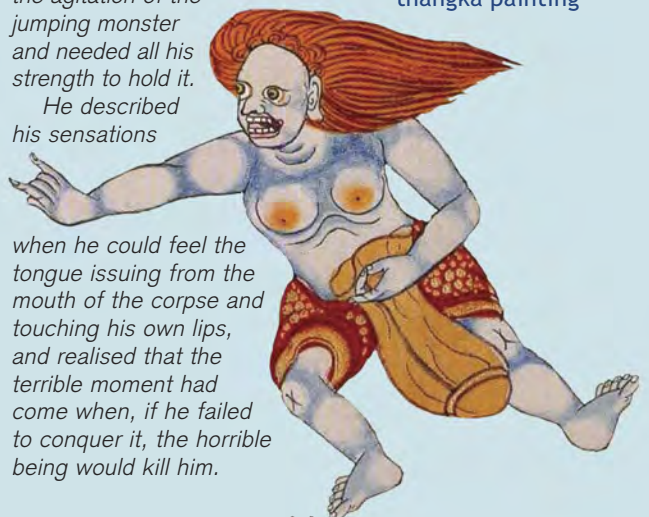
The tongue, carefully dried, becomes a powerful magic

weapon which is treasured by the triumphant ngakpa.'

The Tibetan who gave me these details described most vividly the gradual awakening of the corpse: the first conscious look which brightened its glazed eyes and its feeble movements slowly growing in strength until he became unable to prevent the agitation of the jumping monster and needed all his strength to hold it.

He described his sensations

when he could feel the tongue issuing from the mouth of the corpse and touching his own lips, and realised that the terrible moment had come when, if he failed to conquer it, the horrible being would kill him.





Above: a ro-lang sees a person in half Tibetan painting on card C18-19th

Had that fantastic struggle not been purely subjective? Had it not taken place during one of these trances which are frequently experienced by Tibetan practitioners - which they also voluntarily cultivate?

I doubted, and asked to see the tongue. The sorcerer showed me a desiccated blackish object which might have been a tongue, but it was not sufficient to prove the origin of the hideous relic.'

Below: the low door of a Tibetan house



Ro-langs' tongues may not be every ones cup of magical tea, but they are surely something sellers of fake ritual objects are missing out on with their eBay listings.

Many people have suggested Alexandra David-Neel completely made up this account, but there is at least one ancient story known in Tibet along similar lines which is quite possibly the origin of the story. This tale comes from Odantapuri monastery in medieval Buddhist India, which was well known in Tibet, and describes how the monastery was founded.

A yogi wished to obtain the power to re-activate corpses, but in order to carry out the ritual he needed an assistant. The only person he could find, however, was a devout Buddhist, who first refused to help, but finally agreed to take part, so long as he got a substantial reward.

The yogi had to make a corpse stick out its tongue, which in that moment the assistant had to grab. The corpse would do this three times, but if the assistant failed, terrible things would happen, the corpse would rise and kill and devour the yogi, his assistant and all the people close by.

The assistant failed twice, trying to grab the tongue with his hand, so he lay on the corpse - mouth to mouth - and on the third time managed to catch the corpses's tongue with his teeth. When the tongue was torn off, it turned into a sword and the body of the corpse changed into gold.

The yogi grabbed the magic sword and flew to the land of the gods, while the Buddhist - as his reward - received the solid gold corpse, which he cut up and sold, and raised the funds to build the monastery.

In her book, David-Neel then goes on to give another account of a ro-langs, told to her by a Tibetan she met...

'Beside corpses being revived by special rites, Tibetans believe also that any corpse is liable to rise suddenly, and harm the living. It is for this reason that dead bodies are continually watched by someone who recites the liturgic words which prevent that sham resurrection.

A monk from Sepogon in the vicinity of the Salween told me

the following story... While still a boy novice, he had accompanied three lamas of his monastery to a house where a man had died. There the lamas were to perform the daily rite for the dead till the day appointed to carry the corpse to the cemetery. At night they had retired to sleep in a corner of the large room where the body was kept, tied up in a seated posture with many scarves and swathed in clothes.

The charge of reciting the magic formulas had been entrusted to me. In the middle of the night I was overcome with the continuous wearisome repetition, and may have dozed a few minutes.

A small noise awakened me, a black cat passed by the corpse and went out of the room. Then I heard a kind of cracking noise like tearing cloth, and to my horror, I saw the dead body moving and freeing himself from, his bands.

Mad with fright, I ran out of the house, but before I had escaped from the room I saw the ghost stretching out one hand and creeping upon the sleeping men.

In the morning the three men were found dead; the corpse had returned to his place but the scarves were torn and the clothes lay on the floor around him.'

Here are some stories about ro-langs, recently collected from Tibetans living in Nepal...

My grandfather, who was a ngakpa, had gone away to carry out a ceremony in another village. On his way home, he stayed at a place in order to rest. He put his ritual equipment on a stone and lay down to sleep. In his sleep he heard a bird calling three times so loudly that my father woke up, his mind filled with apprehensions. He wondered if it was an enemy or a bear. He saddled his horse and was just about to ride away when he saw a ro-langs appear. It came straight at him. Then, suddenly, three wolves came running and they tore the walking corpse to pieces and devoured it.

When I was a young boy and my grandfather still was alive a man had just died. This was in the winter and everything was frozen.

The dead man was lying near to where we were cutting some stones. He was a very thin man. I saw the corpse move. I wondered how it could move and stared at it. I said: "The corpse is moving," but the others said that there must be some thing wrong with my eyes - corpses cannot move.

But I saw that it was trying to rise. I told them this again and begged them to cut the corpse with a knife. I thought the flesh should be bloody, not frozen. Just when I said that, the corpse fell on its left side. Then it pressed the hands and forehead against the ground and tried to rise.

I again begged them to look. My grandfather then did, and saw the corpse trying to rise. He immediately ran for his prayer beads, and 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 shouted the power mantra 'phat.'

From the corpse came a loud sound and blood streamed from its mouth and nose, then it fell flat on the ground. My grandfather defeated it.

This happened when I was a boy in Tibet. I was away from home guarding the sheep of a rich man. In the afternoon a man had died. He was lying where the sheep used to graze and I went up to the dead man to take a look.

In the evening I crossed the river and started for home. Then I saw the corpse running on the other side of the river. It was completely naked, but carried its belt in one hand and its boots in the other. Then I saw a wolf coming after it, and knocking it to the ground. When I came back to that place the next morning, there was much blood on the ground. That was all that was left of this ro-langs. This happened when I was a boy of about eight or nine.

Once there was a lhapa [shaman]. He sometimes went to other places to do ceremonies, and one evening he

was going home to his own house very late, and it was too dark to ride on, so he stopped to sleep, out in the open.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, his horse became very scared. It started to jump, and then it ran away. In the moonlight he then saw a dark figure approaching with a stiff-legged, waddling gait. He wondered what it could be. He watched the creature intently and finally understood that it was a ro-langs. He put on his ritual clothes, took his kangling thighbone trumpet, and walked towards the ro-langs.

They stopped - face to face - and then the corpse tried to put its hand on the lhapa's head, but did not succeed. The lhapa quickly took off his ritual head-dress and hit the ro-langs with it - and all people in the neighbourhood woke up because the ro-langs screamed at the moment. I myself did not see this, but other people have told me it.

These informants distinguished between three kinds of ro-langs: *khrag-langs*, *rus-langs* and *nne-langs*. This classification is made according to how the corpse has to be subdued.

A *khrag-angs* merely has to be wounded, a *rus-langs* has to get a bone in its body broken, but a *nne-langs* is harder to defeat because it has to be cut exactly on a special mole upon its body.

The demonic spirit, which is said to reanimate the corpse, are called *dre*, which is a term used for hostile spirits of various sorts. They are always believed to be ready to cause trouble to humans.

PROTECTION FROM RO-LANGS

Ro-langs are not able to walk as a living person. Instead they walk with a rocking gait, as they cannot bend their legs properly. They can not bend their back properly either, so Tibetan houses have low doorways to stop them getting in. A ro-langs will just stand at the door and bang its head against it, unable to stoop to enter the house. They are also said not to be able to cross rivers.

Tibetan zombies -



Above:
the goddess
Ozer Chenma

unlike the Western Hollywood species - have no interest in eating your brains or any other parts of you. Instead, they make people insane by laying their palm on the victim's head.

In two of the stories above, the ro-langs is killed by wolves, and in two by men. It is said anyone can defeat a ro-langs if they know how, but it is easier for someone who owns and knows how to use powerful ritual objects - such as a phurba.

There is one Buddhist being who is said to be especially good at giving protection against ro-langs, a goddess called Ozer Chenma, who is a form of Tara. Her name means 'She who possesses the rays of light of wisdom' and her practice is associated with the rising sun... the time of day all things that go bump in the night should return into the darkness like good little nasties.

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine and has made a life long study of the ritual objects of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism. www.NicholasBreezeWood.com www.3World.com

Below: a
phurba
dagger

