

# **Pleasing the wrathful deities: Ethical approaches to the care of Tibetan skull drums**

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## **Abstract**

In 2023, a number of sacred Tibetan ritual musical instruments fashioned from human tissue were donated to Northumbria University, England. After lengthy consultation with stakeholders, the university took the decision to accept the donation in order to store and care for these objects in a culturally respectful manner. This process involved working closely with the Tibetan diaspora in exile to manage, research and provide access in a culturally sensitive way until such time as they might be returned to their communities of origin. Framing the university's decision were current and ongoing debates within the heritage sector regarding the ethics of storing, researching and displaying human remains, especially where they belong to cultures from beyond the Global West. However, the cultural and ritual status of these objects, not to mention their geographical origin, is such that they do not fall easily into the same defined status as other historical human remains in western heritage collections. We present here ongoing work to build transparent and sensitive collections and research policies specifically around two Tibetan ritual *thöd-rnga* skull drums, traditionally used in the Chöd (gCod) ritual practised in Tibetan Tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism. We situate our work within the complex discourse on caring for contested objects in the United Kingdom in the midst of the restitution and decolonisation agendas, before considering the objects themselves as material artefacts, and the ethics of caring for and researching these objects within the context of a university collection.

## **Introduction**

In 2023, sacred Tibetan ritual musical instruments fashioned from human tissue were donated to Northumbria University in the United Kingdom by a private donor. After lengthy consultation with stakeholders, the university took the decision to accept the donation in order to store and care for these objects in a culturally respectful manner. This process involved working closely with the Tibetan diaspora in exile to manage, research and provide access in a culturally sensitive way until such time as they might be returned to their communities of origin. Framing the university's decision were current and ongoing debates within heritage conservation regarding the ethics of storing, researching and displaying human remains, especially where they belong to cultures from beyond the Global West. However, the cultural and ritual status of these objects, not to mention their geographical origin, is such that they do not fall easily into the same defined status as other historical human remains present in western heritage collections.

The following presents ongoing work to build transparent and sensitive collections and research policies specifically around two Tibetan ritual *thöd-rnga* (skull drums), each formed from the upper part of two human skulls, and traditionally used in the Chöd/gCod ('cutting') ritual practised in Tibetan Tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism. We first situate our work within

the complex discourse on caring for contested objects in the United Kingdom at a time when collections are taking stock of their holdings in light of increasing repatriation requests, and the growing decolonisation agenda in both the education and heritage sectors. We then consider the objects themselves as material artefacts, attending to their formal construction, their specific materiality and their status as functional ritual musical instruments, juxtaposed with the specific collections care needs of human tissue. Finally, we will discuss the ethics of caring for and researching these objects within the context of a university collection.

### **Decolonising provenance**

Recent texts have ruminated on contemporary themes of decolonisation, repatriation, and restitution within UK public collections, most notably through the lens of the Benin Bronzes pillaged by the British naval forces in 1897 and positioned by Hicks and others as an act to further European imperial ambitions in Africa (Hicks 2020). Hicks' timely work illuminated the discussion during a period of significant mobilisation of the decolonisation agenda in the UK, itself propelled by a period of self-reflection enforced by the global Covid pandemic. The year also saw the toppling and sinking of the Edward Colston (1636–1721) statue in Bristol (Siddique and Skopeliti 2020), the removal of *Shuar Tsantsas* (shrunken heads) from display at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (Bailey 2020), and wider political and media calls to decolonise curricula in higher education. Similarly, ICOM adopted decolonisation as a key principle of its strategic plan for 2022–28, (ICOM 2022, 4) with a dedicated working group formed, and a 2020 Museums Association report highlighted the need for proactive approaches to decolonisation across the sector (Museums Association, 2020). Decolonisation of collections has since been a significant theme in scholarship (Brulon Soares and Witcomb 2022; Narkiss 2022; McMaster 2019). Work on the decolonisation of collections is therefore a work in progress - an active conversation between the public, scholars, stakeholders, the incumbent government, and the heritage sector. It is against this complex and ever-shifting, almost byzantine, backdrop we are defining research and conservation practice around the *thöd-rnga*, while remaining sensitive to the geopolitical specificities of an object interlaced with political tensions that often clash with Eurocentric perceptions and *othering* of the macabre (Thomas 2022; Fisher 2016).

One of the central tenets of the decolonisation agenda in museums is accurate and reliable provenance. As part of standard due diligence for acceptance and accessioning, and the sale of goods through auction houses in the UK, provenance is required to document the history of the object. Research into provenance, like the wider decolonisation agenda, is of contemporary concern: at the time of writing, Germany and France will launch a new joint fund in February 2024 to research the provenance of objects from sub-Saharan Africa in their museums, as part of each country's pledge to return artefacts obtained through colonialist activities (Hickley 2023). At a subject-specific level relevant to the *thöd-rnga*, provenance is now one of the three strategic pillars of CIMCIM (ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Musical Instruments), and is indicative of the importance of provenance within the subdiscipline of organology.<sup>1</sup> But while provenance of Western musical instruments can often be relatively easy to prove, objects from the global majority are more often than not unaccompanied by the administration we rely on to evidence origin and ownership of collections objects. This parallels with many historic objects accessioned without documentation, such as archaeological finds with no find-spot data, or antiquities without evidence of legal transfer of ownership. A more focussed study is therefore required to rebuild the object's history of custodianship (Lyons 2016). Further, the provenance of

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objects made from human remains brings with it additional considerations: while the trade in human bones is not illegal in most jurisdictions, and in the UK is governed by the Human Tissue Act of 2004, any trade needs to be ethically grounded (Cassman and Odegaard, 2004). The *thöd-rnga*, as both objects made from human remains and objects created specifically for ritual purposes, require a sensitive and nuanced approach to questions of provenance, status and their position within the decolonisation debate.

Many collections have adopted a collaborative approach to provenance, engaging with stakeholders to evidence and enhance knowledge of collections and objects from non-Eurocentric cultures; an approach that is noted as potentially becoming meaningless given its use as a political tool as part of the decolonisation agenda (Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020). Indeed, the act of collaboration may in fact enforce, rather than refute a *West versus the rest* hierarchy, where the power sits with the collection, rather than serving as an equalizer (Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020, 69). That said, engagement with an object's stakeholders can unlock a fount of valuable information, often transmitted by those with more culturally informed expertise and/or contained within the oral tradition of the community or culture. This knowledge, gathered from both resident and diasporic groups of stakeholders, has proven to be a key resource for the study of ethnographic items and histories. In addition, ethnomusicology, which encompasses the study of Tibetan ritual instruments, typically employs the skills of the ethnographer to document story, ritual and use, in many cases providing additional information through the capture of music and performance through field recording.

In the case of the *thöd-rnga*, we have taken a stakeholder-led approach to our early work with the objects, particularly around issues of care and display (Reedy 1991), and in thinking about issues of provenance and the wider decolonisation debate. As a result of our consultation, we have taken the view that we serve as custodians of the *thöd-rnga* until such time as their community of origin can be identified and that the infrastructure for their care upon return is in place. By serving as custodians, we also prevent the items entering the antiquities market, and can therefore ensure that they are cared for appropriately, as guided by expertise from their community of origin. The alternative - in other words, to return these items to the Tibetan region - would largely fail to recognise the specificities of these ritual objects to their community practitioners, and would arguably risk them being accessioned into collections considered less suitable by both practitioners and communities. Moreover, the continuing tensions between the Tibetan region and China necessitates a sensitive approach to repatriation. Our custodianship therefore demands continual engagement with diverse regional, resident and diasporic stakeholders, but particularly with extended monastic networks across Tibetan Buddhist communities.

### **Tantric Buddhism and music**

The practice of Chöd (gCod) ritual has its roots in early Tibetan Buddhism, brought to Tibet via Indian masters who created monastic sects that blended religious practice with local Tibetan folk magic. Chöd is a fusion of Prajnaparamita and Tantra, and is in essence a form of meditation. In the Chöd ritual the practitioner employs a meditative visualisation process that invokes inner demons or *kleshas*. In the ritual itself, the practitioner uses their awareness to 'cut' through hindrances for the realisation of their true nature and the nature of all beings. The ritual is performed with chants and via the use of ritual musical instruments whose power is increased both through the skill and knowledge of the practitioner and the specific materiality of the instruments used. Ultimately, its aim is to cut, or separate entirely from the ego (Beer 1999; Vasile 2023).

Chöd practice is said to originate with the 11<sup>th</sup>/ 12<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan saint, Machig Labdron: a female Tibetan tantric practitioner, and the author of what is reputed to be the earliest explanation of Chöd.<sup>2</sup> Machig Labdron is often depicted in *thang-ka* in a dance posture with a damaru or *thöd-rnga* in her right hand, and a bell or other Tantric ritual object in her left. She is sometimes accompanied by her teacher who carries a thighbone trumpet, the *rkang-gling*, also used in Chöd. The practitioner chants liturgies which call to the mind a series of visualisations, including the invocation of wrathful deities who may be imagined as cutting the body into pieces, and then placing these into a bowl that is fashioned from the top of the practitioner's skull. These are then given as offerings to both malevolent and benevolent beings, which in turn has the intention of relieving the practitioner from karmic debt. The cutting symbolises the detachment from one's own ego, fear and suffering and often takes place in dark, uncanny and foreboding locations, such as cremation areas and charnel grounds (*dur khrod*) (Brousseau 2018).

While this focused visualisation takes place, the practitioner simultaneously plays the *rkang-gling* fashioned from a human thighbone, the *thöd-rnga* fashioned from two human skulls, and other ritual instruments, which are an integral part of the ritual (Beer 1999). The music is said to be pleasant and beautiful in order to appeal to the gods (Monhart 2017, 96), with the sounds of the *rkang-gling* closely associated with charnel grounds and wrathful deities that inhabit such desolate, uncanny places (Brousseau 2018; Rønning 2005). The *rkang-gling* itself is said to be pleasing to wrathful deities who assist in the cutting through of the ego, but terrifying to evil spirits. The *rkang-gling* is always held in the left (wisdom) hand, while the damaru or *thöd-rnga* is held in the right (method) hand.<sup>3</sup> This 'cutting' ritual serves to illustrate two interrelated components of Mahāyāna thought. Firstly, the practitioner accomplishes the severance of malevolent beings through realization of the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of the self, and secondly, the offering up of the flesh is seen as an act of compassion to hungry spirits (Brousseau 2018; Beer 1999)

### **Skull drums and other Tibetan instruments**

*Thöd-rnga* are damaru drums made from human bone: double-sided drums fashioned from sections of the upper frontal and parietal bones of two human skulls. Holes are cut at the crowns, and are joined by a resonator ring often made of brass (Figure 1). This differs from the traditional Indian damaru, which is more often carved from wood mimicking the hourglass silhouette of the *thöd-rnga*, and similarly adorned with a central cloth strap and two striking pellets on cord which, when the drum is rotated, alternatively strike the drum skins. As observed by Cupchik (2013, 129), the length of the cord impacts the speed of required rotation, as do the size and weight of the pellets, necessitating a particular tempo for the drum's construction to function: a slower tempo and softer percussive strike of the pellets is preferred, in order to complement the meditation and contribute to the pleasant and beautiful music. Many damaru are decorated with traditional ornamentation of copper and brass, gemstones such as turquoise and coral, shell, paintwork and carving, and adorned with elaborate cloth straps, indicative of their prized status as ritual objects.

<Figure 1>

Tibetan Buddhist ritual music also makes use of the bronze or brass *dril-bu* (Tibetan bell) and *dorje* (sceptre), matched and used as a pair; the *dungchen* (an elongated and collapsible metal

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trumpet or horn often used in pairs) and *dung kar* (a conch shell trumpet, typically white); the *gyaling* or *rgya-gling* (shawm with double reed); *dra nyen* (6- or 7-string lute in double courses with a front of animal skin rather than wood); a range of cymbals (e.g. *sbug-chal/rol-mo*, *silnyen*); the *nga chen* (large suspended drum); and the aforementioned thighbone trumpet known as an *rkang-gling* (see Collinge 1996; Kartomi 1990, 75–83; Egyed 2000). While the *rkang-gling* is preferably made from human femur or tibia bone, many are made from wood, metal, or the bones of other large mammals. The construction of the *rkang-gling* from bone sees the marrow removed and a hole drilled through the ball joint to create the bore. The ends are often furnished with metal plating, at the narrow end to create a mouthpiece, and at the ball joint to create the bell; the plating typically retains the outline of the joint to preserve the appearance of a bone, rather than the flared bell we find in Western woodwind and brass. Like the *thöd-rnga*, *rkang-gling* are further decorated with traditional metalwork and gemstones. All of these monastic instruments are used as part of the ritual, with only a few exceptions particular to certain monasteries (Egyed 2000, 151). The bones for both *thöd-rnga* and *rkang-gling* are part of the wider tantric Buddhist engagement with death, for example: skull cups and other vessels made from portions of the skull, *thod pa*; bone decoration, and *rus rgyan*, such as the bone apron, *ska rags* (Fuentes 2021). When actively serving as ritual objects, they are treated with the utmost of respect: Cupchik (2013, 128) observed that the damaru were then stored secretively, wrapped and/or boxed carefully, and ‘never exhibited’.

<Figure 2>

The specific materiality of both *rkang-gling* and *thöd-rnga* have significance to the potency of the ritual. Human remains for use in ritual were sourced from charnel grounds and areas where traditional sky burials took place.<sup>4</sup> Beer observes that in tantric tradition, the left femur of a sixteen-year-old girl was considered to have the most potency for the construction of *rkang-gling*, followed only by that of a murder victim and then one who may have died of an accident. Although damaru are frequently used in Buddhist and Hindu ritual practice, the *thöd-rnga* is unique to Tibet. The most powerful tantric damaru are said to be created from the joined skulls of a teenage boy and twelve-year-old girl. Beer observes that today modern forgeries, and skulls of dubious provenance are now openly sold on the international art market for the purposes of creating ritual instruments, where they command high prices, but crucially, from the perspective of tantric practice, he notes that these are considered almost entirely without potency (Beer 1999). Vasile (2023) confirms that the manufacture of ritual objects from human remains is ongoing in the Himalayas, but exists underground: in Nepal the transport and use of human remains is illegal, but the objects are used freely without consequence.

European musicology places less emphasis on musical instruments as ritual objects, viewing them more as tools for engagement or to enhance the other activities of a religious ceremony. This top down, anthropocentric viewpoint has therefore led to assumptions about the position of musical instruments in other societies: viewed as products of human creation and therefore most suitable for a material culturalist approach, sometimes verging on the clinical dissection of its component parts with little regard for the intangible context.<sup>5</sup> Performance, too, is imbued with notions of entertainment and levity, and even serious religious music-making (such as the use of the organ in the Christian tradition), does not bestow the musical

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instruments with an identity other than at *the service of* the music and the occasion. However, in many non-western cultures, and specifically Himalayan tantric Buddhism, musical instruments are not musical per se, instead serving the specific ritual function of an offering as part of the multifaceted process of summoning and pleasing the deities and cutting through the ego (Tsukamoto 1983; Monhart 2017). The objects therefore demand to be studied unseparated from their community, use, and the specifics of ritual practices.

The care and conservation of the *thöd-rnga*, and the closely related *rkang-gling*, therefore cannot be interpreted solely through a straightforward materialist lens. *Thöd-rnga* are constructed from a mix of materials, mostly organic, and are complex in their construction. This is further complicated by being an instrument that is under tension: two drum skins are adhered to the skull cavities themselves, rather than attached by a frame, and this means that damage to the skins is inevitable. The damaru skins - often goat, but also snake and sometimes human (Fuentes 2021, 234) and typically attached with animal glue - can lose elasticity, and either tear or pull from the edge of the cavity. Fuentes (2021, 236) also notes that treatments are used to keep *thöd-rnga* in playing condition (e.g. alkaline tanning agents), and that in some cases copper carbonates and acetates (verdigris) are used, resulting in the green hues common to some damaru held in museums (Figure 1), and observed in depictions of damaru in Himalayan painting after the eighteenth century. The attached striking pellets are also subject to wear from use, as are the cloth handles. The cloth in particular is at risk of damage from pests (Fuentes 2021, 241-2; Simkin 1998). From the perspective of the conservator, the use of certain original materials (human tissue, snakeskin) to replace lost components or reintegrate losses in a *thöd-rnga*, is largely impossible. Although synthetic substances, or even substances from another animal origin might be substituted to stabilise the instrument and make it visually complete, with objects so intrinsically linked to ritual use, and where the composite materials are imbued with significant meaning, the ethical question of whether to conserve and what materials are appropriate is central to defining an appropriate framework for their care.

### **Ethical quandary**

The *thöd-rnga* present a number of ethical dilemmas. Issues to be considered are their care and conservation, display and handling, policy development, the appropriateness of scientific research and, as functioning musical instruments, performance. This makes the *thöd-rnga* complex items to hold within a collection. Unlike secular musical instruments, where their preservation and playability are governed largely by their condition and the policies of the holding collection, sacred instruments such as the *thöd-rnga* have further intangible considerations that should be respected as far as possible. Taking a respectful and ethical approach helps to counter the rewriting of the object's meaning in light of its changed 'predestined path' as a commodity (Appadurai 1986), viz. a ritual object removed from its social context and resigned from its purpose, to be held in a secular collection to satisfy curiosity; as per Hall's consideration of other Tibetan artefacts (2004, 69), the *thöd-rnga*'s 'spiritual nature has been compromised' by this process. Further still, the *thöd-rnga* are both commodities to be possessed and used, and remnants of ancestors of a marginalised people, adding an additional layer of complexity to their interpretation, and our approach as temporary custodians. This draws parallels with many other cases of indigenous remains in collections, and the moves by descendants to reclaim them (Gunning and Challis 2023).

The ethics of holding objects such as the *thöd-rnga* are therefore subject to additional scrutiny, and warrant a careful, collaborative approach to interpretation and policy development. Working with our small preliminary network of stakeholders - a group formed

of Tibetan and international scholars, museums professionals, practitioners, and community representatives - we have developed a specific Tibetan Ritual Objects policy for our collection at Northumbria University, to govern all aspects of access to and interaction with the *thöd-rnga*. Through consultation, it was unanimously felt by a number of stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, that the objects should be held by a university collection where they may be cared for with respect and in an appropriate environment, rather than risk falling into private hands where they may be treated as macabre curiosities and handled in an insensitive manner. Although there are recent precedents where *thöd-rnga* and other ritual instruments have been displayed in museum exhibitions - for example, *Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution* (British Museum, 2020–21) and *Tibet's Secret Temple* (Wellcome Collection, 2016–17) - the conversation is fluid, and upon discussion it was decided that the Northumbria *thöd-rnga* would not be displayed by default, and would be handled as little as possible until a more comprehensive stakeholder consultation could take place. As a rule, the *thöd-rnga* will not be used for performance, although in exceptional circumstances (and in consultation with stakeholders) permission would be granted to tantric Buddhist practitioners with appropriate ritual expertise and knowledge, and where no damage to the instrument is anticipated.

Research into the *thöd-rnga* can take a variety of forms, from object-based material culture studies, to scientific analysis and forensic examination which conceivably could require invasive sampling. However, the ethics of designing appropriate and sensitive research methods, and whether we *should* research them at all, is a decision that is also reached via stakeholder collaboration. Work by Reedy in the 1980s and 90s on Tibetan Buddhist sculpture, for example, revealed mixed opinions by Tibetans regarding non-Buddhist scientists and art historians studying ritual objects. The opening and emptying of ritual objects (gau) and Buddhist sculptures for study was considered to be grossly sacrilegious in some field studies. Some encounters suggested that the researcher should be initiated in certain texts or practice before attempting to study objects, whereas others felt that scientific study of the non-invasive kind may be permissible where appropriate respect for the object is shown (Reedy 1992, 45). Our work with stakeholders three decades later unveiled similar sentiments, where research was welcomed, but only where objects were handled appropriately, and where non-invasive research methods were prioritised; handling for the sake of curiosity discouraged. Difficulties therefore emerge when scientific advances would permit us to conduct DNA analysis in order to learn more about the remains, and potentially pinpoint their community of origin with a view to a future where repatriation might be considered. This conflict between a desire to locate the community of origin, but utilising invasive analytical techniques presents a similar ethical dilemma, and is part of ongoing and future discussions with our stakeholders. As such, our policy only permits non-invasive and respectful research to take place, subject to clearance by an institutional ethics panel where necessary.

## **Conclusion**

The acceptance of the *thöd-rnga* has provided us with a welcome opportunity to reflect on current heritage discourse, and our institutional approach to the decolonisation debate. It has also provided us with an opportunity to utilise the case study of the *thöd-rnga* - as a nexus point where multiple debates in conservation practice converge - as an educational tool to develop nuanced discussions with students and colleagues in tandem with our stakeholder network. Indeed, our conversations pivoting around the *thöd-rnga* mirror the moves by museums to present their contested holdings as sites for discussions about power through exhibitions and events (Gunning and Challis 2023). The care and conservation of the *thöd-*

*rnga* will continue to be informed by ongoing discussions with our stakeholder network, which we seek to expand, and consultation with heritage colleagues as the approach to such objects evolves.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Organology is the study of musical instruments, covering scientific, historical, and performance-based approaches.

<sup>2</sup> Collected from the original Tibetan manuscripts as *Machig's Complete Explanation or Phung po gzan skur gyi rnam bshad gcod kyidon gsal byed* ('Clarifying the meaning of Chöd: a complete explanation of casting out the body as food'), ca 1055-1155.

<sup>3</sup> An early description of the Chöd (gCod) ritual in western literature is found in Alexandra David-Néel's colourful 1932 text on her travels in Tibet. She notes: "The monotonous *dong*, *dong* of the deep-voiced drum became slower and finally ceased, the young ascetic seemed sunk in meditation. After a while he wrapped himself more tightly in his zen. The kangling in his left hand, the *damaru* lifted high in the right and beating an aggressive staccato, the man stood in a challenging attitude, as if defying some invisible enemy." (David-Neel 1932).

<sup>4</sup> Beer notes that although once common, the practice of sky burial, whereby the remains of the dead person are prepared ritually and left in charnel areas for carrion birds and other animals to feed upon until only bones remain, is almost non-existent today and that such ritual objects now fetch a high price on the art market in the far East.

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## Figures List

Figure 1: Thöd-rnga, 19<sup>th</sup> century (assumed), British Museum, 1992,1214.83. © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Figure 2: Rkang-gling, 19<sup>th</sup> century (assumed), British Museum, 2016,3040.2. © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.