Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38826

Materiality, Symbolism, and Ritual Agency: The Rkang-Gling and Damaru in Tibetan Chöd Practice

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Abstract. This research examines the object agency of rkang-gling (thighbone trumpet) and damaru (skull drum) in 18th-19th century Tibetan Tantric Buddhism by placing them back in their original religious context, based on the materiality foundation. Through the anthropological perspective of emic-etic and material culture, the reasons why bone ritual objects become sacred agents were analyzed from two dimensions: internal cognition and external observation. In the case studies part, the study concentrates on the materiality of rkang-gling and damaru, analyzing the choice of material and religious symbols in the 18th-19th century. Focusing on their ritual functions, the analysis shows how these two types of bone ritual objects function in Chöd ritual by embodying sound, physical action, and material engagement, helping practitioners confront the concept of "cutting through the self". This paper contributes to the analysis of bone ritual objects in terms of transmitting meaning through cosmology, material selection, body embodiment, and ritual practice.

Keywords: Chöd ritual, rkang-gling, damaru, materiality, object agency

1. Introduction

In moral and biomedical frameworks, the deliberate use of human bone in Tibetan Tantric rituals may be interpreted as a violation or transgression of death-related taboos [1]. However, physical objects are regarded as media that connect individual Tibetan Buddhist practitioners' microcosmic practices with the macrocosm of deities, cosmology, and religious doctrines, thereby contributing to the construction of a religious community.

Centering on 18th-19th -century Tibet, this study approaches bone ritual objects not as raw osteological material but as ritually recontextualized artifacts, whose selection, production, naming, and ritual use reflect specific religious meanings.

By investigating the symbolic meanings, cosmology, materials, and production processes of bone ritual objects through two concrete examples, this research explores the significance of bone as a particular material, the transformation of bone into religious objects with ritual efficacy, and the formation of ritual agency through physical and embodied practices.

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38826

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Tibetan Buddhism object studies

As mentioned by the researcher Janet Gyatso, Tibetan materialities and material culture studies stagnated in the descriptive aspect for a long time, isolating themselves from the theoretical framework, which making it harder for Tibetan material studies to engage in broader academic discussions [2]. Ayesha Fuentes acknowledges the tradition of using human bones as ritual objects, research lacks focus on production lines, regional circulation, and varied usage methods [3]. To integrate Tibetan studies into broader anthropological and material culture discussions, this research focuses on Tibetan human-bone ritual objects in 18th-19th-century Tibet, analyzing their materiality and object agency through anthropological theory.

In the historical context, Tibetan Buddhism was deeply integrated with political power during the 18th–19th centuries [4]. This study mainly focuses on the materiality and object agency of human bone objects within ritual and religious contexts.

Although the iconography and doctrines lying inside the Tibetan bone ritual objects have been widely analyzed academically, the materiality of these objects, including the origin of raw materials, the origin of corpses, the production process, and the utilization of these ritual objects, has not been comprehensively discussed. From a Tibetan internal perspective, any kind of sacred material object is said to possess transformational, transcendental power, represented as the materializations and actual embodiment of awakened buddhas, deities, and bodhisattvas, thus inserting them into ritual usage [5]. In this case, the agency of objects is not only socially determined but also actively motivates practitioners to construct a Buddhist worldview in which such objects can function.

2.2. Theoretical framework and methodology

According to Marvin Harris, anthropology can interpret cultures through emic and etic approaches: the emic approach focuses on understanding culture through the concepts and perspectives of cultural insiders, while the etic approach focuses on understanding culture from a universal perspective [6]. Tibetan material studies have often emphasized emic perspectives for understanding cultural meanings. Based on deference and academic decolonization to Tibetan culture, applying the emic-etic approach could interpret the objects' life history more completely and prevent Tibetan studies from being isolated from the broader comparison framework.

In this study, *object agency* is defined not as independent intentionality, but as the capacity of ritual objects to produce effects within a network of practitioners, symbols, and ritual actions, following the relational view of agency in material culture studies. *Materiality* here includes not only the physical properties of bone but also the social and ritual meanings attached to those properties in Tibetan Buddhist contexts.

This study adopts a qualitative analysis focusing on material culture. With a detailed interpretation of two types of bone ritual objects from the 18th to 19th centuries, the article includes two types of bone ritual objects: the kangling (also called rkang-gling) and the *damaru*.

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3. Case studies: *rkang-gling* and *damaru*

3.1. Research object and sources of bone

Tibetan rituals are usually separated into peaceful offerings and wrathful offerings, and the use of human bone generally belongs to the latter category. The use of bone reflects the Buddhist view of the body as an illusion. In Buddhist Asia, bones were often placed in reliquaries to be revered and vested with spiritual and economic value. In Tibetan Buddhism, the continued material presence of a lama can extend through recognized successive reincarnations [7].

Rkang-gling is a thighbone trumpet used in ritual contexts. Although traditionally made from human femurs, it could also be made of copper, silver, wood, or other materials when human bone was scarce or when external appearance was less emphasized. Ideally, the *rkang-gling* was made from the bone of a person of either very high or very low social status who had died in an accident [8]. It was believed that the most valued thighbone trumpets were made from the left thighbone of a sixteen-year-old or from the bone of a Brahmin [8]. Thus, the source and circumstances of death were regarded as important factors in the selection of raw materials.

Some special types of human remains were also used to produce rkang-gling, including bones associated with Bodhisattvas (byan chub sems rkang), pregnant women who died, and warriors who died in battle [3]. The bone and hair of a woman who died while pregnant were sometimes used to produce a particular type of *rkang-gling* known as bam rkang [3]. Such materials were considered distinctive because of their association with unusual circumstances of death and were consequently attributed with particular ritual significance [8].

Different types of bone were associated with different meanings and functions in Tibetan Buddhism. The thighbone was selected not only for its symbolic associations but also because its shape made it suitable for producing an instrument capable of generating a loud sound [9]. Unlike the rkang-gling, which is made from the thighbone, the damaru is a double-sided hand drum made from a skull *(thod pa'I rnga* or *thod rnga*) [10]. The skull symbolizes emptiness (*suñata*) and great compassion. According to Tibetan doctrine, the skull is deeply linked with the summit gate (*brahmarandhra*), referring to the pivot points on the top of the skull, which is generally believed to link consciousness with the cosmos (*Shiva Samhita*).

The practice of "crown opening" is associated with spiritual transformation in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, and the skull can therefore be understood as a material symbol of the practitioner's movement beyond ordinary bodily existence. It is also associated with practices of offering the body to Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, and with dedication to advanced spiritual cultivation [11]. The skull's particular state plays a role in the *damaru* by connecting two human crania by drilling holes at the points of the crown, as well as connecting the passageway for divine consciousness. *Damaru* carries the life and death doctrine of the bardo state, emphasizing the impermanence of life.

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3.2. Case studies



Figure 1. Trumpet, British Museum, 19th century (probably). Object no. 2016,3040.2 [12]

This *rkang-gling* is ornamented with copper alloy, turquoise, and coral, with a snow lion's face in relief. The elaborate decoration may suggest that the deceased, or the subsequent owner of the object, was associated with a relatively high social or religious status, since not all *rkang-gling* were subjected to such elaborate reworking with scarce and valuable materials. Turquoise was frequently used and highly valued in Tibetan Buddhist art and ritual practice. Coral also carried associations with circulation and exchange within upper-class society and functioned as a typical imported luxury material [13]. The snow lion gives power to the *rkang-gling* by presenting its religious identity. Through special decoration and the emphasis on the deceased's social identity or religious achievement, human bone objects became symbols of re-socialization.



Figure 2. Drum, 19th century, Object no. O456310. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum [14]

As shown in Figure 2, this skull damaru is carved with two skeletal faces and two letters in Rañjanā script, separated by masks of the Citipati ghouls, with embedded turquoise eyes and attached striking strings. It is a representative example of an object with artificial processing marks. In relation to the secret of speech, the carved Rañjanā characters may function as a mantra to remind practitioners of doctrinal teachings. According to Hevajratantra, "the sound of the damaru is the recitation"; Rañjanā characters embody the secret of speech (*gsung gi gsang ba*), for the purpose of actualizing the Sambhogakāya, that is, the manifestation of intelligence [15].

A skull *damaru* (thod rnga), a kapala hand drum presented by Changkya Khutukhtu, was made by joining the crania of a boy and a girl and was ornamented with amber bead pendants, gilded

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38826

triangular mounts, and other accessories [16]. The combination of male and female skulls has been interpreted in relation to the concept of Yab-Yum, symbolizing the integration of complementary spiritual principles and the union of male and female bodhicitta essences [17]. The sexual symbolism presented here transcends secular meaning and functions as an abstract religious symbol. The *damaru's* iconography and materiality can be interpreted as contributing to ritual practices involving wrathful deities and the transformation of the mind.

4. Human objects and transformation of agency

4.1. Bone objects in *Chöd* ritual

Both *rkang-gling* and *damaru* are important ritual instruments used during *Chöd*, a practice known as 'cutting through the self(*anātma*)', which means to cut off the attachment to the physical body, with the ultimate goal of destroying the grasp and obsession of "self" by evoking emotion, especially in frightening sights [3]. In this ritual, sound and material objects are not merely decorative but function as instruments through which attachment is confronted and transformed. The practice is traditionally associated with practitioners who have received the relevant empowerment and oral transmission from qualified lamas, as these tantric practices are generally understood to require appropriate instruction and guidance [18]. *Chöd* itself is rooted in a radical method of transforming the body into an offering. According to Vajrayana Buddhist teachings, empowerment and transmission therefore constitute important conditions for engaging in such practices [19].

Through the harsh and sharp sound of the trumpet, repeated several times at the beginning of the *Chöd* ritual, practitioners are led into visualizations in which the body is offered to spirits and other beings. Performing short and simple melodies, the *rkang-gling* is also used in practices involving wrathful deities. While practitioners visualize themselves transforming into deities, the ritual sounds and offerings contribute to the visualization and engagement with wrathful forces [17]. According to Zong Rinpoche's account, *Chöd* can be divided into several stages, in which the *damaru* accompanies the sound of "phaṭ" as a ritual marker associated with the elimination of dualistic distinctions, including the visualization of the refuge field, taking refuge, and generating bodhicitta [20]. The sound of the *damaru* and the sound of "phaṭ" are associated with the three secrets (triguhya) of body, speech, and mind in Tibetan tantra. The *damaru*'s sound relates to the secret of speech, the practitioner's visualization to the secret of mind, and the physical act of playing the instrument to the secret of body. Abstract religious concepts are therefore brought into ritual practice through sensory experiences such as sound, physical action, and engagement with tangible objects, complementing inner visualization and meditation. The *damaru* normally produces short bursts of sound, sometimes marking the end of a particular section or a ritual node after "phaṭ".

Musical performance involved in *Chöd* enhances meditation and visualization by helping practitioners better experience insights into *Chöd* rituals [18]. In this context, Tibetan practitioners choose to meditate and immerse themselves in visualizations in which wrathful deities appear around them [21]. These appearances are believed to be conceptual proliferations arising from the mind's lack of control [22]. As players oscillate their wrists, two striking strings suspended by cords hit both sides of the drumheads, creating a steady, hollow, and beating sound [23]. Because the steady rhythm and the bilateral movement of the wrists demand continuous attention, they interrupt the practitioner's habitual conceptual distinctions. Hitting both sides of the drum produces a consistent sound, while engagement with the instrument can temporarily disrupt habitual dualistic distinctions.

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4.2. Agency of human bone ritual objects

Referring to dependent origination, one of the core concepts in Buddhism, human bone objects can be understood as aggregations of past conditions, carrying the life trajectories of their donors and makers. While the efficacy of objects is rooted in the power of the persons who create them, personal karma and material origin may also contribute to their capacity to transmit blessings and power [5]. Thus, the origin and production of the object can be understood as an important condition in the agency chain. The ritual procedure (sadhana or drubtab) provides a setting for practice, while the practitioner's aspiration connects past conditions with the present ritual action. Practitioners with positive aspiration (bodhicitta) who play the rkang-gling combine these conditions with the ritual procedure, contributing to ritual efficacy and the blessing associated with the object [24]. Referring to the Discourse of the Uninstructed (Assutava Sutta) and its discussion of Buddhist causality, these relationships express a dependency between conditions [25]. Although past conditions and karma cannot be changed, the present condition is not fully determined by the past, leaving space for agency and the creation of new causal conditions. Therefore, the efficacy of ritual objects is connected to the practitioner's aspiration and present ritual action within a dynamic Buddhist causal network.

Embodied ritual action incorporates the ceremonial instructions given by the qualified lama as the primary agent, through which the meaning and power of the objects are activated in the visualization of the self as deities; the objects thus act as secondary agents. As the ritual progresses in a specific time and space, the *damaru* and *rkang-gling* are used according to ritual regulations and at particular stages. Within the religious system, practitioners inscribe concepts and intentions into materials, contributing to the social and religious position of human relics. During the ritual, the efficacy of human bone objects is revisited through performative and acoustic actions. Through physical practice and the embodiment of cosmology, human bone objects contribute to the construction of spiritual connections.

5. Ethical arguments

The ritual use of human bones in Tibetan Buddhism generates ethical controversy because it conflicts with widely held intuitions about the inviolability of the dead. The conflict is not merely about material practice but about competing definitions of what it means to respect a corpse. The reason why human bone objects are not viewed as "transgressive" or "violent" in Tibetan Tantra could be interpreted from an anthropological perspective that comprehends the religious system of Tibetan Buddhism by dividing the world into sacred and profane. n many societies, using human bones as ritual objects is taboo because they are considered impure or dangerous, and contact with them is restricted to protect the sacred from profane contamination. Therefore, Tibetan Tantra presents its own religious meanings through rituals, meditation, embodied cognition, and personal experience in relation to its cosmology.

Human bones were sanctified by religious rituals and achieved their meaning's transformation. The external view of Tibetan ritual objects as "rationalizing violence" arises because the reuse of human bones may conflict with external social regulations, and the ethical argument partly reflects different views of the sacred. Furthermore, as confirmed by the previous paragraphs, most of the human remains were given voluntarily, for the dead believed that they were offering themselves or the nectar to all beings [19]. However, in a society where religious and political authority were closely fused, the boundary between voluntary donation and social expectation is difficult to ascertain.

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Using human bone objects in rituals does not always violate religious ethics, since human bone remains are not equal to the dead themselves according to Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, which holds that body and personality exist as two different aspects. In the view of material culture, human bones were reconstructed into sacred objects apart from taboo, constructing a bodily cognition of death and returning them to religious collectiveness. The ambiguity remains about whether bone ritual objects violate basic ethics in Tibetan Buddhism. The process of using human bones in rituals and internalizing the practice, as well as the controversies about whether this convention is viewed as a rationalization of violence or a concealment of transgression, have not been fully resolved. Tibetan Buddhism connects closely to bodily embodiment. The status of bone objects in interaction with humans should be emphasized through reflection on religion, cosmology, and society, especially when considering their participation in the revitalization and revisiting of dead body parts. To view Tibetan human bone objects dialectically, the sanctity of using human bones, at a time when political and religious power were combined, might be a result of the indoctrination of ideology and regulations. The critical analysis of bone objects should also consider the reduction of religious context and global ethical evaluation.

6. Conclusion

Human bones are meticulously selected based on the manner of death, social identity, and body parts, shaping their varied functions in rituals, especially in *Chöd*. Based on the comparative study of *rkang-gling* and *damaru*, human bone objects play a significant role in marking different sections of the ritual and reinforcing practitioners' concentration. Overall, their meanings are transformed through material selection, religious symbolism, and continued ritual use.

This paper argues that Tibetan human bone objects can be understood as mediators of spiritual transformation. Their agency comes from their material properties, religious meanings, and interaction with practitioners during ritual practice. Since first-hand fieldwork was not feasible, this research mainly relies on museum collections and published sources, limiting direct observation and regional comparison.

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