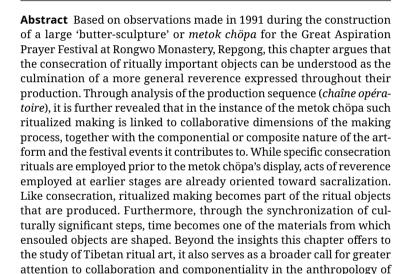
4 Miraculous display Temporal and collaborative materializations in Tibetan Buddhist butter art

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both art and making.



Keywords ritual art, reverence, anthropology of making, collaboration, componentiality, timing

Introduction

In mid-January 1991, with the approach of Losar (Tibetan New Year), I was distracted from my usual fieldwork wanderings by an unexpected invitation to a monk's cell in the Assembly Hall courtyard of Rongwo Monastery, the principle Geluk monastery in Repgong, Amdo (northeastern Tibet).1 'Bring your notebook and camera', my friend said. Early the following morning I found his cell converted to a temporary and rather cramped workspace. For the next five days I made notes and took photographs as four artisan iconographers or lhazo (lha bzo) worked seated on an L-shaped sleeping platform attached to the hearth (tsha thab). Charged with making the Losar metok chöpa (me tog mchod pa; lit. flower offering), the lhazo were supported by a team of four or so monks ready to supply materials, keep the fire going, prepare and serve tea and lunch, and generally make sure operations unfolded smoothly. The helpers also moved materials back and forth between the workspace, the courtyard and the Assembly Hall, this last being the location where the metok chöpa, more specifically identified as 'The Ocean of Sacred Food' (zhal zas rgya mtsho), would be consecrated and publicly displayed for a single day one month later. Completely new to the process and the artform, I jotted down as much as I could as I watched the metok chöpa's tableau of 'offering articles' (mchod rdzas) take shape in brightly coloured butter (Stevenson 1999: 268–323) (Figure 4.1).²

I will continue below with the shape the metok chöpa took and the materials from which it was made. What this chapter is primarily concerned with, however, is what took place during the metok chöpa's making, as well as how that making was ritualized. I should mention that the overall atmosphere in the workspace was not obviously

Rongwo Monastery (rong bo dgon chen bde chen chos 'khor gling) is currently administered under Malho (Ch. Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, which was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1953.

² In English, large and small edifices of 'material religion' bearing butter-modelled figures are familiarly known as '[Tibetan] butter sculpture' (Cooke 2010). In Tibetan the overall tableau—and the 'art form'—is called metok chöpa, while the separate depictions of offering articles attached to it, made from butter, are known as margyen (mar rgyan; butter ornaments).



Figure 4.1 The Offering of the Five Objects of Desire, one of several sets of offering articles mounted on the metok chöpa in 1991. Photograph by the author, 1991.

ritualized—most of the time it was quite casual, even jovial. Nevertheless, there were moments of brief solemnity. Reviewed later, these stood out as being linked to the collaborative dimension of the making process together with the componential or composite nature of the metok chöpa artform and the Losar festivities it contributed to. It is this theme of componentiality in the making of the metok chöpa and its involvement in questions of timing, coordination and collaboration—that plays the largest role in forming my conclusions and requires setting in context. In addition to shedding light on generally invisible aspects of making in Repgong, a key aim of this chapter is to enlarge the palette of things we give attention to when we discuss art, ritual and ritual art—and indeed materials and making.

The collaborative (and by implication, componential) dimension of artmaking has not often been given the attention it deserves in the anthropology of either art or making. For example, Tim Ingold's Making (2013) reflects on the 'correspondence' of materials and makers while persisting with assumptions that isolate the (exemplary) individual

practitioner. That it is primarily a book about individual skills and knowing is given away in his closing injunction, 'Know for yourself!' (141, emphasis in original).³ Even Laurel Kendall's Mediums and Magical Things (2021), a comparative study of the making of 'ensouled objects' not unlike metok chöpa, never reflects on practitioners (artisans, volunteers or both) coming together to work in collaboration. This is despite such arrangements being fundamental to the making of many of the objects she followed. This oversight may proceed from the way Kendall's book draws from in situ interview data rather than extended observation of the making process.

By contrast, this chapter focuses on styles of collaboration present in the making of the metok chöpa. I suggest that this gives us an opportunity to consider how material construction includes more than we usually recognize as material, enriching discussions of making and art in general. Similarly, we will see how time and timing are part of what binds collaborative efforts together, just as team and time become part of what makes the metok chöpa sacred. Within and around the bodies of the lhazo time becomes a material to be worked with so that the metok chöpa can do its work.4 Reading 'behind-the-scenes' collaboration this way takes inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) early interest in 'the ritualization of practices', which in turn informs my conclusion that specific moments or acts of synchronization bring the composite elements of the metok chöpa together into a process I call 'pre-consecration'.

While timing (or synchronization), compositeness and team coordination will be shown to be shared features of 'ritual' and 'art' in contemporary Repgong, given past associations of 'ritual art' with art historical discourses on 'Tribal Art' and 'Primitivism' these are categories that must be framed carefully in relation to locally relevant terms of analysis (Errington 1994). We might start by noting the importance of ritual in Tibetan life. As José Cabezón puts it: 'To a far greater extent

³ Ingold's focus on skill comes from his long-held concern to overcome the split between art and technology (Ingold 2001). Given current Western assumptions about 'the artist' and individual creativity, I suspect that had that project followed a technological vector he may have had an opportunity to engage more with group making.

The Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky held similar views about time as a material to be worked with, as described in Sculpting in Time (Tarkovsky 1989), which actually refers to 'imprinting' more than 'sculpting'.

than either abstract philosophy or silent meditation, it is ritual that pervades the Tibetan religious landscape' (Cabezón 2010: 2). Moreover, monthly and yearly calendars are punctuated by ritual events and activities, such that ritual not only fills Tibetan space; it 'pervades Tibetan time' (ibid.). There is also an argument for taking 'offering' (mchod pa; S. puja) as paradigmatic of Buddhist ritual more widely. Encompassing a vast range of human and interspecies relationships, offerings seek to praise, supplicate, seek blessings, deter, pacify, purify or cure, among other goals. Taken together, these suggest a functional view of ritual aimed at providing happier or more malleable circumstances. Rituals rarely encompass just a single motive, however, and clarification again comes from Cabezón (2010): 'There is good case to be made for the fact that Tibetan rituals, generally speaking, are combinations of fundamental 'subrituals' [sic] pieces that can be combined in different ways for different purposes' (12), which is to say they are componential or 'modular' (15) (see also Garrett et al. 2013).

As I will explore in relation to making metok chöpa, componentiality is also a feature of the art (bzo) that activates (bzhengs) the material tools and symbols of Tibetan religious life. Componentiality, in turn, fits an overarching pattern identified by Matthew Kapstein when he writes that 'religious arts of Tibet, including masked dance, painting and sculpture ... are almost entirely subservient to one great art form, the Buddhist tantric ritual' (2001: xvii, my emphasis). This takes 'art' into unfamiliar territory. While it is useful for comparative purposes to still speak of art, religion and ritual, Tibetan catalogues and categories do not operate within the parameters constructed in Western scholarship. That the material cultures of Tibetan Buddhism are modular is a function of the kusungtuk kyi ten (sku gsung thugs kyi rten) or supports for awakened body, speech and mind paradigmatic of the composite 'one great art form' that Kapstein had in mind.

Acknowledging that the componential character of ritual is widely recognized in the Tibetan case, it is important to understand just how ritual objects like metok chöpa, which are positioned at the centre of ritual events, are composite both in form and in the way they are made. This recognition in turn draws our attention to teams, collaboration and coordination, and how they contribute to processes of consecration or 'ensoulment' (to use Kendall's term). When do the parts of a composite ritual object become 'active'? How this question arises will become more apparent as we look more closely at the composite form and organization of the monastery-centred festival during which metok chöpa are displayed.

Metok chöpa and temporality

While we know that the affordances of temporal categories are not fixed, it is clear that one purpose of material artefacts produced for (or in) rituals is to institute temporal extension—a pre- and after-life of the performance. It is also well known, however, that certain time-consuming and elaborate art forms produced in Tibetan ritual contexts are not preserved, and in some cases their non-preservation or destruction is germane to their production, performance and effects. Heading to Nepal in 1978, Richard Kohn's original plan, prior to being drawn into his encyclopaedic study of the Mani Rimdu ritual cycle (Kohn 2001), had been to investigate 'Temporary Art in Buddhist Communities of Nepal', which included 'sculpture of butter and dough' or torma (gtor ma), 'paintings of sand' (rdul mtshon gyi dkyil 'khor; sand mandalas) and 'ritual constructions of thread' (mdos; thread crosses) (Kohn 1988: ii). In the decades since Kohn's monumental work, the temporary nature of much Tibetan art has captured world attention even as it has been repositioned within very different art worlds in isolation from its ritual and/or festive context, particularly familiar in public constructions of sand mandalas (Kimball 2016; Kohn 2001; xxi).

Like other examples of metok chöpa, the Ocean of Sacred Food offered during Losar at Rongwo monastery falls within the category of temporary art that Kohn describes as 'torma', an 'offering [cake] sculpted from dough or grain and decorated with butter' (Kohn 2001: 119). Ubiquitous in Tibetan ritual life, torma vary immensely in size and shape. Ranging from plain to extraordinarily elaborate, their ornaments are symbolic and usually take an abstract or geometric form (Ortner 1978: 132-133; see also Kohn 1988: 168-70). The metok chöpa made for public display during Losar are distinct among torma in being generally larger and graced with figurative representations of deities, historical persons, ritual objects, symbols and offerings. While it should be the ritual cake and thus food aspect that is the focus of the offering, there is a sense in which the offering cake aspect disappears behind the imaginative and colourful ornaments mounted upon it. A metok chöpa's ornamentation is what draws crowds on the occasions they are displayed, confirming a festive purpose beyond the ritual function attached to torma in general. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that at Rongwo and other large monasteries in the past, according to one of the lhazo, metok chöpa made by different sections of the monastic body were compared and ranked

for their pleasing arrangement and demonstration of skill (see also Cooke 2010: 18).

Team making features prominently in Tibetan ritual art, particularly at moments in the annual cycle when 'ritual, festival, celebration, carnival, holiday, public display event' can be usefully brought together as varieties of 'public performance' (Santino 2017: 3). In Repgong there are many occasions when ritual and festive dynamics overlap or combine, most dramatically during events held in monasteries over Losar. Holidays, especially festivals focused on monasteries and referred to in Tibetan as 'major occasions' (dus chen, from dus ston chen po, great feast; S. mahamahah), are periods when ritual sessions are accompanied by public performances or displays (display often being performed). Because the celebrative mode of festivals requires temporal synchronization of people's activity, we can assume they are structured through time and timing—which amounts to recognizing these events as an assemblage of not just materials and ingredients, but also people. Taking the metok chöpa as an example, we will see how the temporal dimensions or experiences of objects made for display at an event are structured at least as much by time in the sense of timing, coordination and synchronization, as they are of duration. Indeed, torma are commonly dispersed immediately after they are offered or at the end of the ritual event of which they form a part (Kohn 1988: 172-3). Following its day of display, the Ocean of Sacred Food at Rongwo Monastery is moved to a corner of the Assembly Hall until it is dismantled eleven months later and its materials reused.⁵

The interwoven set of concepts, categories and problems explored so far alert us to diverse qualities of temporary Tibetan ritual arts and their production at a moment when elaborate torma are being produced as permanent objects for museum displays, as is the case at present in the Museum of Repgong Arts (reb gong sgyu rtsal bshams ston khang).6 Museumification of Repgong's material and monastic culture follows upon its widespread destruction in 1958, as well as

⁵ Reporting on the metok chöpa at Kumbum Monastery (sku 'bum byams pa gling) in the late 1930s, Thubten Norbu (1982: 132) notes that the 'butter lamps' underwent consecration (rab gnas) just before they were revealed for display, and a 'Request to Depart' prayer (gshegs gsol) was conducted well before sunrise the following morning when the festival crowds had left.

⁶ For a project outlining technical solutions for digital preservation, see Lu and Zheng (2021).

the ravages of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during which the site of Rongwo Monastery was appropriated for secular use. Museumification is also a component of ongoing Chinese state domination. The events I recount here are from January 1991, when the post-Mao museumification of Tibetan religion in China was still in its very early and crudest stage and local communities were in a revival and reconstruction mode (Caple 2019: 19–37; Stevenson, forthcoming).⁷

Compositeness and time

When I first visited Repgong in January 1990, the foundations for rebuilding Rongwo Monastery's architectural infrastructure were only just being laid. Well after the monastery had been allowed to re-open and hold its first assembly gathering in February 1980 (Caple 2019: 26), the monastery site remained in disrepair and overgrown with weeds. By my fourth trip up from Chengdu in January 1991 there was an air of celebration in Repgong's Guchu Valley. The young Eighth Shartsang, the current incarnation of Rongwo Monastery's sovereign lama (*dgon*

⁷ The CCP's institution of a 'peoples political administration' in Repgong (22 September 1949) inaugurated a period of wide social and political change, including the formal displacement of Rongwo Monastery's governing authority. There were two periods when the impact on Repgong's monasteries was particularly intense. The first came in 1958 during a campaign to suppress widening revolt and resistance in eastern Tibet, leading to the closure of monasteries, confiscation of monastic property and symbolic and deliberate assaults on their architectural and material wealth. This first campaign to dismantle traditional culture and institutions was brought to an end in 1962 as a consequence of the Great Leap Forward induced famine in China, and some monasteries recommenced limited operations during a brief interlude. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) led to a second shutdown of monastic life and Tibetan religious culture, including vicious ideological attacks on the remaining religious and cultural leaders not yet killed or imprisoned. While 'rehabilitation' of individuals commenced as early as 1978, monastic life would not recommence until after the Tenth Panchen Lama's push for normalization in the 1980s. On relations between the CCP and Repgong's ruling elite, including monastic authorities, from 1949 to 1958, see Weiner 2012: 163-199; on the 1958 rebellion, its suppression and the ensuing attack on and disbanding of monasteries, see Weiner 2020: 161-180.

bdag), had been identified after a long period of anticipation, his predecessor having died while still imprisoned in 1978. As preparation for the Losar festivities at Rongwo Monastery got underway details of the Eighth Shartsang's approaching enthronement began to circulate, and Rongwo's monks were being exhorted to put special effort into the upcoming Mönlam Chenmo (smon lam chen mo: Great Aspiration Prayer) festival, of which the display of the Ocean of Sacred Food was a part.

The event of the Ocean of Sacred Food's display is known as the Miraculous Display Offering (cho 'phrul mchod pa), so named for the festival day on which it is held—the Major Occasion of the [Buddha's] Great Miraculous Display (cho 'phrul chen po'i dus chen).8 The Major Occasion of the Great Miraculous Display is in turn a part of the composite, multi-day Mönlam Chenmo, known more fully as the Great Aspiration Prayer [Commemorating the Buddha's] Miraculous Display (cho 'phrul smon lam chen mo; conventionally 'The Great Prayer Festival'). Beginning at the beginning, however, the first thing to note is that the five days taken to make the Ocean of Sacred Food began on the first day of the twelfth lunar month (16 January 1991), exactly one lunar month prior to the first day of the Year of the Female Iron Sheep (15 February). Nobody pointed this exactitude out to me at the time, but given the importance of selecting auspicious alignments for the commencement of important activities it is unlikely to have been a coincidence. The second thing to note, already alluded to above, is that the display of the offering is assigned a particular day in the schedule of Mönlam Chenmo, namely the Major Occasion of the Great Miraculous Display. At Rongwo Monastery it falls on the twelfth day of the New Year and inaugurates a series of large-scale public events that bring the multiday Mönlam Chenmo to its culmination. ⁹ The thirteenth day features the Reverent Viewing of Sacred Objects (rten mjal; lha rten mjal ba), the

⁸ This refers to Sakyamuni Buddha's performance of miracles at Sravasti when overcoming challenges from six holders of heretical doctrines. For the important place this event had in stimulating artistic imagination in the Buddhist traditions, see Brown 1984; Foucher 1909. Due to the pervasiveness of this theme during the first month of the year, it can sometimes be referred to as the Miraculous Display month (cho 'prul zla ba).

⁹ I should note here that the New Year butter-sculpture display is widely known—including in Repgong—as 'The Offering of the Fifteenth' (bco lnga mchod pa), the fifteenth day being the day on which the large-scale torma were exhibited around the Barkor in Lhasa (Richardson 1993: 27–30).

fourteenth is the Showing of the Great Tangkha (gos sku chen mo zhal [ta] 'byed [pa]), the fifteenth is Maitreya Buddha's Circumambulation (byams pa gling bskor) in the form of his statue mounted on a cart, and on the sixteenth—just as the waxing moon begins its wane—the previous year's dark forces are exorcized in a Ritual Dance ('chams) (chu skyes dge 'dun dpal bzang 2013: 282–9, 311–3). The schedule of public events mounted by the monastery is not universal; its components and timing may vary from one monastery to another. We can say, however, that there is compositeness within their every layer, the objects on which they focus and the way in which those ritual objects are made or assembled. Parts within parts within parts.

We begin also to see how another requirement within this kind of composite ritual is to line things up and assign them a place in time. There is an ordered passing of the year's seasons, but these also need to be managed through a rite of passage when they reach the point of crossing from one year or cycle into the next. As Pierre Bourdieu noted in Outline of a Theory of Practice:

One of the effects of the ritualization of practices is precisely that of assigning them a time—i.e. a moment, a tempo and a duration which is relatively independent of external necessities, those of climate, technique, or economy, thereby conferring on them the sort of arbitrary necessity which specifically defines cultural arbitrariness. (Bourdieu 1977: 163)

In other words, one effect of ritualizing practices is making them significant. Similarly, Alfred Gell recognizes a 'consensual coordination' (1992: 294-305) between makers (or other actors) which elevates action out of uncoordinated activity in ways similar to those Edmund Leach identified as distinguishing sacred time from profane (Leach 1961: 134; see also Gell 1992: 326). Timing and coordination therefore fit into the paradigm of a marked / unmarked structure that can be deployed, transposed or noted at different scales. Moments, tempos, durations, events, coordinations, marked and unmarked times, contrasted times—these are some of the ways that time and the temporal are involved in producing significant differences, and they inevitably coincide with other sources of significance, verbal and non-verbal.

¹⁰ Running the climax of the festival over the commencement of the waning moon is also a consideration in the timing of Mani Rimdu (Kohn 2001: 71).

It is tempting in the present context to view temporality in Tibetan contexts as composite, 11 with calendars and almanacs drawing on diverse methods for calculating the calendar, including methods derived from Indian and Chinese astrology. Lunar calendars differ as to whether they are calculated on the agricultural new year (so nams lo gsar) or imperial new year (rgyal lo), and communities often draw on both, now with the added complication of the Western calendar. There are also less literal ways in which the year takes on a composite character. I have already mentioned how the day on which construction of the metok chöpa commenced was timed to be one lunar month before the first day of Losar. At the scale of the annual cycle, Losar and the Mönlam Chenmo stand in contrast to a second period of ritual saturation in the central Repgong valley—the summer harvest festival (drug pa'i klu | glu rol) that six months later focuses on local mountain deities (gzhi bdag) and is strictly separated from monastic involvement.

The production sequence

Returning to the making of the Ocean of Sacred Food with these considerations of compositeness and timing in mind, the first question we might ask is how the five days over which it was constructed were organized. The short answer is 'practically'. A core work team had been prearranged, consisting of two senior laymen—who as young men in the 1950s had been monks in Rongwo Monastery—and a younger layman apprentice in his late twenties who had never been a monk. They were joined by a middle-aged monk who worked primarily on the coloured flowers, leaves and clouds that would form the substrate and fringe of the tableau. This core team of four would do all the moulding for all components of the main figures and accompanying symbols. Three or four monks were assigned to prepare meals and arrange anything else that the core team needed during their work, such as kneading butter and preparing iced water.

¹¹ Martin Mills (2005) takes a different perspective on the same phenomenon, describing 'fractured temporalities' in Ladakh. More recently, working with Tibetan refugee communities in the Darjeeling Hills, Barbara Gerke (2012) shows how negotiation or mediation between diverse temporal frameworks offers opportunities for 'situational agency' via ongoing 'practices of temporalization' (see also Kohn 2001: 69-73).

Of the materials necessary for the Ocean of Sacred Food, the most important is butter to which the lhazo add powdered dyes. Here the value placed on luminosity or selwa (gsal ba) is visible, since the coloured butter, at once glossy and translucent, conveys the clarity of awakened mind. While it is a pervasive, everyday substance in Tibetan life, butter also holds special significance as a basis for lay-clerical interaction and exchange. In the material making of the Ocean of Sacred Food it is a glossy fat made luminous through the addition of colour—an amorphous, perishable material given form through skilled modelling (Figure 4.2). Like the gold-foil selwa that adorns the completed offering, butter continues to speak to community aspirations of well-being, despite the arrival of what Trine Brox (2022a) has called the 'plastic skinscapes' of religion. The large torma on which the frames with completed butter figures are mounted is made of parched barley flour (phye) mixed with water. Concealed within its centre is a branch of juniper that is the offering's life tree or enlivening pillar (srog shing). Other materials used to display the figures to best effect include wood frames, coloured cotton thread, dowel, string and wire. In terms of equipment, the work teams need knives to scrape down



Figure 4.2 Coloured butter arranged on palettes according to hue. Work from the previous year is visible at the back and has been stripped of its outer layer of coloured butter ready for re-use. A lump of uncoloured yak butter is visible upper-right. Photograph by the author, 1991.

old butter, wooden work boards, wooden styluses and spatulas, bone joints used as extruders, enamel basins containing water, ice and a small amount of bean flour, 12 and wooden moulds.

Day One focused on dismantling and cleaning the previous year's wooden ökhang ('od khang: lit. lanterns), the frames used to attach the coloured butter figures to the torma body. This was done outside under the warmth of the sun in the courtyard of the Assembly Hall, where the ökhang were stripped of their coloured butter, the remains of which were combined to form a grey-brown filler that would be re-used as substrate. At the same time, also in the courtyard, a mass of fresh butter was kneaded smooth and pale. A side of mutton stood nearby and for the next days would provide lunch for everyone involved. Kneaded smooth, the new butter was taken into the workspace where it was divided into cup shaped portions. Commercial pigment powders were poured in and then blended through by hand. The newly coloured butter was next formed into a series of cones, a shape from which pieces could easily be detached, each cone arranged with others of a like hue on a wooden 'palette' (Figure 4.2). The hues needed for the surfaces of the Ocean of Sacred Food's figures and ornaments, as well as the flowers, leaves and clouds that would surround and adorn the tableau, were all prepared ahead of time in this way, in the quantities that experience predicted would be required. A small amount of black butter was made by dabbing new butter on the bottom surface of a well-used cooking pot.

Early on Day Two the last of the materials prepared on Day One were moved into a small storage area next to the workspace and work began on the two deities who would occupy the front axis of the torma: Samantabhadra (kun tu bzang po) and Jambhala (dzam bha la) in his yellow aspect (Figure 4.3). The basic external surfaces (skin and clothing) of the deities, who at this stage were headless and handless, were fashioned using the coloured butter and completed by the end of the day, the iconographers working more-or-less in tandem on the analogous parts or attributes of the deities. This coordination of work was heightened when the respective deities' heads were attached. The iconographers raised the deities high, watching each other as they did so, and affixed the heads in synchrony. Samantabhadra's crown and Jambhala's topknot were then added. Soon after, the iconographers

¹² Iced water keeps fingers cold to avoid softening the butter, while adding bean flour prevents dyes from running.

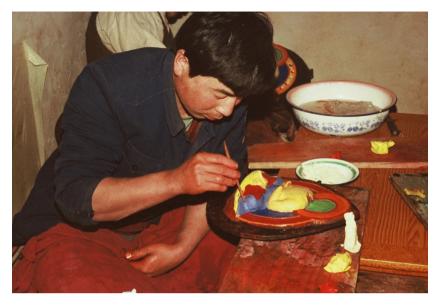


Figure 4.3 Adding blocks of coloured butter during early-stage work on the figure of Jambhala. Work on the figure of Samantabhadra is visible at the rear. The basin of iced water holds wooden tools. Photograph by the author, 1991.

stopped again to coordinate the attachment of the deities' hands, holding them high as before. 13 On Day Two work also commenced on the Emblem of Manjushri ('jam dpal phyag mtshan ri mo; sdom brtson dam pa) which would crown the Ocean of Sacred Food torma. Unlike the figures of the two deities, the emblem's component items were completed over three days and it was finally put together on Day Four.

Day Three consisted of working on the attributes (phyag mtshan; lit. hand-held emblems) of Samantabhadra and Jambhala and fixing them to each image, as well as the completion of a fourth item for the central axis of the torma ornaments, the Five Objects of Desire ('dod yon lnga) (see Figure 4.1). It was on this day, too, that the monk helpers removed the dry crust of the previous year's torma body before giving it a fresh coat of tsampa, which was coated in red butter once it was dry. Continuing from the day before, anyone with spare moments iconographers or their assistants—made individual butter flowers set on wooden stems. Finally, the lhazo also modelled two sets of offerings that would flank each side of the torma, the Eight Auspicious

¹³ The hands and head are modelled further (touched up) after being attached.

Insignia (bkra shis rtags brgyad; S. astamangala[cihna]) and the Eight Auspicious Substances (bkra shis rdzas brgyad; S. astamangaladravya), which are together known as the Sixteen Auspicious Substances and Insignia (bkra bshis rdzas dbang bcu drug; bkra shis rdzas rtags).

On Day Four the pace was much more relaxed. The senior iconographer began the day telling us about ghosts pestering his village, while repairs were made to any butter figures that had been nibbled overnight by rats. The elements of the Emblem of Manjushri were assembled on its ökhang—which included a lotus base—immediately after the second of its two-headed birds was finished. In the afternoon, work was focused on completing the necessary number of flowers. All the main figures, now complete and fixed to their ökhangs by wire, were taken into the Assembly Hall to be positioned on the torma.

Breakfast was a long affair on Day Five, following which the completed flowers, prepared petal by petal over the previous days, were inserted by their stems into holes that marked their position on the wooden frames already mounted on the torma. After lunch the mutton was set to simmer all afternoon in preparation for dinner, using up all that was remaining, while the iconographers set about using small wooden moulds to produce a mass of leaves and clouds to accompany the flowers already surrounding the tableau of butter figures. Once those final decorations had been carefully arranged on the tableau, broken gold leaf was sprinkled over the completed Ocean of Sacred Food—a final flourish of selwa-luminosity. There was a sense of joy as everyone admired the finished work, exclaiming in unison a long 'Yaaamtsen!' (ya mtshan; 'How amazing!'). It was now time for dinner, during which the iconographers were presented with gifts by the caretaker (dkor gnyer; sgo gnyer) of the assembly hall, signalling that the project was complete.

Completed, the Ocean of Sacred Food was around 170 centimetres high, but on its display table towered over 250 centimetres. It would sit at the rear of the Assembly Hall for over a month until its allocated day within the Mönlam Chenmo. Looking at the arrangement of the elements of which it was composed (Figure 4.4), we see a ritual object composed of other ritual objects, some of which in other contexts would be self-standing, some parts of sets. The Emblem of Manjushri with its flaming sword sits at the top of the tableau. Proceeding down the central axis is Yellow Samantabhadra, the Five Objects of Desire and Yellow Jambhala. These are flanked left and right by the Eight Auspicious Insignia and the Eight Auspicious Substances, offset by a mass of coloured butter flowers, together with coloured butter leaves



Figure 4.4 The metok chöpa known as the Ocean of Sacred Food nears completion as the last flecks of gold leaf are added. Photograph by the author, 1991.

and clouds, all arranged in mirror-like symmetry. We can read the form of the completed metok chöpa in terms of the spatial hierarchy of its elements, some of which are assigned a higher or more central place than others. But how should we read the sequence of its production?

Reverential making as pre-consecration

I described the making of the metok chöpa as 'practical' but, we might ask, practical for what purpose and in what way? Bourdieu (1977), as noted above, highlighted the ritual (and social) potential of aligning activities in a way that is 'relatively independent of external necessities' (e.g. climate, technique or economy). If ritualized practices are not practical in terms of 'external necessities', do they have their own 'logic of practicality? And can that logic of ritual practicality in turn serve as a ground from which practices (or things) are further differentiated?

In this instance the question of practicality comes back to the composite nature of the Ocean of Sacred Food, as well as the fact that it is constructed by a team. We can think of these two—compositeness and teamwork—as the internal practicalities of the sequence of production (or chaînes opératoires). The Ocean of Sacred Food has identifiable parts, and responsibility for those parts can be distributed among the work team members according to their level of skill and range of experience. It was clear from the way materials were reused in 1991 that the metok chöpa was repeated in much the same form as the previous year. But I was not witness to any of the planning and discussion that went into deciding which figures would feature on the torma or who would be responsible for what part (for how responsibilities were organised at Kumbum Monastery in the 1930s, see Thubten Norbu 1982: 128–9). I can only assume that the internal practicalities were decided in the weeks leading up to the team's engagement, and in 1991 there was a good chance that team members were repeating roles they had performed the previous year. 14 At the time, it did not occur to me to ask about these details—the opportunity to witness the process had fallen into my lap and I was unprepared. Indeed, most of the observations I make here have their origin in questions I failed to see or ask at the time and that only occurred to me much later. I would like to suggest some more.

Did the construction of the Ocean of Sacred Food in 1991 really require a team of four and its sundry helpers? And a corollary question, was it important that it was finished in five days? How might the organization and distribution of work contrast with that of sand-mandala construction teams? How unique is the jovial atmosphere that accompanied the butter sculpture team, which would be out of place in sand-mandala construction? Was the joviality an effect of festivalization, anticipating the public performances of the Mönlam Chenmo? Or could the joviality be linked to working with the qualities of butter as opposed to coloured sand? Then again, could the materiality of butter inform the process of festivalization in a way that makes it difficult for the last two questions to be distinguished?

A further set of questions, however, has consumed me more than any raised so far, and they concern the modelling of the deities Samantabhadra and Jambhala. The modelling of the two deities was coordinated so that they were begun and completed on the same day (Day Two), the work on them conducted more-or-less in tandem. Their bodies and clothing were completed at the same time, their heads were

¹⁴ I met the same group working on a metok chöpa the following year at Pangkartang Monastery (spang [spen] dkar thang phun tshog dar rgyas gling) in Mepa, Repgong.

attached at the same time, their headdresses were modelled at the same time, their hands were modelled and attached at the same time and their attributes were in both cases left to be modelled and attached (or attached and modelled) the following day (Day Three). The deities were the first of the tableau's component parts to be modelled. They were also the exclusive responsibility of two separate iconographers. If I can still speak of the organization of the construction of the Ocean of Sacred Food as 'practical', it is beginning to appear that practice in this context was also governed by a ritual logic, or at least by a prioritization of what is most holy among the components of this holiday offering.

What the two deities share in contrast to other components of the metok chöpa is their embodied representation as deities. Despite Manjushri's importance in the Geluk tradition practiced at Rongwo Monastery, and even the priority his emblem is given at the peak of the torma, the embodied representations of Samantabhadra and Jambhala seemed to rank higher in terms of the priorities of making. This could have been due to the two embodied representations sharing similar processes of modelling—a level of practical analogy that coincided with their shared ritual significance. Whether or not these tentative interpretations reflect how the iconographers and their assistants understood the ordering and synchronicity of their work, the making process I have recounted reveals at least two systems of priority, the one positional (on the torma), the other processual (in the production sequence)—where things go and how they proceed. Prioritization in space and prioritization in time.

Returning once more to the composite nature of the Ocean of Sacred Food and its ritual context, one way these questions of ritualized making come together in a rather startling way is in the treatment of the two deities' heads and hands. As the heads are attached the two iconographers lift the incomplete deities to the level of their own faces and, in unison, fix them in position. Again, to attach the last parts of the deities' bodies, the torsos are once again lifted faceto-face with the iconographer when each of the hands are inserted. What does the elevation of the deity mean? Why is it done and why is it done twice? What is significant about both the head and hands? This last question could be approached from a number of directions. The approach I favour brings us back to the problem of compositeness and the need for coordination. The delicateness and definition of the heads and hands required they be made separately. Then, as they were attached, the special status of the deities was recognized in

an inaugurating act of reverence. This was done as the deities' bodies were completed but yet to be fully adorned with their regalia and attributes. The raising up of the deities in the moment their bodies were completed is easy to recognize as an act of reverence (and presumably indicates the role that head and hands have in the power or activity of deities). But why should the iconographers do so at the same time? Given that less marked forms of synchronization (without the 'dramatic' raising up) are present throughout the making of the deities—and only the making of the deities—I think we can conclude that the synchronization aspect is a special mode of reverence relating to something that working on more than one deity introduces. That is, we see reverence expressed through the embodied coordination of the lhazo involved, and their coordination contributes to the sacralization or 'ensoulment' of the 'objects' (to employ Kendall's phrase) before formal consecration.

What I have been describing are ways in which behind-the-scenes collaboration and synchronization become or remain a part of substances and artefacts produced for rituals. While I am exploring this in relation to the production sequence, we should not be surprised to find that much the same issue was addressed early in the history of Buddhism in Tibet in relation to consecration rites—which can be considered a culmination of the reverence performed during the production sequence. In a consecration manual prepared and translated before he departed for Tibet in 1042 CE, the great Indian master Atisa (982–1054) revealed how the invisibility of ritual operations has always been a material consideration:

The merit of a ritual correctly performed will arise both in those who saw and those who did not see it done. As for an image, it is by the perfect characteristics of the mantra that blessings enter into the receptacle. (cited in Martin 2018: 125)

Work on Tibetan ritual art by Matthew Kapstein (1995), José Cabezon (2010) and Irmgard Mengele (2010), among others, provides additional evidence that ritual work is ritualized, and that in great part such ritualization of ritual work is achieved by organizing tasks in phases—a kind of separating out. There are generally three successive phases: (1) preparation (sbyor ba; sta gon), (2) the actual ritual (dngos gzhi) and (3) the concluding rites (rjes; mjug). The aforementioned scholarship describes the elaborateness or ritualization of ritual tasks in each of these phases in terms of precaution and protection. Examining the

Ocean of Sacred Food's production sequence, we begin to see additional perspectives. From an etic viewpoint, we might say that the moment of completion of the deities' bodies is recognized with a rite of passage (the coordinated elevation of the deities' forms) that introduces the new entities to the world. An emic view might be that special junctures of coordination align the making process with the requirements of consecration. Blending both perspectives, what have been viewed in previous analyses as acts of precaution can equally be seen as acts of *pre-consecration*. The reverence offered to the object as it is completed is an extension of the same reverence that is embodied in less dramatic forms of coordination present throughout the production sequence.15

Neither the gestures marking the completion of the deities' bodies nor the coordination of their production sequences were technically necessary to achieve their outward form. Imagine Samantabhadra and Jambala being made to order at different times and in different places before being put in place on the Ocean of Sacred Food torma. Would it result in any perceivable difference? Would anyone notice? And yet the work is conducted by an onsite team, a work style that provides opportunity to coordinate the assembly of the metok chöpa's different parts into a single unified effort. Unseen by the public, the work itself is an event-before-the-event of the metok chöpa's public display (I see this 'eventness' of the making as one reason for my being invited to observe it). Consecration procedures, the rationales offered for them and even the question of what they add, seen or unseen, are by no means uncomplicated matters in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (Bentor 1995; Martin 2018: 128). As with consecration formulae, the 'unnecessary' arrangements included in the production sequence nevertheless become part of what makes a completed metok chöpa complete, creating an object possessing agencies or powers that other objects do not have. There should not be anything surprising about work on ritual objects itself being ritualized, yet our explanatory efforts tend to emphasis the unified finished object, the thing, not the composite stages of its production. Where Kendall (2021: 10) has described ritual specialists employing 'magic' or 'technologies of sacred production' to enliven completed statues and images, the Repgong example leads me to suspect that our focus on those same specialized, post-production

¹⁵ See also Caple 2021 on synchronous standing as a practice of respect and reverence.

procedures has tended to blind us to less explicit events that ritualize the making of ritual objects.16

Conclusion

This chapter shares the same comparative impulses as Kendall in its wish to recognize the applicability of its findings beyond a single cultural area. But looking through the pictures of statues being hewn from wood or beaten from metal that appear throughout her book, I have come to see how the making of metok chöpa from butter is by contrast a very quiet, gentle and relaxed process. The convivial and collaborative atmosphere that surrounded the five-day making process would have been very different had it been hot and noisy, and I am not surprised that Kendall did not focus on teams or timing. This should not be taken to mean that collaborative and reverential moments cannot be found or are not meaningful in other contexts or processes. Where we have opportunities to spend more time with makers as they work, sharing in their temporality, we also need to seek opportunities for understanding the significance of collaborative making. In the instance of the metok chöpa, a key discovery is what I have called the ritualization of ritual work or making. The ritualization of ritual work might have other affordances, but here it has been shown to contribute to the sacralization of ritual objects.

If this Tibetan example of ritualized making contributes to how making is understood in anthropology more broadly, it does so by focusing on aspects of making that de-emphasize the individual, at the same time suspending the need to locate actors and their motivations within their 'material and sentient process of socialization and subject construction' (Hermkens 2015: 12; see also Ingold 2013;

¹⁶ Kendall does at one point acknowledge 'magical' practices being 'integrated into the process of production' (2021: 67). What I describe in this chapter presents an example of why even the 'heuristic' use of the term 'magic' runs into problems. To speak of magic's integration into the production of 'ensouled objects' is problematic since this implies that magic must at first be extrinsic to that process. In an earlier article that she draws on in her book, Kendall acknowledges that 'the heuristic distinction between technology and magic ultimately collapses where craftsmanship... combines with such extra-material procedures' (2017: 870).

Mauss 1973 [1934]). One strand of theory that can assist in this reorientation is Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) early work on 'the ritualization of practices', which revealed that the complex layers of temporality that rites and rituals engage are indispensable to their cultural and social significance. Largely forgotten in favour of his elucidation of the practicalities of accumulating cultural and symbolic capital, the temporal dynamics of Bourdieu's logic of practice have not been adequately explored in ritual studies, let alone material culture studies. A second strand is a similarly neglected aspect of Walter Benjamin's (2008 [1936]) reflections on the aura inhering within made objects, in particular as it relates to the origin of art in cult (i.e. ritual) practices. Benjamin's 'aura' is not a sensuous glow, but rather an awareness of the ritual (or care) that accompanies the making of things, which has come to stand in contrast to their consumption or exhibition (see Thomas' and Brox's chapters, among others, in this volume). 17

A third seam is Alfred Gell's observation that technical virtuosity has an effect in social life comparable to a supernatural power, a power 'intrinsic to the efficacy of works of art' (1992: 52), an insight revisited recently by Pierre Lemonnier (2012). Similarly loosening the 'opposition between technology and magic', Lemonnier explores interrelations of material actions, objects and techniques—interrelations held to be active in rituals and objects and perceptible when their performance or production is documented in operational sequences (chaînes opératoires), a concept he adapts from archaeology. To return to terms also operationalized by Kendall, both Gell and Lemonnier take 'art, magic, and the *production* of objects to be intimately linked to each other' (Lemmonier 2012: 140, original emphasis). On the question of how festival and ritual align, folklorists such as Jack Santino (2017) have been interested in how they might be understood as 'public performance', yet the processes by which material objects are made ready to enter public performances are still underexplored. In the Tibetan case, as I have made clear, a useful step is to recognize how events and objects are composite. This demands a focus on coordination, including moments when coordination itself is made significant.

As foreshadowed in my introduction, I have attempted to draw lessons from festive spectacles and ritual art produced at Rongwo

¹⁷ As Trine Brox's (2019) research in the Chengdu 'Tibetan market' has revealed, devotees and astute retailers have developed methods for reinvesting commoditized mass-produced religious objects with 'cult value' and aura.

Monastery, Repgong, in 1991. I am the first to acknowledge that the data I am extrapolating from is severely limited considering the extensive social and symbolic frameworks within which it was embedded. By reflecting on what could have been asked had I thought of those questions at the time, this chapter nevertheless alerts others researching Tibetan art and religion to aspects of the making process that have previously remained unremarked. Among those aspects, it is particularly important to consider the composite nature of Tibetan ritual and ritual art. What Richard Kohn called 'temporary art in Buddhist communities' is paradoxically often more complexly composite than more permanent art forms such as sculpture and painting. The paradox is perhaps resolved when we acknowledge the involvement of temporary art forms in public performance—spectacles do not endure, yet their temporariness leads them into other temporal considerations, what I have referred to as coordination, synchronicity and timing. Likewise, ritual objects display a temporal involvement that shows up in the process of their making. I would not suggest we draw hard lines around the categories employed in this analysis. Making, for example, is a very elastic concept that can be easily extended to include modes of an object's use and ultimately its disposal. 18

What the making of the 1991 Ocean of Sacred Food reveals about the production of publicly performed art works and the behind-thescenes work they entail may also reveal that the making process is part of the process of sacralization.¹⁹ While specific consecration rituals may be applied to ritual objects, all stages in their making are already oriented toward sacralization, we might say from the start. Following Bourdieu, we can expect this orientation to be acted out in the synchronization of culturally significant steps as ensouled objects near completion. Beyond the production of ritual objects, I would even venture to say that all forms of making are to some degree ritualized. In making something new and introducing it to the world or a

¹⁸ This is one of the major insights introduced by the chaînes opératoires approach.

¹⁹ Other recent works have similarly noted the importance of the process of making to the status and efficacy of Tibetan Buddhist objects. See, for example, Catanese (2019: 178–9) on the importance that Tibetan tangkha painters attribute to proper execution as well as correct iconography in creating an image that serves as the basis for a deity. See also Brox (2022b: 210) who refers in passing to protocols regulating the making of Tibetan prayer wheels.

community, the making itself requires its rites of passage, however subtle, fleeting or everyday they may be. Rites of passage nested within rites of passage. This has been shown to be the case when the object and its making are a component of a larger rite or when gestures of reverential making are performed behind-the-scenes. Finally, whether seen as sacralization or ritualization, when the making of ritual objects is collaborative or modular (or both) we can expect to see reverence expressed through the makers' embodied synchronization. Time and timing are made material.

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