

# AMONG TIBETAN MATERIALITIES

Materials and Material Cultures  
of Tibet and the Himalayas

**Emma Martin, Trine Brox  
and Diana Lange (eds.)**



## Among Tibetan Materialities




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**CLUSTER OF EXCELLENCE**  
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# 1 Feeling, knowing, interpreting On Tibetan lives and objects

Tsering Yangzom

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1.

A person is born into a crevice between a nomadic past and a nomadic future. Their belongings are temporary and contingent before an ever-changeable land/identity/language/name/story. The person carries their belongings from place to place, even when the objects no longer make sense in the next life. No one carries more on their back than a nomad far from their pastures.

2.

The simplest way to categorize Tibetans is to say there are those of us in exile and those in Tibet. This distinction is not merely a statement of geographic location. It is deployed politically.

As a college student in the early 2000s, I saw prominent Tibet scholars differentiate us in this way. One unfortunate metaphor (of the ‘tail wagging the dog’) sticks in my mind. The scholar used it to describe how exile Tibetans protested or spoke on behalf of those inside Tibet. This metaphor served to negate our connection with our kin and, ironically, to further silence people inside Tibet. This distinction also mirrors Chinese state rhetoric, which blames exile ‘separatists’ for unrest they encounter in Tibet. Of course, the 2008 uprising, which erupted spontaneously across historical Tibet even after five decades of iron-fisted colonial rule, revealed the profound and persistent unity of our shared feelings and wishes.

This categorization of Tibetans causes a double bind that precludes any voice from legitimately expressing the will of the Tibetan people.

It also reflects the state lens because it denies our experience, what it feels like to be alive today as a Tibetan.

It seems to me that every Tibetan alive today is an exile. Whether in the diaspora or in our homeland (where Tibetans cannot move, speak or live freely), displacement is our unifying state of being. Exile is not only a matter of physical deracination, but also of psychological, cultural and spiritual displacement.

### 3.

Let us agree on this: Tibetan materialities exist as part of a history and experience of ongoing settler colonialism and exile. Anyone who owns, uses and theorizes Tibetan materialities is thus engaged in actions charged with the political and material conditions of the Tibetan people.

To put it plainly, here is a civilization facing its slow annihilation, a people fighting for our survival.

What does it mean to study Tibetan lives, objects and ideas in such a time? What does studying Tibetan lives, objects and ideas *do*?

### 4.

The colonizer is preoccupied with possession. They seek to possess the land, objects, bodies and even the minds of the colonized. But the colonizer does not want to be close to the colonized. Proximity threatens their fictions about the colonized as well as themselves.

### 5.

Closeness comes from an embodied understanding of self and other, a recognition of the fullness of being alive as a person. Closeness also recognizes the limits of completely knowing someone else's existence. It generates and enlivens an understanding that manifests as epistemic humility or even silence—an understanding that reveals itself as awe, gratitude, veneration.



6.

All text is potential. A reader comes to the text with a certain state of receptivity. If they cultivate the receptivity owed to the story, the reader regenerates it. Whether or not they cultivate the ideal receptivity, the reader changes the story. Before long, through their participation and labour, they have created a text that belongs to them, a text for which they are responsible.

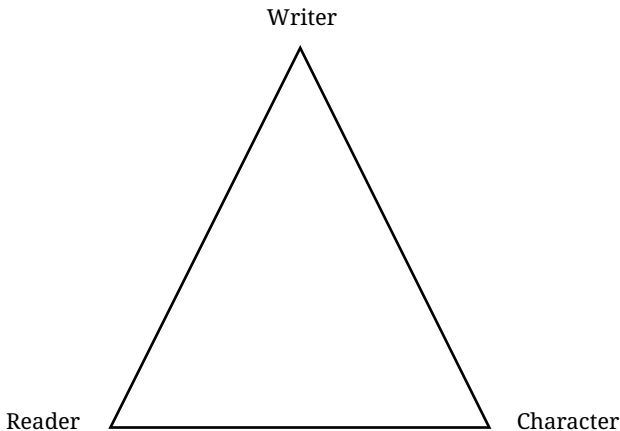
7.

It is said that every work of literature is a triangulation between three people—the reader, the writer and the character of a story. All three are agents in the story. A perfect triangle comes to mind. Lines of even length so that the distances between the writer, reader and character are identical. Each body exerts the same pull; each is an equal participant in the story.

8.

Question: What is a 'fiction'?

Answer: That it is possible to have story like this:



## 9.

Over the years, I have visited dozens of museums across the world that hold the material culture of colonized, enslaved and eradicated peoples. These monumental cabinets of curiosities present a chronological history of humankind, a teleology that leads to modernity. Like other visitors, I have engaged in brief observations of the world's great civilizations, moving from display to display, catching glimmers of vast worlds but never entering them.

At the end of each visit, I feel empty and vaguely ashamed. After taking in so much so quickly, all while seeing nothing of the violence and injustice behind these acquisitions, I wonder what I am meant to do. Why should I access so many sacred objects while giving almost nothing of myself? What is the message here? These questions are most poignant on the rare occasions when I come upon Tibetan objects. At first, there is a flash of joy. We exist, I think. We are included.

But then a familiar ambivalence sets in as I consider the terms and conditions of our inclusion. Our objects are rarely called Tibetan. Instead, they are either attributed to China or categorized under the tepid designation of 'Himalayan', which erases us nonetheless. The selection of objects is limited to our ancient past, without any hint of our present conditions or existence—as though our fossils are all that remain of us. As though we only existed briefly.

Of course, it is the very colonization of Tibet that has made it possible for a museum to decide whether and how one of the world's great civilizations now exists.

## 10.

Just like the life of a person, the life of an object depends on the vitality and cooperation of whole communities. When an object is in community with people, it does not exist as a static historical thing, a fossil under glass. Its uses and meanings reflect the lifeworld of a community. It becomes sentient, dynamic, an agent in our lives.

## 11.

I understand that museum staff and scholars are well-meaning. I understand that there have been strides to include more Tibetan voices

in these spaces. But the fact remains: Tibetans are vastly underrepresented in spaces of power that shape discourses about us, our history and our material culture.

So long as discourses about Tibet are determined by non-Tibetans for non-Tibetan consumption in the service of non-Tibetan ends, they will have little to do with our desires and fates. At their worst, they will reflect a colonial logic of parasitism.

## 12.

In October 2016, a panel gathered at Harvard's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies entitled 'China's Tibetan and Uyghur Nationalities', featuring scholars of Tibetan and Uyghur studies (Shen et al. 2016).<sup>1</sup> None of the speakers was Tibetan or Uyghur—a fact not lost on the final speaker, historian Rian Thum, who critiqued the term 'minority' as applied to Uyghurs. He argued that since no Uyghur considers themselves a minority, it is wrong for Western scholars to uncritically apply the Chinese state's term to Uyghurs. Furthermore, he went on to say:

Whether you accept the term 'colony' or not, Tibet and Altishahr<sup>2</sup> are large, ethnically homogenous regions, roughly, ruled from outside without the consent of their inhabitants and subject to demographic and ethnic engineering via a strong settler policy. And I should say that there's a consensus emerging in English language scholarship of a willingness to call Xinjiang at least a colonial project or a colonial situation if not directly a colony. (Shen et al. 2016: 1:10:34–1:11:08)

I wondered: Are Tibetologists forming a similar consensus? Are Tibetologists collectively rejecting the colonizer's fictions? And if not, what further evidence do they need?

---

1 I use the spelling 'Uyghur' rather than 'Uighur', since this is the Romanized spelling commonly used by Uyghur scholars, organizations and community groups.

2 Altishahr (meaning 'six cities') is the southern half of what is commonly known as East Turkistan or Xinjiang, the latter being the colonial name used by successive China-based powers since the eighteenth century.

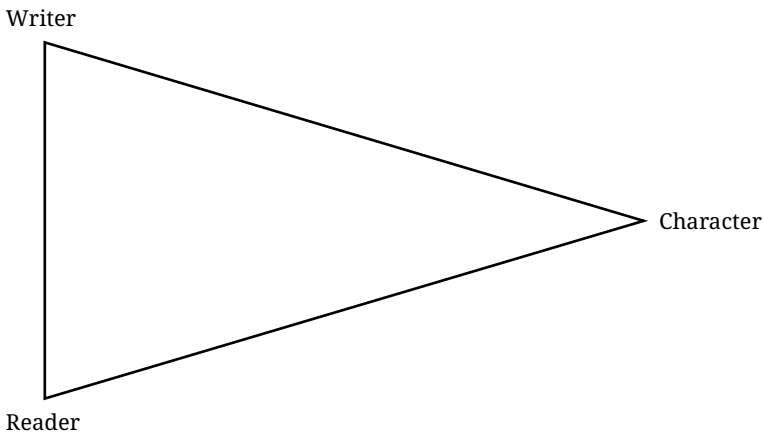
The Chinese scholar on the Fairbank panel gave a long, mealy-mouthed apologia for the poor condition of Tibetan studies in his country (ibid.: 1:38–20:08). When asked by an audience member about methodological changes he would advise to improve the scholarship in China, he replied that methodology was not the real issue. It was the interpretation of history, in particular the focus on ancient Chinese dealings with Tibet (ibid: 1:30:05–1:31:58). I took him to mean that their research was centred around proving China’s historical claim over Tibet—thus propaganda, not actual scholarship.

Yet, over the years, I have observed many Tibet scholars accept the terms set by the Chinese state. These panels, lectures and papers sputtered on without stating the basic facts of Chinese state violence, human rights abuses and cultural genocide in Tibet—not to mention the will and desire of the Tibetan people. I was perplexed by the absurd terms of the discourse. It seemed like they were playing word games while Tibetans were dying. Most of all, it was plain to me that if so many Tibet scholars were willing to treat a people’s survival and self-sovereignty as distinct from their study of those very people, the discipline was choosing a deliberate distance from its subject. A profound distance indeed.

### 13.

Question: What is the shape of the novel, *Lost Horizon* (2015 [1933]), which tells the story of an imagined Tibetan city and was written by an Englishman for Western readers?

Answer: The writer and reader are close, but the character (Shangri-La and its people) is distant. The writer and reader assert their shared will, fantasy and desire upon the character. So it is a triangle that looks like an icicle or a shard of glass. A story that looks like a weapon.



## 14.

In 'Against Interpretation', Susan Sontag (1966: 3–14) laments the way Western thought has severed art from its ancient role in ritual. She recognizes that our distant ancestors viewed art as 'incantatory, magical' (3)—something to be experienced.

Western theorization has led us to see interpretation (or translation) as the primary mode of engagement with art. When we look at a work of art, we try to decipher its hidden meanings, as if it is a code that needs to be cracked. This theorization takes us away from the potentiality of art to act upon us and our lives, to make us *feel* something.

Ritual is an experience made possible through our whole bodies, not just our minds. Whether it involves singing, dancing, walking, gesturing, visualising, it involves the whole self.

Buddhism does not separate the phenomenal world from the metaphysical. The material realm—our bodies, other beings and the world at large—is neither our enemy nor our servant. Even the Buddha had to come to this understanding. After starving himself to no avail, like the ascetics of his day, he finally attained enlightenment when he accepted rice porridge from a village girl. He fed his body and gained Nirvana with his body, not despite it. Liberation is embodied, not theoretical.

Whether it is tangkha paintings that aid in meditative practice or gorshey, the circle dance that Tibetans love to hold for every party's ending, I see Tibetan art as something that cannot be accessed through theoretical means alone.<sup>3</sup> It is aimed at our full being—intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical. It is art created for living within the community and the world.

## 15.

Stories perform a kind of magic. They are portals to other existences, immersing us in different minds and bodies. They give us a means of achieving closeness, healing, learning and even liberation.

---

3 I have chosen not to follow the conventions for the spelling and italicisation of Tibetan terms generally used in this volume. I wish these words to be spelled how I always write them and for them to exist typographically in the same way as English words (i.e., non-italicized), for this reflects my relationship with them. In my voice, Tibetan terms are no more alien than English.

But there are perils for the Tibetan storyteller today. Many people know about the extreme dangers faced by Tibetan writers working under occupation, but we writers outside Tibet face our own quieter perils.

Edward Said writes that in literary works, exile is largely conceptualized as ‘enriching’ and ‘beneficially humanistic’ (2000: 173–4). This romantic notion is derived from the association of exile with spiritual alienation or self-selected separation from one’s homeland (think Joyce, Hemingway). But the vast scale and profound deprivation of displacement in the present day makes the romantic, literary notion of exile an unfit, banalizing motif.

Within this milieu, the exiled writer is troubled in multiple ways. On the one hand, we must navigate a reading public that insists on receiving a story of suffering as something dignified, affirming, even triumphant. Literature of exile, like immigrant literature, is consumed as something ‘good for us’—that is, good for the society that hosts the exiled writer. It teaches and builds empathy within the host society.

On the other hand, the exiled writer must navigate the national narrative. They feel ‘an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people’ (Said 2000: 199). This narrative sweeps away stories that do not fit its form and frustrates the possibility of genuine artistic expression.

But the other state of being—the profound loneliness of the solitary exile—is unbearable and perhaps not survivable.

## 16.

Question: What does it look like when a Tibetan writer produces a story about a Tibetan character? Now imagine that there are both Tibetan and non-Tibetan readers, though the former are far outnumbered by the latter.

Answer: A disassembled and unstable triangle.

W        r        i        t e r

Character/ Tibetan Reader

Non-Tib

e

t

a

n Reader

## 17.

Said, who was an academic rather than a creative writer, suggested that we must look beyond iconic exile writers of the past like Joyce and Nabokov, and reflect instead on the masses of unknown exiles around the world.

I often think of a little-known short story by Nabokov called ‘The Visit to the Museum’ (Nabokov 1997: 277–285). I’m convinced that if Said had read this story, he would not have so readily discounted the Russian exile, for this story captures the horror of exile with terrifying sharpness.

In the story, an unnamed Russian exile visits a museum in France and discovers that it contains a portrait that once belonged to his friend, also a Russian exile. Seeking to purchase the portrait, the character approaches the director of the museum, who repeatedly denies that they possess the portrait. When the director is confronted with the artwork, he draws the Russian exile through the museum, which transforms before him, becoming an increasingly surreal and frightening maze full of strange objects. The Russian exile runs outside to find that he is no longer in France. Instead, he is back in Russia, where he is in danger. Despite his best efforts, he is soon discovered and arrested by the authorities, suffering unspecified ‘ordeals’ until he is inexplicably able to escape and return to exile in France.

This story is often dismissed as one of Nabokov's less successful works, but it takes an exile to appreciate its power and precision. In it we see the psychic dislocation of encountering an object of one's homeland, as well as the maddening distress of facing institutional denial. We see how these events revive trauma and disassemble the fragile solidity of the exile's new life. In this story, Nabokov does something unrecognizable, perhaps incomprehensible to many readers. But only a speculative work of horror can capture the perilous absurdity of exile.

Walking through a museum with other Tibetans, I have seen complex emotions on their faces. A silence hangs over us as we lean into the glass cases full of deities. We see tangible evidence of the violence done to us by history, yet these incalculable losses are never acknowledged. In that moment, we are witness to the displacement of our sacred objects—and of ourselves.

## 18.

Finally, because institutional power can lay a path for actualizing new futures with a community, because power can be a liberating force for a genuine politics of solidarity, I will close this essay with the following musings.

### Thought experiments for museums\* as spaces of potentialities

\*Insert universities, governments, corporations or other institutions.

- What if museums deliberated on and accepted their significance for peoples engaged in liberation struggles, for peoples fighting to assert their existence and narratives?
- What if, understanding the real stakes of the moment, museums raised their standards for what they want to achieve within a society?
- What if museums redesigned the governing principles for organizing and displaying objects, moving away from a Western-centric logic?
- What if Tibetan objects were placed in conversation with objects of other colonized and displaced peoples?



- What if museums were organized to celebrate the materialities of resistance, survival and creativity in the face of hegemonic annihilation?
- What if Tibetan objects were presented not only for interpretation but for experience?
- What if encountering a Tibetan object required participation and embodiment, the viewer being invited to give of themselves? What if the viewer experienced loss, retrieval, preservation, sacrifice, reverence and more?
- What if museums centred the Tibetan worldview and de-centred or contested the dominant cultural order?
- What if museums celebrated Tibetan resilience, intelligence and creativity?
- What if museums grieved when we grieve?
- What if the distinction between secular and religious culture was recognized as a colonial fabrication?
- What if museums preserved the things Tibetans consider valuable, not just 'exotic' objects?
- What if museums acknowledged the gap between objects and their interpretation?
- What if every single display placard could be revised by Tibetans?
- What if museums abandoned their desire to possess?
- What if museums held Tibetan objects on a basis of trust with Tibetans? What if museums committed to return all objects to Tibet when the occupation ends?
- What if museums taught visitors about the injustices faced by the Tibetan people?
- What if museums taught people about Western profiteering, participation and complicity in the ongoing occupation of Tibet?
- What if museums sought to inspire collective liberation, solidarity and action under Tibetan leadership?
- What if museums understood that the Tibetan struggle is not just about Tibet?
- What if museums saw that the Tibetan struggle can free the world?
- What if museums admitted that they need us?

## Note on the author

Tsering Yangzom's bestselling debut novel, *We Measure the Earth with our Bodies* (published under the name "Tsering Yangzom Lama"), was nominated for nine prizes including the Giller Prize, and won the Banff Mountain Book Prize for Fiction/Poetry and the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award. It is published or forthcoming in ten countries and eight languages.

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## 2 Introduction

# Materials, materiality and material culture

Trine Brox , Emma Martin  and Diana Lange 

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**Abstract** This introduction advocates for the expansion of Tibetan studies by embracing new sources, methodologies and frameworks to better understand the material culture of Tibet and the Himalayas. We start by reviewing the current state of the discipline's engagement with material culture. While recognizing the positive trend over the past decade of moving beyond the largely descriptive nature of earlier literature on Tibetan material culture, the chapter emphasizes the need for greater interaction with other academic fields to make our work relevant beyond Tibetan studies. We also address the limits and boundaries of how Tibet is understood as a political and geographical entity, stressing the importance of highlighting the localized experiences of regions like Sikkim, Ladakh, Bhutan and Nepal in scholarship. Additionally, we explore key terminology related to materiality, materials, labour and material culture, welcoming diverse perspectives in materially-led research rather than settling on a single approach. Along the way, we discuss how each chapter bridges other disciplines and is an example to follow. We conclude with a brief overview of the volume's structure, arguing that its chapters—both individually and taken together—promote the significance of knowledge produced when among Tibetan materialities.

**Keywords** material culture studies; methodologies; state of the field; sources; Tibetan studies

## Introduction

This volume is an effort to bridge Tibetan studies and material culture studies, offering fresh perspectives on how we understand materials and materiality in both historical and contemporary Tibetan and Himalayan contexts. We ask the discipline to reconsider what constitutes the Tibetan material world and to embrace new sites and lines of enquiry. In this introduction, we invite our Tibetan studies colleagues to share our interdisciplinary vision and expand their ambitions beyond the confines of Tibetan studies. By reaching out to other disciplines, we can contribute new theoretical discussions and ethnographic insights that hold broader relevance. We argue that the chapters that follow achieve precisely that; they speak directly to critical museology, waste studies, anthropology, religious studies, material culture studies, paper science, heroism studies and more, making our Tibetan and Himalayan topics relevant both for the insights they offer and for their role in shaping these diverse fields. Every chapter engages multiple disciplines while maintaining their solid Tibetan and Himalayan studies anchoring. Through this introduction, we encourage others to follow their example.

The connective thread that runs through this volume and connects each chapter is the material. In addition to its call to interdisciplinarity, *Among Tibetan Materialities* attempts to broaden the scope of Tibetan studies by highlighting the dynamic processes of becoming, making and knowing that shape material culture in Tibet and the Himalayas. As a benchmark publication at the intersection of Tibetan studies and material culture studies, it identifies keywords, concepts and ways of writing and thinking for an emerging area of research by bringing together a wide range of current scholarship on materials, materiality and material culture in Tibet and the Himalayas in both historical and contemporary contexts. Taken together, its contents disrupt accepted approaches to material culture in Tibetan studies by considering socially constructed materiality and the materials constituting things from their conception and production to their end of life and afterlife. Individual chapters offer theoretical, methodological and empirical insights of importance to various debates, from how we conceptualize and understand processes of becoming, making and knowing, to the different approaches that can be taken to investigate, conserve and communicate material culture. However, the conception of this volume and our collaboration with its other contributors are rooted in more

specific concerns and aspirations that we share as scholars working in the field of Tibetan studies. It is primarily to these issues that this introduction speaks.

Visual analysis and visual culture have been critical modes of analysis for Tibetan studies scholars, yet the use of material culture studies frameworks and theories of materialities and materials have received far less attention. In response, *Among Tibetan Materialities* aims to make an intervention into the discipline by challenging the limited and limiting ways it continues to understand itself. Our choice of title for this volume is not a coincidence. In reconfiguring the name of E. Gene Smith's (2001) celebrated work, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*, we honour, address and begin to unpick the discipline's long-time commitments to textual scholarship and to classical texts as its core primary source material. We take this approach both to challenge current perceptions of the boundaries of the field and to open up debates on methodologies and analytical techniques that take Tibetan studies beyond its established practices.

We are not the first to ask questions of the discipline, not least regarding its relevance to the academy beyond Tibetan studies, to wider societal questions and—most importantly—to Tibetan and Himalayan societies. In October 2015, Janet Gyatso stated in her Inaugural Aris Lecture, 'Beyond Representation and Identity: Opening Ways for Tibetan Studies', that the field was at an important crossroads (Gyatso 2015). The discipline was witnessing a moment of change. Not only was it attempting to respond to broader transformations underway across the humanities and social sciences, but there were also increasing numbers of researchers from China joining the field and shifting the discourse.<sup>1</sup> Gyatso also noted a refocusing on what might be considered legitimate sources for Tibetological study as the discipline sought to make room for what she described as more 'prosaic' vernacular and

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1 To give just one example, at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) Seminar in 2022, during a discussion on a draft code of ethics for the association, inclusion of the word 'decolonial' was rejected on the grounds that researchers from China would not be able to agree to or adhere to this code. The discipline needs to recognize that such decisions are also based on researchers from outside China maintaining access to field sites in China. For democratic complicity with authoritarian states, see Greitens and Truex (2020); Pils (2021).

everyday materials, having previously predominantly focused upon the study of texts.

Beyond sources, Gyatso reflected on the aims and objectives of the discipline, commenting that ‘what we are doing in the field overall is primarily the history of Tibet: its religion, its culture, its language, its political institutions, its wars, and its knowledge systems’. Although subtle in her critique, she wondered how researchers could make other intentions more transparent and how we might ‘connect with our objects of study as fellow human beings, and ... subject Tibetan materials to forms of analysis common in other academic fields that are indeed well aware of the larger human interest of their topics of study’. For Gyatso this question was critical to the future of the field of Tibetan studies, which she felt was ‘in a crisis because it is barely equipped to do such things’. Nearly ten years on her lecture remains deeply relevant and serves as the starting point for our introduction to this volume. What has changed following Gyatso’s lecture, particularly in relation to materiality-related research? How has the discipline responded to this crisis? And where does this lead us?

The first part of this introduction addresses these questions, providing an overview of the state of the field followed by a discussion of its boundaries, and why and how these can be expanded. We then turn to a discussion of how we and the other contributors approach materials and materiality and objects and their stories, drawing out common threads and divergences across the chapters, before concluding with a brief overview of the volume’s organization.

## State of the field

Before 2015, interest in the visual and material were most obvious in two established strands of Tibetological research—art history and archaeology. The former was largely focused on a long-standing interest in pre-twentieth century Tibetan art history driven by questions associated with visual analysis, and with identifying and situating specific styles and religious iconography (e.g. Heller 1994, 1999, 2002; Henss 2020; Jackson 2005, 2009; Jackson and Jackson 1988; Klimburg-Salter 2000; Luczanits 2001, 2004; Singer and Denwood 1997; Tsering 2013).<sup>2</sup> This body of research sat alongside Tibetan studies’ long-standing

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2 For a critical reflection on this approach, see Lo Bue (2008).

connection to the material through archaeology and the excavation of sites in Tibet and across neighbouring Himalayan territories, the findings from which have been used to document, analyse and preserve cultural heritage (e.g. Aldenderfer 2003; Brantingham and Xing 2006; Devers 2019, 2021; Hazod 2015, 2010; Heller 2006). There is also a substantial body of literature that takes a descriptive approach to Tibetan material culture, providing detailed explanations and typologies of artefacts and their production technologies (*bod rum 'thag pa'i bzor tsal* 2013; Buckley 2005; Erhard and Wild 2022; Molacek et al. 2023; Ronge 1984, 1989; Ronge and Ronge 1980, 1981; 'Zang di shougong' 2007). These approaches have defined the kinds of research questions the visual and material have predominantly afforded the discipline.

During the last decade, however, several publications have offered reappraisals of core Tibetan studies subjects through materiality frameworks. Notably, there have been calls for greater attention to materiality in the writing of histories of Tibetan Buddhism and its institutions (Townsend 2021) and in analyses of Tibetan understandings of the roles of objects in Buddhist religious life (Gentry 2017). Dan Martin's (1994) work on relics, reliquaries and precious pills signalled the beginnings of this turn towards Tibetan Buddhist materiality, but the last decade or so has seen a growing focus on material religion (Bhutia 2022; Brox 2019, 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014, 2022; Kerin 2013, 2021; Turek 2017). There has also been growing engagement with network perspectives on material culture common to many academic fields, resulting in increased attention to interactions between things—people, places, materials and texts—particularly in terms of ritual and medicinal practice (Blaikie, et al. 2015; Diemberger 2019; Gerke 2021; Hofer 2018). While recognition of Igor Kopytoff's (1995 [1986]) well-trodden analytical framework of the 'object biography' is not entirely new within the Tibetan studies community (O'Neill 1999), it too only appears to have gained some momentum more recently (e.g. Gerke 2013; Harris 2013; Shakya 2021; Xue 2021). Museum collections have also been reappraised and reconceptualized as not only a source for exhibitions and (art) historical research (e.g. Clarke 2004; LaRocca 2006; Pal 1969; Rhie and Thurman 1991), but also as teaching tools for understanding cross-cultural exchange (Debreczeny and Pakhoutova 2023).

These contributions reflect the discipline's late turn toward object-led pedagogies and its growing acknowledgment of long-standing bodies of research in critical museology, anthropology and material culture studies that place importance on critical inquiry through materiality.

These often-fleeting engagements with materiality are underpinned by long-standing enquiries into the visual and material centred around questions of (self)representation through museums, contemporary art and photography (Clark 2016; Harris 1999, 2012; Harris and Droma 2018; Harris and Shakya 2003; Keränen, Dodge and Conley 2015; Linrothe 2020; Martin 2017, 2024; Miller 2016; Singh 2013). Such enquiries often intersect with provenance research into the colonial histories of Tibetan collections in European museums and archives (Carrington 2003; Lange 2020; Linrothe 2015; Livne 2019; Martin 2015, 2019; Myatt 2012).

We have also seen growing momentum over the past decade or so in interdisciplinary investigations into economies, value, trade, commodification and consumerism (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2017; Caple 2020, 2022; Catanese 2019; Harris 2013; Lau 2012; Sulek 2019; Williams-Oerberg 2022; Zhang 2012), as well as groundbreaking interdisciplinary comparisons of print cultures (Diemberger, Ehrhard and Kornicki 2016) and scientific analyses of material components of objects (Helman-Ważny 2014; Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021). We particularly want to highlight the relatively recent publication of two Tibetan language illustrated lexicons, which serve as extraordinary sources for the terminology given to objects (dkon mchog bstan 'dzin et al. 2010; tshul khrims blo gros 2017). Published in Beijing and Chengdu, these pictorial dictionaries map the Tibetan material world, classify and group objects relationally and act as catalogues of what counts as Tibetan material culture.

Beyond these works there is still little theorization of Tibetan materiality, its production technologies and the language and practices that support Tibetan ways of knowing and understanding the material world. This volume provides the first collection of materiality-focused research in Tibetan studies, covering a breadth of subjects (both historical and contemporary) and theoretical approaches. As such it captures many of the current methodological and analytical developments in this emerging field. While acknowledging the discipline's existing interests in the material and visual, our aim is to start to address the lag in its uptake of conceptually challenging frameworks. As Gyatso noted, this lag isolates Tibetan studies from participating in wider academic and societal debates. Tibetan studies should be relevant beyond Tibetan studies. We appreciate the knowledge produced and represented in scholarly works within our specialized field, but we also see how little impact they have had beyond it. This volume exemplifies in different ways how Tibetan studies can engage with broader scholarly



fields by bringing research on Tibetan and the Himalayas into dialogue with frameworks, concepts and methods developed elsewhere—or by offering new ones.

Our contributors use Pamela Smith's (2004) framework of 'artisanal epistemology' to analyse medicine making (Singh and Gerke) and bring Walter Benjamin's (2008 [1936]) notion of 'aura' into discussions about the making of butter ornaments (Stevenson). They draw on Bill Brown's (2001) 'thing theory' to analyse a film object (KS and Gupta) and take Michael O'Hanlon's (2000) notion of the 'scene of collecting' as a point of departure for discussing how Tibetan material knowledge can be recovered from the imperial archive (Martin). Some offer new concepts, such as the notions of 'ritualized meshwork' (Surbhi and Van der Valk) and 'heroic artefact' (Chophel). By engaging with these and other concepts—whether adopted or invented—the authors make Tibetan and Himalayan worlds relevant beyond their situated contexts in innovative and unexpected ways, contributing new perspectives to on-going methodological and epistemological debates in fields as diverse as museology (Thomas) and ritual studies (Wulff). They are examples of how this volume endeavours to position discussions on Tibetan material culture, materials and materialities in interdisciplinary fields and develop frameworks and concepts that can be productively applied beyond the scope of Tibetan studies.

## Borders and boundaries

A question central to our discussions has been around how we constitute space and place and what we mean when we say 'Tibetan' and 'Himalayan'. What comprises these material worlds? The precise borders and boundaries of Tibet and the nations situated within the Himalayan mountain range remain contested (McGranahan 2003; Yeh and Coggins 2014). Debates over what constitutes a recognizable and agreed site of study and what it should be called have produced new naming conventions and cartographies for the discipline (Shneiderman 2010; Tenzin 2017). As a group we have spent time thinking about these questions. A particular concern has been Tibet's erasure as a political and geographical entity, and its increasing absence in university departments, museum and library catalogues and exhibition halls, and as a site of inquiry in funding applications. In turn, we have questioned the wholesale labelling of something as Tibetan or Himalayan as shorthand for a kind of material culture that is expected to

look or function in a particular kind of way, a case in point being the widespread reference to ‘Tibetan Buddhist objects’. This denies specificity of place to researchers from and/or working in Sikkim, Spiti, Ladakh, Bhutan, Nepal and across India. In her contribution to this volume, Wulff has chosen to refer to Vajrayana Buddhism to avoid the conflation of Tibetan Buddhism with Buddhist practices in Bhutan. Several other chapters similarly recognize and address the politics and situatedness of place and the knowledge and practices produced in highly localized contexts.

This volume takes an expansive understanding of Tibetan and Himalayan material worlds. It includes material markers that embody a shared cultural identity and logic that can be just as easily present in Australia, Canada, the USA and Europe as it is in specific and bounded Tibetan and Himalayan geographical locations (see, e.g., KS and Gupta, this volume). We have few expectations that an object will openly display its Tibetan or Himalayan-ness. Our interest goes beyond obvious visual signals and looks to the mundane and to things that are seldom placed at the centre of inquiry, such as a stone used to grind medicines (Singh and Gerke, this volume), the harvesting of medicinal plants (Surbhi and Van der Valk, this volume), the worn-out washer of a prayer wheel (Brox, this volume) or a sword worn as a part of an official’s ceremonial attire (Chophel, this volume). Helman-Ważny (this volume) tackles the question of Tibetan-ness head on in her exploration of the process of understanding and granting Tibetan identity to paper, which is a surprisingly complex object. As these examples suggest, one of our aims is to contribute to and further encourage the burgeoning study of things in plain sight, from transport (Altner [Lange] 2009) and military equipment (LaRocca 2006; Venturi and Travers 2021) to everyday objects such as fishing supplies (Altner [Lange] 2009), mobile phones (Kukuczka 2016), backpacks (Martin 2024) and houses (Ptáčková 2020). Through our inclusion of a methodological chapter on the use of ethnographic illustrations as communicative media (Wulff), we also celebrate and foreground the potentialities of non-textual responses to the material, a notable example being Huatse Gyal’s documentary film, *Khata: Poison or Purity?* (2023).

It is a legacy of colonial scholarly practice that, as Tibetan studies scholars, we tend to be conditioned to follow predefined routes that privilege philology and philosophy based upon textual analysis over everyday experiences and practices, and that elevate religious authorities as sources of insight above lay practitioners who possess expertise in their own right. With this edited volume, we want to shine a light on

the stuff that constitutes Tibetan and Himalayan materials, materiality and material culture as experienced and understood by the people who make it, live and work with it, buy and offer it, cherish and discard it. The contributors to this book demonstrate the wealth of insights that can be gained through ethnographic fieldwork, archival studies, material-led enquiries and other methods that are under-acknowledged in the field of Tibetan studies. But for such enquiries to both enrich Tibetan studies *and* impact other fields of study it is essential to embrace interdisciplinary approaches that draw from diverse fields of study, collaborate with scholars from different backgrounds and engage in co-authorship to incorporate multiple perspectives.

A prime example of the productive potential of interdisciplinary collaboration is the chapter by Diana Lange and Oliver Hahn, who have worked together across the humanities and natural sciences divide in their analysis of a map of Mount Kailash. By combining their respective expertise in Tibetan cartography and scientific material analysis of colourants, they were able to uncover important information about the dating and production of the map that would otherwise have remained hidden. They show how the materials of which an object is made can be brought together with its historical context and cultural meaning to generate new knowledge. Similarly, Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (this volume) shows how the study of Tibetan paper and books as complex objects necessitates a research design inspired by both the humanities and the natural sciences. Instead of operating with a generalized theory of materiality, Helman-Ważny defines the materiality of books as constituted by both raw materials and production technologies. Her approach is truly interdisciplinary, drawing on heritage and conservation studies, fibre analysis and paper science.

Although material culture is critical to Tibetan society, it is seldom at the centre of scholarly inquiry; materials and materiality assume only secondary roles in studies and representations of Tibetan culture. This marginalization is also fuelled from a prominent position within the Tibetan community by the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA, previously the Tibetan Government-in-Exile), in part as a strategy of providing hope for the survival of Tibetan culture at a time marked by violent attacks on material culture within Tibet. The Dalai Lama has argued that authentic Tibetan culture does not lie in its material manifestations, which can be violently smashed under Chinese Communist party campaigns; rather, it is in the hearts and minds of Tibetans who embody an immaterial, Buddhist culture (Brox 2006). By highlighting the intimate connection between Tibetan

culture and Buddhism, the Dalai Lama has provided space and hope for the continuity of Tibetan culture despite its destruction in Tibet and irrespective of the geographical location of Tibetans. However, as a dominant discourse on Tibetan culture, the emphasis on immaterial, Buddhist culture has also legitimized a disregard for Tibetan material culture, materials and materiality in scholarship on and the representation of Tibet and the Himalayas. This was exemplified in the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Uprising Day speech to Tibetans on 10 March 1985. Telling Tibetans that it made no sense to simply arrange 'culture' in a book or set up 'culture' on an altar, he explained that culture does not involve physical exhibitions or ritualistic manifestations; it is not something one wears on the outside but has within (Dalai Lama XIV 1986: 424). In contrast, we embrace the concept of 'material culture', which contests this distinction as it acknowledges the fact that culture is not merely symbolic (Woodward 2020).

When Tibetan material culture does receive attention, it is commonly framed within the context of Buddhist material culture. The common approach here has been for scholars to seek to decipher the meaning of religious objects, which are viewed as conduits to something transcendent, as if there is always something more important lying beyond the material. From this perspective, material culture is only scrutinized for its symbolism or mediative potential. Yet, paying attention to the symbolism of Buddhist objects does not necessarily tell us much about how these objects become sacred (Brox, this volume), how they are understood and interacted with (Thomas, this volume), how their provenance is determined (Helman-Ważny; Lange and Hahn, both this volume) or even how they are appreciated (Martin, this volume). This is exemplified in Emma Martin's chapter, which examines how a Sikkimese connoisseur of Tibetan Buddhist Objects, Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal, evaluated a statue of Dorje Chang. Martin reveals how the material knowledge upon which his appraisal was based relied on a body of literature and a vocabulary focused on aesthetics rather than solely on religious efficacy. In other words, Martin forcefully delivers the imperative message that there is a Tibetan and Himalayan tradition for evaluating Buddhist objects that is determined by something other than dominant white Euro-American frames of reference. These objects are appreciated not only for their religious symbolic significance but also for their material properties, artisanship and execution.

As Katia Thomas highlights in her chapter, we often find the opposite problem within museology, namely that objects are evaluated—and

handled—in accordance with Euro-American aesthetic and scientific standards and priorities that often disregard the practices and beliefs of communities of origin. In her discussion of the restoration of a Manjushri statue on display at a museum in Gangtok, Thomas shows how Himalayan conservation practices are, in contrast, guided by religious values and protocols. This does not mean that the statue's aesthetics were disregarded, just differently valued. Restoring it to its original luminosity was seen as crucial to its intangible power and was prioritized over other considerations, such as the patina of ageing that would typically add historical or monetary value to an artefact in the setting of a European museum or art market. Thomas, like Martin and Helman-Ważny (this volume), lets us know that materials and their properties matter and are not somehow separate from or secondary to emic valuations of and engagements with Buddhist material objects.

## Materiality, materials and labour

The things that we study are part of the material cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas. This means that they must be studied as cultural and social phenomena, since they create the lives and worlds of people as much as people create things (Woodward 2020). Beyond this fundamental consensus, we do not privilege or propose a singular theory of Tibetan materials, materiality and material culture.<sup>3</sup> When we and the other contributors to this volume talk about materials and the materiality of things, we are all interested in relations, especially people-thing relations. But the way we talk about materiality differs according to the key dimension of person-thing relations or kind of knowledge that the concept of materiality serves to unlock or highlight. As a result, the volume does not present a unified, coherent understanding of or language about materiality. Instead, the author(s) of each chapter elucidate their framework and explain why their chosen approach matters to their particular study.

For some contributors, materiality means the physical aspects of a thing (Helman-Ważny; Martin, this volume). Others use the concept with reference to thinkers such as British anthropologist Tim Ingold, American art historian Michael Ann Holly or historian of science Lorraine Daston. For example, Mridul Surbhi and Jan M. A. van der

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3 For a history of theories of materiality, see Hicks (2010).

Valk (this volume) are inspired by Ingold (2000, 2011) in their analysis of the harvesting and processing of medicinal plants in Spiti and Kinnaur. Rather than merely focusing on the materiality of the final ‘thing’, they describe the sorting, grinding and sieving of medicinal herbs as ongoing activities embedded in what they conceptualize as ‘ritualized meshworks’. Similarly, Stuti Singh and Barbara Gerke (this volume) reference Ingold (2000, 2007), emphasizing his view of materiality as processual and relational. This perspective allows them to illustrate how medical practitioners, engaged in various medicine production processes, form an intimate connection with their tools, such as the grinding stone. Lange and Hahn (this volume) take a different approach. Inspired by Holly (Rosler et al. 2013), they approach materiality as the juncture between matter and imagination, highlighting how the two aspects must be studied together. This framework allows them to explore how crafting a map entails the selection of materials with specific properties that will aid its intended users in recalling (a story), comprehending (a teaching), or orienting themselves within their surroundings.

Likewise, there is no single theory informing how the authors differentiate between materials and materiality. Whereas some authors explicitly establish the differentiation, for others, it is inferred. Brox (this volume) uses the term materiality to describe how people interpret the potentials and lifecycles of materials worn and empowered through faith labour. A few authors avoid the term materiality altogether (Chophel, KS and Gupta, Wulff, this volume). Even so, they nonetheless speak to a distinction similar to that made by Ingold (2007) in his definition of materials as ‘the stuff that things are made of’ (1) and materiality as ‘what makes things “thingly”’ (9). ‘Thinglyness’ is not inherent in the thing, but is ascribed to it, for example through the fine materials (gold, silver, exotic skins) and interrelated affective discourses that make a sword into a ‘heroic artefact’ instrumentalized in nation-building (Chophel, this volume), or through the aesthetic choices of filmmakers who cast an amulet box in a ‘catalytic role’ in their movie (KS and Gupta, this volume).

Although we engage with these varied usages of the concept of materiality—ranging from its association with the physical composition of objects to the interplay between matter and imagination—we also want to privilege the materials involved. We address their availability, applicability, values and properties, as well as how these properties manifest and transform through manufacture, labour, practical application and usage. The materials and substances that the authors deal

with include (among others) bamboo, shells, pigments, dyes, cyanide, stone, gold, silver, goat brains, soot, animal skin, ammonia, cotton, barley and butter. They are materials ‘that have properties that are afforded (discovered through our interactions) and enacted (acting out their built-in potential)’ (Brox 2022a: 94). We have learnt about their different properties, such as their hardness, luminosity, reflectivity, solubility, abrasion resistance, density and biodegradability. Even the protective amulet box wrapped in a yellow cloth and featured in the film, *Dreaming Lhasa*, has material properties that influence how it is handled, its life trajectories and the meanings that are ascribed to it (KS and Gupta, this volume). Singh and Gerke (this volume) highlight how the material qualities of a grinding stone matter to both the physical production of medicine from herbs and to the medicine’s empowerment. Both the herbs and the grinding stone must have certain qualities in order to fulfil their potential, and it is only the skilled maker who knows how to bring this about. As this and other examples show, it is almost impossible to talk about materials and their properties and potentials without also discussing the human endeavour or labour that material culture demands, which includes physical and mental effort, expertise, tools, technologies, methods, collaboration, time and timing.

Several chapters highlight the labour invested in creating an object, including bringing forth the properties of its materials and realizing their potential. This includes the manual labour involved in tasks like grinding herbs or kneading butter. But it also encompasses the processes that Fabio Rambelli (2017) identifies in the production of Buddhist material objects, namely semiotic (signification of an object), ritual (e.g. bowing, circumambulating) and performance (e.g. entertainment, education). We see this in Katia Thomas’ (this volume) discussion of the restoration of a Buddhist statue, which involved a form of labour that she identifies as a Himalayan practice of ‘care’. Since this care was directed toward both the tangible and intangible aspects of the statue as a Buddhist material object, consecration rituals were considered as necessary as cleaning and replacing damaged parts of the statue in order to restore it to its original aesthetic splendour and religious power. Stevenson (this volume) similarly highlights the behind-the-scenes labour that goes into the ‘ritualized making’ of a ritual offering crafted from brightly coloured butter, a process that he conceptualizes as ‘pre-consecration’.

The chapters in this volume zoom in on these multi-layered productive processes and materials, including their temporal, collaborative and co-creative dimensions. The focused and repetitive labour of

the skilled medicine maker as he works with his grinding stone and herbs produces efficacious medicinal ingredients (Singh and Gerke, this volume). The team brought together to craft butter sculptures for a monastery prayer festival produce a ‘miraculous display’ through their synchronized movements and coordination (Stevenson, this volume). And the collection of medicinal plants in the Himalayas is a process embedded in ‘ritualized meshworks of potency’, within which medicinal practitioners, landscape, plants, weather, deities, ceremonial scarfs and mantras are intertwined (Surbhi and Van der Valk, this volume).

In short, rather than attempting to reach a consensus on how we talk about materiality, materials and labour, we have embraced an array of perspectives as this enriches our understanding of material culture in Tibet and the Himalayas. What binds these perspectives together is that they highlight how materiality manifests itself in interactions between people, things and natural, political, social and cultural environments.

## Objects and their stories

The range of interpretations of materiality to be found in this volume reflects the complexity of material culture and the different research interests and perspectives of the contributors. We also focus on a diverse range of objects. These things not only speak to us (Daston 2008; Lange and Hahn, this volume), but also appeal to us in ways that have prompted us to single them out, follow them, experience them and tell their stories. Helman-Ważny selected paper, KS and Gupta a film object, Lange and Hahn a map, and Brox a component of the prayer wheel. Why did the authors choose these specific objects? Because they are often overlooked, yet worthy of attention? Appreciated, even loved? Or are they things that we did not understand or knew were misunderstood? The things that surprised us?

Dendup Chophel (this volume) makes explicit the roots of his academic interest in the Bhutanese sword or *patag* (*dpa’ rtags*), which was fuelled by a long-standing personal fascination that culminated in his decision to acquire one for himself. Taking the patag as both a material object and an object of discourse, he explores how it became and has remained a potent symbol and material manifestation of heroic qualities, but also how it has become an object of potential contestation in Bhutan’s current socio-political context. Akin to other authors in this volume, Chophel’s chapter has served as a starting point rather than a conclusion to his inquiries, propelling him into further research aimed



at addressing gaps in Tibetological research on non-religious artefacts and exploring the potential that such scholarship has to promote societal change—one of his key personal aims as a scholar.

In her research, Mareike Wulff has been interested in how community members ‘read’ and made sense of the formal attire worn during their annual tantric Buddhist festival. In this volume, her primary focus is on the question of how to reproduce and communicate this visual layer of everyday knowledge in academic publications. She discusses her design and use of technical illustrations as a counterpart to written text, showing how this has enabled her to reveal, understand and visually communicate the multiple layers of information and meaning that a costume contains. By inviting the reader into her personal process of analysing and communicating through drawing, Wulff illuminates the potential for technical illustration as a method and communicative medium. Her chapter thus serves as a source of inspiration for the study of the material cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas—and beyond.

Martin also makes an inspiring methodological intervention through her decision *not* to focus on a thing. Although her chapter features a statue that is now part of a museum collection in Liverpool, she chooses to turn her attention from the object itself to its material-led appreciation by a Sikkimese connoisseur. Her motivation, visible throughout her scholarship, is to bring to light the individuals behind the material knowledge preserved in colonial archives. In this case, the individual in question is Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal. To a Western audience, he was previously an unknown Buddhist lama who served as an informant to a well-known colonial officer. By recognizing his contributions, Martin recovers his material knowledge and repositions him as a connoisseur and ‘a centre of power in his own right’.

These and the other contributors to this volume tend to use the terms ‘object’ and ‘thing’ interchangeably. We are, however, aware that some scholars have argued for an analytical distinction to be made between these concepts (Woodward 2020: 15). Gokul KS and Sonika Gupta (this volume) directly address the question of what makes an object a thing. Turning to literary studies and Bill Brown’s (2001) ‘thing theory’, they analyse a protective amulet box as a narrative device in the film *Dreaming Lhasa*. The authors highlight the significance and agency of the amulet box, showing how it affects the people who hold it and think about it, and how it plays an active role in shaping their identities, behaviour and relationships. Although the other contributors do not explicitly articulate any theoretical position when speaking

of objects and things, they nonetheless demonstrate how objects such as grinding stones and swords are agentic and significant—just like the amulet box in *Dreaming Lhasa*.

Several authors also point to what Stevenson (this volume) calls the ‘componentiality’ of objects; they are not one thing but many. This is exemplified in the Tibetan prayer wheel, which is an assemblage of several distinct components, including sacred texts and ordinary objects such as a bamboo tube and a washer made of shell (Brox, this volume), as well as in the costumes that Wulff (this volume) dissects through her illustrations. As Stevenson points out, in the case of objects that are collaboratively made, their creation necessitates the coming together of not only diverse materials (e.g., butter, flour, gold foil, dough, dyes and so forth) but also people, which requires coordination. He argues that these objects therefore comprise materials that extend beyond our usual understanding of the material to include elements such as time and timing. Similarly, Surbhi and Van der Valk (this volume) demonstrate the rich coming together of many things with different properties and potentials in the collection of medicinal plants and the making of medicines. They make a point of not reducing the landscape and pharmacies in which medical practitioners work to a context or backdrop for these processes. Instead, they relate how medicinal practitioners traverse landscapes in pursuit of medicinal plants in a ritualized meshwork of changing weather, rituals, tea breaks and so forth, and how preparing dried plants in a high-altitude pharmacy resonates with the surroundings and the tools that they use.

When we start disassembling these meshworks, assemblages and composite things, we get to experience objects in their different biographical phases—their coming about, usage, endurance, wear and decay—and also how people care for materials to prolong their existence and efficacy. We learn about processes of repair and renewal when, for example, a butter ornament is nibbled by rats (Stevenson, this volume), a statue is attacked by termites (Thomas, this volume) or a grinding stone is worn too smooth (Singh and Gerke, this volume). The dematerialization of an object can even be part of its productiveness. This is examined in the chapter by Brox, who shows how skilled practitioners produce sacred, apotropaic and auspicious objects through the wear of an apparently insignificant component of the prayer wheel, namely its washer. Tibetan elders explained to her how, when they diligently turn a prayer wheel, the washer absorbs blessings and becomes sacred. Worn out washers can thus be repurposed as amulets carried around the neck like beads on a thread, and given to beloved

grandchildren for protection, to women hoping for fertility or to the sick for recovery.

These studies of materials and their properties, as well as the values (cultural, social, economic, political) that things are ascribed, reveal stories about their making, endurance, affordances, travels, disposability and afterlives. These stories are typically not prescribed by Buddhist scriptures. Rather, they unfold through people's lives—through their work (Singh and Gerke; Surbhi and Van der Valk, both this volume), annual festivals (Stevenson; Wulff, both this volume), care practices (Thomas, this volume), filmmaking (KS and Gupta, this volume) and colonial encounters (Martin, this volume). Yet, Buddhism is nevertheless present in every chapter of this volume: even a weapon symbolizes Buddhist virtues (Chophel, this volume). In the study of Tibetan and Himalayan material culture, it seems that the everyday, past and present, is saturated with Buddhist values, things and atmospheres, underscoring the pervasiveness of Buddhism.

We are conscious of the absences in this volume, in particular its overreliance on Tibetan Buddhism as a site for understanding materiality in Tibet and the Himalayas and the lack of case studies that disrupt this. Nevertheless, we see this volume as the beginnings of a reappraisal of what Tibetan and Himalayan materiality is and hope that future studies will continue to challenge and expand on what we have begun here.

## Organization of the volume

Taken together, the chapters in this volume provide a broad view of Tibetan material culture, materials and materiality, underscoring the potential significance of a material focus within Tibetan studies. It is bookended by two reflective pieces: Tsering Yangzom's powerful meditation on Tibetan lives and objects, which forms the preface, and a final chapter that offers our reflections as editors on the story of this volume and the critical questions for Tibetan studies that this story raises. The remainder of the volume is organized into two parts, starting with the materials and other things that come together in material culture and then moving on to ways of knowing and interpreting material culture.

The five chapters in Part One, 'Matter and Material Epistemologies' explore the becoming, temporal dimensions and compositional complexities of materials and things. They are arranged to provide

a progressive narrowing of focus, from a broad exploration of the complex meshwork of relations that bring things into being, through detailed analyses of composite objects and individual components, to examination of the materials of which things are made. We start with the chapter by Surbhi and Van der Valk who examine the coming together of people, materials and environments in the gathering and making of medicines, a generative process they conceptualize as a 'ritualized meshwork'. Similarly, Stevenson highlights componentiality in his reflections on the collaborative making of a complex and composite 'flower offering' crafted from dough and coloured butter, and what this tells us about the importance of team, time and timing in processes of (pre-)consecration. The following chapter by Brox zooms in on one component of the prayer wheel, namely its washer, which dematerializes through a process of faith labour that is simultaneously generative of new efficacious objects, such as amulets, which can be made from worn down washers. The next two chapters hone in on materials. Helman-Ważny's discussion of the material composition of paper that can be considered 'Tibetan' is followed by Lange and Hahn's material analysis of the colourants used to produce a Tibetan map. Both chapters use interdisciplinary lenses, emphasizing material analysis as a means of bridging boundaries between the humanities and the sciences.

Part Two, 'Knowing and understanding matter', starts with three chapters that investigate the different kinds of literacy applied in assessments of Tibetan material culture among the people who live with, make and use it. This includes the Tibetan connoisseur's mastery of an 'aesthetics-based literature and lexicon', essential to evaluating the materials, material properties and form of a statue, as related by Martin. But it also includes the knowledge gained and expressed through a medical practitioner's use of a grinding stone as discussed by Singh and Gerke, as well as the visual literacy of community members who learn to 'read' material culture through socialization—a 'visual layer of knowledge' that Wulff seeks to communicate through her drawings of formal attire. The last three chapters provide object analyses that explore object politics and the role of cultural and political institutions in the production, maintenance and transformations of the narratives that they are cloaked in or produce. Thomas contributes to discussions on decolonial museum practices by showing what object preservation looks like within Himalayan museology. Chopel enquires into an object that is both materially and discursively central to the politics of heroism at the heart of Bhutanese nation-building. Finally, KS and

Gupta analyse what we can learn about refugeehood and the contested politics of the Tibetan struggle through a film object.

Together, the chapters presented in this volume offer new perspectives on Tibetan and Himalayan worlds as seen from materials and things, knowledge systems and cultural practices, inviting a reconsideration of Tibetan studies. They also promote the significance of knowledge produced when among Tibetan materialities. As related in the postscript by Barbara Gerke, *Among Tibetan Materialities: Materials and Material Cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas* offers a more inclusive approach to Tibetan studies and promises a transformative impact on future research agendas within the study of Tibetan and Himalayan material cultures and beyond.

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### 3 Ritualized meshworks in landscape and pharmacy

#### Harvest and production alongside amchi from Spiti and Kinnaur

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**Abstract** Inspired by Tim Ingold’s phenomenological approach towards materials, skill and dwelling, this chapter shares and discusses fine-grained and first-person sensorial descriptions of herbal harvest and manual medicine making processes alongside Spiti and Kinnauri family lineage practitioners (amchi) of the Tibeto-Himalayan science of healing (Sowa Rigpa). Responding to Ingold’s critique of Actor-Network Theory as a framework that ignores the dynamism of organisms as well as land-based and meteorological phenomena, we show how the work of amchi is embedded in living meshworks of beings-in-environments. In particular, Surbhi’s extensive apprenticeship alongside amchi and her close engagements with weathered mountains, healing mantras, land protectors, medicinal plants and grinding tools illustrate crucial linkages between taskscape and the temporality of landscape. This chapter is therefore a call for closer attention to be paid to the embeddedness of practices, and a proof of principle for the utility of an Ingoldian dwelling perspective for Tibetan (medical) and Buddhist Studies more broadly—a perspective that pushes us to read the world and not only text by thinking *with* as well as *about* materials. In recognition of ritual as skilled practice and in light of the pervasiveness of Buddhist religious praxis in Sowa Rigpa pharmacy, we also introduce the term ‘ritualized meshwork’.

**Keywords** Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine), taskscape, more-than-human landscape, Tim Ingold, medicinal plant collection, Western Himalayas

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- 1 The ethnographic fieldwork that constitutes the core of this chapter was conducted as part of Surbhi’s doctoral research. Van der Valk mainly developed the theoretical framework, writing in close collaboration with Surbhi.

## Introduction

Since the initial colonial prospection by William Edmund Hay (1805–1879) (Hay 1850) and the fascist orientalist Giuseppe Tucci's (1894–1984) expedition to Spiti and Western Tibet in 1933, the history, literature and culture of this sparsely populated Trans-Himalayan cold desert region has received considerable scholarly attention (Heller and Orofino 2007; Jahoda 2015; Klimburg-Salter, Jahoda and Tropper 2007; Laurent 2023). Although far from comprehensive, material-focused studies are available on Spiti's prehistoric rock carvings, early Buddhist archaeological layers, religious architecture and art history across Tibeto-Indian pilgrimage routes (Laurent and Pritzker 2017; Mc Allister, Scherer-Schaub and Krasser 2015). Otherwise known for their Siberian ibex and blue sheep, hunted by snow leopards often perceived to be in competition with the livestock of local agropastoralists, the peripheral Himachal Pradesh districts of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur are nowadays facing a boom in domestic adventure (eco)tourism, a sprawl of proposed and opposed hydroelectric projects and the disruptive effects of climate change (Bodh and Mehta 2018; Gagné 2019, 2020).

Regarding traditional medicine in Spiti, several Indian researchers have undertaken ethnobotanical and ethnomedical surveys of remedies for various ailments (e.g. Singh et al. 2008). However, only the work of anthropologist Florian Besch (2006, 2007; see also Singh and Gerke, this volume) has so far focused in depth on Sowa Rigpa—regionally known as amchi medicine, after its practitioners. Many parallels can be drawn with research from the adjacent territory of Ladakh, including the prevalence of family-lineage based rural practitioners who manufacture medicines themselves and the increasing regulatory influence of the Indian state (Pordié and Kloos 2022). Such medical lineages or *menpé gyü* (*smān pa'i rgyud*), known simply as *gyüpa* (*rgyud pa*), represent a mode of knowledge-practice transmission that operates through intensive hereditary and/or master-disciple affinities. Although marginalized and partially incorporated in state-led professionalization efforts, *gyüpa* transmission—along with the related 'medical houses' (*smān grong*)—continues to hold sway in localized rural settings across Tibet and the Himalayas (Pordié and Blaikie 2014; see also Hofer 2018: 33–7).<sup>2</sup> There also appear to be parallels in the

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2 As laid out by Pordié and Blaikie (2014: 345–50), this long-term training generally consists of guided memorization and exegesis of the *Four Tantras*



narrative of a declining tradition. Chandra Prakash Kala's (2005) field surveys in Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti between 1998 and 2001 found that nearly half of the eighty-three amchi surveyed were over forty-six years old, and more than 60 per cent were without a disciple. Calum Blaikie (2014: 72–3) confirms that there were probably more Ladakhi amchi in the 1950s than four to five decades later, but complicates the implications of this by noting that their distribution has been and is becoming more and more concentrated in wealthier and more accessible regions.

Situated within the broader context sketched out here, this chapter aims to provide materially sensitive sensorial descriptions of plant collection and medicine making by Spitipa and Kinnauri amchi. As far as we know, this is the first time that Kinnauri amchi have been given a voice in the ethnographic literature on Sowa Rigpa.<sup>3</sup> Earlier research has been exemplary in mapping out the broader implications of development projects, state policies, and social and economic change on multiple facets of Sowa Rigpa,<sup>4</sup> but these analyses leave little room for thick descriptions of actual medicine making. Notable, albeit rather brief, exceptions include Besch (2006: 126–31) and Blaikie (2014: 300–3, 310–12). Blaikie explicitly notes the paucity of fine-grained anthropological studies on pharmacy (*sman sbyor*; lit. compounding medicine): 'There is almost nothing available on the dynamics of *sman jor* knowledge transmission, the daily routines, bodily habits, techniques and decisions it involves, its social organization, or the thoughts of those concerned' (2014: 262). His trailblazing publications have indeed addressed much of this lacuna. However, listing and discussing generalized steps of the pharmaceutical taskscape is not equivalent to narrating specific instances experienced and observed alongside practitioners, especially when it comes to the rich sensorial tapestry of

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(*rgyud bzhi*), the sharing of closely-guarded pith instructions and practical procedures over an extended period, a public examination involving textual recitation and practical aspects, and ritually conferred oral transmissions and empowerments (the latter usually by religious authorities).

- 3 Surbhi documented twenty amchi in Spiti (including one female, one inactive practitioner and two apprentices) and four in Kinnaur (one female, one inactive). See Millard 2009 for some relevant historical details on the legacy of the renowned Bönpo lama, pilgrim and Tibetan medical physician Khyungrul Jikme Namkhe Dorje (1897–1955) in Kinnaur.
- 4 On Spiti, see Besch 2006, 2007; on Ladakhi Sowa Rigpa, see e.g. Blaikie 2018, 2019; Pordié 2016; Tsewang Smanla and Millard 2013.

hands-on learning, the following of materials in dynamic processes, and the development and execution of embodied skill through dexterity, care and playful experimentation.

In what follows, we argue that Tim Ingold's (2000, 2011a, 2012) phenomenologically inspired approach towards materials, making and dwelling presents a fruitful avenue for better understanding amchi activities of harvest and production. We see practitioners of Sowa Rigpa as immersed in responsive environments or 'lifeworlds', skillfully finding their way through landscapes in the search for plants and dealing with the properties of 'things' in 'taskscape' that gradually transform ingredients into medicine. Ingold (2000) defines a taskscape as a field of practice-in-environment, a resonating 'pattern of dwelling activities' that ultimately constitutes the landscape itself as a temporally dynamic phenomenon (190). In this sense, the taskscape exists as 'interactivity' and the landscape as 'the congealed form of the taskscape' (199). Applying this framework to Surbhi's extensive fieldwork experiences,<sup>5</sup> we expand on Blaikie's (2014; see also Pordié and Blaikie 2014) exploration of the Ladakhi amchi taskscape by paying particular attention to landscape.

We also engage with James Gentry's (2017) *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*. In this monograph, Gentry successfully draws on Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in order to challenge the disparagement of the material aspects of tantric rituals in earlier Tibetological textual studies. He takes seriously the agency of 'non-humans' such as Brahmin flesh pills, amulets with protective diagrams and initiation implements by analysing how the material 'object', social power and representational discourse come together across the writings of the infamous enemy-repelling ritual proponent, Great Perfection master and physician Sokdokpa Lodro Gyeltsen (1552–1624). Apart from demonstrating that 'material culture has been a topic of theoretical, philosophical speculation for Tibetans themselves' (6), Gentry methodologically follows Latour in treating agency as performed on a level playing field and distributed across assemblages of heterogeneous

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5 Between 2019 and 2023, Surbhi spent a total of twenty-five months in Spiti and Kinnaur during the summer, autumn and winter seasons. The bulk of her doctoral fieldwork was conducted over thirteen months since 2021. Surbhi mainly communicated with amchi in Hindi, at times with the kind help of Lama Lobsang Yeshe, a monk from Key Monastery who acted as Spitian–Hindi translator. She became conversant in Spiti Tibetan by late 2022.

‘actants’ (22–6). His aim is to move beyond the privileging of human intentionality and representation while not neglecting ‘subjective language’ and intellectual technologies such as written documents. Gentry’s work is relevant to our argument partly because medicine and religion are deeply interrelated in the sensibilities of Sowa Rigpa physicians as we will illustrate below (see also Adams, Schrempf and Craig 2011), but also because Ingold has developed a sustained critique of ANT (2011a: 89–94; 2012, 2013).

Latour and Ingold are both philosophically-inclined white male anthropologists with an idiosyncratic yet influential transdisciplinary oeuvre that foregrounds relationality and interactivity, and that aims to move beyond human exceptionalism and the nature/culture dichotomy. However, they hold very different views when it comes to agency and materiality. As already indicated, Ingold (2011a) envisions ‘meshworks’ of perceptive-responsive organisms acting skillfully along entangled line-like trajectories of life while immersed in the currents of material media such as air and water. In contrast, according to Ingold, ANT’s hybrid networks of actants consist of an assortment of dead, self-contained objects juxtaposed with other objects, seemingly resurrected ‘by sprinkling a magical dust of “agency” around the fragments’ (93). At the core of Ingold’s critique of Latourian material semiotics and related trends in material culture studies is that they ignore the aliveness of organisms under the common denominator of non-humans and prioritize finished artifacts over things that are ‘gatherings of materials in movement’ (Ingold 2012: 439). These issues, he argues, unwittingly reinforce the sovereignty of human subjecthood over and above ‘becoming *with*’ other be(com)ings (Ingold 2013: 21).

In this chapter, we apply Ingold’s task/landscape dyad to plant collection journeys on the rugged slopes of the Pir Panjal mountain range, and then to the making of multi-compound medicines in pharmacy rooms at the homes of medical lineage practitioners from Spiti and Kinnaur. In addition to showing how both processes are embedded in ritualized and more-than-human meshworks of potency—putting Ingold’s approach to the test—we also reflect on how our findings relate to Gentry’s ANT-inspired work. How, we ask, can we attend to landscape and the meteorological currents that shape it, if not as object-actants? And what could be the place of ritual practices, spirit beings and Buddhist cosmology in Ingoldian lifeworlds?

## Harvesting from animated landscapes

### Encountering Kunzum La with Amchi Nawang Tsering

As the temperature drops to below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the winter months in Spiti present ample opportunity for lengthy indoor conversation. In 2022, Amchi Nawang Tsering, Lama Lobsang Yeshe and I (Mridul Surbhi) sat together in the glasshouse—the warmest room during the day—while grinding raw materials into powder. Nawang Tsering (born in 1960?) hails from a family lineage, but his renowned father Amchi Sonam died when he was fifteen years old, and his grandfather Amchi Tsultrim had already passed away by that time. Enduring many hardships, he managed to complete his training between 1977 and 1985 at a small state-supported Sowa Rigpa institute in Manali, founded by the Lahauli tulku and amchi Sundar Singh who graduated from Chakpori in Lhasa.<sup>6</sup> Over a hot cup of butter tea, Amchi Tsering recalled the arduous journeys he undertook from his native village Kibber to Manali almost three decades ago, crossing Kunzum Pass (elevation 4,555 m) and Rohtang Pass (3,978 m) on foot to collect herbs and to procure essential necessities to survive the long isolation of winter. Nowadays, that trip can be done in eight hours by car, but back then it easily took six or seven days and effectively took the form of a pilgrimage, with people travelling together in groups of about a dozen. Kunzum La (Figure 3.1) is not just a stop for tourists to take selfies, Amchi-la asserted, it is the land of Mother Kunzum (kun 'dzom lha mo): 'If we do not pray to her before undertaking the journey, we are invoking the wrath of the mountains. She is a protector of the land, her presence has to be acknowledged.' Along the way, they more frequently encountered wolves and wild horses than other people. Human contact was mostly with Gaddi shepherds accompanied by their large flocks of sheep and a few donkeys, or with fellow travellers in tea stalls at fixed junctures along the route where Tibetan-style soup (*thug pa*) was on offer for 2 rupees. On the ascent to Rohtang Pass everyone had to tie a black cloth with two small holes in it around their heads to prevent snow blindness

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6 This was confirmed by Amchi Tsering (from Kibber), Amchi Lhotsey (Zanskar) and Amchi Norbu (Kullu), all of whom attended Sundar Singh's institute in Manali. According to Besch, however, Singh graduated from Mentsikhang in Lhasa (Besch 2006: 95).



**Figure 3.1** Kunzum Pass and some of the surrounding peaks, which are also known as the Glorious Goddess (dpal lha mo). Photograph by Mridul Surbhi.

whilst hiking up the foot trails.<sup>7</sup> When Amchi Tsering started to practice Sowa Rigpa on his own, he and his peers from Lahaul would camp for four days near Gramphu, the final hamlet before Rohtang. Rain would bring more fog, further decreasing visibility; after they waited for it to pass they explored the area in every direction. Each eventually carried down a few sacks of raw materials to Manali, where the shared harvest provided enough stock for three or four years.

Traversing the same landscape in 2019 with Amchi Tsering, some aspects remained unchanged while others differed. ‘Twenty years ago, we cared much more about packing food for another four or five days along with offerings of roasted barley flour (*rtsam pa*), butter and beer (*chang*) for Kunzum La’, he recalled. ‘We focused on mantra recitation

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7 Amchi Tsering told Surbhi that during an ascent to Rohtang Pass in the early 1990s, his mother’s sister, who was also an amchi, performed emergency eye surgery on a fellow traveler, draining a blood clot that was obstructing the cornea. The traveler reached Manali, performed the suggested purification rituals, and his eyes fully recovered.



**Figure 3.2** Kunzum Temple (right) with stupa and prayer flags. Photograph by Mridul Surbhi.

and made offerings so that our journey ahead would be safe and productive.’ Although nowadays he and other amchi do not have to worry so much about provisioning, Mother Kunzum’s presence remains unquestioned and they offer a white ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*) to her at the temple at Kunzum La (Figure 3.2). Amchi-la explained:

Mother Kunzum feels, expressing her wrath in the form of avalanches or landslides at times even though her love for the people of Spiti is still there. If it was not for the deities that overlook and protect the land, who knows if the medicines we need would be found. It is not like somebody went to these places to plant herbs; the land and its deities offer these to us. ... This is why praying to them not only protects our human selves, but also generates life-giving healing materials.

This brief vignette serves as a first introduction to an amchi’s particular way of dwelling. It shows that when traversing a dynamic Himalayan environment permeated by aliveness, praying and making offerings to personified land features are an integral part of the harvesting

taskscape. Amchi Tsering's musings resonate with Ingold's (2000) approach to storied places: 'To perceive the landscape is ... to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past' (189). The land-shaping quest for herbs constitutes a becoming-with through lines of skilled movement and reciprocity that blur the boundaries with pilgrimage. As such we would like to call this entanglement a 'ritualized meshwork'. Yet, the surveillance of these politically sensitive border areas, involving patrols, permits and checkpoints, has deeply transformed the experiential reality of engaging with these places in tandem with the continual construction and maintenance of motorable roads. 'Who has the energy these days to negotiate with the army?', Amchi Tsering asked.

### Collecting herbs with Amchi Dorje Yongma in Pin Valley

In the summer of 2019, Lobsang Yeshe and I went on another plant collection trip to Pin Valley with Amchi Dorje Yongma (born in 1958?) and two locals. Amchi Dorje was born into a family of tantric householders or *jowa* in Chango, Kinnaur.<sup>8</sup> He studied Buddhism for three years at Banaras Hindu University but was forced to return to the village because of his father's ailing health, and eventually took up the practice of Sowa Rigpa after a decade-long tutelage under Tsering Lhotey from Dangkhari. Amchi-la had also done numerous retreats in mountain caves to practice *chö* (*gcod*, lit. 'severance'), for instance, and some patients visited him specifically for ritual healing. Two days before the scheduled departure, we were requested to abstain from alcohol, meat, sexual contact and overstimulation of the senses through our mobile phones (which would hamper our ability to spot the medicinal herbs). Following a three-hour drive from Chango to the end of the gravel road, we hiked for another two hours carrying our rucksacks, bags, utensils and flasks containing sweet and butter tea. We halted at a suitable site to set up camp near bushes that would provide some shelter against the wind. A white scarf and incense were offered to the

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8 *Jowa* (*jo ba*, also spelled *cho wa*; see Besch 2006: 22n26) is the local name for *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*), literate ritualists who in Spiti often equally act as astrologers. See Joffe 2019: 37–49 for an exploration of *ngakpa* identity and expertise, especially in relation to monasticism.

local deities (*yul lha*) and land spirits (*sa bdag*) for suitable weather and auspiciousness along with prayers: ‘The wisdom of these deities guides collectors. We ask them to come, to be at our side and guide us. Our aim should be the benefit of others, not business or leisure.’ Homage was also paid in the direction of a monastery perched on a distant mountaintop, to the Medicine Buddha (*sangs rgyas sman bla*), and finally to all beings inhabiting the area. While collecting, I was instructed to recite the mantras of the Buddhas of Medicine and Compassion as much as possible to overcome mental afflictions. Moreover, I was specifically asked where I would be relieving myself; to do so in the wrong place would upset the serpentine naga spirits (*klu*), which could provoke harm (*gnod pa*) in the form of illness or accidents.

The second day of harvest began with prayers and the preparation of tea on our portable stove. Amchi Dorje left early for the higher plains to collect *ukchö* (*ug chos*; *Eriophyton wallichii*), returning later with less than fifteen small woolly-leaved specimens that were left to dry in the shade. My task for the day was to collect *achak* (*a cag*; *Gynura bicolor*) from riverbeds together with another villager who had accompanied us. We were instructed not to pull up the roots, and succeeded in gathering a considerable amount—half a sack—by the end of the day. A decoction would be made of the bright yellow-orange flowers while the rest of the plant would be ground into powder. Both support the healing of weak or fractured bones and stimulate blood circulation, the powder being stronger but less ideal for children and the elderly, and both are locally in high demand. Over the course of the next three days, work conditions fluctuated along with the weather: clouds protected us from the penetrating sunrays but also reduced visibility and the temperature. Some of us gathered dry wood or cattle dung for the fire, on which we boiled potato momos or pea soup in the evenings. We wandered further and further from camp to collect *triyangku* (*pri yang ku*; *Dracocephalum tanguticum*), *jakangpa* (*bya rkang pa*; *Epilobium latifolium*) and *trönbu* (*khron bu*; *Melanoseris macrorrhiza*).<sup>9</sup> The latter prefers rocky crevices, making it hard to find. It is a cooling ingredient which counteracts excessive bile heat that usually flows upwards in the body. Amchi-la explained that there is a general correspondence

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9 Jakang is commonly identified on the Tibetan Plateau as *Delphinium caeruleum*, and trönbu as *Euphorbia stracheyi* (Dga’ ba’i rdo rje 1995). Both of these species are also found in the West Himalayas. Our findings attest to the importance of local identifications.



between plant and body: the lower parts of the former, such as roots and rosette leaves, tend to have a downward cooling potency (*nus pa*) whereas the buds and flowers generate an upward motion that is relatively warming. The top parts are lighter, the bottom ones heavier, like sky and earth. This is one of the ways in which the morphology of ingredients-in-environments resonates with patients; even after the ingredients have been processed, their elemental signatures endure.

As the days progressed, I became aware of a kind of sensory shift. From the start, we shared with each other our perceptions of shifts in flowering times and species abundance. Yet as our phone batteries died, and experience and mantras accumulated, the eyes, nose, tongue, ears and sense of touch were increasingly attuned to the taskscape of collection, leading to a long-lasting habit of scanning the landscape for medicinals. Amchi Dorje later told me that

the art of an artist and the ability to heal only increase with age. It is not like doing a job that has a retirement age. The more amchis practice, the more their craft will benefit not only themselves but also their lineage and surroundings.

On our way back to Chango we paid a visit to Chango Gompa to make offerings and were given a wholesome meal. Exhausted, none of us spoke while taking in the sounds of ritual and the sights of butter lamps being lit. We only returned home with our harvest the next day because everyone from the area knows that driving the rocky, icy track leading down from the monastery at night would be life-threatening.

## The medical and ritual taskscapes of pharmacy work

*Whereas both the landscape and the taskscape presuppose the presence of an agent who watches and listens, the taskscape must be populated with beings who are themselves agents, and who reciprocally 'act back' in the process of their own dwelling. In other words, the taskscape exists not just as activity but as interactivity. (Ingold 2000: 199)*

In order to illustrate some of the pharmacy processes in which this interactive 'acting back' takes place, we return to Amchi Nawang Tsering, with whom Surbhi spent several weeks during the winter of

2022–3. In the midst of participating in these processes and later while describing them in a few words, we strongly relied on material properties and media but did not feel the need to interpret these further through the lens of ‘materiality’. This aligns with Ingold’s (2007, 2012) critique of the focus on conceptualizations of materiality in material culture studies as founded on a nature/culture dichotomy, leading to a problematic distinction between ‘brute matter’ and social (i.e. human) relations as well as a concomittant prioritization of ‘finished’ artefact-objects over flows and frictions. Instead, we center medicine makers as craftpersons and things such as ingredients as transient gatherings of materials in our descriptions.

Amchi Tsering had consulted the jowa of Rangrik village to select an astrologically auspicious starting time for the medicine making season, for which the glasshouse was then prepared by sweeping the floor and setting up all necessary tools whilst reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra. The next morning, Amchi-la lit incense, did prostrations dedicated to his teachers in the direction of Key Monastery, and then consecrated the implements we were about to use with a brief prayer and a rosary round of murmured mantras. I was then asked to separate dried *kyuru* (*skyu ru*; *Phyllanthus emblica*) berries from their seeds and to pick out inferior pieces based on color. I was instructed to taste three blackish-brown pieces to notice how each had a different taste profile. Although it was impossible to taste each subsequent piece, I was assured that a better sense of the appearance-taste correlation would soon develop through experimentation. A few hours later, I was beginning to make astute visual judgements. ‘What would happen if I don’t separate properly and we use all pieces?’, I asked. ‘Then my medicines will not work and patient health will not improve’, the amchi swiftly replied. ‘Plant parts are not uniformly potent; sorting and processing plants is like preparing a good foundation to build a house on.’ He later added: ‘Though using the plant directly without sorting would not be poisonous or fatal, it will certainly harm the digestive heat and bodily constituents.’

Sitting in a corner repeating mantras, Amchi Tsering checked the results of my sorting, directing my attention again and again to slight variations: the way the flesh sticks to the seed, or the hollow sound a withered fruit makes when tapping it compared to fruits that retain potency. This embodied knowledge is gradually acquired through participation in these time-consuming, deceptively simple tasks that need to be adapted to each ingredient. Amchi Tsering ensured that nothing was wasted along the way, not even the less useful fraction that was

sorted from the rest. The discarded plant parts were collected in a cloth bag, to be later dispersed across the pastures around the house or on mountain passes. This material act of reciprocity with the land again shows deep respect for the preciousness and life-supporting potential of these scarce natural resources, as well as being a recognition of the amount of labour and care required in the making of medicine.

After sorting ingredients for several days, we proceeded to the first stage of grinding, which entailed beating the materials into a granular powder using a mortar and pestle set on top of a thick stone slate (see Figure 3.3). This technique involved repetitive cycles of hammer-like beats. Performed the wrong way, blisters quickly appear on the hands. Amchi Tsering demonstrated: ‘Beating the mortar with all your strength will not break down the plants; the materials will slip away from under the pestle. Instead, following the rhythm of the movement and pressing down slightly will do the trick.’ As I proceeded, the air of the room became infused with the rhythmic sounds of beating and mantras, and with fragrant minute herbal particles that eventually saturated the taste buds. Apart from when it was too cold or there was snow, we worked for five hours a day on average over the next two



**Figure 3.3** Iron mortar and pestle. Courtesy Mridul Surbhi.

weeks, grinding batches of *trasang* (*skra bzang*; *Corydalis govaniiana*), yellow-flowered *chaktik* (*lcags tig*; *Scorzonera virgata*), *nyalo* (*snya lo*; *Koenigia tortuosa*) and the purple flower heads of *nyenmayül* (local name with uncertain spelling, unidentified) in multiple rounds interspersed with sieving.<sup>10</sup>

The second stage of grinding, which transforms the coarse granulate into a fine powder, is carried out by rubbing a rounded stone across a large, slightly hollowed-out slab (see Figure 3.4). This flat stone (*rdo leb*, *H. mandah*) is often passed down through the lineage as a sacralized possession that is emblematic of years of accumulated hard work, skill and merit (see Singh and Gerke, this volume). Fine grinding is an arduous process, even more so for a novice. It involves sitting cross-legged on the floor for hours, and relies on muscles and joints in the entire upper body—especially hands and shoulders—to generate friction through a circular movement. Whereas Amchi Tsering positioned the slab in front of him, he suggested I place it closer to my thighs as women generally have more strength in that area. This position was indeed much more effective when combined with a straightened spine and a rather loose grip on the grinding stone (a tight hold makes the powder stick to it). Each granulated ingredient required roughly twenty repetitions of grinding and fine sieving to finish an entire batch. The contrast between the rhythmic sounds of grinding and recitation and the piercing silence of the surrounding snow-capped mountains gradually induced a seemingly timeless state of flow in which nothing else mattered; a meditative concentration strived for by dedicated medicine makers. For Amchi-la, this experience leads to insight into emptiness, which together with the driving force of his religious vows on compassionate behaviour lays out the path towards liberation. During the relaxing breaks, nearby villagers took turns cooking meals for us and serving tea.

None of the amchi I met in Spiti or Kinnaur currently produces medicine in pill form (*ril bu*) even though some purchase and prescribe readymade ones—including precious pills (*rin chen ril bu*)—from Men-Tsee-Khang. Since each ingredient is ground individually and therefore not immediately compounded into a formula with fixed proportions, the practitioner retains greater flexibility to create medicinal powders

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10 *Corydalis govaniiana* is more generally called *tongri zilpa* (*stong ri zil pa*), whereas *chaktik* is identified as *Halenia elliptica* and *nyalo* as *Polygonum* spp. (Dga' ba'i rdo rje 1995).



**Figure 3.4** Amchi Nawang Tsering grinding rapeseed (*nyungs ma*) into fine powder, March 2023. Photograph by Mridul Surbhi.

(*phye ma*) adapted to a patient's body constitution, disease, and other circumstances such as seasonality and lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> By way of example, Amchi Tsering mentioned that excessive alcohol intake in Spiti needed to be taken into account. For some chronic illnesses he would give a certain formula for seven days and then adjust it depending on the result: 'When the disease changes its character, the medicine has to be changed as well.' This is also why we did not finalize a single medicine during this period. For each specific formulation, Amchi-la would estimate the required amounts on sight using different measuring spoons. A batch that would ideally last for a year weighs three to five kilograms and is stored in sealed glass jars. Once a year he lays out all his medicines in front of the Medicine Buddha and other scroll paintings in a locked room for several consecutive days to absorb blessings. During that period he only enters in the mornings and evenings to replace

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11 See Besch 2006: 147–51 on the powder versus pill efficacy debate in Spiti, and Blaikie 2014: 308–13 on the economic, technical and urban institutional factors that have driven a shift towards pills in Ladakh.

the water and butter lamp offerings. This element of the ritualized pharmacy taskscape is part of a specialized retreat (*snyen mtshams*) in which amchi are expected to complete at least ten thousand Medicine Buddha mantra recitations and renew their religious vows. No recurring communal ‘medicine accomplishment’ rituals (*sman sgrub*) involving multiple physicians have been observed in the area (cf. Blaikie 2013: 431–6). Instead, some individual amchi would request blessings at local monasteries or even in Bodhgaya. However, amchi did often add a pinch of powder from a previous batch of the same medicine to the next, which implies continuity of blessings.

## Concluding discussion

Responding to Ingold’s (2000: 189) call ‘to move beyond the sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space’, this chapter has foregrounded a dwelling perspective in which the close encounters and form-(de)generating processes of medicinal harvest and production take precedence over the more prevalent interpretation of sociocultural ‘contexts’. Although analyses foregrounding the latter are certainly insightful, their tendency to ignore the temporality of landscapes and the embeddedness of taskscape risks reducing vibrant ecologies of materials to either sets of dead objects or playgrounds for human-exceptionalist conceptualizations of materiality (Ingold 2012). We do not wish to overstate our point, being aware of several rather vehement criticisms—along with strong counterarguments—unleashed by Ingold’s iconoclastic interventions in material culture studies (Miller 2007; Tilley 2007) and anthropology of the senses (Howes 2011a, 2011b). A burgeoning literature of what could be termed more-than-human ecological approaches to Tibetan, Himalayan and Buddhist lifeworlds also attests to an increasing attention to these entanglements through analyses of indigeneity, sacred sites, mountain deities, climate change and apocalyptic narratives.<sup>12</sup>

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12 For recent contributions, see e.g. Smyer Yü and de Maaker 2021; Kuyakanon, Diemberger and Sneath 2022. Refer to Gagné 2019 for relevant work on Ladakh; on Sowa Rigpa see Chudakova 2017, Van der Valk 2024 and Vargas-O’Bryan 2013.

Nevertheless, Ingold pushes us to ask ourselves: ‘Are there contexts that are *not* social, or worlds that are *not* material?’ (2007: 32). Can we think outside the boxes of representationalist knowledge production and cultural constructivism (2011b)?

We have explored these questions through descriptions of Surbhi’s intimate engagements with windswept mountains, active deities, aromatic herbs and grinding tools alongside Spitipa and Kinnauri practitioners of Sowa Rigpa. On the arid slopes of Kunzum Pass we caught a glimpse of how recurring plant collection journeys inscribe memories into the landscape, and the ways in which infrastructural and military developments precipitate changes in modes of travel as well as in perceptions of the sacred. Nevertheless, Amchi Nawang Tsering and others continued to pay respect to the mother goddess that dwells there through acts of reciprocity that recognize her as a protector and the ultimate source of the potent ingredients that flourish on her land. Camping and harvesting in Pin Valley with Amchi Dorje Yongma equally left visible traces: footprints, a white offering scarf, charcoal, fertilising excrement, affected biota, exhausted yet satisfied bodies, and so forth. The perceptual attunement of ritual acts was an inextricable part of the transformative material processes that enliven beings-in-environments, including buddhas, nagas, plants and humans (try reciting mantra while out of breath!). Following Ingold (2000: 63), we approach these generative relational fields as meshworks: ‘entangled lines of life, growth and movement’. Expanding on this, we proposed the term ‘ritualized meshwork’ to unsettle *a priori* distinctions between medicine and religion in the case of Sowa Rigpa, and more specifically in recognition of the foundational roles played by Buddhist-inflected cosmology and religious praxis in our fieldsites. This meshwork repeatedly came to the fore, including in conversations on skill. A final example is the following reflection by Amchi Urgyen from Lalung Village: ‘There were times that I could not see medicinal plants right in front of my eyes while my grandfather would easily find them. Although his eyesight was quite poor, his skills, ethics and merit as an amchi were unmatched.’

Gentry’s work (2017; see also 2023) has much to offer along these lines. His exploration of the relations between revealed treasure texts and substances and the Tibetan landscape convincingly questions any spiritual/physical dichotomization of ‘indigenous non-human landscape entities’ (2017: 51–2), and he also notes the recurring relevance of ‘body-landscape homology’ (155–6, n. 277) for ritual intervention and sacred architecture. What is less satisfying from an Ingoldian

perspective, however, is how ANT conceptualizes land features, meteorological phenomena and organisms. Reflecting on the lived experiences we just recalled and realizing how the weather-world is in constant flux, what sense does it make to call a steep slope or a gust of icy wind during a hike up to camp an ‘actant’, or a group of *trônbu* flowers taking root in a rocky crevice an ‘object’? Such a reduction of the living complexity of things, media and other ‘non-humans’ to Latourian mediators ultimately goes hand in hand with the contradistinction of ‘brute materiality’ and meaning and the consecutive need for hybrid amalgams. Gentry (2017) argues that ANT provides a methodological solution for dealing with interactions between objects and discourse, and even that Sokdokpa’s writings themselves suggest such a ‘symmetrical’ stance (19–27).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, we have hinted at some limitations of Gentry’s material semiotic approach which consciously restricts itself to ‘language about objects, and not objects themselves’ (435). While recognizing the pioneering value of his ‘re-materialization of textuality’ (440), we therefore suggest that Tibetan and Himalayan Studies could also benefit from Ingold’s phenomenology of dwelling, which pushes us to read the world and not only text, and to bring materials back into our analyses in a different way.<sup>14</sup> This approach might come across as not sufficiently textual or Tibetological to some. Although we acknowledge more work is required to bridge this epistemological gap, it is worth emphasizing that the rural lineage amchis we engaged with did not embed their artisanship in elaborate Sowa Rigpa theorization—even when explicitly requested.

This still leaves open a question about the (inter)activities of seemingly more ethereal entities such as Mother Kunzum and nagas. If, as researchers, we choose not to sprinkle the fairy dust of agency across heterogenous networks of connected-yet-distinct actants to decentralize Anthropos, how can we understand these usually unseen beings as

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13 For an incisive critique of Latour’s symmetry, see Ingold 2012: 430–1; 2013: 12–14. See also Graeber 2015 on the pitfalls of the ontological turn and, in particular, Viveiros de Castro’s ‘many natures’ (on which Gentry also draws).

14 Gentry (2017: 438n7) reiterates Latour’s evaluation of phenomenology as narrowly focused on human consciousness and intentionality. However, Ingold’s approach (2000: 168–71; see also Ingold 2011b), which integrates the work of ecological psychologist James Gibson, decidedly moves beyond representational understandings of knowledge production and is applicable to any perceptive—and thus skilled—organism.



more than discourse, and not as signs of an unfathomable alternate reality? As anthropologists we should not be surprised that not all people agree on what is alive and why, or on whether life is thought of as an attribute of things at all. Thinking with Ingold (2011a: 67–75) once more, and opening up to an animic way of being and perceiving, we can comprehend aliveness as more than a projection of the imagination onto external objects, more than a belief about the world.

Animacy ... is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation. (Ingold 2011a: 68)

The implication of such an animic perception of the world is that ‘things *are* their relations’ (ibid., 70), just as all kinds of beings are becomings—open-ended entanglements that are better characterized with verbs than with nouns. In this sense, appeasing and enlisting the support of spirit owners and protectors of the land are truly reciprocal acts of coproduction, not just cultural constructs.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to the winter-time manual pharmacy work alongside Amchi Tsering, it became clear from the outset that the pharmaceutical taskscape is embedded in a close-knit nexus of medical, religious and astrological practices. Showing in particular that ‘skill is not an attribute of the individual body in isolation but of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in his or her environment’ (Ingold 2000: 291), we have pointed out the need to ground the taskscape in landscape and immerse it in the weather-world of sound, light and feeling. Spending weeks sorting, crushing and grinding dried fruits, stems and flowers in a glasshouse at more than 4,200 metres above sea level, Surbhi directly perceived how *materia medica* interacted with iron and stone tools and resonated with the body, the air in the room, the temperature, and the stillness of the surrounding mountains, facilitating a Himalayan Buddhist cultivation of concentration. In this chapter, we have not been able to offer much more

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15 For nuanced analyses of human–nonhuman relationality in Tibetan lifeworlds, see Fjeld and Lindskog 2017; Tidwell, Niangajia and Fjeld 2023.

than a proof of principle of the value of attending to these ritualized meshworks. Our hope is that this will stimulate future work containing many more pages (and audiovisual documentation) of first-person and/or apprenticeship-based experiential descriptions.<sup>16</sup> In this age of modern technology, climate breakdown and mass extinction, perhaps it is more important than ever to honor this interconnectedness and to overcome ‘a stifling division between academic study and observational practice’ (Ingold 2007: 36) by thinking *with* as well as *about* materials.

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16 Barbara Gerke, Jan van der Valk, Calum Blaikie and Tawni Tidwell are currently working on a collaborative volume, *Crafting Potency*, that seeks to answer this call.

Jan M. A. van der Valk is an independent scholar-practitioner working at the interface of Sowa Rigpa and western herbalism. Drawing on a multidisciplinary background in biology (MSc, KU Leuven), ethnobotany and anthropology (MSc and PhD, University of Kent), his interests revolve around Eurasian *materia medica*, traditional pharmacy and more-than-human ecologies. As a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies (University of Vienna), he contributed to two Austrian Science Fund research projects: ‘Potent Substances’ (2018–23) and ‘Pandemic Narratives’ (2023–24).

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# 4 Miraculous display

## Temporal and collaborative materializations in Tibetan Buddhist butter art

Mark Stevenson 

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**Abstract** Based on observations made in 1991 during the construction of a large ‘butter-sculpture’ or *metok chöpa* for the Great Aspiration Prayer Festival at Rongwo Monastery, Reppong, this chapter argues that the consecration of ritually important objects can be understood as the culmination of a more general reverence expressed throughout their production. Through analysis of the production sequence (*chaîne opératoire*), it is further revealed that in the instance of the *metok chöpa* such ritualized making is linked to collaborative dimensions of the making process, together with the componential or composite nature of the art-form and the festival events it contributes to. While specific consecration rituals are employed prior to the *metok chöpa*’s display, acts of reverence employed at earlier stages are already oriented toward sacralization. Like consecration, ritualized making becomes part of the ritual objects that are produced. Furthermore, through the synchronization of culturally significant steps, time becomes one of the materials from which ensouled objects are shaped. Beyond the insights this chapter offers to the study of Tibetan ritual art, it also serves as a broader call for greater attention to collaboration and componentiality in the anthropology of 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 (north-eastern Tibet).<sup>1</sup> '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).<sup>2</sup>

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

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1 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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Reggong, 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

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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.

4 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 Reppong 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. mahamahā*), 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 Reppong Arts (*reb gong sgyu rtsal bshams ston khang*).<sup>6</sup> Museumification of Reppong’s material and monastic culture follows upon its widespread destruction in 1958, as well as

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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).<sup>7</sup>

## 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*

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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).<sup>8</sup> 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 multi-day Mönlam Chenmo to its culmination.<sup>9</sup> The thirteenth day features the Reverent Viewing of Sacred Objects (*rten mjal; lha rten mjal ba*), the

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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 tormas 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).<sup>10</sup> 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.

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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,<sup>11</sup> 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.

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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,<sup>12</sup> 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

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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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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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 tormas.

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 tormas. 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.<sup>14</sup> 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

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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, Rebgong.

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 face-to-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.<sup>15</sup>

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 tormas. 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 emphasize 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

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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.<sup>16</sup>

## 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;

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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).<sup>17</sup>

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' (Lemonnier 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

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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.<sup>18</sup>

What the making of the 1991 Ocean of Sacred Food reveals about the production of publicly performed art works and the behind-the-scenes work they entail may also reveal that the making process is part of the process of sacralization.<sup>19</sup> 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

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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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# 5 The afterlives of Tibetan Buddhist material objects

Trine Brox 

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**Abstract** How does the wear of materials affect the status, life trajectories and post-consumption destinies of Buddhist material objects? Based upon ethnographies of waste in India, Nepal and China, this chapter investigates the consumption of Buddhist material objects and their post-consumption afterlives. Its main argument is that the wear (the gradual physical deterioration of materials due to repeated use, time and environmental impact) that accompanies the consumption of religious objects is not only destructive, corroding their materials and utility value, but can also be productive. Taking the Tibetan prayer wheel and its component parts as an example, I show that the end of consumption is not always waste. The sacred does not necessarily expire with consumption. Wear can even give apparently mundane components, such as a worn-out washer, a new life, status and potency after their ‘death’ by transforming them into sacred objects or apotropaic and auspicious tools.

**Keywords** Afterlife, Buddhist materiality, consumption, object biography, prayer wheel, waste

## Introduction

Any material object that is being consumed is heading towards its end, towards its exhaustion and expiration. Historian of religion Kathryn Lofton (2017) points to the resulting loss, focusing on consumption as destruction—as the wearing away of utility, value and life.

Consumption is loss. After consumption, something is gone: gone because of use, because of decay, or because it was destroyed. In economic terms, consumption describes the using up of goods or services having an exchangeable value. In pathology, consumption describes the progressive wasting of the body. (Lofton 2017: 1)

That objects are subject to decay is a fundamental problem with religious materiality (Kendall 2017). Objects that are essential to religious practice, identity and belonging in various ways will inevitably be consumed over time and with usage. Scriptures become tattered and unreadable, ritual tools break down, protective amulets disintegrate and monks' robes fray. While some Buddhist material objects have extremely ephemeral lives, such as sand mandalas and water votive images that are produced in order to be destroyed, others are made to be long-lasting supports of enlightened body (e.g., images), speech (books) and mind (reliquaries) (Bentor 1996: 290–1). In this chapter, I focus on the wear, i.e. the gradual physical deterioration of materials due to repeated use, time and environmental impact, which accompanies the consumption of religious materials. I show that although such wear corrodes their use value, it does not necessarily transform their status from sacred items to worthless waste. To the contrary, it can move some objects *into* the category of the sacred, affecting what we can call their 'afterlife'.

The concept of afterlife, as I have explained elsewhere (Brox 2022a), is relevant to the theorization of the wear of Buddhist material objects because it has to do with the meaning of things and the work that they do after their breakdown—how they are 'working beyond the utilitarian function for which they were designed' (Soto 2018: 2). As Michael B. Schiffer (2013: 2) notes, 'any entity—person, artefact, organization, or place—that has undergone a change from some sort of "life" to some sort of "death" may have an afterlife'. Afterlife objects have lost their use value: they are the non-functioning electronic gadget, the worn-out dress, the wrecked ship and the ruins of a building after a fire. When

these and other entities enter new relationships and perhaps secondary uses, their fates after their breakdown, wear, accidental damage or destruction can be seen as their afterlives. What is interesting is what is lost, what remains and what is gained after death. Does death include the total breakdown of an object's integrity? What connections are there between the original artifact and the afterlife artifact?

Based upon a multi-sited investigation in the Tibetan cultural sphere, I address these and related questions through a study of the prayer wheel, an iconic Tibetan Buddhist ritual tool and technology. I focus in particular on the handmade, handheld prayer wheel. Since it consists of several discrete components, which include sacred text but also far more mundane parts such as the washer, the Tibetan prayer wheel is a particularly complex and interesting object (or assemblage) to study. Often associated with the six-syllable mantra *om mani padme hum*, it is a device containing and enabling the rotation of sacred text, a practice considered to produce merit (*bsod nams*) and confer blessings (*byin rlabs*) and good fortune (*bkra shis*). Regular prayer wheel practice is most common among older Tibetans who take it up in their retirement years. The more labour they put into it, the more merit they produce, but also the more they wear the various prayer wheel components. According to these elders, Buddhist material objects like prayer wheels should not be thrown in the bin after their use value has been exhausted; they should not be treated like mundane, disposable commodities. Prompted by this observation, I ask how Tibetan Buddhists perceive the value and wear of prayer wheels and how they treat their various components when they are worn down.

This investigation into the post-consumption status of Buddhist material objects contributes to Tibetan studies and religious materiality studies an overall ignored but important aspect of object biographies. I agree with Irene Stengs (2014) that a general disregard for the destruction of objects in biographical approaches to material religion means that we lack knowledge about an important dimension of their lives. Whereas I am unaware of any such studies on Tibetan material culture, there are a number of insightful articles on people's destruction of and detachment from post-consumption Buddhist objects in Japan (Gould 2019; Gygi 2022; Rambelli 2007; Triplett 2017), the Global North (Gould 2022; Wilson 2022) and Vietnam, Korea, and Myanmar (Kendall 2017; Kendall, Tâm and Hu'o'ng 2010). Like these studies, the present chapter acknowledges destruction and detachment and thus the loss that consumption entails, but additionally deals with the productive potential of consumption and people's attachment to

post-consumption Buddhist material objects. It thus offers new insights about how the status and wear (consumption) of objects in their original lives relates to their afterlives, focusing on various prayer wheel components and the peculiar case of the prayer wheel washer (*dung*).

The chapter draws on data collected as part of a broader study of waste care practices and places across four sites in Asia. Following a research guide that I developed, I conducted fieldwork in Dharamshala, India (September 2018, 2019) and Chengdu, China (January 2019, 2020) and two research assistants collected data at other sites: Heng Peng worked in Lhasa, central Tibet (July 2018) and Kirsten Skov Vang in Kathmandu, Nepal (February–April 2019). In addition to observation of waste care practices and places, we collected interpretations of them through interviews with fifty Tibetans (both lay and monastic). Supplementing that research, this chapter additionally draws on observations documented through photography by Chaksham Tsering under my guidance at a fifth site, Repgong, in northeast Tibet (fall 2018–spring 2019), as well as conversations with Tibetan Buddhist teachers in Denmark and Germany.

I first dismantle the prayer wheel to explore its value and discuss the different ideas that our monastic and lay interlocutors had about what should happen to its different components when they reach the end of their lives. Can they simply be thrown away like worthless waste? I then turn to focus on the prayer wheel's washer, showing that as wear corrodes this object, decreasing its use value as a wear pad, another kind of value is simultaneously augmented that relates to its efficacy as a religious object.

## The handheld prayer wheel, its value and its afterlives

The prayer wheel is an 'efficacious technology' (Brox 2022b), a device for ritually spinning a Buddhist scripture. Inside the prayer wheel drum is a tightly packed scroll (or several depending on the size of the drum), which is spun when the prayer wheel is rotated. The text often consists of mantras—sacred or magic sounds in the form of a series of syllables, which may not have semantic meaning but are considered by Buddhists to be powerful formulas (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 529). The most popular is the six-syllable mantra of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion: om mani padme hum. The drum can also contain *zung* (*gzungs*),



**Figures 5.1 and 5.2** Handmade, handheld prayer wheel. Figure 5.1 shows the wheel assembled, ready for use. Figure 5.2 shows its component parts (bottom to top, left to right): washer, bamboo tube, drum with ball-and-chain governor, scroll, roof, pinnacle, and handle with a stick.

which are formulas expressed in longer phrases that convey the essence of lengthier texts or teachings and function as mnemonic devices (ibid.: 541). Nowadays, it is also possible to find prayer wheels containing many different scriptures and even the entire Buddhist canon.

The most common prayer wheel is the handheld wheel (*lag 'khor*), put into rotation by a slight movement of the wrist and kept in motion with very little effort.<sup>1</sup> It consists of a drum revolving around a fixed stick that is stuck into a handle (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Centrifugal momentum is incited by the so-called ‘ball-and-chain governor’ (Martin 1987), a heavy governor shaped like a globe or conch shell and attached to the side of the drum by a chain or a cord. Figure 5.1 shows a prayer wheel that has had further weight added to the chain to increase its momentum by the attachment of a worn-out washer and a mould for a miniature votive image (*tsha tsha*). The paper scroll is tightly wound around a ‘life tree’, letters facing outward, and then wrapped with cloth and placed inside the drum. As many mantras as possible are inserted by stacking and winding the scroll, which is measured to fit the drum’s cavity. A prayer wheel’s exterior is usually decorated with mantras or other Buddhist auspicious symbols and sometimes ornamented with silver, gold and precious stones. The roof is decorated with an eight-spoked wheel that signifies the Buddha’s teachings and his eight-fold path. The base is usually decorated with a lotus. The top part of the wheel, the pinnacle (*stod*), functions like a nut that holds the components together: it screws on to the central stick where it emerges through the prayer wheel’s roof. Attached to the base of the wheel is a bamboo tube (*snyug ma*) that rotates with the drum. Beneath this, separating the handle from the rotating part, is a washer (*dung, mani dung* or *dung rtse*).<sup>2</sup>

Some interlocutors talked about the prayer wheel as if it was a precious living entity with a body and limbs. They treated it carefully and

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- 1 Although my focus here is on the handmade prayer wheel, it should be noted that there are many different types of prayer wheels, including the Chinese octagonal sutra library, Tibetan water, air, fire and earth prayer wheels, and contemporary optic discs, wheel apps, automated praying machines, mani fidget spinners and mani finger rings (Brox 2018).
  - 2 There is usually a piece of sponge under the washer to stabilize it. Some Tibetans melt the sponge so that it glues the washer to the stick. Others use the sponge to fill the small cavity between the handle and the washer, which is not entirely flat but curves slightly towards the handle.



respectfully. As well as observing the rule that prayer wheels should be rotated clockwise so that the scripture can be ‘read’, older Tibetan practitioners followed a number of proscriptions (although not necessarily comprehensively). One should not turn the drum downwards because the prayer wheel body has an up and a down, lay it on the ground because the ground is dirty, twist the pinnacle because it is like ‘pulling the prayer wheel’s hair’, nor place one’s thumb on the washer while rotating the wheel because it is like ‘choking the prayer wheel’. It is the sacred scroll that elevates the prayer wheel in a hierarchy of Buddhist material objects (Brox 2018) and causes its owner to treat it as a precious entity. In Tibet, Buddhist scriptures are not only read; they are produced, copied, translated, recited, paraded, worshipped, revered, circumambulated, rotated and also placed inside other Buddhist material objects to sacralize them, acts that are all perceived to be meritorious. We have here a ‘cult of the book’ (Schopen 2005: 348), within which Tibetan Buddhists’ devotion to the teachings of the Buddha are expressed in a complex of religious rituals, faith and protocol (Brox 2018; Schaeffer 2009). Even a single syllable of Buddhist script is treated respectfully and worshipped, since it is believed to be able to transfer blessings and good luck to the person interacting with it as if it was the Buddha himself.

Some older interlocutors in Dharamshala, Kathmandu, Lhasa and Repong owned prayer wheels that had survived two or three generations. The scrolls had taken little damage as they were usually wrapped in a cloth that was commonly replaced when old. However, at some point in the lives of such wheels, their most vulnerable body parts—the washer, bamboo tube and pinnacle—had to be repaired or replaced. In terms of how replacement parts should be handled, our lay interlocutors suggested purification by burning juniper branches or incense, and perhaps saying a mantra. They usually took new prayer wheels or scrolls to the local temple to be consecrated by monks.<sup>3</sup> However, they did not know of any disposal rituals for retired and replaced parts of old prayer wheels—even though they felt that these should never be thrown away. As in other Buddhist cultures (see Kendall 2017; Triplett 2017), burning is a common disposal method, at least for Buddhist scriptures. The disposal of retired scrolls by burning can be performed while reciting an appropriate passage from the sutras.

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3 See Brox (2019: 118–19) for an example of a brief consecration ritual for prayer wheels.

One Geluk scholar (*dge bshes*) in Dharamshala suggested a passage spoken by the Buddha in the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*. During our talk in September 2018, he explained that one ‘will not commit any negative actions’ if a scripture is burned while reciting the following verse:

Like a star, hallucination, candle  
 Magical illusion, dewdrop, bubble  
 Dream, lightning or cloud  
 Know all compounded phenomena to be like this.<sup>4</sup>

However, none of the Tibetans who spoke with me or my research assistants in Tibet, China, India, Nepal or Europe—lay or monastic—knew of any written sources relating the ‘correct’ way for dealing with post-consumption Buddhist material objects.

Since authoritative (written) disposal practices and afterlife instructions were generally not known, it is perhaps unsurprising that perceptions of post-consumption prayer wheel components and their disposability varied among and between the laity and religious authorities. The Geluk scholar cited above thought that everything but the scroll could be thrown away like waste. Comparing the prayer wheel drum to a worn garment that can be disposed of with ease, he argued that when it is broken, one can throw it away (*g.yug*) as long as it contains no script. The mantras inside the wheel are the most important component, he said, and should be protected as a sacred object. If this is not possible, then it is appropriate to burn them in a clean place (*gtsang sa*) or to offer them in a reliquary (*mchod rten*). To this Geluk scholar, only the parts of the prayer wheel containing sacred writing were precious and thus valuable at the end of their life. Yet, it is clear that not all Tibetans deem other prayer wheel components, or other Buddhist material objects for that matter, worthless and therefore disposable when broken. Material evidence points to popular practices that indicate different waste conceptions and waste care among Tibetan Buddhists.

At each of the research sites in this study, prayer wheel drums, sticks, pinnacles and washers were not thrown in the bin to end up at dumpster sites. Instead, retired prayer wheels and their components spent their afterlives inside peoples’ homes or in places considered pure and elevated, such as circumambulation routes and reliquaries.

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4 Translated by Tsering Norbu.

Observations from Dharamshala, Kathmandu and Lhasa suggest that these places are the most common afterlife abodes of Buddhist material objects.<sup>5</sup> Along the circumambulation routes around the Potala Palace and Ganden Monastery in Lhasa, Tibet, the residence and temple of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamshala, India, and the Boudha Stupa in Boudhanath, Kathmandu, one can see an enormous quantity of post-consumption Buddhist material objects including votive images, frayed offering scarfs, statues, protection cords and amulets (see also Brox 2023; Brox, Vang and Heng 2023). In places where these circumambulation paths had a prayer wheel wall to the right of the path with a shelf above the prayer wheel drums, there were different kinds of Buddhist ‘waste’. Some objects had been left there to rot and some placed there for storage, wrapped in plastic or kept in containers so that they did not decay but had enduring afterlives. Neither I nor my assistants saw any prayer wheels deposited in their entirety—complete with drum, handle and all. But on the circumambulation paths in Lhasa and Dharamshala there were many prayer wheel scrolls and washers. At times we also saw prayer wheel handles, pinnacles and roofs that had been worn down or broken, or (I was told) had belonged to people who had passed away.

Scrolls were usually placed on top of the large prayer wheel drums that bordered the circumambulation paths, some of them protected by a container made from a plastic water bottle or a tin jar and some wrapped in cloth and cling film. It was as if this type of ‘waste’ was so valuable that it had to be protected from its own decay. Four or five scrolls could be fitted on top of each prayer wheel. Their protective covers and conspicuous placement gave the scrolls a productive afterlife. They were not lying in their afterlife abodes to decompose. Instead, to borrow terminology from the natural sciences, they had become ‘inquilines’, a term usually applied to an animal that ‘lives habitually in the nest or abode of some other species’ without harming it.<sup>6</sup> The afterlives of such scrolls are dependent upon their ‘host’ prayer wheels, with which they live in symbiosis. Unlike parasites,

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5 In Repong, prayer wheel components were not commonly seen deposited in these sacred places, but one can find votive images, candy and fruit (usually after New Year), protection cords and wheat grains along circumambulation routes as is also common in Dharamshala, Kathmandu and Lhasa.

6 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inquiline> (accessed 21 March 2025).

which harm their hosts, inquiline scrolls do not compromise the rotations of their host prayer wheel; they live commensally. Moreover, they increase the efficacy of prayer wheel practice. When people rotate the scrolls inside the prayer wheel on the circumambulation path, they simultaneously rotate the inquiline scrolls on top—all in one single rotation.<sup>7</sup> Their protective covers and conspicuous placement have enabled a productive afterlife for scrolls that were no longer spun by the owners of their original prayer wheels, perhaps because they had died. Instead, they were being rotated by the hands of thousands of strangers on their daily circumambulations—strangers who earned merit from turning prayer wheels and thus from the many inquiline scrolls. When post-consumption Buddhist material objects like these inquiline scrolls can serve meritorious purposes in their afterlives, we should perhaps not regard them as waste.

The other prayer wheel component that could be spotted in large quantities on the circumambulation paths in Lhasa and Dharamshala was the used washer. Washers were often tied together on a string that was suspended on the frame of the prayer wheel wall, lying on the shelf above the prayer wheels, threaded onto the bottom of the prayer wheel's axis, or tucked in between the stones of *mani* walls and cairns. The fact that washers, like scrolls, are kept in places that are considered proper for precious objects in their afterlife tells us that they are not considered worthless waste. In the case of scrolls, it seems that the script, which is considered sacred even before it is installed in a prayer wheel and consecrated, maintains its sacredness in its afterlife. The washer, however, has no sacrosanct status before it is used in a prayer wheel, so why does it enjoy its afterlife in places that are considered sacred or pure? As I will discuss in the next section, the answer to this question lies in Tibetan Buddhists' perceptions of the process of wear.

## Wearing the washer

I visited Wangmo in her home in September 2018 to see her prayer wheels.<sup>8</sup> Wangmo lived in Dharamshala with her daughter and took care of her grandchildren. While we talked, she was constantly working—changing the gas tank of the stove and folding clothes—while all

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7 I have also seen such inquiline scrolls on the roofs of handheld wheels.

8 All personal names are pseudonyms.



**Figures 5.3 and 5.4** Prayer wheel washers. The washer in Figure 5.3 is new. The washer in Figure 5.4 has been worn down and split in two by the bamboo tube that rotates on top of it.

the time ensuring that my teacup was filled and that I enjoyed the biscuits that she had offered me. She said that she had only a little time for active prayer wheel practice. On her home shrine was a fire wheel (*me 'khor*) powered by the heat of a butter lamp sitting underneath the prayer wheel drum. 'I keep it alight in the offering bowl day and night without a break. The wheel cannot turn if I do not offer a butter lamp', Wangmo explained. When I asked why she was careful to keep the prayer wheel powered around the clock, she responded that it was so that she could 'take [merit] with me at the time of death'. 'Life is limited', she added. 'If we pause or do not offer butter lamps, we will not be free from the hell realms.' She also had a handheld wheel but had little time to turn it. She had started using it fifteen years ago but there was still 'no hole in the washer' because she had so many other things to do. 'When I turn it for a long time, I get pain over here', she said, pointing to her arm. 'Besides, I have to prepare food and pick up my grandson from school.' Wangmo knew that handheld prayer wheel practice would have the 'benefit [*phan yon*]' of avoiding 'taking rebirth in the hell realm', but lack of time and pain limited her engagement. Like many of our other lay interlocutors, she measured such practice by the (lack of) wear of her wheel's washer: 'If we turn [the wheel] swiftly, the washer is drilled [*rdo!*] within one month. It also depends

on the thickness of the washer. If the washer is very thick, it does not drill a hole quickly.’

The washer, called *dung* in Tibetan, is the handmade handheld prayer wheel component that will be most frequently replaced because of wear.<sup>9</sup> It is a thin, slightly curved, disc-shaped plate that has a small perforation in the middle so that it can be threaded onto the central stick and fixed between the two joining surfaces of the handle and the short bamboo tube that rotates with the drum (see Figure 5.3). It needs to be replaced when the short bamboo tube, which moves on top of the *dung*, has consumed the *dung* and penetrated it. This ‘wearing’ is a major incentive for prayer wheel practice for some Tibetan elders. The washer functions as a wear pad preventing the erosion of the handle and enables frictionless high-speed rotations of the drum by insulating the wooden stick from the surface of the rolling bamboo tube. Yet as Wangmo’s comments suggest, it also functions as a material measurement of what I call ‘faith labour’ (Brox 2019), that is the labour involved in interacting with an object with faith (*dad pa*) and conviction (*yiḍ ches*) in its sacredness.

Wangmo explained that the benefit accumulated through prayer wheel practice was proportionate to the number of rotations made upon the *dung*. Most of our Tibetan interlocutors associated the washer’s name—*dung*—with its materiality. The most common meaning of *dung* is ‘shell’ and they believed that prayer wheel washers were made of conch shells originating in sacred lakes in sacred lands (in practice, *dung* are also made from other materials such as plastic and cattle bone).<sup>10</sup> However, some (like Wangmo) associated *dung* with the number one hundred million (*dung phyur*), glossing the *dung* as a calculation device. A *dung* can only support one hundred million rotations, it is commonly said, before the rotating bamboo stick erodes it and splits it into two parts. The consumed *dung* is thus material proof of a great amount of faith labour, although (in practice) not necessarily

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9 Only handmade handheld prayer wheels have externally visible *dung*; others have bearings rather than washers.

10 Interlocutors residing in Lhasa and Kathmandu thought *dung* came from Nepal or India, while interlocutors in Dharamshala and Chengdu thought they came from Tibet. In Tibetan, the word *dung* in the sense of a shell refers to three different things: the conch shell used as a Buddhist musical instrument, the washer with a perforation in the center used on prayer wheels, and the tube used as a hair decoration for women and men.

one hundred million rotations. As Wangmo pointed out, the number of rotations that a dung can endure (and thus how quickly it can be ‘drilled’) depends upon the material qualities of the dung; a thin dung will require less labour than a thick dung. It took older Tibetan interlocutors between two weeks and several years to make a hole in a dung, depending on the materiality of the dung and how much they used the prayer wheel.

According to the beliefs of our lay interlocutors, faith labour not only affects the owner of a prayer wheel, generating merit. It also affects the washer, charging the dung with sacredness and efficacy. In other words, wear enables a productive afterlife within which the dung enters into new relations, serves new purposes and affects people. A used dung, Wangmo explained, has apotropaic powers of protection (*srung*) comparable to that of protection cords given by lamas, transforming it into an amulet:

It can protect us from any kind of obstacle [*gnod pa*]. By turning a wheel as much as we can, the dung absorbs blessings [*dung la byin rlabs zhugs*] and becomes sacred [*rtsa chen po*]. ...We wear them around our necks, and we also use them for our children as a protection [*srung*]. It has great benefit [*phan thogs chen po*].

There are now many factory-made prayer wheels that have a washer made of metal or a metal bearing rather than a dung. As such, they cannot be used to make protective amulets. Wangmo explained: ‘Metal used instead of a shell has no benefit. It can never become sacred [*rtsa chen po*].’ She thus directly connected the sacred nature of the washer to the material manifestation of wear—of making a hole. She deemed this impossible in the case of metal due to its material properties, which resisted wear.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Despite Wangmo’s claim that metal washers can never become sacred, it should be noted that in Amdo (northeast Tibet) traditional Chinese coins that have a square-shaped hole in the middle are often used as washers in handheld prayer wheels. Although metal, these washers, called *dung tsé* (*dung rtse*) in Tibetan, can be eroded and treated like other used dung. Chaksham Tsering saw such worn coins attached to the ball-and-chain governors of prayer wheels in Repgong, while Heng Peng saw them deposited along the Potala circumambulation route in Lhasa, probably carried there by pilgrims from Amdo.

In other words, for Wangmo, as well as for other interlocutors, it was not only faith labour but also the material properties and wear of the dung that were crucial to its potentiality as a sacred and efficacious object. The bamboo tube's erosion of the dung through prolonged prayer wheel practice forms a disc-shaped indentation the size of the touching surface of the bamboo tube and finally splits the washer into two parts: a small inner disc that can be separated from the dung, which I refer to as the dung bead; and a bigger outer disc with a large hole in it—what is left of the washer after the bead has been removed (Figure 5.4). During an interview in Kathmandu, one older woman, Dechen, explained the technique that she used to control the splitting of the dung into two. Once she had threaded a new dung onto the prayer wheel stick and secured it to the handle, she would take the dung bead from a previously finished dung or a piece of plastic of the same size and thread it onto the stick, on top of the new dung. This was to prevent the rotation of the bamboo tube on top of the new dung from being unbalanced. Dechen stressed the importance of making sure the bamboo had a precise circumference to ensure exact, smooth and balanced rotations. The auxiliary bead defined the precise outline for the bamboo tube to carve so that an almost identical dung bead would be produced once the new dung had worn down. Once the bamboo tube had made its mark on the dung through repeated rotations, she would take the small disk out and the bamboo tube would do the rest of the work. Dechen compared this technique to that of sawing a piece of wood. Before starting, it is helpful to mark the wood where one wants to saw. The auxiliary bead serves the same purpose, enabling precise wear that produces one small dung bead.

Data collected from Lhasa, Dharamshala, Kathmandu and Chengdu reveal that when the washer is worn out, these two parts—the outer disc and the dung bead—have different statuses and afterlives. Although some people kept an outer disc in their pocket as if it were an amulet, it is the dung bead that tends to be associated with the kinds of apotropaic powers that Wangmo referred to when she said that dung could 'protect us from any kind of obstacle'. This explains why Dechen paid so much attention to producing the perfect dung bead. The status of the outer disc is more ambiguous, as is evident in the different kinds of afterlife that such discs can end up living. If there is enough space, an outer disc can be reused. One can perforate a different place on the dung, thread it back onto the stick and churn out another dung bead. I have seen washers with two, three or even four big holes. Once its use value as a wear pad (and dung bead



manufacturer) has been completely exhausted, the used outer disc can be exchanged—this is the case in Kathmandu at least, where outer discs have monetary value. Our interlocutors there could receive one new dung in exchange for three to five used outer discs. Shops around the Boudhanath Stupa, situated in a predominantly Tibetan neighbourhood of the Kathmandu Valley, had such exchange schemes with Tibetans, but they also bought bags of conch remains by the kilo from India. One shop displayed baskets filled with different conch remains, among which were outer discs. Having once served in prayer wheels, they were now lying on the concrete floor in colourful plastic baskets, waiting to become something in the imagination of a customer who could see some kind of usage for round shells with big holes in them. Although such discs had not simply been thrown away like waste, they were not being treated in the same way as, for example, a fragment of sacred text.

However, in other cases, outer discs have afterlives that show that they can cross more clearly into the category of the sacred and/or have meritorious functions by being upcycled or deposited. They can be upcycled by being passed on to serve new purposes in other ritual practices. Interlocutors in both Europe and Asia said they gave used outer discs to their lama, the local monastery or tantric community, believing that they would serve as a sacred content of a stupa or be burnt in pyres to purify the smoke. One interlocutor in Lhasa explained that she donated the outer discs to tantrists, who could use them on the handles of their ritual implements to prevent the implements sliding in their hands during rituals. I have also seen them attached to the ball-and-chain governor of prayer wheels to add weight and thus increase centrifugal power (see Figure 5.1). As already discussed, outer discs can also be deposited in places considered pure or elevated—not only on circumambulation routes and in mani walls, but also on mountain tops and in temples where they are tucked in among the stones of a wall or cairn, or hung up in trees or on prayer wheel walls. They can also be stored at home above the door of the family shrine or offering room, in a cupboard on the house altar, or around the place for burning offerings. In Reppong, when people perform the ritual burial of 100,000 votive images (commonly in the family yard) they sometimes deposit outer discs along with the tablets.

As indicated above, the dung bead—called the small dung (*dung chung*) or baby dung (*dung phrug*)—has a different status and afterlives to those of the outer disc. Like many interlocutors, Dechen collected them to make prayer beads, often referred to by their Sanskrit name,

*mala*. Until she was able to collect 108 beads to complete a dung bead mala (*dung phreng*), she threaded them onto a piece of string. Some older Tibetans would hang these strings around their necks, believing that this served a protective function, or keep them in a cupboard on their home shrine. Others might keep a dung bead as an amulet in their shirt pocket. If she was able to produce more than 108 beads, Dechen related, she could make a chain of these dung beads to wear over one shoulder and across the chest. Our interlocutors not only used or wore these beads themselves as mala or amulets, but also—as Wangmo mentioned—gave them to their children and grandchildren ‘as a protection’.

As long as the bead does not break when it is churned out of the dung, this part of the washer can thus have afterlives as an auxiliary practice object (a bead in a mala), an auspicious and apotropaic object (an amulet), and/or a representational object publicly displaying a person’s faith and virtue (one or several beads on a string worn around the neck or across the shoulder and chest). Data confirms the intense prayer wheel practice of older Tibetans in both Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora who drilled one dung after another with the intention of producing such amulets and malas. These elders rotated their prayer wheels eagerly, diligently and with high intensity, as if it was their job. They were rewarded with merit, but their prayer wheel practice also produced transferable protective powers in the dung beads. While producing merit for herself, the practitioner was simultaneously charging the dung beads with apotropaic and auspicious powers that could be enjoyed by others.

Wear—and consumption more generally—should therefore not only be seen as a destructive process. In the case of the washer, it is also a manufacturing process during which the dung captures and stores powers from the script that rotates upon it. My specific focus here on ‘wear’ draws attention to the material effects of consumption—how usage causes the abrasion of the object so that it deteriorates and diminishes—but also to how consumption is perceived. Many interlocutors spoke about the material corrosion of the dung and the creation of a dung bead and hole, which they expressed as being due to *zé* (*zad*), an intransitive verb that means to finish, exhaust or wear out, in other words ‘to consume’ in the English sense of the verb. Yet they simultaneously spoke about this wear as sacralizing, relating how ‘the dung absorbs blessings’ (*dung la byin rlabs zhugs*) or ‘becomes sacred’ (*rtsa chen po chags*) because of the rotating script. These emic ways of speaking about the wearing of the washer show

that consumption (in this case at least) is not only destructive but also productive, transforming a washer into two objects that are understood by many Tibetans to have been blessed and to have become sacred, albeit to different degrees.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the end of consumption is not necessarily waste. In order to understand the afterlives of prayer wheel components, we must not only look at the material evidence, technology and practice of functioning prayer wheels but also engage with the wear resulting from faith labour. To think about an object's afterlife is to consider what comes after consumption—after death—and the potential futures of significant objects that are broken or have expired. It is to acknowledge that these objects can enter into new relations that were not necessarily part of their intended, primary utility value during their original lives. Objects can have a life after death that does not necessarily characterize their present nature. As a washer, a dung is just a conch shell (or cattle bone) used as a wear pad.

Sacred materiality is destined to decay because of consumption, but in the case of handheld prayer wheel components this does not mean that their power and efficacy is lost. The sacred status and potency of the scroll did not expire with consumption. Moreover, the mundane washer absorbed sacredness and even power from the scroll through the rotations of the prayer wheel drum. The worn-out washer has some kind of value, for our older lay interlocutors at least. They will not discard outer discs and broken dung beads. They might deposit, burn, bury, recycle, exchange and repurpose them, but they do not sort them into the same category as the litter that ends up in a trash bin. Similar afterlives await the other components of the prayer wheel when the practitioner believes that these components have become sacralized through a rotating prayer wheel. Yet the dung beads have emerged as the most valuable product of consumption. They are material manifestations of an enormous number of merit-generating rotations. It seems to be this personal faith labour as much as the power of the sacred script that gives them their perceived potency.

The washer is not unique as a Buddhist material object in its potential to live a productive afterlife, the outer disc being reused, exchanged, upcycled or deposited and the inner disc repurposed as a precious dung bead. However, we can learn from the case of the dung

how the materiality of wear, as well as the original status of an object and the faith labour invested in its transformation, can affect the post-consumption, afterlife status, value and economies of Buddhist materiality. To determine the extent to which the dung is a peculiar case, we need further studies of the different meanings and statuses that Buddhists ascribe to the objects—and the different components of the objects—they consume in Buddhist practice and how this affects their diverse afterlife destinies as, among other things, worthless waste, sacred objects, or apotropaic and auspicious tools.

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## 6 What makes ‘Tibetan paper’ Tibetan? Understanding the materiality of Tibetan paper

Agnieszka Helman-Ważny 

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**Abstract** Paper, as a writing support, is an integral element of the materiality of Tibetan books together with the technologies of their production. Analysis of the material features of the paper used in Tibetan written artefacts can help us to unravel their provenance, which is often unknown. First, however, we need a relatively clear understanding of the characteristic features of paper produced within particular book cultures and geographical regions at particular periods of time. This chapter offers a starting point by discussing the general characteristics of paper that originated in Tibet. Drawing on macro- and microscopic studies, it highlights the wide variety of paper types that have been used as writing supports in Tibetan written artefacts, before examining in more detail the raw materials, papermaking technologies and processes, and writing surface preparations that might justify the descriptor ‘Tibetan’ and thus grant Tibetan identity to paper.

**Keywords** Tibet, material culture, written artefacts, paper, Tibetan books, paper production, paper analysis, provenance, papermaking plants

## Introduction

Tibetan books are carriers for a vast array of knowledge, from religious and philosophical treatises, ritual texts and biographies to scientific works. For followers of Buddhist and Bon traditions, books—especially those concerned with religious topics—are also considered as sacred objects of devotion and as ‘containers’ for sacred or efficacious text that are generative of karmic merit for those who read or produce them (Diemberger, Elliot and Clemente 2014: 7–12; Pakhoutova and Helman-Ważny 2012: 124–9).<sup>1</sup> Yet, while the study of Tibetan texts has been central to Tibetan Studies since its establishment as a discipline, it is only in recent decades that the Tibetan book has been studied as a written artefact in its own right, that is, as both a material and textual object. This is partly a reflection of broader developments in the academy, notably the development of preservation as a scholarly discipline, but also increasing interest in cultural production and Indigenous knowledge in communities living beyond the centers of state powers (Auslander 2012; Miller 1998, 2005; Soentgen 2024) and the application of biographical methodologies to the study of things as well as people (Kopytoff 1986).

Paper, as a writing support, is an integral element of the materiality of Tibetan books together with the technologies of their production. I have been studying Tibetan paper from different perspectives since 1997, including through ethnographic fieldwork in Tibet and the Himalayas (Helman-Ważny 2016a; Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021a, 165–210), where I have documented paper production in multiple

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1 As a result, Tibetans do not always attach higher value to older copies of texts, as is often the case in European-based Enlightenment cultures (Helman-Ważny 2024a: 160, 166). Some scholars have argued that this lack of any automatic correlation between an object’s importance and its age shapes Tibetan attitudes to material culture, materiality and the preservation of cultural goods more generally (Luczanits 2013). Among non-Tibetans, Tibetan books were often treated as curiosities brought to Europe by travellers as gifts or memories and originally not intended to be read or studied. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, colonial officers and the first scholars of the culture and religions of Tibet were collecting texts to study them for historical and ethnographic reasons.



workshops in both Tibet and Nepal.<sup>2</sup> At the same time I have worked on the material characterization of paper in Tibetan written artefacts through the study of methods of paper preservation, mechanisms of paper deterioration, the use of paper in rituals and as a writing support, the anatomy and distribution of papermaking plants and the nano-structure of paper using Synchrotron facilities,<sup>3</sup> as well as through carrying out codicological studies of Tibetan book collections preserved in Asia, Europe and America (Helman-Wazny 2014; Helman-Wazny and Ramble 2021b). I have built my 'paper' curriculum via heritage studies including art, paper and book conservation, as well as fibre analysis and paper science. This reflects the different types of evidence upon which I base my research, which include material culture, interviews and written sources.

At some point I started asking myself what material features of paper would justify the naming of a piece of paper 'Tibetan'. This question became more and more pressing as I continued to research materials in books containing Tibetan text and started to grasp the great variety of different kinds of paper that had been used (Helman-Wazny 2016, 179–181). Understanding these differences opens up new possibilities for identifying the provenance of the many Tibetan books that have no attribution. Although paper is made up primarily of cellulose fibres, it is not as simple a material as most people think. A huge variety of paper types have been used for bookmaking over more than two thousand years of paper production. Different types of paper have required different manufacturing processes. Any evaluation of the qualities of paper requires an examination of the raw materials and technologies used, as well as the aesthetics and intended uses of the paper in any given historical period. The final product thus depends on local technological know-how, the availability of materials, the preferences of the patron or bookmaker and the form and function

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- 2 In Tibet, I have documented paper production in Nyemo and Lhasa; in Nepal, in Lekphat, Salijia, Ghandruk, Taman, Darbang-Phulbari, Lamsung, Karimila and Nangi in Myagdi, Baglung, Parbat and Kaski Districts, Jiri in Dolakha District, and other workshops in Kathmandu and southern Nepal.
  - 3 Synchrotron radiation source has become an increasingly important tool for all kinds of research in physics, chemistry, biomedicine, material science, human heritage, technology and, more recently, art, archaeometry and the conservation of heritage objects. On methodology and possible application in paper analysis see: Grzelec et al 2025.

of the book, along with various other locally specific considerations. This means that by analyzing the material features of paper we should be able to gain important insights into the provenance of the written artefact that has used it as a writing support. However, we must first have a relatively clear understanding of the characteristic features of paper produced within particular book cultures and geographical regions at particular periods of time.

This chapter discusses what material features might grant Tibetan identity to paper. The first part situates the discussion, showing why the materiality of paper is integral to, but also needs to be distinguished from, the materiality of Tibetan books—and why the identity of paper matters. To illustrate the different kinds of paper found in Tibetan books, I use some examples from my macro- and microscopic studies of different collections of Tibetan written artefacts. In the second part of the chapter, I focus more squarely on the question of what makes Tibetan paper ‘Tibetan’, starting with an outline of what we know about the historical origins of Tibetan paper and a critical discussion of oral and written accounts of the raw materials used to produce it. I then describe characteristic raw materials, technologies and processes, and writing surface preparations based on the available evidence. These discussions are brought together in the conclusion, where I highlight several features that would, I suggest, justify describing a piece of paper as ‘Tibetan’.

## Studying the Tibetan book as a material object

Despite the increasing attention to the materiality of Tibetan books, generally speaking there has been a lack of systematic work in this area. Publication of Cristina Scherrer-Schaub’s proposed methodology (1999) and typology (Scherrer-Schaub and Bonani 2002) for old Tibetan manuscripts probably represented a pivotal moment. Yet, surprisingly few studies have considered the materiality of Tibetan written artefacts since (Helman-Ważny 2019: 95–6). Among those that have, some explicitly focus on the material aspects of manuscripts (Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016; Helman-Ważny 2014; Helman-Ważny and van Schaik 2013; Viehbeck 2021), while others address their materiality in the wider context of studies of Tibetan manuscript cultures (Almogi 2016) and printing (Diemberger, Ehrhard and Kornicki 2016). The recent publication of a two-volume edited collection of introductory essays on the material and aesthetic features and major categories of

Tibetan books (Kapstein 2024) represents another step towards the consolidation of Tibetan manuscript studies.

The relative paucity of systematic research on the materiality of Tibetan books has been paired with the rapid development of digital humanities in the field of Tibetan studies (Wallman 2024: 268–90). The ever-increasing availability of internet resources has resulted in a field of scholars who engage with books—indeed all texts—as virtual objects in digital or digitized microform formats. This virtual archiving of Tibetan books is crucial, but at the same time it has narrowed the focus of research on Tibetan written heritage and diminished the perceived value of written artefacts in their physical, material form. As a consequence, research on Tibetan manuscripts is now split, with the study of virtual texts separated from analyses of their physical forms, making the integrated meaning of their textuality and materiality much harder to retrieve.

Studying the materiality of Tibetan books—and Tibetan material culture more generally—requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines humanities-based methodologies with scientific material analysis (see also Lange and Hahn, this volume). This in turn requires precise definitions of concepts and the different elements of Tibetan book culture. Such an approach has been promoted over the last decade or so by the Cluster of Excellence 'Understanding Written Artefacts' (UWA) at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at the University of Hamburg. UWA brings together scholars from thirty disciplines across the humanities and sciences with the aim of investigating the rich diversity of global manuscript cultures as material objects. One of the challenges in forging this kind of collaboration across disciplines, especially between the humanities and sciences, is that different terminologies are used depending on the discipline and the scholar's scientific background.<sup>4</sup> CSMC accordingly established a Theory and Terminology (TNT) working group.

CSMC defines a 'written artefact' as 'any artificial or natural object with visual signs applied by humans' (Bausi et al. 2023). Following this definition we may assume that a Tibetan written artefact can be defined as *any artificial or natural object written in Tibetan and/or created by Tibetans*. Although we usually do not know who produced a

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4 For example, terms like form, format, provenance, materiality, binding, preservation, conservation and restoration are understood differently depending on whether or not one takes a humanities or material science perspective.

given manuscript, we do know that many people are usually associated with its production, each playing one or more of various roles from papermaker, scribe and printmaker to patron (among others). Since the manuscript is a complex object we should look at it as such, considering all its components, associations and contexts. The definition of a manuscript developed in 2015 by the CSMC is: ‘an artefact planned and realised to provide surfaces on which visible signs are applied by hand; it is portable, self-contained, and unique’ (Lorusso et al. 2015: 1). Applying this definition as a framework for Tibetan book studies it is clear that we need to differentiate the elements composing the written artefact, namely: the ‘surface’, for example, paper, which varies depending on the raw materials of which it is made and its other components, as well as how it has been produced and prepared for writing; the ‘visible signs’, such as script, which is not necessarily the same as language; and the ‘hand’ that applied them, which has implications for the cultural associations of the artefact and its constituent elements and components.

Understanding the materiality of Tibetan paper is therefore an integral element in understanding the materiality of Tibetan written artefacts, but the identity of the two should not be conflated. The materiality of Tibetan books can be specified by the raw materials and combination of technologies (papermaking, ink production, book-binding, writing) used in the process of their production. The latter is conditional on a number of variables, such as the availability of materials and technological know-how in the site where the written artefact is created, which is to some extent also conditional upon the choice of materials. Together these create the unique resources available locally. While these circumscriptions clearly shape the physical appearance of books produced in particular places and times, it is much more difficult to understand the reasons behind the choice of particular raw materials or technologies. For example, the writing supports used in the production of Tibetan books have been determined primarily by their availability in particular regions, but also by conditions of patronage, aesthetic preferences and a given book’s status and functions. Materials are carefully chosen for their intrinsic qualities as well as their suitability for specific types of writing and engraving. Their selection is usually relatively local and dependent on social, cultural and economic habits, as well as climate and other factors such as the availability of certain natural resources coupled with the dynamics of local mining industries, laws regulating resource exploitation and trade networks. The use of particular technologies, in

contrast, is usually considered from a wider perspective, such as the global spread of papermaking, printing and less obvious book technologies such as bookbinding, ink-making and writing. We actually know very little of the historical ambit of specific technologies, what facilitated their adaptation and transfer, or the preconditions for the speed of such transfer.

Regional diversities in the production of Tibetan books in local workshops within the Tibetan and Himalayan region (and beyond) is sure to be a major avenue for future study, given the rapid development of provenance studies. As we gain more information about the materials used or available in different localities, this will provide us with reference points for identifying the provenance of particular books on the basis of the materials of which they are composed. This will take time, since we will need a large number of case studies to draw valid conclusions. Nevertheless, as this chapter will unfold, we are already able to make some observations about the general characteristics of paper that originated in Tibet, which can help us to unravel the provenance of Tibetan books. In order to do so, however, it is crucial to first distinguish between the identity of a book written in by Tibetan or created by Tibetans (a 'Tibetan book') and the identity of the paper of which it is made.

## The identity of paper

Often when scholars refer to a 'Tibetan paper' they are not implying that the paper itself was necessarily made in or originated in Tibet; they are instead referring to what is written *on* the paper, namely Tibetan script. Even if this distinction is understood, it is unfortunately often ignored in material analysis or museum collection studies as, in many cases, there is no provenance information. If the provenance of the manuscripts in a collection is known, it is often not possible to identify where exactly the paper itself was produced. It cannot be assumed that it was made in Tibet. Despite this, collections are still considered collectively as groups of objects and interpreted as Tibetan. This grouping together of all texts in Tibetan only because they are in the Tibetan language can be somewhat misleading when it comes to determining provenance. The process of writing with Tibetan script on a piece of paper does not alone grant 'Tibetan identity' to that paper. To take a hypothetical example: if a piece of paper made by a German papermill (which could justifiably be called 'German paper') were to

be written upon in English, that process of inscribing English letters onto a piece of German paper would not change its provenance from German to English.

Understanding this distinction between the identity of paper and the language written upon it is important in the field of provenance studies,<sup>5</sup> since material analyses—if interpreted accurately—can be successfully implemented to investigate the origins of manuscripts. Conversely, analyses conducted on the assumption that all paper inscribed with Tibetan characters is ‘Tibetan’ can lead to problematic conclusions. This is exemplified in a recent article by Yujia Luo, Irena Kralj Cigić, Quan Wei, Marjan Marinsěk and Matija Strlič. In their study of the durability of nineteenth and twentieth century Tibetan manuscripts, the authors define Tibetan paper as ‘all papers with Tibetan characters’ and note that it is characterized by its laminated structure (which is not typical in China) (Luo et al. 2023: 11784). They justify this definition by arguing that regardless of whether or not such papers were strictly produced in Tibet, they are part of Tibetan cultural heritage. The results of their fibre analysis suggest that the raw materials probably originated in China, even if the papers were produced for and used in Tibet. In other words, the authors carried out sophisticated material analyses of what is in fact typical Chinese paper, which was used as a support for manuscripts of unknown provenance written in Tibetan. They then compared these papers with other studies of Chinese paper. This leads them into a process of circular reasoning and the misleading conclusion that Tibetan paper of this period is similar to Chinese paper.<sup>6</sup> As this example shows, a great deal of confusion can

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5 In the literature two largely synonymous terms *provenience* and *provenance* are current, but while both refer to an artefact’s source or origin, the latter also encompasses its history and can be thought of as an artefact’s curriculum vitae (Price and Burton 2011: 213). As researchers, however, we tend to focus on specific moments of the object’s life and rarely enter into a thorough investigation of its past, especially when there is no provenance information in the text.

6 The authors further justify their definition of Tibetan paper with reference to the definition of ‘Islamic paper’ provided by Mahgoub et al. (2016). In that article, the authors were looking at the properties of paper used in Islamic countries at the turn of the twentieth century, where imported paper was finished by local craftsmen into what was a typical local product, although it technically did not originate in Islamic countries.

be created when the paper used as a writing or printing support for Tibetan-language books produced in different geographical locations is attributed to Tibet and named 'Tibetan'.

Thus, despite the apparently simple nature of the question 'What makes "Tibetan paper" Tibetan?', the answer is neither obvious nor unambiguous. Whether in the wake of pilgrimage or as a result of ethnic, national and/or territorial conflicts, Tibetan communities have often migrated. By the turn of the millenium, more than 120,000 Tibetans were living in exile across the globe, while there were about 5.4 million Tibetans in China (MacPherson, Bentz and Dawa Bhuti Ghoso 2008). In the aftermath of China's invasion of Tibet during the 1950s, Tibetan material culture, including written artefacts, spread all over the world and Tibetan communities in exile have successfully managed to keep their culture and language alive. Thus, a large number of Tibetan manuscripts and woodblocks are extant. They can be found in homes, offices, monasteries, caves, stupas and tombs in Tibetan cultural areas. Globally, there are tens of thousands of Tibetan texts of various types preserved in museums and libraries, including the Tibetan libraries located in Russia, Mongolia and China. In India new Tibetan books have been produced using local paper. This is not to mention the manuscripts and printed books produced in Nepal and Bhutan, where book making traditions are closely linked to Tibetan methods in terms of both the raw materials and technologies used in local papermaking. Books have been produced wherever Tibetan communities have lived, using local materials that have sometimes differed drastically from those found in Tibet. Thus, in both the past and the present Tibetan books have been produced according to traditional methods far beyond the geographical scope of Tibet.

Macro- and microscopic analyses that I have conducted on specific collections demonstrate the wide variety of paper types used in Tibetan books. From a practical point of view, my material analysis of paper is usually divided into stages. First, I study the papers in manuscripts *in situ* using codicological methods and basic equipment such as a digital Dino-Lite microscope (see Durkin-Meisterernst et al. 2015; Helman-Ważny 2016a). The aim is to document technological and visual features of paper in different lights and to sample paper for fibre analysis. Further analyses are conducted in the lab environment. The methodology is always adjusted to the specific research questions, which are connected to the type of written artefact and its function.

During my doctoral studies in the years 2002–7, I realized that many nineteenth-century Tibetan books held in the Mongolian and Tibetan

collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw were produced on Russian paper certified by the watermarks of Russian papermaking mills or on industrial paper that could have been produced elsewhere (Helman-Ważny 2009: 129, 141, 145–6; Strzechowska 2000). Many of the Tibetan books produced on the territory of the Russian Empire and early USSR are now preserved in the libraries of St. Petersburg and Ulan-Ude among many others (Zorin 2016). These books were also produced using Russian paper from the first half of the eighteenth century to the middle of the 1930s. Thereafter many of the manuscripts and xylograph books in these collections use machine-made paper, reflecting technological developments and industrialization that saw this type of paper starting to be used in early nineteenth-century Europe and then gradually in Asia. Despite this shift to using a contemporary material, a large number of these books remain in the traditional loose-leaf *pothi* format.

Paper of Chinese origin can be found in the Yongle and Wanli editions of the Tibetan Buddhist canon preserved in the University of Michigan Library in Ann Arbor, USA, the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow, Poland and the Harvard-Yenching Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. The paper used in these volumes is a very thin paper made of six or more sheets glued together and composed of paper mulberry fibres. The sheets were prepared with a dipping technique and by using a papermaking mould with a movable bamboo sieve (Helman-Ważny 2012/13; for general information on these technologies see Hunter 1978). This kind of sieve/mat is formed from finely cut strips of bamboo laced together with horsehair or natural fibre thread. These bamboo strips leave impressions on the paper known as ‘laid lines’; the thinner the bamboo, the more laid lines and the finer the pattern produced. The marks left by the thread used to join the bamboo strips are called ‘chain lines’. The chain lines are hardly visible in the paper used in the volumes in question due to the gluing of many layers of paper together, but still possible to discern. Most of the volumes contain laid paper characterized by twenty-four tiny but visible laid lines every three centimetres. The type of mould that would result in this kind of paper was not used in Tibet. This and the paper’s fibre composition confirm the Chinese origin of the paper; paper mulberry fibres, together with bamboo and straw, are typical Chinese paper components. In fact the consecutive editions of the Peking Kanjur (of which the Yongle and Wanli are two) are typically written on Chinese paper (Helman-Ważny 2014: 136–58), which is not that surprising given that they were produced in Beijing. Since the materials composing those



volumes are typically Chinese, we can hypothesize that they were produced by Chinese craftsmen (Mejor, Helman-Ważny and Kunga Chashab 2010).

Perhaps the best known early Tibetan written artefacts are the thousands of manuscripts written in the Tibetan language that have been discovered at Dunhuang, in present day Gansu province, China. These manuscripts have been dated to approximately the tenth century (Dalton, Davis and van Schaik 2007; van Schaik 2014; Uray 1988). The majority of them are executed on paper made of both recycled rag and fresh bark fibres, components that are also widely found in manuscripts written in Chinese and other languages of the Silk Road (Helman-Ważny 2014; Helman-Ważny and van Schaik 2013). This again shows that the types of raw materials used and the technologies applied differ significantly from what is often assumed to be the type of paper used in Tibetan books, namely paper made with *Daphne* fibres on a papermaking mould with a woven type of sieve. The rag paper of the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts is composed of ramie and hemp, while most of the bark paper is composed of paper mulberry or mulberry (*Broussonetia* or *Morus* spp.) fibres; *Daphne* fibres have been identified in only a few samples. Paper mulberry and mulberry are usually associated with Chinese types of paper and books featuring the Tibetan language that were produced in China or other areas where paper made from paper mulberry was used (Hunter 1978; McDaniel and Ransom 2016; Tsien 1985).

In the case of the paper used in the canonical volumes found in the Upper Mustang caves in Nepal the traditional Tibetan papermaking process was followed and traditional raw materials such as *Daphne* and *Stellera* were used by the local Tibetan communities (Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021a, 2021b). As these plants are sparse, their use can be said neither to have been widespread nor common in that area and may correspond to local attempts at developing papermaking technology. The minor presence of other unidentified fibres suggests that some details remain to be studied.

I will return to a discussion of these traditional raw materials and what I mean by the 'Tibetan' papermaking process, as well as traditional methods of writing surface preparation that have been used to produce different kinds of Tibetan paper. However, considering the more recent globalization of 'Tibetan' paper, it is worth first outlining what has been noted of the origins of Tibetan paper in the historical record and the limitations of accounts of historical papermaking to be found in oral and written accounts.

## Accounts of Tibetan paper

### Historical origins of Tibetan paper

The historical origins of Tibetan papermaking are difficult to determine. Traditional Tibetan and Chinese historiography link paper to the arrival of the Chinese wife of Tibetan Emperor Songtsen Gampo (Konishi 2013: 187). The Tang Annals mention the date 648 CE in a report of Songtsen Gampo's request for paper, ink and other writing equipment from the Chinese emperor (Uebach 2008). Until the middle of the eighth century, however, most official Tibetan documents were written on wood. The entry for the years 744 and 745 in the Old Tibetan Annals records the transfer of official documents from wooden 'tallies' (*khram*) to paper (ibid.: 61). That entry also provides the first dated attestation of the word *shog* (paper) in Tibetan literature. Archaeological evidence suggests that paper was known in China from the second century BCE (Tsien 1985; Pan 2011) and was gradually carried throughout East and Central Asia, where Muslim Arabs encountered it in the eighth century CE (Bloom 2017). It thus appears that by the time writing arrived in Tibet in the seventh century the technology of papermaking was already known in East and Central Asia (Tsien 1973, 1985; see also van Schaik 2011).

Before the Tibetan imperial period (618–842 CE) vague knowledge of the Tibetan plateau circulated in Europe and other parts of the world (Kaschewsky 2001: 3–4).<sup>7</sup> People probably already had far better contact with neighbouring countries at this time than is generally supposed. The earliest accounts of relations between Tibet and its neighbouring regions, however, date from the early seventh century, with the earliest documented contact occurring during the Sui dynasty (581–618). Major relations with China framed the Tibetan imperial period (van Schaik and Galambos 2012), which was contemporaneous with the Tang dynasty (618–907). The trades route(s) that came to be known as the Silk Road(s) encouraged intellectual and religious exchange, as well as serving as conduits of

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7 Kaschewsky gives an overview of how Tibet was imagined in the West from ancient Greece to the eighteenth century.

commerce for not only silk but also many other commodities, among them paper.<sup>8</sup>

During the imperial period Tibet intermittently gained control over crucial parts of the Silk Road, and at times was able to dominate trade between China and the West. At that time, the production and circulation of manuscripts intensified along with the rise of Buddhism. At the end of the first millennium Tibetans started to produce their own paper made of *Daphne* plants, using technology developed earlier in China, as testified to by the oldest extant examples of Tibetan papers preserved in the Dunhuang collection of the British Library (Helman-Wazny and van Schaik 2013).<sup>9</sup> As already noted, only a few samples from the large collection of Tibetan-language manuscripts found at Dunhuang and other places in Central Asia have been confirmed through scientific material analysis as composed of *Daphne* fibres. Interestingly, these few samples originated from Miran and Mazar Tagh, which were Tibetan fortresses during the imperial period. This suggests that the first use of *Daphne* fibres can be assigned to Tibetans, justifying the use of the term 'Tibetan' for *Daphne* paper, even though *Daphne* was also used later for papermaking in Japan.

## Accounts of raw materials used in papermaking

The papermakers who I interviewed in Western Nepal and Tibet, as well as the secondary literature,<sup>10</sup> mention various raw materials used in papermaking. However, these are not always properly identified and confirmed by material analyses. As this section will discuss, much of the evidence that these sources present with regards to historical

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8 Of all the precious goods crossing this area, silk was perhaps the most remarkable for Europeans. Paper was not yet known in Europe, and it took a thousand years before it was appreciated and properly valued in that region (Bloom 2017; Hunter 1978). Instead, writers wrote on a variety of other materials such as cuneiform clay tablets, wax tablets, papyrus, parchment, pottery, animal hide and wood. To a certain extent, there was a progression over time from the use of papyrus to parchment and then paper, but most of the other aforementioned materials were still used for specific purposes (Bülow-Jacobsen 2012).

9 On the earliest examples of *Daphne* sp. plants identified in Tibetan manuscripts see Helman-Wazny and van Schaik 2013.

10 For an overview of secondary sources, see Trier 1972: 58–68.

papermaking is anecdotal, while local names of the plants used for papermaking vary from place to place and are not easily translatable into the Latin nomenclature used in the West. These difficulties must be taken into account when attempting to identify characteristic features of Tibetan paper.

Traditional papermaking knowledge was not preserved in writing until very recently (see, e.g., byams pa brtson 'grus 2010; Sherpa et al. 2008). Among papermakers, knowledge of raw materials and technologies is mostly passed orally from generation to generation. Those who I interviewed usually learned on the job from older practitioners, often their parents or grandparents. They were always much more eager to demonstrate their methods and skills, or to show their materials (usually stored in the workshop), than to talk about the process. Practicalities, effectiveness and income were much more important to them than theoretical knowledge. That being said, those with whom I talked were usually well informed about the materials and processes currently in use. However, it was impossible to judge the accuracy of their recall of knowledge learned in the past and not practiced themselves; they were often even unable to say how long ago this knowledge had been passed on to them. For example Jagat Thing, a papermaker from the workshop in Ghandruk, Kaski District in Nepal, reported that everybody in the region gathered only *lokta* (*Daphne* sp.), but he had heard about other plants used for papermaking in other places or abroad, such as banana, *alaichi* (cardamom), *babiyo* (sabai) and *khar* (grass). However, he was unable to say where they were used, and there is no available evidence to suggest that any of them can be associated with Tibet.

Written sources can have similar limitations. For example, the recent overview of Tibetan papermaking written down by Tibetan papermaker Jampa Tsundru from Lhasa (byams pa brtson 'grus 2010), though very informative, contains both material and anecdotal evidence. It is unclear which type of evidence is being referred to in its outline of materials and tools (ibid.: 54). There are also problems with the identification of certain plants used for paper manufacture in the anecdotal accounts of non-Tibetan travellers, explorers and missionaries who passed through Tibetan cultural regions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, Bentley Beetham, who was a member of the 1924 British Everest expedition in 1924, wrote that paper being produced in the Rong shar Valley at that time was made from the bark of the elder (*Sambucus* sp.) (Boesi 2016: 502–3). While there are two species belonging to this genus present in Tibet

(*S. adnata* and *S. javanica*), neither have ever been used for making paper (ibid.: 503).

As demonstrated by these examples from the accounts of both papermakers and observers, anecdotal evidence may limit our understanding of historical papermaking in Tibet. There are some, more recent, short reports on the papermaking process by travellers (usually white and of North American or European descent), although their depth of focus depends on the knowledge and familiarity with the topic of the reporter (see, e.g., Imaeda 1989; Koretsky 1986; Sandermann 1968). In many cases travellers were only able to report on the general steps of the process but rarely do they offer the details that are the most informative for a study like this.

The papermakers who I interviewed always used local names of plants and tools and were hardly ever able to name foreign materials or technologies if they were used. This points to another difficulty in identifying the raw materials used in Tibetan papermaking through narrative accounts alone, namely that the plants are often mentioned in different contexts or by local names only. For example, *Stellera chamaejasme* is usually named *rechakpa* (*re lcag pa*) in Tibetan and is a well-known paper plant in many Tibetan cultural regions, including Amdo, Kham and Ü Tsang, as well as in the Nepalese high valleys of Dolpo and Mustang. Yet in each region a local vernacular name for *Stellera* is used. It is known as *gore chakré* (*mgo re lcag re*) in Lithang, *gonara* (*mgo na ra*) in Nepalese Dolpo, *gowo röldang* (*mgo bo rol gdangs*) in lower Mustang District (Nepal) and *rama racho* (*ra marwa co*) in the Xining area (Qinghai Province, PRC) (Boesi 2016: 504). To my knowledge *Stellera chamaejasme* is also known locally in Mustang as *sedri metok* (*se dri me tog*; lit. disagreeable smell of underarm sweat flower). This plant was very common around Muktinath, Jharkot, Khingar and in the vicinity of Lo Monthang. Furthermore Tibetans often refer to *Stellera chamaejasme* and other plants used locally for papermaking as *shokgu metok* (*shog gu me tog*; paper flower), *shogdum* (*shog ldum*; paper plant) and *shogshing* (*shog shing*; paper wood) (ibid.: 504).

These various local names of papermaking plants and other vegetal materials are not easily translatable into Latin nomenclature used in the West. Some modern Tibetan materia medica record the use of certain medicinal plants for papermaking and include their botanical identification: *rechakpa* corresponds to *Stellera chamaejasme*, *arnak* (*ar nag*) to both *Daphne aurantiaca* and *Wikstroemia canescens*, *arkya* (*ar skya*) to *Daphne aurantiaca* and *ngönbu* (*sngon bu*) to a few

Campanulaceae species (Boesi 2016: 516). While scientific analyses have shown that these are all plants that have been used in papermaking in Tibet, medical texts also mention a fifth plant, *duksé* (*dug srad*), which they identify as corresponding to *Oxytropis ochrocephala* and *Astragalus strictus* (ibid.: 516, 520). There is no evidence that these species have ever been used for manufacturing paper.

On the question of nomenclature, it is also worth noting that in Nepal lokta (*Daphne* sp.) paper is often mis-named ‘rice paper’, a generic term used by non-specialists to refer to paper from Asian countries. Unfortunately, this term has also been mistakenly used in Tibetan ritual contexts, having been adopted by some Tibetan lamas and their followers as synonymous with good quality paper, white as rice.

Caution is also required when interpreting the appearance of plants in both accounts of papermaking and in samples of paper. There are many discrepancies in the proportional use of plants in papermaking, so when a papermaker mentions several plants on an equal footing, this can be misleading. For example, some plants were only used as an auxiliary component such as a formation aid, for purely decorative purposes or for smell. Additionally, paper can contain impurities that were accidentally mixed with the pulp, beyond the control of the papermaker, such as singular cotton fibres that in most cases probably originated from the extensively used cotton sieve that was spread on papermaking moulds. Many admixtures of plant fibres were never truly intended for use as the main components of the paper.

Despite the various limitations that I have highlighted here, the interviews I conducted with papermakers showed that Tibetan papermakers developed methods that were conditioned by the unique qualities of the raw materials available locally. Taken together, the materials, technologies and papermakers’ skills resulted in paper products with distinctive properties and features adjusted to their specific purpose and intended use. It is to these materials and methods that I now turn.

## Deciphering Tibetan paper

### Raw materials

Considering all types of evidence, including the literature, interviews and my own experience of papermaking, it is possible to summarize that Tibetan paper was originally made mainly from the phloem of shrubs of the Thymelaeaceae family, specifically the *Daphne*,

*Wikstroemia*, *Edgeworthia* and *Stellera chamaejasme* species (Boesi and Helman-Ważny 2020). Thymelaeaceae is a family of dicotyledonous flowering plants with 898 species in 50 genera. The phloem contains very strong fibres with a large content of hemicelluloses, making the bark of many species of this family very suitable for the manufacture of high quality paper such as that used for bank notes and writing supports. The fibres are long and narrow, while supportive cells provide tensile strength without limiting flexibility. These characteristics render the bark a valuable material for papermaking. Moreover, most species are poisonous and some are important medicinally, which means that paper made from them can resist insect infestation longer than paper made from other plants and is therefore more durable and long lasting.

Besides the use of *Daphne* fibres, Tibetans usually claim that paper made from *Stellera* sp. is the 'original' Tibetan paper. This is probably because Tibetans associate this type of paper exclusively with 'the heart of their culture', since the plant grows at over four thousands meters above sea level and has not been mentioned anywhere else in the context of papermaking. When I asked Tibetan monks, scholars and craftsman the question 'What is so special about *Stellera* paper?', they usually pointed to the poisonous properties of the plant, and hence its strength and resistance to insects. We can assume that *Stellera* paper is unique to Tibet, or at least there is no available evidence that it was produced in places other than the Tibetan plateau; *Stellera* fibres have not been identified using scientific methods as the main component in any non-Tibetan manuscripts.<sup>11</sup> The oldest samples were identified in manuscripts from Central and Western Tibet that were respectively dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries (Helman-Ważny 2016a). It should, however, be noted that there is no evidence of these plants in the Tibetan manuscripts found in Dunhuang. After the fifteenth century, we more often find this plant being used in addition to *Daphne*, possibly to add some softness to the *Daphne* paper to make it more suitable for printing (Helman-Ważny 2016b). Used alone, the *Stellera* root fibres create a very specific soft type of paper, which was later considered by Tibetan papermakers to be of lower quality than bark

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11 Minor admixtures of *Stellera* fibres were identified in four of the Naxi manuscripts housed in the Weltmuseum in Vienna (inventory numbers 101502, 101505, 101511 and 117921). These manuscripts used paper primarily made of *Daphne* fibres, which suggests a typically Tibetan type of paper (see Helman-Ważny and Cai 2023: 409, 414).



**Figure 6.1** *Daphne* sp. used for making paper in Tibet and Nepal. Photograph by the author, 2015.

paper made of *Daphne*, *Wikstroemia* and *Edgeworthia*, since its fibres are not considered as strong.

From the perspective of manuscript studies, therefore, a significant number of the early manuscripts from Central and Western Tibet that have been subjected to microscopic analyses were written on *Stellera* paper or on paper where *Stellera* was a dominant component, the exception being the Dunhuang manuscripts which were written on rag or *Daphne* paper. Whilst it is difficult to establish the origins of Tibetan paper, the working hypothesis is that the usage of particular raw materials was strongly conditioned by geography. *Daphne* sp. grows up to 3,600 metres above sea level and *Stellera* sp. to 4,500 metres, but *Daphne* plants need much more moisture than *Stellera*, supporting the conclusion that these two species very rarely grow in the same habitat (Figure 6.1–6.3). However, the choice of materials has always been conditioned by more than one factor, sometimes many. This is what makes material analyses complex and can lead to problems in the interpretation of data. Despite the occasional ambiguities in data resulting from material analyses, however, we can develop protocols aimed at both interpreting each factor separately and then pulling these analyses together to draw our conclusions from as many perspectives as we can. The more information, data, and facts we are able to draw





**Figures 6.2 and 6.3**  
*Stellera chameejasme*  
plant and its root used  
for making paper in  
Dobe Shang, Ngamring,  
Central Tibet. Photo-  
graph by the author,  
2013.

together from both the paper used in a given object and that object's context, the better our chances of making a successful identification.

To return to the hypothetical factors determining the choice of *Daphne* or *Stellera* fibres, we need to consider their respective properties and how those might (or might not) have related to their use in paper production for particular uses, and related technological factors. To some extent it is possible to use a variety of fibres for the production of paper regardless of their individual properties and strength, since paper for manuscripts has to be processed before its use as a writing surface. This technological step allows for the adjustment of certain properties of the paper to suit the purpose to which the paper will be put, for example by gluing sheets of paper together or coating the surface with additional substances (processes to which I will return). Therefore, from a technological point of view, the only factor influencing the selection of fibres is the size of the manuscript. Small format manuscripts can be easily produced on pure *Stellera* paper, the fibres of which are soft and flabby with a wide lumen and narrow irregular fibre walls. But *Stellera* alone is not stable enough for large formats, since *Stellera* paper can easily bend or break. While it is sometimes made thicker by gluing several layers together, this is not enough to achieve the stability necessary for a large format, which is possible in *Daphne*, *Edgeworthia* and *Wikstroemia* based papers. In the case of liturgical texts, the addition of significant amount of more rigid *Daphne* fibres permits monks to turn folios easily with one hand, while leaving the other free to manipulate ritual objects and musical instruments during the course of a ceremony. However, there are advantages to using *Stellera* paper in such texts, namely that its softness improves the printability of such paper, and its poisonous qualities give it slightly better resistance against insects than *Daphne* paper.

## Papermaking processes and technologies

Besides raw materials, paper can be distinguished by technological features that directly originate from the papermaking process. In principle, there are several steps to papermaking:

- processing the raw material, which involves collecting, separating and cleaning the fibres;
- cooking the fibres;
- beating and refining the fibres;
- diluting to form a thin pulp suspended in a water solution;

- spreading the pulp to form a web of fibres on a screen;
- pressing the web to increase the density of the material;
- drying to remove the remaining moisture;
- and finishing, to provide a suitable surface for the intended end use.

Since these basic steps are shared by all papermaking traditions, general information about the papermaking process used by Tibetan papermakers is not helpful in identifying what makes paper Tibetan. However, parts of their process are specific to their practice.

While Tibetan papermaking technology has many similarities with the technology originally invented in China, it is clear that Tibetans established their own tradition of making paper suitable for writing, printing and other daily uses. The method seems to have evolved very little over the centuries. Each sheet of paper is dried on an individual papermaking mould called a 'floating mould', so named because it is placed on a water surface such as that of a lake, pond, river, puddle or, later, a wooden basin. The floating mould is made from a wooden frame with an attached woven textile that serves as a sieve; use of this technology results in a 'woven' type of paper (Figure 6.4). Since the



**Figure 6.4** A woven type of paper made with a floating mould constructed with a wooden frame and attached woven textile. Photograph by the author, 2016.

textile creates a finer mesh than the bamboo strips (or metal wires in European papermaking moulds) used in laid paper technology, woven paper is distinguishable by its different texture, since it does not have the chain lines or laid line pattern that are created by the imprint of bamboo or wires—that is, the lines and pattern that we saw, for example, in the Chinese paper used for the aforementioned Yongle and Wanli editions of the Tibetan canon. As shown in Figures 6.5 and 6.6, when using the floating mould technique, the papermaker stirs up a quantity of the pulp by moving the frame in the water until it entirely and equally covers the surface of the mould. Two people then tilt the frame until the water drains off to assure that a large even sheet is made (see also Helman-Ważny 2016a).

While we can say that this floating mould technology is Tibetan, this does not mean that it was necessarily the technology used by all Tibetan papermakers. It is important to note that macroscopic examinations of the paper in Tibetan books have more and more often identified the use (and adaptation) of a different technology, namely the ‘dipping mould’. With this kind of mould, the sieve is made from bamboo, reed or another kind of grass and is moveable, and results in the production of laid paper. Significant amounts of laid paper have been found in Tibetan books in the Dunhuang collection, as well as in the more recently studied Mustang and Dolpo manuscripts. Analysis of the fibres of this laid paper allows us to identify whether it is of Tibetan, Chinese or some other origin (Helman-Ważny 2016a: 191–2). However, it is worth mentioning that this technology was also adapted by Bhutanese craftsman for making *tshar-sho* paper for writing purposes. *Tshar-sho*, which is considered an ordinary type of traditional Bhutanese paper, is in fact aesthetically very similar to Tibetan paper and is also made with *Daphne* fibres.

In addition to the traces left from the technologies used to make it, Tibetan paper is also characterized by aesthetic features that result from processes specific to the practice of Tibetan papermakers. Firstly, Tibetan paper contains the remains of outer bark in the paper structure and is therefore not as white as Chinese and other East Asian papers, including the paper made in Japan from the same components. This is due to the relative simplicity of the Tibetan papermaking process and the fact that papermakers never sufficiently cleaned the bast strips before and after cooking (i.e., the outer bark was not entirely removed). Secondly, Tibetan paper is also usually thicker and of uneven thickness due to the traditional use of ash, rather than chemical agents, in the cooking process, which involves boiling the fibres



**Figures 6.5 and 6.6** The process of making paper in Nyemo, Central Tibet. Process of shaping the sheet of paper. Photograph by the author, 2013.

in an alkaline solution to soften them and to disintegrate the strips of bast into singular fibres. While these flaws relating to the papermaking process diminished the quality of the paper, they simultaneously serve as among the most typical aesthetic features of Tibetan paper.

### Writing surface preparation

Independent of the raw materials, technologies and processes that Tibetan papermakers used, they glued a few layers of paper together and sometimes finished the surface with additional substances, such as wheat or barley powder, to obtain a smooth surface that allowed for even hand lettering. This writing surface preparation involved pressing several layers of paper together using a paste made of boiled wheat flour and smoothing it with a stone (Figure 6.7); for some kinds of paper special ink, paint or dye would be applied to the surface before polishing (Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021b). Each paper sheet was comprised of between two and eight layers depending on the paper type. Analysis of Tibetan bookbinding media shows that the sheets were attached with starch paste or, less often, with animal glue depending on the type of paper used and the availability of glue



**Figure 6.7** Monk in Triten Norbutse monastery, Kathmandu, polishing the surface of a book leaf in preparation for writing. Photograph by the author, 2017.

(Helman-Ważny 2014). Such preparation of traditional Tibetan paper no doubt contributed to Tibet's lettering style. The surface of the paper made of glued and then polished layers became practically unabsorbent and smooth. This encouraged the use of a wooden or bamboo pen for writing, implements that could not be used on one-layered Chinese-type absorbent paper for which the brush was the designated writing tool.

This process of gluing several layers of paper together characterizes Tibetan book leaves independently of the type of paper that was used. For example, the paper leaves found in Tibetan canonical volumes produced in China contain more than five layers of thin Chinese paper to achieve the thickness and stability of a large paper leaf. Those produced in Tibet usually contain two or at most three layers of paper, achieving the same thickness. This practice of gluing the paper sheets together into a book leaf of a certain thickness seems to be associated almost exclusively with Tibetan book culture. It likely originated during the early period of Tibetan book culture when Tibetans tried to make their books similar to their Indian precursors by adopting the loose leaf *pothi* format from the Indian palm-leaf books named *pustaka*.

Another kind of preparation that appears to be particular to Tibetan book culture was (and is) the colouring of paper to produce *tingshok* (*mthing shog*), a special kind of dark blue or black Tibetan paper that is used as a support for writing in gold. Its production often involved a range of specific products, such as paper (*shog bu*), brains (*glad pa*), yak hide glue (*phing*) and soot (*sre nag*). According to James Canary (2014), who has studied the technique of *tingshok* production among contemporary Tibetan craftsmen, the black mixture is prepared by kneading a paste of yak, sheep or goat brains with very fine black powdered soot and a small amount of cooked hide glue. This mixture is then painted on to the surface of the paper and left to dry, after which the surface is burnished (*dbur ba*) with a smooth piece of conch shell or a *zi* (*gzi*) stone. The specific ingredients combined with the burnishing process turn the matte surface into a shining support for writing in gold. While gold writing has been used in sacred texts and other types of manuscript in many places and cultures, to my knowledge the particular combination of materials and technologies used in the production of *tingshok* is rarely, if ever, found outside Tibetan book culture.

Some *tingshok* paper was produced using indigo dye, which was also used as a colorant in the decoration of other Tibetan written artefacts. Indigo, like gold, was a common substance treasured by all

literary cultures that were committed to embellishing their sacred books with the best possible materials (Balfour-Paul 1996, 2011). The discovery of indigo dye may have evolved independently in many civilizations where a suitable dye plant existed.<sup>12</sup> It may have reached Europe by way of Egypt originating in India. It is commonly used for dyeing paper blue in East and Central Asia. Interestingly it is often found in Tibetan books despite the fact that it was usually bought from India. In the Himalayas, the *Strobilanthes cusia* plant was used for producing indigo dye. This plant can be found most extensively in the Western and Central Himalayas, Southern China and Southern Japan (Zhang et al. 2021). As in the case of many other plants related to papermaking in this region, distribution of *Strobilanthes cusia* is conditioned by altitude and may be limited to specific valleys with a suitable climate. Even it may not be able to grow on the Tibetan plateau it must have been easily accessible and traded. This is probably why indigo is quite commonly found in Tibetan books, as both a textile dye and a component of pigments.

## Conclusions

Depending on the type of evidence used one may draw differing conclusions when trying to discern what ‘Tibetan’ paper is. Studies of Tibetan books as material objects clearly show that a variety of different paper types have been used for handwritten and printed Tibetan books across the vast geographical regions where Tibetan communities have lived. As explained above, this can create a great deal of confusion and even lead to misleading conclusions if the paper used as the writing support for such books was produced in different geographical locations but is still attributed as ‘Tibetan’. The process of writing on a piece of paper with Tibetan script does not immediately grant Tibetan

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12 Indigo is an organically derived pigment this is a unique shade of dark blue with a hint of purple, unlike most mineral pigments which have the earth colour palette of yellows, browns, greens and reds. Although indigo is typically known as a fabric dye, it is thought that it was first used as a pigment in inks and paints. Greeks and Romans used it in the last century BCE and first centuries CE for painting as well as for medicinal purposes. It was later banned from the European market to save the local woad markets (McCreery 2006; Enzel et al 2021, 83).



identity to that paper. The lack of clear terminology and systematic research on this topic does not help. However, on the basis of the above discussion I would like to propose that several features rooted in Tibetan culture would justify describing a piece of paper as 'Tibetan'.

The most important raw materials for papermaking in Tibet were the various plants of the Thymelaeaceae botanical family, especially *Daphne* and *Stellera* fibres. But while this is an important part of what makes Tibetan paper 'Tibetan', it is not conclusive. The same type of paper based on the same fibres was also produced in Bhutan and other Himalayan regions, and named accordingly as, for example, 'Bhutanese' paper. Furthermore, both *Daphne* and *Edgeworthia* plants were also used later in Japan (known as *gampi* and *mitsumata*). Despite use of the same raw materials, the final products that we can call 'Japanese' and 'Tibetan' paper clearly differ due to the different methods and technologies used for their production. Thus, it is not only the specific raw materials that make a piece of paper Tibetan, it is also the papermaking process and technologies that were used, as well as the preparation of the paper as a writing surface.

As we have seen, flaws related to the Tibetan papermaking process resulted in one of the most recognizable aesthetic features of Tibetan paper, namely the remains of outer bark in the paper structure, as well as its uneven thickness within the same sheet. In terms of technologies, I would not hesitate to describe the floating mould technology as Tibetan. However, like the use of *Daphne* fibres, this technology was employed in a geographical area extending well beyond Tibet. Preparation of the writing surface by gluing together sheets of paper into thicker book leaves is also an identifiable Tibetan practice. So too is colouring the paper with black ink or indigo to prepare a dark background for the execution of golden letters, which we find in tingshok manuscripts. Although manuscripts written in gold on coloured paper were produced all across Asia, this particular aesthetic can be called Tibetan. What is important is that the materials and techniques most often used in Tibetan books are distinguishable. The resulting aesthetic can be related to the function of Tibetan manuscripts, as well as the types and qualities of materials used in Tibet.

Last but not least, the ethnicity of the papermaker is the most obvious feature that justifies the use of the adjective 'Tibetan'. However, this is the most difficult thing to deduce from an examination of the paper in books alone. The ethnicity of a papermaker is not possible to determine by material analyses of books written on the paper they made. We can only know this if we buy paper directly from producers,

or if the paper contains ownership marks such as a papermaker's seal. In books, it is usually only the scribe or author who is mentioned, not the papermaker. The knowledge and skill of the latter remains obscured in the record.

In short, papermakers in Tibet developed methods for paper production that reflected the particular qualities of the raw materials and specific technologies they used. As a result, their paper products were unique. Among other uses, they served as writing supports for Tibetan written artefacts, with distinctive properties and features that are sometimes traceable to their place of origin. To summarise these features, I would say that the use of *Daphne* or *Stellera* fibres combined with the use of 'floating mould' technology, the presence of outer bark particles in the paper and the layered structure of book leaves would justify the use of the descriptor 'Tibetan paper'. Other combinations of features would require further discussion on a case by cases basis.

## Note on the author

Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (Ph.D. 2007) is Professor of Book Studies at the University of Warsaw and a researcher at the Division 4.5—Analysis of Artefacts and Cultural Assets at the Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing in Berlin. She is also affiliated with the Cluster of Excellence 'Understanding Written Artefacts' at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg. Her publications include monographs and articles on the history of books and paper in Central Asia and the Himalayas, material culture of Tibet, codicology of Silk Road manuscripts and history of Asian book collections, including *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books* (Brill, 2014) and *The Mustang Archives: Analysis of handwritten documents via the study of papermaking traditions in Nepal* (Brepols, 2021, co-authored with Charles Ramble). Her recent work, since 2019, explores the complex history of hand-made paper in Asia. While there is a good amount of information about paper-production techniques from mainland China, Japan and Korea, very little is known about papermaking in borderland areas of southwestern China and upper mainland South-east Asia (Thailand, Burma, Laos and Vietnam) where minority ethnic groups still keep their traditions of papermaking. Helman-Ważny's research contributes to our understanding of how these traditions developed and evolved, especially in light of specific local circumstances.

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# 7 Materials and materiality as keys to understanding a map of Mount Kailash

Diana Lange  and Oliver Hahn 

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**Abstract** How does materiality matter when understanding Tibetan maps? While graphic and linguistic content is central to the identification of maps and can provide insights into the concepts and systems of rules, ideas and beliefs that led to their production, the materials that constitute maps may speak about manufacturing processes, the provenance of raw materials, the practical and technical knowledge of the mapmakers, and the use of the maps. This chapter underscores how the materials employed in Tibetan maps reveal aspects of their context and trajectory. Furthermore, materiality, conceptualized as a convergence of matter and imagination (Rosler et al. 2013: 15), can yield even more profound insights into artefacts like maps. Through a detailed case study of a map of Mount Kailash in the tangkha format and a specialized material-scientific analysis of the colourants employed in its creation, this chapter explores how a map can ‘talk’ (Daston 2008) through its materiality. With this case study it will show how Tibetan Studies can benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration. Crossing the field’s traditional boundaries and working with other disciplines, we argue, is absolutely essential for serious research.

**Keywords** materiality, material culture, materials, map, tangkha painting, Mount Kailash, colourants, pigments, non-invasive analysis, scientific analysis

## Introduction: Spatial works and materiality

When I (Lange) entered the world of Tibetan maps around fifteen years ago, I started working on the materials in the British Library's Wise Collection (Lange 2020). These maps were first introduced to me when Toni Huber displayed a selection on a large computer screen in his office at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The digital format enabled the display of their seemingly infinite, minute details, which deeply impressed me. Only later did I have the opportunity to experience the originals in a British Library reading room. That was when I realized what a difference it makes to sensorially experience a map in physical form. Since then, I have seen many Tibetan maps in various places and at different institutions. I have worked with digitized versions, but having a map on a computer screen does not give you a sense of its original size or the materials of which it was made. You miss the true colour intensity, traces of use and the nature of the paper or canvas. Usually, you cannot see the back (where you can make exciting discoveries!) and sometimes you cannot read faint pencil notes and drawing lines. Moreover, having the original in front of your eyes brings you very close to the map maker's spatial world. You can smell the map, discover traces left on it by previous users and start travelling mentally through the landscapes it shows, some of which may be familiar. Touching a map with your fingers and feeling its soft or rough surfaces makes you think about the map maker who touched it before, how it must have felt to write or draw on that material, and what drawing and writing instruments they chose. If a map smells dusty and old, you think about where it was stored. Being so close to the drawing lines, to the different types of paper, to the colours and their shades, and to text written in ink many years ago produces a feeling of intimacy with both the materiality of the map and its maker. From time to time, you find blots, corrections and even fingerprints. Sometimes you hardly dare to unfold or turn a map because it seems so fragile. You start thinking about who made it, where, when, how and why, pondering the map's biography and how it ended up here, and wishing it could 'talk' to you. But how can we understand a map's messages?

As historian of science Lorraine Daston explains, things might not literally whisper or shout, but they do 'press their messages on attentive auditors, many messages, delicately adjusted to context, revelatory, and right to the target' (2008: 12). Such messages can be found in the materials of which objects are made. Sometimes they are easy to 'read';

sometimes they are hidden and need to be searched for. As this chapter will show, one of the best ways to learn, use and develop methods to understand these messages is through interdisciplinary collaboration. Taking the case of a Tibetan map of Mount Kailash, a sacred mountain in Western Tibet known in Tibetan as Gang Tisé (gangs ti se) or Gang Rinpoché (gangs rin po che),<sup>1</sup> it examines the possibilities that material scientific analysis can offer to the study of Tibetan maps and map-making processes more generally. As the main author who provides the knowledge and analysis of Tibetan maps, the chapter is written in my voice. But it is based on a collaboration with the second author, Oliver Hahn, a scholar from the natural sciences. We came together to explore the messages that maps communicate through materials and materiality, combining our respective expertise in Tibetan cartography and material culture studies (Lange) and in the non-destructive material analysis of colourants and writing and drawing materials (Hahn).

For a long period, the material nature of maps was taken for granted by many researchers even though, in many European languages, the terms for cartographic images derive from the materials on which they were drawn. The English word map, for example, derives from the medieval Latin *mappa* (large cloth). The Latin *carta* or *charta* (borrowed from the Late Greek *chartes*) originally meant a sheet of paper or parchment (Edney 2019: 74). Until relatively recently, geographers

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1 This map is being studied as part of the research project ‘Maps as Knowledge Resources and Mapmaking as Process: The Case of the Mapping of Tibet’ (2021–2024), which is affiliated with the Cluster of Excellence Understanding Written Artefacts (research field Formatting Multigraphic Artefacts) at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), Universität Hamburg and led by Diana Lange as Principal Investigator. The core of this research project is to gain a new and more precise understanding of the materiality of maps and the processes of mapmaking using the example of the mapping of Tibet. Applying methods from the material sciences and taking both art- and cultural-historical as well as cartographical approaches, the project aims to provide a comprehensive historical and analytical account of maps of Tibet, their production and their significance. Its main outcome will be a monograph entitled *Tibet in 108 Maps: A Journey through Different Mapping Practices* (Brill) showing how different cultural and material conventions have influenced the formatting of the contents and shape of maps of Tibet. For further information see: <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/research/cluster-projects/field-i/rfi07.html> (accessed 22 July 2025).

did not view maps as visual and material artefacts, but rather judged them by the reality they depict (Jacob 1996: 192). Over the past few decades, however, the study of maps and mapping has been developing into a multi-faceted research field, with the materiality of maps and its significance for understanding maps and map-making processes attracting growing interest (see, e.g., Edney 2018). Furthermore, the primacy of essentially Western ideas about the importance of scale and accuracy as the sole criteria for assessing the quality of maps has been questioned and non-European Indigenous mapping has widened understandings of the field.<sup>2</sup>

Although I very much welcome the growing importance placed on the contextual understanding of maps and their material nature, in this chapter I want to emphasize their materiality. Maps are artefacts; they exist in different sizes, have different material properties and are made of different materials. Their outer appearance can change over time as they are handled, consumed and decay. Maps are not lifeless things; they have life cycles and social lives (Brook 2013; Lange 2020). But what exactly is their *materiality*? Art historian Michael Ann Holly regards materiality as ‘the meeting of matter and imagination, the place where opposites take refuge from their perpetual strife’ (cited in Rosler et al. 2013: 15). This definition applies very well to maps since it links the mapping process with the material choices made for a map’s production and its resulting properties and capacities, such as its functions as an instrument for teaching, memory or orientation. In this sense, through the materiality of maps, the relationships and meanings that arise between people, human imaginings, materials and the environment become visible and tangible.

Although they are usually analyzed separately across the divide of the natural sciences and humanities, I argue that it is insufficient to look at matter and imagination as two separate aspects. The study of maps needs more diverse perspectives, not only from different cultures and regions but also by collaborating across academic disciplines. Using the example of the Tibetan map of Mount Kailash, this chapter shows how taking an interdisciplinary approach is essential

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2 The British map historian and former Head of Map Collections at the British Library Peter Barber, for example, underlined the ‘seismic transformation in the study of maps’ in his keynote delivered in 2019 at the *International Conference on the History of Cartography*; see Barber 2020 for the published version.

if one is to produce innovative research that is recognized beyond the Tibetan Studies field. Moreover, it demonstrates how use of advanced technologies can give us access to important information and enables us to read stories told by maps that are still widely overseen in Tibetan Studies. I did not know of the technical and practical possibilities of material analysis when, in 2018, I joined the three-year interdisciplinary research project ‘Coloured Maps’, involving the University of Hamburg, the Hanseatic Business Archive Foundation and the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) in Hamburg.<sup>3</sup> That project examined maps of East Asian and European origin that had been coloured by hand between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on the colours and colourants used for their production. The project’s multidisciplinary approach and my close collaboration with Oliver Hahn (see, e.g., Lange and Hahn 2023) made me aware of the immense importance of scientific material analysis for the study of artefacts and the strong need for collaborative research and cooperation between the humanities and natural sciences.

This chapter opens a new branch of study, as we know of no existing material analyses of Tibetan maps prior to our research. First, it provides a short overview of Tibetan mapping and Tibetan maps, the material choices made for their production and how they have been studied. It then introduces the Kailash map and demonstrates the productive potential of a material analysis of the colourants used for its creation for gaining a better understanding of this map in particular and for map-making processes in general. It also exemplifies how materials are transformed into materiality through the imaginations of map makers and users.

## Tibetan mapping and Tibetan maps

Tibetan maps, and in particular the map of Mount Kailash that will be introduced in this chapter, are an excellent case through which to explore maps as human-made products of their particular cultural, social and historical milieux, rather than as pure containers of spatial information. It is clear from the study of historical examples of Tibetan maps that Tibet has a remarkably rich and varied cartographic

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3 For further information on the project, see <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/coloured-maps.html> (accessed 22 July 2025).

tradition. Tibetan maps have evolved over many centuries and assume many forms. Geographer Joseph Schwartzberg (1994) distinguishes between cosmographic and geographic Tibetan maps. The former include mandalas, the *bhavacakra* or wheel of life, lineage fields, the Mount Meru world-system, depictions of portions of the Buddhist universe such as various heavens and hells, and astrological and geomantic charts. Such maps were made to support religious education and meditation, as adjuncts to illuminated religious texts or to glorify places of religious importance such as pilgrimage sites. The number of known geographic maps from Tibet appears small in comparison with the cosmographic materials (Schwartzberg 1994: 612, 638), but nevertheless encompasses various genres including world maps, regional maps, town maps, monastery maps, route maps and maps of pilgrimage sites. Although Schwartzberg makes a basic distinction between cosmographic and geographic mapping, he was aware that this distinction does not always make sense and that some maps cannot be assigned exclusively to either category. For example, maps of pilgrimage sites, such as those of the sacred region around Mount Kailash, include numerous mythological places.

Historically, the rules governing the composition of Tibetan maps appear to have been far from uniform. General principles as to the 'correct' orientation of maps did not exist and it was common for map makers to use varying scales for different map elements. Many Tibetan geographic maps depict towns, monasteries and other specific localities, namely Lhasa and important monastic sites in Central Tibet. Tibetan map makers often adopted an oblique perspective, as if from a perch in space. This practice was possibly influenced by the physical environment. Over most of Tibet, there exist high vantage points from which largely barren expanses of land stretch before the observer like living maps (Schwartzberg 1994: 671–73). The use of such an oblique perspective for the production of maps brings us to the Tibetan term for map, *satra*, which has two spellings: *sa khra* and *sa bkra*. The latter translates as 'earth-beautiful', 'illuminated' or 'variegated' and refers to the outer appearance of maps. However, the majority of Tibetan maps that have a title use the spelling *sa khra*, which translates as 'earth eagle' or a 'bird's (-eye view) of the earth', in clear reference to the map maker's spatial perception of the area represented on the map.

Tibetans produced maps in various physical formats, of various materials and using different techniques. The majority of the surviving and accessible historical maps were made on paper or on textiles

(mainly canvas) as manuscript maps.<sup>4</sup> We should bear in mind that these materials are technological products, not raw materials (see also Rosler et al. 2013: 34). They thus include the technological and material knowledge of their producers. There also exist maps in the form of murals drawn on the walls of monasteries, such as depictions of monastery compounds like Tashilhunpo; in contrast to manuscript maps, these murals are not portable.<sup>5</sup> Both manuscript and mural maps were drawn with various inks and colours consisting of colourants made from different raw materials. All Tibetan maps produced before the twentieth century are unique. Although woodblock printing had been used to reproduce texts in Tibet for hundreds of years,<sup>6</sup> this technique was apparently not used for map-making until the twentieth century. It was only then that Tibetans started to use woodblock or copper-plate printing to produce maps that were then hand-coloured or left uncoloured.<sup>7</sup>

For the majority of Tibetan maps, neither the exact date of production nor the name(s) of the map maker(s) are known. But the materials of a Tibetan map can provide hints about its date of production and its maker(s), as well as its purpose, circulation, handling and users. Before a map is produced, material choices have to be made by its maker(s). These choices depend on their material knowledge, the availability and costs of materials, the map's purpose, size and content and, not least, the map's intended user(s). The use of expensive materials, for example, indicates that the person who commissioned or was to use the map was wealthy. Using exclusive colourants such as gold for selected map elements might also indicate the special meaning of those elements.<sup>8</sup> The colourants that a painter might use for a large-scale mural of a

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4 I follow the definition of a manuscript as 'an artefact planned and realized to provide surfaces on which visible signs are applied by hand; it is portable, self-contained, and unique' (Lorusso 2015: 1).

5 There exist several such murals in the Nubra Valley north of Leh in Ladakh. According to an elderly monk they may have served to commemorate the place and to share it with others who did not have the chance to visit it in person (Kozicz and Lange 2018: 10).

6 For a history of Tibetan woodblock printing, see Helman-Ważny 2014: chapt. 5.

7 The earliest Tibetan printed maps were published in the Tibetan-language newspaper *The Tibet Mirror* (*yul phyogs so so'i gсар 'gyur me long*) published between 1925 and 1963 (Sawerthal 2018).

8 For example, the Golden Gate of Jerusalem is often coloured in gold on maps.

monastic complex like Tashilhunpo,<sup>9</sup> might be different from those they would use for a small-scale *tangkha* (*thang ka*; scroll work) painting drawn on canvas. For a route map drawn on thin local paper made of plants, a map maker would choose other and fewer colourants than for a similar map drawn on textile;<sup>10</sup> they would probably also use different drawing and painting techniques. The storage of maps also influences the choice of materials. A map maker would not use the same material for a map made to be hung and displayed on a wall as they would for a map made to be stored rolled up. Physical traces of use and wear, from inscriptions to cracks, faded colours and water damage, can also provide information about a map's use(s) and user(s). In short, Tibetan maps can send messages through the materials of which they are made.

## Maps in context: A Tibetan map of Mount Kailash

Following Schwartzberg's (1994) loose categorization of Tibetan maps, the map of Mount Kailash (Figure 7.1) belongs to the group of Tibetan geographic maps emphasizing sacred places. In the past, such maps were usually displayed in monasteries to provide their audience with a visual guide to the places to be visited. From an art historical perspective, the Kailash map would be categorized as a 'monument painting', a genre of traditional Tibetan art that depicts important sacred monuments and places of pilgrimage. However, in catalogues and publications, such monument paintings may be found under a variety of genres, such as maps, pure lands, pilgrimage depictions, architectural views and topographic views (Arthur 2015: 10). Let us start by describing the map.

The map carries no title nor any information about its maker or place and date of production. The prominent pilgrimage site Mount Kailash and its surroundings are shown in great detail, including the pilgrimage circumambulation path. According to the Tibetan Buddhist narrative, Kailash was established as a Buddhist mountain as the result of a contest between the magical powers of two renunciates of

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9 See, for example, the maps of Tashilhunpo in the Nubra Valley, Ladakh, discussed in Kozicz and Lange 2018.

10 See, for example, the route map of the Tsari valley in southeastern Tibet described and discussed in Huber 1992.





**Figures 7.1** The thangka's front side, size of the painting 39 × 49 cm. Photograph by Diana Lange.



**Figures 7.2** The tangkha's reverse side, size of the painting 39 × 49 cm. Photograph by Diana Lange.

differing traditions; one Buddhist and one Bön.<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist hero of this myth was Milarepa (1040–1123), who is recorded as visiting the place in 1093; his Bönpo counterpart was Naro Bönchung (eleventh century) (McKay 2015: 293f). The map provides a visual representation of this magical duel. Both competitors are shown in the upper part, Milarepa sitting on top of Mount Kailash and Naro Bönchung flying on his magic drum. The large blue lake in the map's lower part represents Lake Manasarovar (mtsho ma pham). It is surrounded by several monasteries, seven of which are named. These appear to correlate with seven of the eight monasteries associated with the lake mentioned in the late nineteenth-century Kailash pilgrimage guide written by the 34<sup>th</sup> Drigung Kagyü hierarch Könchok Tendzin Chökyi Lodrö Trinlé Namgyel (trans. Huber and Tsepak Rigzin 1995). The following are the names inscribed on the map (clockwise from the yellow building), together with the spellings from the pilgrimage guide and their translation by Huber and Tsepak Rigzin [in square brackets]:

- (1) sergyi ja khyim (gser gyi ja khyim) [gad pa gser kyi bya skyib?; the bird shelter of golden bluff]
- (2) gotsur ('go tshur) [mgo tshugs; the beginning]
- (3) khangba (khang rba) [glang sna?; the elephant's trunk]
- (4) nyengo (gnyen sgo) [mnyes mgo; the pleased head]
- (5) trügo lho ('khrus sgo lho) [khrus sgo lho; southern bathing entrance]
- (6) jiu gön (byi'u sgon) [byi'u dgon; small bird]
- (7) sera lung (se ra rlung) [se ba lung; thorn bush valley].<sup>12</sup>

As shown in Figures 7.1 and 7.2, the map is made of different materials in the style of a traditional Tibetan tangkha painting or scroll work. It is drawn with ink and colourants on a canvas that is bordered with red and yellow silk, and sewn to a cloth frame made of light green silk on the front and light blue cotton on the back. The silk feels incredibly smooth and soft—completely different to the brocade fabric often used

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11 The Bön tradition has its own narratives about Mount Kailash, a mountain that is also sacred for Hindus and Jains. See, e.g., Loseries-Leick 1998; McKay 2015.

12 For further details and descriptions of these monasteries see Huber and Tsepak Rigzin 1995: 37–9.

for tangkha production. The inner and outer seams on the front side of the frame are reinforced with cord. Cotton cords are also fixed at the upper part to hang the tangkha. The canvas is protected by a yellow-orange silk cover; this is lifted and held up by two violet silk ribbons to display the map. These ribbons are also used to tie the tangkha when it is rolled for storage or transport. On the tangkha's upper and lower parts, the typical wooden batons embedded in the textile act as weights that support the straight hanging of the tangkha and retention of its shape. The lower baton's ends are covered with metal finials.

I purchased the map from the German auction house Kiefer Buch- und Kunstauktionen in 2021.<sup>13</sup> Since I had not seen many maps of Mount Kailash I was primarily interested in its content. Like the maps from the Wise Collection, I first encountered the Kailash map in a digital format in the form of the photographs that the auction house shared with me. It was delivered in a cardboard tube and carefully swathed in plastic wrap. When I unpacked and unrolled it, I once again became aware of the great contrast between digital and physical forms. With the original map in front of my eyes, I could clearly see its age and many signs of use. The colours differed from those on the photographs. Similar to my first experience with the physical maps in the Wise collection, I was suddenly transported into the world of the mapmaker and asking the questions that arise every time I see a map for the first time: who made it, when, where, why and how? I had to help it talk.

I was able to discern some of the messages in the map's materials without using advanced technologies. For example, it was clear from its component parts that its production involved people from different handicraft trades, such as painters, tailors and metal workers, and had depended on their technological and material knowledge.<sup>14</sup> I was also

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13 The auction house is based in Pforzheim (see <http://www.kiefer.de> [accessed 22 July 2025]) and the auction number was 117-1845. I am aware of the ongoing debate on the role that academics might play in the trade of objects from the Himalayas (e.g., Smith and Thompson 2023). This was the first time I had purchased an object from an auction house. My initial motivation was to avoid this object ending up in a private collection and being lost for research. When I received the tangkha I was very irritated that the auction house provided no information about its provenance and did not respond to my inquiry about this. I had suddenly arrived in the reality of the market.

14 For further in-depth information on the production of Tibetan tangkha see Jackson and Jackson 1988.

able to surmise from the condition of the materials and their evident wear that the tangkha had been used extensively over a long period. On the upper part of its cover, there are traces of insect damage. The colour of light-green silk on the front side is faded. The map also shows signs of wear in places, as well as some water damage, cracks and fractures. This tangkha, like others, would have been designed to be portable, and would have been kept rolled up when being transported or when not being hung. Most tangkhas have been rolled up and down many times over the course of their life. This handling causes damage to the fabric, and it is not unusual to find horizontal and vertical breaks on the canvas—like those on the piece introduced here. Indeed, I would have preferred not to roll it up again to avoid further damage. While the tangkha does not show evidence of old repairs, the wear-related condition of its materials (faded silk, stains, cracks, fractures) tells us something about its life.

Other messages, however, were only revealed by combining my knowledge with that of Hahn in a historically and culturally contextualized material scientific analysis of the colourants used in the map's production. As the next section discusses, our cross-disciplinary collaborative analyses allowed the map to reveal certain clues about its age and place of origin.

## Shedding scientific light on the Kailash map

The map was drawn using different colours, namely blue, green, red and yellow in different shades, as well as white and black. The painter used different colourants, most of which are opaque. Colourants can be divided into two subgroups, pigments and dyes, which are prepared in different ways. Pigments are not soluble in bonding agents and solvents, so they are visible as small particles when viewed through a microscope, whereas dyes dissolve and cannot be discerned as individual particles. This difference plays a role in the choice of a suitable method for material scientific analysis. As a general rule, pigments are inorganic compounds—metallic salts like oxides, carbonates or sulphides—which can easily be identified by the presence of so-called 'marker elements'. They might be natural pigments, obtained as minerals from corresponding deposits, or artificial pigments that have been produced. Natural dyes, in contrast, are obtained from plants, fungi or insects by purifying or chopping up the relevant parts and then extracting or fermenting the dyes with suitable aqueous solvents. The solution

containing the dye is filtered and then either dried or stabilized with a pickling solution or by adding a substrate, for example alum. There are countless recipes for producing organic dyes from natural raw materials. A wide variety of synthetic organic dyes (and pigments) have also been available since coal tar dye chemistry was developed in the middle of the nineteenth century. By identifying the colourants used to produce the Kailash map and situating their use in historical and cultural context, it was possible to reach some conclusions as to the provenance of some of the component raw materials and, perhaps more significantly, about when the (undated) map was made.

## Methods of analysis

For most of our material scientific analyses of the map we applied radiodiagnostic examinations. In a process known as ‘excitation’, light of a specific wavelength interacts with the materials to be investigated. The way this interaction occurs has to do with the kind of excited light used—visible light (VIS), ultraviolet light (UV), infrared light (IR) or X-rays—and the structure or composition of the material. After a brief disturbance, the material returns to its original basic state. This relaxation process leads to the release of characteristic radiation which, properly interpreted, provides indications of the composition of the investigated material.

Our investigation started with the use of a visible light microscope, which gave us information about the main characteristics of the map’s material components, for example, differences between paper and textile, details of drawing and colouring technology, and damage or overpainting, as well as the use of soluble dyes and insoluble pigments in the map. We then carried out a two-wavelength reflectography using a handheld microscope equipped with UV and near-infrared (NIR) light. With UV or IR light, the absorption and reflection of the radiation provides initial knowledge about the map’s material characteristics. For example, NIR light allows us to distinguish between different black writing and drawing materials such as carbon inks and iron gall inks, while UV light helps us to see where the painting has been restored or damaged (Figure 7.3).

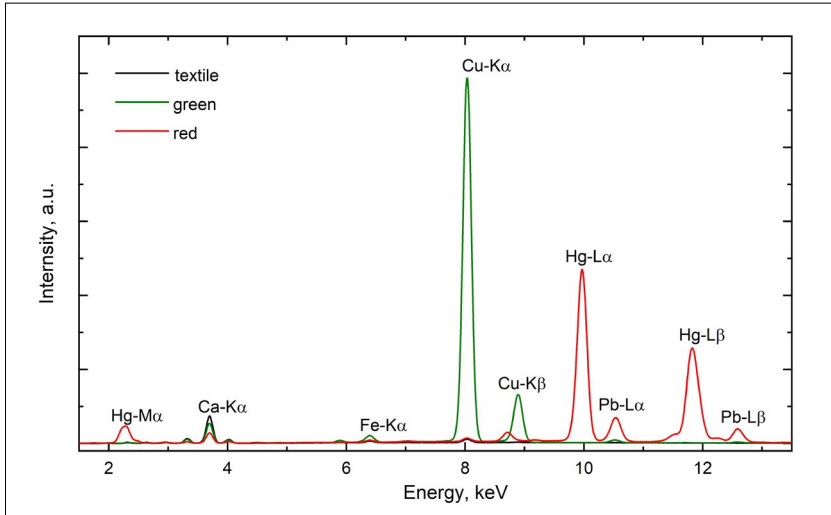
The next step was to use X-ray fluorescence analysis (XRF) and visible (VIS) spectroscopy to identify the pigments that the map maker used for different colours. Like optical microscopy and wavelength reflectography, XRF and VIS spectroscopy are both non-destructive, non-invasive methods. XRF analysis is one of the classic methods for



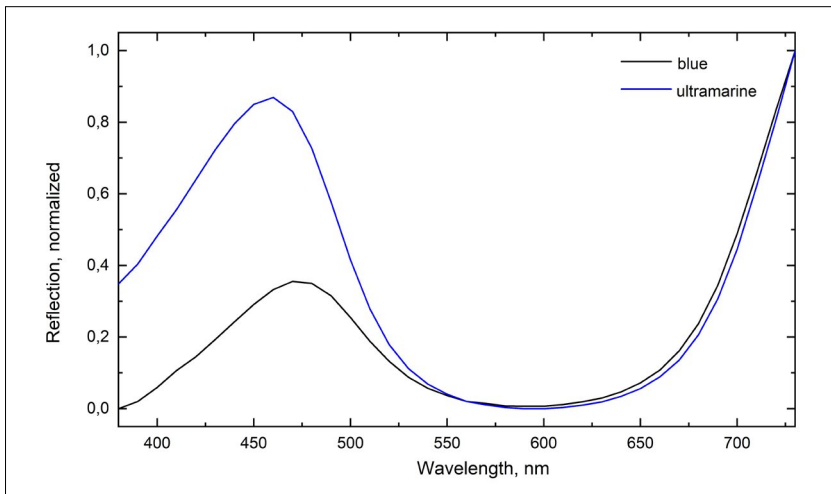
**Figure 7.3** Two-wavelength reflectography, carried out with a hand-held USB microscope equipped with in-built light sources at 365 nm (left column) and 940 nm (right column), and an external lamp in the visible range (middle column). While most colourants become transparent in the NIR (near-infrared), carbon ink absorbs significantly in this wavelength range and appears black. The UV image makes corrections—or in this case damage—more obvious.

investigating the elemental composition of inorganic-based pigments (Hahn, Reiche and Stege 2006: 687–700; Mantler and Schreiner 2000). It is an atomic process in which an atom of the material under investigation returns to its ground state after excitation by emitting specific radiation. At the beginning of the process, the incident beam interacts with the inner shell electrons of the atom and one of these electrons is removed. To restore the equilibrium of the atom an electron from an outer shell, which has a higher energy level, then takes the place of the knocked-out electron. The excess energy of the electron that has moved into the inner shell is emitted as X-ray radiation or ‘fluorescence’. Since only very specific electron transitions are possible for specific elements, the excited element can be identified from the energy position of characteristic X-ray fluorescence peaks. The height of the peak corresponds to the amount of the element within the sample. As shown in Figure 7.4, the presence of particular elements, for example mercury or copper, provides an indication of the inorganic pigments that have been used for certain colours, for example, cinnabar (red) or malachite (green).

VIS spectroscopy is another technique that allows the identification of coloured materials (Fuchs and Oltrogge 1994: 133–171, 603). Strictly speaking, VIS spectroscopy can be only applied to coloured or chromatic substances. Achromatic colours (black, white, greys) cannot be



**Figure 7.4** XRF spectra of the green and red colours on the map. The presence of mercury (Hg) indicates cinnabar (mercury sulphide), whereas the element copper (Cu) indicates a copper green pigment (probably malachite). The small amount of calcium (Ca) results from the supporting textile.



**Figure 7.5** VIS spectra of a blue area with corresponding reference curve of ultramarine. The similarity of the course of both reflection curves is obvious.



analysed with this technique. When visible light interacts with coloured matter, the latter absorbs specific parts of the incident light and reflects other parts. The resulting reflection curve, which reveals the correlation of the reflected light as a function of the energy of the excitation radiation, is specific to each dye and can be used for the differentiation of, for example, red dyes such as brazilwood or cochineal or blue pigments such as indigo and ultramarine (for a reflection curve of ultramarine, see Figure 7.5). In general, the method works quite well for determining the mineral pigments and organic dyes used until the end of the eighteenth century (Hahn, Oltrogge and Bevers 2004: 273–282). With the development of ‘tar dyes’ many artificial pigments and dyes were produced from the middle of the nineteenth century. Since their reflection curves are very similar, the extent to which we can distinguish these synthetic colourants is limited (see also Lange and Hahn 2023: 40–42).

### Situating the results in historical and cultural context

Our material scientific analyses of the Kailash map show the different colourants used in its production. Cinnabar (*mtshal*) was used for the red elements (Figure 7.4), ultramarine for blue (Figure 7.5), chrome yellow for yellow and calcium white (*ka rag*) for white. The green parts were painted using a copper green pigment (Figure 7.4), probably malachite (*spang*). Mixing blue and yellow dyes and pigments to obtain green, although common in other parts of the world,<sup>15</sup> was not preferred by Tibetan artists (see also Ricciardi and Pallipurath 2016: 487). For black, the painter used carbon ink (Figure 7.3).

The choice of malachite, cinnabar and calcium white corresponds with the traditional mineral pigments (*rdo tshon* and *sa tshon*; stone colours and earth colours) that were used extensively for tangkha painting in Tibet (Elgar 2006: 102; Jackson and Jackson 1976). Many of them were mined locally. The main source of malachite was Nye-motang (*snye mo thang*) in Tsang.<sup>16</sup> Tibetan artists used both native

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15 In East Asia, for example, a mixture of indigo and gamboge (or orpiment) and orpiment and Prussian blue was quite common. See also Lange and Hahn 2023: 54.

16 Because of its importance the Lhasa government strictly controlled the mining and distribution of malachite; artists usually obtained it directly or indirectly through a government office (Jackson and Jackson 1976: 274).

and synthetic mercury sulphide for their red. The native mineral *cog la* (or *mtshal rgod*; cinnabar) occurs naturally in some parts of south-eastern Tibet, while synthetic mercury sulphide vermilion (*mthsal* or *rgya mtshal*; Chinese vermilion) was imported to Tibet from India and China where it has been synthesized since ancient times (Jackson and Jackson 1976: 277). The white paints of Tibetan artists were all calcium minerals available throughout Tibet, the most well-known deposit being at Rinpung (rin spungs) in Tsang.<sup>17</sup>

While malachite, cinnabar and calcium white are traditional mineral pigments used for tangkha painting in Tibet, this is not true for the two pigments that were identified for the yellow and blue elements, namely chrome yellow and ultramarine blue. Traditionally, the mineral pigments azurite (*mthing*) and orpiment (*ba bla*) were used to tint blue and yellow areas on Tibetan tangkhas (Jackson and Jackson 1976: 277, 279). The main source for azurite in Tibet was also Nyemotang in Tsang and the most famous deposit of arsenic trisulphide orpiment was in Kham (East Tibet) near Chamdo (Jackson and Jackson 1976: 274, 278). So where did the map maker's chrome yellow and ultramarine come from?

In their analysis of fifteen pigment samples from wall paintings on the pilgrimage corridor at the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, Li et al. (2014) found not only the traditional mineral pigments azurite, malachite, cinnabar and calcium white, but also many synthetic pigments including ultramarine blue and chrome yellow. They suggest that the wall paintings in the Jokhang Temple were executed after the 1850s, mostly around the 1900s (Li et al. 2014: 5). The synthetically produced pigment chrome yellow is created when a chromate solution is added to dissolved lead. Lead chromate was first synthesized by the French chemist Louis Nicolas Vauquelin in 1809. But it was only when major deposits of chromium were opened up for mining in France, Great Britain and the USA from about 1820 that chrome yellow was established as a colourant (Kühn and Curran 1986; Li et al. 2014: 5). It began to be widely used as a pigment in watercolours, coach paintings and oil paintings in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Another French chemist discovered the process for synthesizing ultramarine in

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17 Jackson and Jackson (1976: 280) state that according to Tibetan nomenclature there exist two varieties of this calcium white, which are designated masculine (*po*) and feminine (*mo*). The masculine type (*po rag* or *po dkar*) is harder and coarser, the feminine type (*mo rag* or *mo dkar*) is relatively soft and fine.

the late 1820s. By the 1830s, it was being produced in large quantities in Europe and soon became the most popular deep blue.

When and under what circumstances did synthetic pigments from Europe find their way to Tibet? Pigments and dyes had been common articles for trade for centuries all over the world. With the growth of European empires, new synthetic pigments from Europe were swiftly and thoroughly assimilated in Asia, especially from the nineteenth century onwards. For example, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the innovative iron-based pigment Prussian Blue was invented in Europe. The formula did not remain a secret for long, and the pigment, which was cheap to make, rapidly spread throughout the world. From the eighteenth century onwards it quickly replaced the organic dye indigo for colouring rivers and bodies of water on East Asian maps (Lange and Hahn 2023: 62).

Historical records indicate that during the 1840s, the pigments imported into Nepal and then into Tibet by the British East India Company included vermilion, red and white lead, and indigo (Hodgson 1874: 101). The Chinese painter Yu Feian mentions in his work on Chinese painting colours that, after the Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century, foreign synthetic pigments were imported in increasingly large amounts. Some of them replaced traditional mineral pigments as they were inexpensive, gave good results and were convenient to use (Yu 1988: 30).<sup>18</sup> European synthetic paints may have been introduced into Tibet via India or China, and their availability and affordability probably increased in the early twentieth century. The synthetic pigments applied in the Jokhang wall paintings were most likely introduced into Tibet no earlier than the 1850s (Li et al. 2014: 5). Thus, it can be assumed that these pigments were also not used for tangkha painting before the mid-nineteenth century. In their analysis of six Tibetan tangkha paintings produced between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, Mass et al. (2009) only identified the pigments ultramarine blue and chrome yellow on twentieth century tangkha paintings. They found it ‘notable

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18 Yu’s (1988) manual is one of the richest sources on Chinese painting colours and their historical development. It was originally published in Chinese in Beijing in 1955 under the title *Zhongguohua yanse de yanjiu* (Research on Chinese Painting Colours). As well as sharing practical knowledge acquired through years of painting practice, the author provides a detailed account of the pigments and dyes used in China compiled from diverse written Chinese sources, and a detailed list and table of recipes for mixing colours (33–34, 68).

that pigments introduced in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the West do not show up in Himalayan tangkhas until the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (115).<sup>19</sup>

The fact that ultramarine and chrome yellow were found among the colourants used for painting the map of Mount Kailash suggests that it was not made before 1850 and probably in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. But this still leaves us with an important question: Why did the painter choose these two artificial pigments? Their use of artificial ultramarine blue instead of the traditionally used azurite might have been partly a question of cost. According to Jackson and Jackson, azurite was not expensive, but because it was used in great quantities for areas like sky, and since it had to be applied fairly thickly to achieve the deeper colours, it used to account for a great portion of a painter's expenses (Jackson and Jackson 1976: 275–76). The preference for ultramarine over azurite, as well as for chrome yellow over orpiment, may also be due to the fact that these two artificially produced pigments are significantly more intense in colour. In high-altitude areas like the Tibetan plateau colours generally seem more intense to the human eye, in particular the blue sky or blue lakes. So it is not surprising that this intensity is reflected in the use of colours for paintings on monastery walls, for painting wooden elements in architecture and, of course, for the production of tangkhas. It is therefore possible that the tangkhas painter wanted to use the most intense pigments available to produce the map of Mount Kailash. Moreover, in addition to their colour-intensive character, both pigments age less. In the case of orpiment, the painter might also have had in mind the widely known toxicity of the substance.<sup>20</sup>

While the map's colourants hint at the provenance of its raw materials and *when* it was produced, we can only speculate about the place of its production. We cannot exclude the possibility that the map was made not in Tibet but in Nepal. It is probably linked to a very similar map located in Tragyam Monastery in Dolpo, north-western Nepal on the border with Tibet (Figure 7.6).<sup>21</sup> It would be highly interesting to

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19 Richard Ernst also analysed the pigments of several Tibetan tangkhas. He found chrome yellow on one and for this reason suggests that it dates to 'well in the 19<sup>th</sup> century' (Ernst 2014: 9).

20 Today we know that chrome yellow is also a toxic pigment.

21 A photograph of this map taken by Edward Worcester is reproduced as the frontispiece for the first issue of volume five of the *Kailash* journal (1977) and in Alex McKay's (2015) book on constructions of Kailash's sacred geography.



Figures 7.6 Map of Mount Kailash at Tragyam Monastery in Dolpo (photograph by Edward Worcester).



**Figures 7.7** Map of Mount Kailash introduced in this chapter (photograph by Diana Lange).

conduct a material analysis of the colourants used for the production of that map to see if the same materials were used and if the provenance of both maps is linked.

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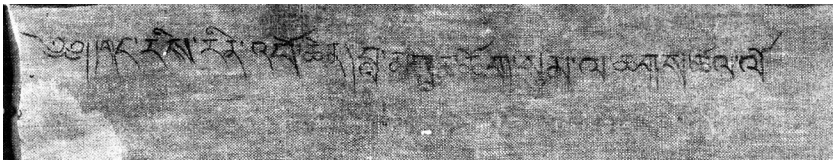
Another similar map can be found in the Himalayan Art Resources Database, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/84054> (accessed 24 July 2025) Thomas Laird Collection (item 84054, from Tibet, date range 1800–1899).

## Recovering damaged writing

In addition to the clues revealed by material scientific analysis of the map's colourants, imaging technology also allowed us to decipher a message that had been left on its reverse. During careful examination of the back of the Kailash map, traces of a pencil inscription were visible. This inscription could not be seen on the photographs provided by the auction house. Even once the original was in my hands, parts of the inscription were indiscernible to the naked eye (Figure 7.8), but we were able to decipher them with the help of infra-red photography (Figure 7.9).



**Figure 7.8** Extract of the reverse side showing the pencil inscription. Image Capture by Gerald Schnittger and Annette Keller, PhaseOne. Image Processing by Ivan Shevchuk, CSMC, University of Hamburg.



**Figure 7.9** Infrared photography of the inscription. Image Capture by Gerald Schnittger and Annette Keller, PhaseOne. Image Processing by Ivan Shevchuk, CSMC, University of Hamburg.

In the work of recovering damaged writing, imaging hardware plays a significant role. Multi-spectral imaging captures image data within specific wavelength ranges across a broad electromagnetic spectrum. The wavelengths can be separated by filters, generated by LEDs, or captured using camera systems sensitive to specific wavelengths, including light at frequencies outside the visible light range, such as infrared and ultraviolet. These procedures can allow the extraction of information that the human eye cannot capture with its visible red, green and blue receptors. Due to the material-dependent interplay between reflection, absorption and transmission, texts that have been

lost due to aging, damage or reuse can be made visible again (Janke and McDonald 2014: 113–24). In the case of the Kailash map, the coating on the back had crumbled and fallen off in places, making parts of the inscription illegible. Scientific light allowed the Tibetan map to talk through materials that had (partly) faded away.

The inscription reads ‘Gang rinpoché lama künchok sumla chak tselo’ (I pay homage to the Precious Snow Mountain, the guru and the Three Jewels).<sup>22</sup> This is a prayer that was probably written by the owner of the tangkha. Inscriptions such as holy mantras and syllables on the reverse side of Tibetan tangkhas are relatively common. However, they are typically written by the artist monks with red or black ink in preparation for the consecration ceremony. Here, the pencil inscription is probably a physical trace left by the map user. Such inscriptions made by the user, and with a pencil, are rather unusual. It is possible that the tangkha was not used in a monastic context but was commissioned by a person who had perhaps completed the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and wanted to have a visual and material reminder of this experience. Or perhaps they did not have the chance to visit in person but wanted to have a visual representation of Mount Kailash for meditation purposes. We do not know. We can only speculate about the purpose of the map.

## Concluding remarks: The meeting of humanities and science

According to the traditional division of expertise within academia, philologists exclusively engage with textual aspects of sources while art historians and archaeologists address their visual or material components. These disciplinary boundaries limit our understanding of artefacts such as Tibetan maps, tending to obscure the shared materiality and regional provenance of the materials employed in their construction. Our analysis of the Kailash map shows the productive potential of a cross-disciplinary approach. By combining our respective

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22 The spelling used in the inscription is *gang ris rin 'po chen bla ma kun mchog sum la chags tshal lo*. The correct spelling of this prayer is *gangs rin po che bla ma dkon mchog gsum la phyag 'tshal lo*. I am very grateful to Huadan Zhaxi (Central Asian Seminar, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin) for discussing the spelling of this inscription with me.



expertise in Tibetan cartography and material culture studies, on the one hand, and in the non-destructive material analysis of colourants and writing and drawing materials, on the other hand, we have been able to uncover messages within the materials of which the map was made—messages that would otherwise have remain hidden. Humanistic and scientific collaboration has made it possible to both identify component materials through material scientific analyses *and* to place those materials in the historical and cultural context in which the map was made, drawing out its complexity as a social artefact. In short, we have been able to bring together the materials the map was made of (matter) with its cultural meaning (imagination).

This *meeting of matter and imagination* offers insights into who made the map, how, when and why. What we have here is a geographic map foregrounding a prominent pilgrimage site in Western Tibet. The mapmaker shared spatial ideas about this place, provided inscriptions for selected monasteries and offered a visual representation of a Buddhist narrative closely connected to Mount Kailash. The form and content of the map are clearly intertwined. The content suggests that the map was used in a religious context and explains its framing in the form of a tangkha, tangkha painting being a genre of Tibetan religious art. The map's style suggests a maker who was familiar with traditional Tibetan mapping practices. Numerous human imaginings of and knowledge about Kailash and its environs are materialized in and circulated through this map, which was both portable and displayable. But other places also come into play when we follow the materials that the map maker used. Scientific analysis of those materials informs us about both matter and global flows of materials and technologies. It tells us that in the making of the Kailash map, artificial pigments from intercontinental trade came together with materials predominantly obtained locally in Tibet. Multiple people in different roles contributed to the production of this map. It has been used and probably touched by many hands and seen by many eyes. Its producer will have had both the purpose of the map and its intended users clearly in mind when making their material choices. Although we could not witness the map's manufacturing process, scientific methods have made it possible to trace at least part of the story of its production and given us important clues as to when it was made, while signs of wear have also helped us to trace part of its use and history—up to its sale at an auction in Europe.

Despite our intensive collaboration on this case study, we feel that we have only scratched the surface of the benefits of interdisciplinary

cooperation. The team could easily be expanded by scholars from other disciplines such as paper analysis, restoration, art history or textile studies. Nevertheless, we hope that our work stimulates further crossing of traditional boundaries in the field of Tibetan Studies, both as a way to help our sources talk and to make research in this field more visible to a broader audience.

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# 8 Recovering Barmiok Lama, Tibetan material knowledge and a Himalayan 'scene of collecting'

Emma Martin 

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**Abstract** This chapter considers what it means to recover Tibetan material knowledge from the imperial archive. It pays attention to the 'scene of collecting' (O'Hanlon 2000), namely the location of colonial collecting and those present in that 'scene'. The relative absence of the scene in colonial collecting histories means that they still largely privilege the decisions, knowledge and movements of the colonial collector and their supporting institutions. To counter this and enable others present in the scene to come to the fore, this chapter stays in a Himalayan scene of collecting to recover the material knowledge and connoisseurship of a Tibetan Buddhist lama from Sikkim, Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal (1871–1942). Of particular interest are the values and meanings that the lama ascribed to numerous Tibetan Buddhist objects offered to him for his opinion by the colonial administrator, Charles Alfred Bell (1870–1945) in 1912–13. Bell later included his notes of their conversations as object descriptions in his 'List of Curios'. I read this document for the scene of collecting, listening closely for Barmiok Lama's voice and use of terminology in order to recover his appraisal of the Tibetan material world and the layers of Tibetan material knowledge he relied upon.

**Keywords** material knowledge; scene of collecting; colonial collecting; Tibetan Buddhism; Buddhist statues



**Figure 8.1** The Dorje Chang statue appraised by Barmiosk Lama on 13 January 1913. Currently in the collection of National Museums Liverpool, accession no. 50.31.58. Courtesy of World Museum, National Museums Liverpool.



## Introduction

On a January day in 1913, a lama sat in the drawing room of the British Residency in Gangtok, the capital of the Himalayan principality of Sikkim. He carefully studied a small metal statue or *kuten* (*sku rten*) of the Tibetan Buddhist deity Dorje Chang (rdo rje 'chang) that had been placed before him (Figure 8.1). As he did so, he was closely watched by a colonial officer who sat fountain pen in hand, notebook at the ready, poised to scribble down the lama's pronouncements on the exquisite little figure that had been offered to him for an expert's opinion. The lama held Dorje Chang into the light to register the rich red metal with a hint of yellow that formed the statue's body. Looking closely, he appraised the figure's beatific face, supple arms and the folds of his diaphanous garment. Having made his assessment, the lama turned to the officer and, according to that officer's notes, said: 'This image is a very old one (i.e Chö-gyel [sic] li-ma alias Ser-sang Nying-ba) of the time of King Song Tsen, Gem-pa [sic] or a little later; i.e 1000 to 1200 years old.' He then pointed out to the officer: 'Dorje Chang is as a rule represented as holding a Dorje in his right hand and a bell in his left, but here for the sake of adornment, a lotus is held in each hand, the Dorje resting on one and the bell on the other.'<sup>1</sup> The British officer who sat hurriedly translating and transcribing the lama's words was Charles Bell (1870–1945), the colonial administrator, collector and, later in life, well known Tibetan scholar. His instructor, who Bell referred to only as 'Barmiok Lama',<sup>2</sup> was the highly regarded lama from Sikkim, Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal (1871–1942).

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1 Description recorded in Charles Bell's 'List of Curios' (Bell n.d.) as part of the entry for Dorje Chang, recorded as No.34.

2 Following the lead of Alex McKay (2002: 263), I use this naming convention knowingly (i.e. the lama from Barmiok), while remaining aware that this colonial shorthand has deprived individuals of their proper name and title, something I aim to rectify in this specific case. For further discussions, see Lopez 1997: 15–45. There are several variations on the spelling of Barmiok, for example, Bermiok and Burmiok. I will use the preferred spelling of Barmiok (as used by the lama's family, the Densapa family, whose ancestral home is in Barmiok) unless I quote directly from Bell, in which case I will revert to the spelling he used which is Barmiak. Barmiok is pronounced 'Ber-nyag'.

This chapter focuses on the intimate transfer of knowledge between the lama from Barmiok and Charles Bell, extending Carole McGranahan's question: 'What can imperial but non-colonial subjects teach us about empire? They have stories to tell that challenge and complement understandings of empire drawn exclusively from colonialism' (2017: 68). I use McGranahan's question to consider the affordances offered by an imperial archive when recovering Tibetan material knowledge from 'the scene of collecting', particularly the still overlooked knowledge of Tibetan and Himalayan intellectuals. This in turn adds to understandings of connoisseurial practices in Tibetan Buddhist material worlds.

I borrow the term 'scene of collecting' from anthropologist Michael O'Hanlon's (2000) introduction to the foundational volume on colonial collectors *Hunting the Gatherers* (O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000). When researching the histories of anthropology collections, O'Hanlon (2000: 9) suggests that it is useful to distinguish the different stages of collecting, namely, the 'before of,' the 'scene of' and the 'after of' the collecting act (see Figure 8.2). Structurally speaking, this framework continues to dominate research produced on colonial-era histories of collecting, including those pertaining to Tibet and the Himalayas.

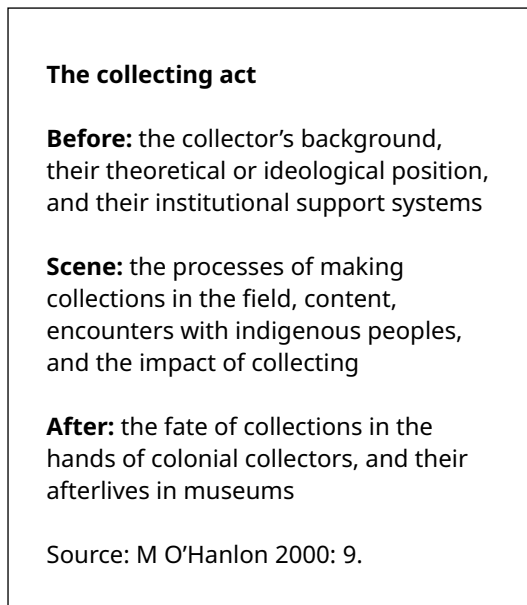


Figure 8.2 The collecting act

Historical and provenance-based studies that focus on Tibetan and Himalayan collections now in North American and European museums still largely tend to spend far longer dwelling in the ‘before’ and ‘afterwards’ of collecting acts than they do in the ‘scene’.<sup>3</sup> This tendency speaks to a wider body of studies on the history of collections.

A longstanding and familiar lament amongst researchers is that colonial-era collectors rarely documented the scene of collecting or the precise circumstances under which objects left a maker, owner or practitioner’s possession. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recover the named individuals (other than the colonial-era collector) who were active in that scene (Gosden and Knowles 2001; Schindlbeck 1993; Thomas 2000; Wintle 2013). As a result, studies continue to privilege the decisions, knowledge and movements of the colonial-era collector (including their movement of material culture), and their associated networks of supporting institutions. For research based on Tibet and Himalayan collections, this means that the names of prominent colonial and colonial-connected actors—Francis Younghusband, Giuseppe Tucci, Laurence Waddell, the Schlagintweit brothers and Charles Bell—are searchable via museum catalogues, publication titles or keywords, but this is not the case for the Tibetan and Himalayan actors who were also living, learning, collecting and negotiating in the same spaces made visible by the imperial records used in such research (e.g. Carrington 2003; Diemberger 2012; Höfer 2017; Klimburg-Salter 2015; Lidchi and Nicholson 2020; Livne 2010; Martin 2012, 2014; Myatt 2012; Phuntsho 2012; Von Brescius 2018).<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, increasingly thoughtful critical reflections on the visibility of the colonial-era collector and the usefulness of the archives pertaining to them, with a growing recognition that such documents need to be reframed as obstructive rather than productive

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3 Important exceptions are Rob Linrothe’s (2014) *Collecting Paradise* exhibition catalogue, which not only dedicates a chapter to Tibetan Buddhist patronage, but also critiques the Italian explorer Giuseppe Tucci for both his collecting methods and his denigration of the Tibetan Buddhists he worked with during his expeditions; and Diana Lange’s (2020) study on the Wise Collection, which recounts the painstaking methods she employed to identify and locate a Tibetan lama.

4 See Harris (2017) for further discussion and her use of James Clifford’s concept of copresence to reflect on indigenous agency and transcultural interaction in early twentieth century Darjeeling through the lens of colonial photography.

archival spaces for research (Elliot 2016). In these readings, the collector is recognized as a presence that looms so large that they become a barrier to research, blocking our view of what and who lies beyond their immediate actions. I argue that staying with the collector has produced a palpable bias in the ways histories of collections continue to be imagined and constructed. Not only has the collector's name retained a prominent position in the titles of publications, but the collector still defines what and who is worthy of a researcher's attention. The collections named after the collector—and what they chose to steal, buy, commission or take as a gift—continue to determine the scope of grant applications and research projects. In other words, those who are repeatedly written into the archive inevitably shape the agenda, remit and future of collections-based historical research. Acknowledging this bias should mean that imperial archives are taken as a starting point only and with the recognition that research must move beyond the colonial-era collector, rather than seeing the recovery of their actions as the ultimate goal. In this context what does it mean to read imperial archives *against the grain* so that one's attention is focused beyond the actions of the colonial collector?

In this chapter I take the still unusual and challenging position of staying in the historical field and the scene of collecting. My reason for this is simple. If one stays in the acts that the archive records in detail—the before and afterwards—the researcher is unavoidably led back to the colonial institutions of Europe and the actions of non-Tibetan collectors and curators.<sup>5</sup> We become more concerned with what non-Tibetan actors did to Tibetan objects, and with the new classification systems and ways of dating and knowing Tibetan material culture that emerged in European institutions. In the process, significant figures in Tibetan and Himalayan society are left behind and their presence in the collecting narrative becomes peripheral rather than essential.

This was true for the subject of this paper, Barmiok Lama, who remained unidentified in a UK museum archive for more than fifty years. The name 'Barmiak Lama' is repeatedly recorded as the source for the descriptions of numerous Tibetan Buddhist objects loaned and eventually donated by the family of Charles Bell to National Museums Liverpool in northwest England. Yet the identity of this lama remained unknown to museum staff and researchers until it was identified

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5 A rare exception is the work of Samuel Thévoz (2019).

during my doctoral research.<sup>6</sup> When previous unsuccessful attempts were made to locate the lama, curators and researchers privileged colonial institutions and networks as potential sources of information. In contrast, here I show that the lama remained alive and well in the scene of collecting, his birthplace, where he was a significant and well-known figure of intellectual and religious standing. I argue that when a researcher leaves the historical site they knowingly place themselves at a distance from individuals of historical importance who were present there—and from those individuals' knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist material culture: staying in the scene of collecting closes that distance. In this chapter, I stay close to the scene of collecting because this is the space where the lama and his actions are most visible.

This Himalayan vantage point allows for a reflection on what Ting Chang calls, 'the messy components, the dialogic and social relations involved in forming a collection' (2013: 75). By mapping out the social relations that ensured the lama was present in this particular scene of collecting, this chapter starts by tracing out the circumstances that led him to the Gangtok Residency drawing room, and to the series of materially-led conversations he held with Bell over the course of several months during the winter of 1912–13. In locating the lama's life in Sikkim and Tibet through additional Sikkim and Tibetan sources, some written with the specific aim of countering the colonial narrative, this study shows how multiple acts of colonial violence—ranging from acts directed at the lama to those against the sovereignty of Sikkim—conditioned and produced this collecting scene. The chapter then turns to the dialogic through a consideration of the archival echoes of Barmiok Lama's voice. Here, I am particularly interested in what values

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6 The assumption was that the lama was Mongolian. Elaine Tankard, the Keeper responsible for building and curating the Tibet collection in Liverpool, tried at several points to identify 'Barmiok Lama'. She was an exceptional curator who understood the value of knowing the lama and where his knowledge came from (for an introduction to Tankard's practice, see Martin 2010, 2014). Shortly before her retirement Tankard wrote to Dr R. O. Meisezahl (1906–1992) at the British Museum on 22 June 1965 asking, 'while in London you can trace the name. The Central Asian Society might help' (Tankard Papers). But Meisezahl and the CAS were of no help. In the first detailed study of the colonial history of the Tibet collections at Liverpool, Jane Moore noted the presence of the lama in Bell's documentation, 'though this man is otherwise elusive in Bell's writings' (Moore 2001: 88).

and meanings Barmiok Lama ascribed to the objects set before him at the Gangtok Residency, and the kinds of Tibetan material knowledge we are privy to because of this scene of collecting. Of note are the ways he used Tibetan terminology to think through the materiality of Buddhist statues—something rarely recorded and attributed to named individuals in colonial sources. In acknowledging the presence of this terminology, I offer a repositioning of this lama from a religious archetype towards that of a Tibetan connoisseur who had a deep material and intellectual engagement with Tibetan things. In reading for his connoisseurial skills, this chapter also pays close attention to Barmiok Lama's education and training to understand how he came to make these material assessments. In this regard I believe that a focus on the scene of collecting produces a counter to established narratives of colonial collecting, enabling those beyond the colonial collector to come to the fore.

We are taken to this specific scene of collecting via the pages of an unpublished document, spread over two volumes, which records more than four hundred Tibetan objects that were either gifted to Bell or that he bought, took or commissioned when he lived and worked in the north-eastern Himalayas and Tibet between 1900 and 1921. He called his documentation project 'List of Curios' (Bell n.d.), but this is a misleading title as the document is not simply a list of curious things. Instead, List of Curios can be understood as a relational piece of imperial paperwork that can be read in counterpoint. On the one hand, it is a document that catalogues the social and political circumstances of collecting Tibet at the height of the British empire and the lasting material effects of British imperialism on the people of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. On the other hand, it also draws into its pages the voices of those who carried on their lives despite continual colonial imposition and who become audible when their lives intersect with the colonial project. By listening closely and muffling the continual presence of the collector, we can focus our attention on discussions that may now be faint but are nevertheless still possible to recover. Making a choice about which register to follow determines the types of conversations deemed worthy of attention and whose actions one might then track.

This type of recovery work relies on processes of acknowledging and locating. It requires long periods of comparative analysis and the layering together of often dispersed archives across several continents. It involves flipping back and forth between objects, written words, photographs and oral testimony in the hope of confirming what might

seem like deceptively simple details, such as an individual's full name,<sup>7</sup> a date of birth or death, or exactly where they lived. To acknowledge those who are so often relegated to the role of intermediary or informant we stay with a Himalayan counterpoint that comes in the form of Barmiok Lama. We will listen to his spoken words and use of Tibetan terminology as recorded in *List of Curios* as a way to recover his appraisal of the Tibetan material world. There are many examples—142 descriptions in total. As with the case of Dorje Chang they are short and his words have been translated. As a result, we hear him once removed and through the filter of the colonial officer. But there is still much we can learn from staying with these traces.

## The scene of collecting

In Christmas week 1912 the Barmiok Lama came to explain the meaning of those Tibetan curios wh.[ich] were concerned w.[ith] religion. He is first among the Sikkim lamas for learning & has a high reputation among the learned lamas of Tibet ... He is renowned for his piety no less than for his learning and holds himself aloof from political intrigue and from the invitations of others to wield secular power in the state. (Bell, 'Diary Volume V', n.p., private collection).

In late December 1912, Barmiok Lama entered a particular scene of collecting. His visits to the Gangtok Residency during Christmas week were the first of many that he would make over the winter months of 1912–13. However, before we turn to his connoisseurship, his presence in this decidedly colonial world raises a question: if Barmiok Lama was a man who kept himself 'aloof from political intrigue' as Bell described him, under what circumstances had he come to be offering object appraisals in the Gangtok Residency, the epicentre of colonial rule for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet?

Despite Bell's imagining of Barmiok Lama as an other-worldly presence, this was not the first time the lama had been recorded in a colonial scene of collecting. Sometime around 1910, he had been engaged in lengthy conversations with the French explorer and writer

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7 As shown in this chapter, all too often names are spelt in multiple ways by colonial actors which makes cross referencing and archival and digital searching difficult.

Alexandra David-Neel (1868–1969) in the grounds of the Royal Palace in Gangtok at the request of the Crown Prince of Sikkim, Sidkeong Tulku (1879–1914), a close friend of David-Neel and the same man who likely facilitated the lama’s meeting with Bell. In the following vignette, David-Neel provides a useful insight into Barmiok Lama’s approach to knowledge transfer:

Nearly every afternoon he crossed the gardens and went to the villa where the crown-prince lived. There, in the sitting-room furnished according to English taste, we had long conversations on topics quite foreign to Westerners. ... At a short distance from the prince, the Honourable of Bermiag, majestically draped in his garnet-coloured toga, had an arm-chair and a bowl with a silver saucer, but without a cover. ... While the learned and fluent orator, Bermiag Kushog, talked, we were lavishly supplied with Tibetan tea. (David-Neel 1936: 29)

David-Neel’s recollections make it possible to imagine Bell and Barmiok Lama in a similar situation in the Gangtok Residency, engaged in focused conversation and studying the assembled collection of objects intently. While it is tempting to read these respective scenes of collecting as isolated, intellectual encounters, the existing connections between Barmiok Lama, Sidkeong Tulku, David-Neel and Bell alert us to the colonial context that underscored these meetings.

Before entering this scene of collecting, Barmiok Lama had already spent more than a decade as a person of interest to the British, to the extent that he had earned an entry in the colonial publication, *List of Leading Officials, Nobles, And Personages in Bhutan, Sikkim, and Tibet, 1907* (1908), a who’s who of influential figures in the Himalayan region. Members of the Densapa family, including the lama, were included in this publication due to their loyalty to the Sikkim royal family and the significant role they played in negotiating and contesting colonial rule in Sikkim and southern Tibet. Yet, when reading the colonial-sanctioned publications on Sikkim and Tibet that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. Risley 1894; Waddell 1895; White 1909), there is little evidence of the oppression meted out by the British colonial government toward the royal family of Sikkim during the latter stages of the nineteenth century. To find a detailed counternarrative of Sikkim resistance during this period one must turn instead to the accounts in *’bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (History of Sikkim) written at the behest of the ninth chögyal (monarch) Thutob Namgyal (1860–1914)



and the maharani Yeshe Dolma (1867–1910) (Tsering 2012), and translated into English as ‘History of Sikkim 1908’ (hereafter ‘The History’).<sup>8</sup>

The History provides the royal family’s perspective on the British government’s attempts to undermine the rule of the chögyal and the particular divide and rule approach they took in Sikkim, including the considerable role played by the Densapas in that contestation. It records how from 1889, coinciding with the arrival of Bell’s predecessor John Claude White (1853–1919), the Sikkim aristocrats loyal to the chögyal, including Barmiok Lama’s father, were replaced with British supporters and exiled to their family estates, effectively placing them under house arrest. In response, the chögyal made a bid for exile taking a small group of loyal supporters with him towards Nepal. This group included the chögyal’s spiritual advisor, who at the time was Barmiok Lama. The escape plan failed, and the entourage was route-marched back to Sikkim.

The History measures the severity of British brutality in the wake of that failed escape through the treatment of Barmiok Lama. It records how White took it upon himself to severely reprimand the lama for leaving with the chögyal. Although White knew that the lama’s mother was dying at the family estate, Barmiok Lama was placed under house arrest and heavily fined for trying to leave. As a result, he only reached his ancestral home after his mother had died. Barmiok Lama was then intimately embroiled in a power struggle between the chögyal and the British and marked by the British as an unfailing supporter of the man they wanted to oust from the Sikkim throne. Nevertheless, the British were determined to bring the lama into the colonial fold. After 1895, when the chögyal was gradually given back a number of his political powers, the British allowed Barmiok Lama to travel to Tibet and he was included in several geopolitically sensitive imperial events.<sup>9</sup> While Bell

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8 My discussion of this history and its contents is based on copies of what was then the unpublished manuscript ‘History of Sikkim 1908’, written by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma and translated into English by Kazi Dawa Samdup (India Office Records, MSS Eur E78; SOAS Library Special Collections, MS/380072). Since undertaking this research, a lavish annotated volume has been published under the auspices of the Bhutan Royal family. See Ardussi, Balikci Denjongpa and Sørensen 2021.

9 He was included in the following: the Sikkim chögyal’s delegation to Calcutta from December 1905 to January 1906 for the ninth Panchen Lama’s audience with the Prince of Wales; the 1908 Sikkim delegation to Nepal; and the March

had not played a part in the attempted overthrow of the chögyal he had been part of the organizing committee for several of the diplomatic events the lama had been a party to, and so even before Bell wrote down his thoughts on this ‘aloof’ lama, politically he knew him very well.<sup>10</sup>

It is from this destabilizing moment in Sikkim’s history that Barmiok Lama’s material contact with Bell arose. While Bell looked to settle some of the many differences that had been a feature of White’s tenure, the political restrictions put in place by White to control the power of the chögyal would remain highly visible in the distinctive staffing arrangements that existed between the chögyal’s palace and the Gangtok Residency. During Bell’s tenure these two sites, built next to one another but representing very different ideological worlds, would increasingly use the same men to administer their political and diplomatic affairs.<sup>11</sup> Bell would take advantage of these administrative arrangements as he began to document the Tibetan objects he had started to amass. As a result, Barmiok Lama walked across the gravel paths of the Gangtok palace to the Gangtok residency to offer his knowledge to a colonial presence. This colonial context is vital if we are to understand the unequal power relations behind this moment of material knowledge exchange, but it does not define the lama, as is evident when we turn to consider his educational background, knowledge and status.

## The Lama from Barmiok<sup>12</sup>

Barmiok Lama (Figure 8.3) belonged to the most prominent lay family in Sikkim, the Densapas. He was the son of Barmiok Athing Tenzin Wangyal (d.1926), Chief Steward at the chögyal’s palace and one of the

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1910 Sikkim delegation to Calcutta for the thirteenth Dalai Lama’s audience with the Viceroy of India.

10 Barmiok Lama was also likely already assisting Bell in his collecting activities as Bell records in a notebook that the lama gave him a number of manuscripts (‘Tibet Note Book I’: 33, private collection). Although an undated entry the lama’s donation is noted between two entries dated to 1910.

11 See Martin 2012 for an overview of some of these influential men and their backgrounds.

12 This chapter contains a much-expanded biographical account of the lama first published in Martin 2012, made possible by archival research and importantly, two people. Firstly, Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, Research Co-ordinator



**Figure 8.3** Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal (1871–1942) aka ‘Barmiok Lama’. Photograph taken around 1920 (photographer unknown). Image kindly sourced by Tashi Tsering. Courtesy of the Densapa Family.

most influential landlords in Sikkim. Barmiok Lama's half-brother was Barmiok Athing Tashi Dadul Densapa (1902–1988), considered the most important political figure in Sikkim during the twentieth century and a doyen of Sikkimese literary and historical studies.<sup>13</sup> Barmiok Lama was an important Buddhist figure in his own right. Having been recognized as the first reincarnation of one of the four yogis of Sikkim, he held several influential monastic positions. He was head lama of both Simick monastery in eastern Sikkim and Ralong monastery in southern Sikkim. Although he was a Nyingma lama by reincarnation, his family were Kagyupas and followers of the Karmapa. As such he was well versed in the traditions of both Nyingma and Kagyu lineages, an intersection that would have a bearing on his connoisseurial education. His knowledge and status meant he was also appointed as chief Buddhist counsel to the Sikkim royal family and later sat on the Sikkim state council (1917–18). The lama's family was also recognized for their scholarship and famed for their extensive ancestral library held at the family estate in southern Sikkim. This and other libraries contained not only texts dedicated to historical, religious and literary genres, but also treatises and texts on the production and appreciation of Tibetan arts and crafts.<sup>14</sup>

Barmiok Lama was then one of Sikkim's elites, who moved in privileged monastic and aristocratic circles and was widely recognized

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at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, who I initially contacted to see if the 'Barmiok Lama' could have come from Barmiok in Sikkim; she delighted in informing me that her then director, the late Tashi Densapa (1942–2021), was in fact the reincarnation of the Barmiok Lama. She provided various pieces of biographical information. In addition, Tashi Tsering, one of the founding directors of the Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamshala, has shared photographs and information he transcribed from the Densapa family archives relating to Barmiok Lama and has also pointed out several archival sources. For his short biographical account of Barmiok Lama see Tsering 2013a.

13 For a short retrospective of his life, see Tashi 2010.

14 The library was destroyed on 7 April 1973 during the overthrow of the chögyal and the destruction of property that belonged to his supporters: 'The Densapa family home in Barmiok was razed to the ground. Rare *thankas* [*sic*], *ikons* [*sic*], Tibetan brass and bronze, and ancient Buddhist manuscripts—a priceless collection matched only by the Namgyal Institute's treasures—went up in flames' (Datta-Ray 1984: 184).

as a key Tibetan Buddhist leader and intellectual in Sikkim. Via his family estate and his monasteries he gained access to important monastery and private collections of ancient Buddhist statuary, religious implements and tangkhas, as well as high quality silks, porcelain and saddlery.<sup>15</sup> He would have had ample opportunity to study these treasures, appraising and comparing their styles, their metallurgical compositions, and the skill in the casting, incising and setting of precious and semi-precious stones. But it was his travels to some of the great monastic seats in Tibet that likely honed his connoisseurial skills.

In 1896 Barmiok Lama began an extensive tour in Tibet taking in several of the great Nyingma and Kagyu monasteries.<sup>16</sup> The lama travelled first to Mindröling, a Nyingma monastery situated to the east of Lhasa, which Dominique Townsend has described as a civilizational centre for the elite education of the Tibetan world's ruling upper classes (2021: 22). It combined both Buddhist and worldly subjects, with an emphasis on its students acquiring an aesthetic education framed by *rikné* (*rig gnas*) or the *recognized* fields of learning, which include arts and crafts (*bzo gnas rig pa*). This environment would have provided Barmiok Lama with growing expertise in a type of Tibetan Buddhist cultural production that valued worldly arts and sciences as an integral part of a Buddhist education. His learning would have been further deepened that same year when he travelled across central Tibet to Tsurphu, the seat of the fifteenth Karmapa, Khakyab Dorje (1871–1922), and then accompanied the Karmapa to Kham to study with Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, Lodro Thaye (1813–1899), at one of the prodigious artistic and scholarly centres of Karma Kagyu learning, Palpung, in Derge. Palpung monastery was then home to an important regional university, an impressive library and a significant collection

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15 This access extended to his daily life, including the robes he wore. On seeing a photograph of Barmiok Lama (Figure 8.3), Sherab Tharchin, the Changdzo or manager for Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche (b. 1954) remarked that the lama was wearing a very fine cloth made from a wool called *tseter* (*tse ther*), usually reserved for the Dalai Lama (Tashi Tsering, pers. comm., 14 April 2013).

16 The Densapa family papers record that Tibetan border officials at Gnatong treated the Barmiok party with a great deal of suspicion due to their colonial links. They were detained at the border for a year and Barmiok Lama only gained entry after agreeing to sign a contract stating that he was entering Tibet purely for study and monastic training (Tashi Tsering, pers. comm., 13 April 2013).

of tangkha paintings, a rich material and artistic world that the lama would have come to know well. In total the lama spent nine years in Kham and Ü-Tsang, returning to Sikkim sometime between 1903 and 1904.

During his studies and travels, Barmiok Lama gained privileged access to some of the great monastic minds of his generation and trained at some of the most distinctive centres of learning. Critically for this paper, he also had access to many important collections of Tibetan material culture in Tibet. Taking his knowledge, experiences and skills into account, Barmiok Lama can be thought of as not only an important monastic figure and outstanding scholar, but also as someone who gained the type of aesthetic education that would define him as a connoisseur. How then, did his connoisseurial training materialize in the colonial record?

## Recovering Tibetan material knowledge

Bell gave Barmiok Lama a very precise task when he entered the Gangtok Residency on the winter morning of 13 January 1913. During his daily visits over a period of three months, the lama was asked to provide Bell with a spoken commentary on the many unidentified and decontextualized objects that were placed before him. Bell would then translate and record in English the lama's appraisals, including his enthusiasms, uncertainties and expertise. Bell determined what was religious and thus which objects fell under the lama's purview; any objects Bell considered to be secular were appraised and commented on by others (see Martin 2014). Figure 8.4 shows an image of the full description, according to Bell, that the lama provided for the statue of Dorje Chang—this was later typed up (as we see here) and became part of Bell's List of Curios. If we purposely look beyond the Christian positioning that underpins Bell's translation, it is possible to identify a Tibetan classification system (in this case for statues) that sits at a distance from the classification systems later constructed by western Tibetan art historians.<sup>17</sup>

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17 See for example, Von Schroeder (2008: 18–19) for a discussion on Tibetan and non-Tibetan classification systems using stylistic markers. In this chapter, I am solely concerned with how the lama chose to identify this statue and the knowledge he drew on to do so. Peripheral to this study is the western



*tshogs theg pa'i rgya mtsho* by Jigme Lingpa (1729–1798).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, we know that the lama had a number of such manuals, including copies of some of those mentioned here, at his disposal.<sup>20</sup> Several decades after the lama referred to these manuals, they garnered the interests of a number of Tibetan studies scholars who translated, surveyed and aimed to make sense of Tibetan ways of knowing and reading Buddhist statuary through the frameworks offered in such texts.<sup>21</sup> In particular, the works of Lo Bue (1991) and Tucci (1959) are pertinent to this case study as both scholars drew on several manuals to determine Tibetan

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19 I have referred to digitised versions of these manuals available in the Buddhist Digital Resource Centre: Ja Jamyang Tashi Namgyal n.d.; Pema Karpo 1973; Jigme Lingpa n.d. Tucci used an incomplete manuscript of Ja Jamyang Tashi Namgyal's *'jig rten lugs kyi bstan bcos las / dpyad don gsal ba'i sgron me* without colophon. He did not know who the author was and when it was written. This is the same text used by LaRocca who notes five extant versions (2006: 252–63). When writing this chapter, I did not have Tucci's manuscript at my disposal. Instead, I used the Gangtok version published in 1981 in Sñags-'chañ Hūm-ka-ra-dza-ya's *legs par bshad pa padma dkar po'i chun po*. For further readings on the appraisal of *kuten*, see also Sñags-'chañ Hūm-ka-ra-dza-ya 1979: 2–14; 1981: 3–21 (for *sku gzugs brtag pa*), 165–181 (for *sku rten brtag pa*).

20 Barmiok Lama gave Bell copies of two such manuals, both of which were donated by Bell to the British Museum in 1933 (Barnett 1933) and were later believed to have been moved to the British Library manuscript collection. One of them is catalogued: *rin po che bzo yi las kyi bsgrub'i rgyud dang ja dang dar gos chen dang rta rgyud tshugs bzang ngan gyi rtag pa bzhugs so* (n.d.). Donald LaRocca (2006) draws extensively upon this manual in his exhibition catalogue, *Warriors of the Himalayas: Rediscovering the Arms and Armor of Tibet*. The second manual, *bzo rig kha shas kyi pa tra lag len ma yod pa*, has yet to be located in the British Library collection; neither does it feature in E. Gene Smith's 1969 catalogue of the Tibetan holdings at the British Library. However, see *bzo rig kha śas kyi pa tra lag len ma and Other Texts* (1981), a volume that includes the title 'bzo rig kha shas kyi pa kra lag len ma yod pa lags so' (1–20) which closely resemblances the text given to Bell by Barmiok Lama.

21 See, for example, Denwood and Singer 1997; Kreide-Damani 2003; Lo Bue 1991; Tucci 1959. One could also argue that the work of Loden Sherap Dagyab and his 1977 publication *Tibetan Religious Art* was instrumental in establishing this growing interest in Tibetan artistic styles and aesthetics.



methods for identifying the material properties of a statue and a methodological approach to a statue's appraisal, the same methods used by Barmiok Lama.

The lama appears to structure his appraisal following a materially-led tripartite frame of reference for thinking through *kuten* or, bodily religious supports, which Tucci highlights in his translation of an incomplete version of Ja Jamyang Tashi Namgyal's manual.<sup>22</sup> These are the *gyu* (*rgyu*) or material properties; the *rik* (*rigs*) or stylistic varieties (e.g., proportions or type of adornment); and the *ngowo* (*ngo bo*) or identification of whom the statue represents or embodies (for example, the Buddha, a bodhisattva or a Buddhist teacher).<sup>23</sup>

## Gyu

A connoisseur, like Barmiok Lama, would consider two things when determining a statue's *gyu*: the site of manufacture and the materials used in the statue's production. Both the sites of production and the materials indicative of those sites are described in Ja Jamyang Tashi Namgyal's manual and arranged in chronological order, thus the site combined with material properties determines a statue's date.<sup>24</sup> For example, Barmiok Lama made a temporal and spatial appraisal of the statue based on this framework when he described Dorje Chang as *chögyal lima* and *sersang nyingpa*. *Sersang nyingpa* literally translates as ancient gold. Despite the broad nature of the term, it still hints at the lama's understanding of the statue's age. His reference to *chögyal lima* provides greater insight. By defining the statue as 'lima', a metal with the finest red brilliance with a slight yellowish tinge, Barmiok Lama had considered the material makeup of the statue's metal body. In using 'chögyal' as a precursor he had also seen something else. In Pema Karpo's classificatory system the term *chögyal lima* identifies a statue as coming from Tibet and being produced during the reign of one of the three Tibetan kings. Pema Karpo then goes on to attribute a set of specific stylistic and material qualities to the statuary of each king. It

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22 See note 19. Tucci cross references and elaborates on his translation with Pema Karpo's manual, which he surmises, and which Jigme Lingpa, in turn, drew on extensively for his own work.

23 Tucci 1959: 181.

24 These are India, Upper Hor, Uigur, Tibet, Old Chinese, Hor and New Chinese (Tucci 1959: 181).

was following such criteria that Barmiok Lama narrowed down his opinion further and dated the statue to the period of Songtsen Gampo ‘or a little later’, tentatively placing its production in the oldest of the three periods of chögyal lima.

## Rik

The lama’s apparent hesitancy in dating Dorje Chang firmly within Songtsen Gampo’s reign can be explained by his observation of stylistic markers consistent with two distinct periods of statue making. In Ja Jamyang Tashi Namgyal’s manual the connoisseur is directed to look for particular attributes in a statue from the Songtsen Gampo period:

[F]ace wide, body gentle: upper and lower part of face large, cheerful in appearance and face a little elongated, well-shaped nose, eyes long, the lips accurate, the shape good, body big, hands and feet soft, folds of the garment small; generally the shape of the casting is marvellous. The seat is like that of South Indian images, but they may also have neither throne nor cushion. ...

Usually the garment has chiselled designs ... they are fire-gilded or polished with resin or greasy material or not polished at all. (trans. Tucci 1959: 185)<sup>25</sup>

The manual then notes how statues from the time of Trisong Detsen should be differentiated from this earlier period of chögyal lima:

[T]hey have short face, style of the fingers not accurate; they are polished with greasy matter or resin and have coloured inlaid work; the fusion of the lower edge is not accurate: generally many

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25 My quotation of Tucci’s English translation of Ja Jamyang Tashi Namgyal’s manual omits the transliterated Tibetan terms Tucci provided in parentheses in favour of providing the original Tibetan in full from *Sñags-chañ Hüm-kara-dza-ya* 1981: 176(5)–177(2): *zhal ras stod smad rgyas zhum med pa la/ cung zad dkyus ring sku yis tshugs legs pa/ sha nyams che zhing sor mo sgros gtsang ba/ na bza’ dar dpyangs lhug cing gos ’khyud rings/ pad ma la sogs lho phyogs pa dang tshungs/ na bza’ ber dang zhabs la phyag gsol ba/ dbu brgyan gsum pa brtse mo nang du sbug/ de ’dra’i lugs kyang ’ga’re ’byung bar snang/ phal cher na bza’ bzung ris yod pa mang/ gdan med pa dang ’bol gyi rnam pa’nag srid/ tsha gser byugs pa’i che chung sna tshogs yong/.*

of them have triple diadem; the images of the *C'os rgyal* [chögyal] have no turban, the tresses of the hair hang down to right and to left. (trans. Tucci 1959: 185)<sup>26</sup>

In making his decision we can see how the lama recalled many attributes ascribed to a Songtsen Gampo period statue, but also took note of the presence of several stylistic features present at the time of Trisong Detsen, for example, the triple diadem and the positioning of the statue's hair that placed the figure in a later period.

Barmiok Lama may not have commented on the quality of the chiselled work present on Dorje Chang's garments, but we know from other descriptions in the List of Curios that the lama would have taken this into account. For example, in List of Curios No. 32, the lama is recorded explicitly guiding Bell in how to assess a statue's manufacture:

Barmiok Lama thinks this image a good one. ... The workmanship is good in that details e.g on the soles of the feet, the borders of the robe etc. are carved in accurately and neatly. In inferior work the impressions made by the hammer and the file will show on the image.<sup>27</sup>

Using a statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, the lama pointed out the quality of the chisel work, drawing Bell's attention to the high calibre craftsmanship that left no visible trace of the metalsmith's labour on the statue's surface. Here we see that the lama understood the varying qualities of a statue's craftsmanship through reading the statue's materiality and therefore knew how to differentiate between what might be considered marvellous and the not so marvellous.

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26 The original Tibetan in full from *Sñags-'chañ Hūm-ka-ra-dza-ya* 1981: 177(4)–177(7): *chos rgyal khri srong lde btsan dus kyi lha/ gzhan rnams snga ma dag dang mtshungs pa las/ zhal dkyus cung 'thung sor mo'i sgras mi gtsang/ byu rtse byugs zhing khra rnams mtshon khra bkye/ bsham gyis lugs kha cung zad mi gtsang zhing/ phal cher dbu brgyan gsum pa mang ba yin/ chos rgyal sku la la thod med pa la/ dbu skra lan bu g.yas g.yon gnyis su 'chang/.*

27 List of Curios No.32: a figure of Buddha Shakyamuni, given to Bell by Sidkeong Tulku as a wedding present in January 1912, current object location unknown.

## Ngowo

Comparative analysis was also vital to the lama as he came to a decision on the statue's ngowo. As someone who has curated Tibetan material culture for a number of years what strikes me about Barmiok Lama's identification and grading of Dorje Chang is the complex form of comparative analysis required to make this appraisal. It involved a process of comparing and contrasting that necessitated a mental back catalogue of statuary gathered over many years of study.<sup>28</sup> The authors of the manuals discussed here expected their readers to have this type of ability, as is evident in the direction given on how to read the differences between Songtsen Gampo and Trisong Detsen statuary. Barmiok Lama is recorded using this practice when he makes note of the additional lotus in each of Dorje Chang's hands. With this notation we witness him mentally searching, firstly for attributes that would allow him to put a name to the statue placed before him and, secondly, for any other statues of Dorje Chang he had seen before that he could now use for the purposes of comparison. He decided that this Dorje Chang was unusual and worthy of Bell's attention. In turn, his insights allow us to pause and pay attention to this statue today.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown Barmiok Lama to have possessed many of the skills considered necessary if one is to be recognized as a connoisseur of Tibetan Buddhist material culture. Not only should a connoisseur be a *taktap khepa* (*brtag thabs mkhas pa*), or a skilled appraiser, but they must also be *nor nyamchöpo* (*nor nyams chod po*), that is, skilled in differentiating between the poor and excellent qualities in a treasure, and *gyu nyamchöpo* (*rgyu nyams chod po*), skilled in evaluating the materials and/or qualities of a treasure (Tsering 2013b: 126). According to these overlapping terms a Tibetan connoisseur needed an eye for the material and to be equally capable of judging an object's aesthetic worth, meaning that the values inherent in a Tibetan Buddhist

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28 In her review of *Tibetan Art Towards a Definition of Style* (Denwood and Singer 1997), Deborah Klimburg-Salter notes a lack of comparative stylistic analysis techniques used in the volume. She goes on to ask: 'What is style when it is discussed by Tibetan traditional sources?' (Klimburg-Salter 2000: 84).

object did not, and still do not, rest entirely with its religious efficacy, but also in its material properties and artistry. This combination of skills produced what the scholar Tashi Tsering calls the ability to, ‘appreciate not only the beauty of these masterpieces but also the deep significance of the traditions responsible for their creation’ (2013b: 126). From this we can infer that early twentieth century elites like Barmiok Lama continued to draw on a longstanding aesthetics-based literature and lexicon to understand the merits of the Tibetan Buddhist materiality that surrounded them. By acknowledging the presence of Tibetan connoisseurial manuals in this scene of collecting, we also see that Tibetan material knowledge was known to colonial agents—and by extension western scholarship—much earlier than is currently acknowledged.<sup>29</sup> Arguably this knowledge received less attention because it was passed on in oral form in the scene of collecting; it would only be recognized much later, when the types of texts the lama drew upon were deposited in Europe’s libraries and museums or became available via publications produced in Europe and North America.

Many western scholars have noted the vagueness or imprecise nature of these connoisseurial manuals as a barrier to using them as a tool for classifying Tibetan Buddhist statues. What we might draw from Barmiok Lama’s appraisal of Dorje Chang is that the manuals were only one part of a connoisseur’s repertoire. As the lama’s words show, he relied on layers of material knowledge—the material, the textual and the comparative—to bring insight to the figure placed before him. Following the identification of many of the statues in the *List of Curios* by a succession of curators and researchers (including myself), I have been able to study the same statues that the lama held in his hands as I attempted to understand his material knowledge. I have come to the conclusion that none of the forms of knowledge used by the lama could have been considered definitive or intended to be used alone. Each was meant to be ‘read’ in conjunction with the others to produce a kind of material knowledge and understanding that required one to be in the presence of a statue if one was to benefit from consulting the manuals.

I argue that understanding Barmiok Lama’s material knowledge is made possible by staying in the scene, pausing over small details and following his gestures. He is visible to us due to moments recorded

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29 Tucci believed the Tibetan connoisseurial manual he translated was the first known example in western hands (1959: 180).

and archived by a colonial collector—moments underscored by a cruelty and violence that ran through the colonial presence in Sikkim during the lama’s lifetime. Yet we can also acknowledge that his knowledge was sufficiently valued by Bell that he wanted the lama’s contributions to his own ways of knowing to be recognized and held in the archive.<sup>30</sup> In many ways the List of Curios and the objects recorded within it make visible the complex and intimate interplay between individuals in the Himalayas and Tibet at a time when an appreciation of one man’s connoisseurship sat alongside the suppression of his sovereign’s right to rule. Yet, one can consider much more than coloniality if one follows the lama rather than the colonial collector. Tracing the lama’s movements over the course of this chapter, we have seen that Barmiok Lama’s life was shaped by Tibetan Buddhist worlds and in places well beyond the jurisdiction of the political officers of Sikkim and the British government in India. As a centre of power in his own right, Barmiok Lama drew on and was part of a wide-reaching religious and aristocratic network, whose intellectual and temporal leadership was located in Himalayan and Tibetan power places—Ralong, Simick, Mindröling, Tsurphu and Palpung—several of which no colonial officer had the right to travel to. Bell, the colonial collector, was not the centre of this story; he was just one of several foreigners who Barmiok Lama was asked to educate due to their colonial presence in his homeland.

Finally, then, what form of Tibetan material knowledge does Barmiok Lama represent? His intersecting background as a Lepcha, a Sikkim aristocrat, a Tibetan Buddhist of the Nyingma and Kagyu schools, and someone who resisted colonial power and defended the sovereignty of his country presents us with a question over what and where we might consider authentic Tibetan material knowledge to come from and who gets to produce it. In identifying ‘Barmiok Lama’ and locating his knowledge, skills and experiences to a specific space and time, the museums and libraries that now hold his connoisseurship in their archives have the opportunity to recognize the precise nature of his material knowledge and how it came to be present in those institutions.

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30 In Bell’s last will and testament (Archives of National Museums Liverpool) he left a number of objects to the British Museum, stating (my emphasis), ‘*and I direct that the explanation of such of the said curios ... may be furnished from my typed volume entitled “List of Curios”*’.

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# 9 *Menjor* tools and the artisanal epistemology of making Sowa Rigpa medicines in Spiti

Stuti Singh  and Barbara Gerke 

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**Abstract** In this chapter, we explore material aspects of making Tibetan medicine in the north-western Himalayan region of Spiti, focusing on the artisanal relationship between Sowa Rigpa medical practitioners (amchi) and their tools in their practice of *menjor* (medicine compounding). Approaching amchi and their practices only through language and texts is, we argue, limited and overly anthropocentric. Instead, we ask: What emerges from the interrelation between amchi and their *menjor* tools, specifically their grinding stones, in terms of their materiality, potency and artanship? Inspired by the work of Pamela Smith on ‘artisanal epistemology’ we focus on the intimacy between the practitioner and their tools that develops over time through the sensory engagement of the artisan with the materials worked with. This implies long-term skill development and practice, as well as constant innovation, through which practitioners adapt to changing environments, economic constraints, technologies and the availability of things. How can we learn the artisans’ ‘material languages’ and understand the significance of their tools? How are these tools embedded in amchi Buddhist practices? Drawing on ethnographic examples from Spiti, we argue that *menjor* tools become ‘alive’ through the qualities of the materials worked with, as well as being consecrated through ritual practice.

**Keywords** artisanal epistemology, medicine-making tools, Spiti, Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan Medicine), *menjor* (*sman shyor*), grinding

## Introduction

Entering the workspace of an amchi,<sup>1</sup> a practitioner of Tibetan medicine or Sowa Rigpa,<sup>2</sup> in their private practice in the Himalayas, we encounter many different materials used in the compounding of medicines, a process called *menjor* (*sman sbyor*).<sup>3</sup> Amchi engage with tools throughout the process of making, storing and distributing medicines: from grinding tools, sieves, brushes made from Himalayan rabbit or fox legs and paint brushes, to plastic jars and bags and leather and cloth pouches. At the centre of all these tools is the grinding stone, on which substances are ground by hand. Drawing on fieldwork in Spiti, this chapter ethnographically explores grinding stones and some accessory tools as active players in the making of medicines. We approach these tools as ‘living archives’ (Smith 2004) through which *menjor* knowledge is transmitted and medicines are made within the larger cosmologies of Buddhist ritual and Sowa Rigpa healing.

Spiti, a 130-kilometre-long valley in the Western Himalayas south of the Ladakh Changthang area, has been minimally studied in terms of Sowa Rigpa due to its remoteness, inaccessibility during long winters and peripheral status in Tibetan medical recognition. Since Florian Besch’s doctoral research on the impact of monetization on amchi in Spiti (2006, 2007), only Indian anthropologists Stuti Singh and Mridul Surbhi (this volume) have researched Sowa Rigpa in the region. Our analysis is limited to small-scale cottage industry practitioners who are trained and practice outside the Sowa Rigpa medical institutions currently registered under the Government of India’s Ministry of AYUSH

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- 1 We use the non-italicized term amchi (from the Mongolian *em chi*), which by now is a standard anglicized term, like lama or rinpoche.
  - 2 Tibetan medicine refers to the heterogeneous medical traditions of Tibet, practised widely across Himalayan regions in India, Nepal and Bhutan, where it is known as Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*; Science of Healing).
  - 3 In line with the general conventions of this volume, Tibetan terms are transliterated at first mention, following the ‘Wylie’ system. However, for phonetized terms, we use spellings that reflect Spiti dialect, which do not always match the spellings of the “THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan” (Germano and Tournadre 2003).

(Blaikie 2016; Kloos 2016).<sup>4</sup> They work in what is often termed ‘the periphery’ of Sowa Rigpa (Kloos and Pordié 2022), the ‘centre’ of which has been Lhasa for Tibetans (at least since the seventeenth century). In India, the Sowa Rigpa medical institutions recognized by the Government of India function as the ‘centre’, since amchi also receive recognition through them.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the rise of the Sowa Rigpa industry (Kloos et al. 2020), amchi artisanship in the rural Himalayas still exists in Lahaul and Spiti, and Ladakh (Besch 2006, 2007; Blaikie 2013; Kloos 2004). However, since Ladakhi amchi were instrumental in gaining recognition of Sowa Rigpa as an ‘Indian system of medicine’ under AYUSH (Blaikie 2016), they have moved more and more to the ‘centre’ of Sowa Rigpa in India. In contrast, the Spiti amchi introduced in this chapter have remained at the periphery of this movement because they work in remote high Himalayan rural areas and often grind their medicines, largely without electric tools. In Spiti, there is only one practising female amchi. She does not prepare her own medicines but has them supplied from senior amchi and her mentor. Most male amchi prepare their own medicines at their respective pharmacies.

In Spiti, the grinding stone emerged as the most intimate tool between amchi practitioners and their medicinal materials. The many hours that amchi spend hand-grinding their herbs and minerals fosters an enduring relationship between their bodies and their grinding tools. Throughout our fieldwork, the grinding stone was also the primary tool offered to us to ‘try’ and engage with menjor. These stones are considered sacred, never stepped on and carefully stored in designated places. Before use, they are purified and consecrated with prayers and mantras.

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4 AYUSH handles the education, research and recognition of several systems of traditional medicine: Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani medicine, Siddha and Sowa Rigpa, and Homeopathy. Sowa Rigpa was officially recognized by AYUSH in 2010.

5 These are the Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamshala and its Men-Tsee-Khang Sowa Rigpa College and Hospital in Bengaluru, the National Institute of Sowa Rigpa in Leh, the Department of Sowa Rigpa at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Choglamsar, Chakpori Medical Institute in Darjeeling, the Faculty of Sowa Rigpa at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath and the Faculty of Sowa Rigpa at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok.

Taking inspiration from and building on the work of Pamela Smith (2004), we explore the ‘material languages’ of the grinding stone and other menjor tools, that is the ways in which knowledge is expressed in the process of their use. To coherently analyse our ethnographic observations and interpretations, we focus on ‘artisanal epistemologies’ (Smith 2004), emphasizing how artisans gain knowledge through engaging with the materials of the natural world, evident in specific menjor tools. We pay attention to the ‘lived theories’ (Smith 2010: 48) emerging from these tools as amchi work with them, and also ask how the tools become an extension or part of a larger theory of the use of materials as potent ingredients in Sowa Rigpa. Which specific Sowa Rigpa theories shape amchi’s use of tools in substance processing? Do tools and how they are engaged with alter the properties or potencies of substances?

## Artisanal epistemology in Sowa Rigpa contexts

Although a focus on artisanship and materials is new in Sowa Rigpa studies, historians of science have extensively explored the relationship between artisans and their tools and materials. While their research relies on textual sources, amchi offer a living example of artisanal menjor practices that can be studied ethnographically. Theoretically, we are inspired by and contribute new insights to the work of historian of science Pamela Smith, who highlights three points in her writings on artisans in early modern Europe, which we find pertinent in Himalayan Sowa Rigpa contexts for several reasons.<sup>6</sup>

First, in her article on late-medieval and early modern metalworking, Smith (2010) emphasizes that many substances artisans worked with were considered ‘alive’ and transformable. Artisanal practices were ‘neither rote nor random nor untheorized’, but ‘tied to a kind of lived theory’ that was not necessarily ‘articulated in words’ (Smith 2010: 48). These ‘lived theories’ of early artisans reveal the underlying principles of their work with materials. Taking the example of making the red pigment vermilion, Smith unearths the vernacular ‘science’ of matter and meaning, showing how knowledge flowed through the

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6 This is also discussed in more detail in forthcoming publications based on the FWF-funded Sowa Rigpa Potent Substances project at the University of Vienna (<https://potentsubstances.univie.ac.at/output/> [accessed 27 July 2025]).



interconnections between making things out of and with matter and artisans' engagements 'in life forces and in the relationship of matter to spirit' (48).

Not unlike those vernacular knowledges, Sowa Rigpa theories of the five elements, the three *nyepa* (*nyes pa*)<sup>7</sup> and the eight *nüpa* (*nus pa*; potencies) engage with substances through their qualities. Amchi employ menjor techniques to bring out the potent aspects of substances that then become beneficial and medicinal (*sman*). *Nüpa* or potency encompasses a substance's general potencies, which refer to sensorial parameters (heavy, oily, cool, blunt, light, coarse, hot and sharp) and are linked to the six tastes (*ro drug*) and the three post-digestive tastes (*zhu rjes gsum*) (Tidwell and Nettles 2019).<sup>8</sup> Amchi consider all of these parameters when manually combining and grinding substances into multi-compound powders, which are sometimes further processed into pills to preserve the *nüpa* for longer. The materials of the tools also alter *nüpa*. For example, electric machine grinders are deemed to 'heat' ingredients, thus making their *nüpa* warmer. Moreover, grinding substances on a consecrated stone while reciting mantras is believed to enhance the overall *nüpa* of the medicine. Thus, knowing and making are deeply interlinked in artisanal menjor and Buddhist ritual practices.

Second, Smith's descriptions of metalworkers show an intimacy between practitioner and materials through the sensory engagement of the artisan with the material worked with. In the Making and Knowing Project (Smith 2016), Smith reconstructs early recipes with her students. She highlights trial and error and experimentation as a route to skill and practice refinement in the absence of complete textual instructions. Similarly, amchi in Spiti rely significantly on oral transmissions from their teachers, but they also experiment with techniques and tools, adapting to local environments. For example, the flow of river water shapes the surfaces of stones and the sounds of stones underwater reveal signs of a potentially good grinding stone. Finding a good stone requires skills. Some grinding stones are individually carved with additional engravings to enhance grinding techniques,

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7 These are the three key physiological parameters in Sowa Rigpa, embodying to varying degrees the five elements earth, fire, water, wind and space (Tidwell and Nettles 2019).

8 Each of the six tastes is predominated by two of the five elements and shapes the *nüpa* of each substance (Tidwell and Nettles 2019: 132–3).

revealing further refinement of practice and an intimacy between each amchi and their grinding stone.

Third, Smith explores historical art objects by ‘following non-textual materials and processes’ (Smith 2004: 7), emphasizing and respecting forms of ‘artisanal literacy’ (Smith 2004: 8). Amchi are usually literate in Tibetan and have to imbibe medical texts and knowledge through reading, reciting and memorizing (Tidwell 2017). The fundamental Tibetan medical work, the *Four Tantras* or *Gyüzhi* (*rgyud bzhi*), which dates to the twelfth century and earlier, is still partially memorized by Sowa Rigpa students. In this chapter, we explore a different kind of literacy, illustrating how the intimacy amchi create with their tools leads to a form of material or artisanal literacy. For instance, amchi handcraft their menjor tools in creative and individualized ways, passing them on to the next generations as embodied forms of a living archive within which menjor knowledge is embedded. For example, the textual knowledge of the *Four Tantras* can be perceived as being inscribed in an inherited grinding stone, transmitting the lineage of the amchi along with the accumulated blessings of their healing practice.

Pertinent to all three points is Smith’s insight that even textual ‘imprecisions’ can make sense and that we can learn the artisan’s ‘material language’ (2004: 8) by respecting such imprecisions as an enskilment embedded in their ways of making. We explore, for example, how amchi identify the best quality tools for grinding and learn the techniques to work with them, as well as how tools used in the grinding process affect the nüpa of the substances ground together. Before going on to discuss these and other forms of artisanal epistemology in relation to amchi tools and their materiality, we turn first to an introduction of the field sites and our methods.

## Field sites and methods

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork by Stuti Singh in the summers of 2022 and 2023 in amchi villages of the Spiti valley near Kaza and in the remote Pin valley southwest of Kaza. Singh collaborated closely with Barbara Gerke throughout the conception, research and writing of this chapter. Gerke visited amchi in Ladakh from July to October in 2018 and in the Dharamshala region annually between 2008 and 2020 and again in April 2023. Together, Gerke and Singh visited Spiti amchi in the Dharamshala region in April 2023. However,

all fieldwork material presented here was collected, recorded, transcribed and translated by Singh.

Our discussions are based on open-ended interviews conducted in English, Tibetan, Hindi and, in some cases, the local Spiti dialect with the assistance of a local interpreter and recorded with the amchi's consent. Each of us engaged in hands-on participation in the grinding process—Gerke in Ladakh and Singh in Spiti—to gain first-hand understanding of menjor techniques. The amchi's artisanal literacy involves a lengthy apprenticeship, surpassing any ethnographic immersion. Our brief but impactful trial-and-error experiences in the field nevertheless provided valuable insights into what artisanal literacy might entail and how it is acquired through sensory engagement with materials and tools.

### Spiti as a field site for Sowa Rigpa research

Spiti is surrounded by what are now the western Tibetan areas of the PRC and the Indian regions of Kinnaur, Lahaul, Kullu and Ladakh. This led to its name, Piti, the 'middle land' between India and Tibet along the Silk Route. Spiti is divided into three valleys. Stod Valley stretches from



**Figure 9.1** A digitally drawn approximate map of Spiti and the villages where the amchi mentioned in this chapter live. Map by Stuti Singh.

Losar to Shichling, Sham Valley from Mane to Sumdo, and Pin Valley from Attargo to Mud (see Figure 9.1). Pin Valley houses the only Nyingma monastery (Kungri), whereas the rest of Spiti is largely affiliated to the Buddhist Geluk (Dhankhar, Tabo and Kee) and Sakya traditions (Komic). The three valleys are home to around 12,500 people (District Lahaul and Spiti n.d.). During an initial survey in 2022, Singh met fifty amchi while working with the Indian Council of Medical Research. The majority of the data presented here are from Singh's field visit of July 2023, when Pin valley alone had around seventeen practising amchi.<sup>9</sup> The health services provided by these amchi are essential due to the region's isolation. The available biomedical primary health centres and the community health centre in Kaza are insufficient, and patients often travel to Kinnaur, Mandi or Shimla for basic essential biomedical services such as blood tests and X-rays. Moreover, this access to biomedical health care is frequently hampered by bad weather and closed roads.

In Spiti, amchi are also called *amji*, *ahwa* and *lharje*. They still work within a donation and barter system, although monetary exchanges have increased (Besch 2007). Patients offer food, money or work time, assisting amchi with their agricultural activities—all amchi are also farmers with land sustaining their livelihoods. Usually, amchi hold a high social status in their communities and often belong to *khangjen* (landlord) families who traditionally own land. Earlier, members of a *khangjen* family would marry into another *khangjen* family. Singh encountered only one amchi who belonged to a *khangjen* family but did not possess land.

In the past becoming an amchi was challenging for ordinary individuals, since texts were not easily available and only a few people could afford them. Even if students managed to borrow texts, obtaining raw materials not found in Spiti, such as the three myrobalan fruits, posed financial challenges as they had to be bought from herb markets in lower areas of Himachal Pradesh. Singh interviewed a range of amchi, from novices to seniors with fifty years of experience. All amchi presented here underwent Sowa Rigpa training through a mentor–mentee system and were practising at the village level.

With her long-term and well-established rapport with amchi, Singh was able to stay at some of their homes, record their views and photograph their tools. This allowed her to understand their intimate

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9 For additional details on the nine amchi mentioned in this chapter, see Table 9.1 in the appendix.

relations with their tools and texts. She also participated in grinding her own medicines during a personal consultation with Amchi Sonam Dorje in Ka.

## The grinding process as the centre of menjor

Amchi in Spiti are skilled artisans. They primarily prepare powders called *chema* (*phye ma*), which they sometimes turn into round hand-made pills called *rilbu* (*ril bu*); the latter have a longer shelf life than chema, which last only one month and then begin to lose their fragrance and potency. One of an amchi's central activities is therefore grinding, for which they use specific tools. Our focus here is on stone tools and grinders, and some accessory tools such as brushes, and the intimacy amchi develop with them throughout their life cycle. What is the significance of the material characteristics and lineage of grinding stones, and of their sacredness, cleanliness and purification? And how do amchi experience the strength of a stone, the heat from an electric grinding machine and the quality of a brush?

### Materials matter: Sounds, surfaces and strength in the making of grinding stones

In Spiti, Singh observed two traditional grinding tools (Figure 9.2). The nether stone is a flat rock with a rough surface, which is called *mandah*, *mantah* or *mandoh* in the Spiti dialect and *mendo* (*sman rdo*) in Tibetan, meaning 'medicine stone'. The handheld stone tool used to grind substances on the mandah is the muller or pestle, called *dozul* (*rdo sho*). These variously sized round river stones are chiselled on one side to create a rough surface for grinding. Stones serve as versatile tools across the Tibetan and Himalayan world, not only in menjor, but also in the kitchen to grind spices, in art to grind pigments and in construction for pounding mud and polishing floors (see, for example, Grothmann 2011).

The material characteristics of rocks used for making a mandah are important for amchi since they affect the grinding process. Singh found that when amchi were sourcing rocks from their surroundings, they paid particular attention to their sound, surfaces and potential strength. These material nuances have particular effects on menjor practices and processes. Following Smith, we view these methods of identifying an appropriate rock for making a mandah as a form of



**Figure 9.2** Mandah and dozul at the pharmacy of Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk and Amchi Sunil Bodh in Poh, 2023. The rabbit leg at the bottom right is used as a brush. Photograph by Stuti Singh.

artisanal literacy. In *The Body of the Artisan* (2004), Smith describes how artisans engage with materials through hands-on techniques and sensory engagement with their natural surroundings rather than acquiring knowledge solely through reading and writing. Under their teacher's guidance, an amchi will find a suitable rock and carve it into mandah. They directly engage with materials in nature, exploring and understanding them through their senses—evaluating sounds, observing exposure to flowing water, sensing potential rough or smooth surfaces—and accordingly carve them into suitable menjor tools. This can be illustrated through some specific examples.

When an amchi identifies a suitable rock for a mandah in nature, they listen to the sound it produces when struck, using this as an indicator of quality and potency. In Poh village, Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk and Amchi Sunil Bodh were using an inherited mandah (Figure 9.2), which Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk described:

This particular mandah was prepared in our Sham Valley by acquiring a locally available rock called *rundoh*. The rock used for making the mandah is identified by the sound it produces while giving it a blow with another rock or metal. It should sound like a metal bell.

These amchi had developed a particular sound technique using an additional tool—a rock or a piece of metal—to test whether the potential rock could be made to sound like a metal bell, which they considered a sign of good quality.

A second criterion in the making of a mandah is its surface quality: grinding stones can be made rough or smooth, each with its own advantage. Amchi Chhewang Namgyal from Khar village had a grinding stone that he chiselled, making it rougher in order to make grinding easier (Figure 9.3 a). Most amchi had learned from their mentors how to source and chisel a mandah. Amchi Tsering Tashi from Tangti Gogma carved additional horizontal lines on the surface of his own mandah to further ease the grinding process (Figure 9.3 b). Thus, each amchi experiments and designs his own mandah, implementing his own experience in the process.



**Figure 9.3** a) The mandah used by Amchi Chhewang Namgyal, Khar, 2022. b) A mandah carved with horizontal lines shown by Amchi Tsering Tashi in Tangti Gogma, 2022. Photographs by Stuti Singh.

In Kibber, Amchi Chhering Dorje emphasized the smooth surface of his mortar and pestle set, which were brought by his great-grandfather from Tibet where he studied Sowa Rigpa. The mortar is a hollowed-out heavy stone with a very smooth surface (Figure 9.4). The smooth surface supported him in crushing rough substances, such as salt and rough raw materials. It also helped him make finely ground powders after the herbs had been initially ground in a machine or on a mandah. According to his experience, the smooth surface allowed for both very fine grinding of pre-ground materials and pre-grinding of very rough materials. He also used an iron barrel and pounder (Figure 9.5 a), a



**Figure 9.4** Amchi Chhering Dorje from Kibber and his grinding mortar and pestle brought by his great-grandfather from Tibet, 2023. Photograph by Stuti Singh.

mandah (one of the oldest tools in his pharmacy) with a dozul, and other accessories (Figure 9.5 b).

In terms of his mandah's material qualities, he shared his knowledge of how he knows whether a rock is strong enough to become a mandah. The strength of a rock occurs naturally and is influenced by the flow of river water that the rock is exposed to. The more water





**Figure 9.5** a) An iron barrel and pounder. b) A mandah with a paintbrush, dozul and a few prepared formulas at the pharmacy of Amchi Chhering Dorje, Kibber, 2023. Photographs by Stuti Singh.

flows across the rock, the harder the rock becomes. Determining the hardness of a rock helps amchi choose the right stone—one that does not require re-carving every year. Thus, the strength of the stone is assessed by whether it needs repeated re-carving to maintain its rough and chiselled surface over long periods of grinding. Amchi Chhering Dorje explained:

My mandah [Figure 9.5 b] was made here in Spiti. The particular rock is found under the water source. The rock should have been under the flowing stream of water for a long time, only then can it be used. This kind of rock is very strong. We have to carve its surface to facilitate the process of grinding. The carving stays for a very long time on the kind of rock that we have. If the stone has less hardness, a practitioner will have to re-carve the rock lines every year.

We have shown that amchi from different valleys source their grinding stones from different sites, including rivers and rock mines. The qualities of flowing water, the rock’s hardness and its sounds, and the additional lines carved into it constitute the materiality of a mandah. Considering the rock merely as a ‘material’ would be limiting because a stone is continuously evolving and generated through the substances surrounding it. Its materiality, defined by Tim Ingold (2007: 1) as processual and relational properties, is significant in amchi artisanship.

Since only a specific rock with a certain amount of strength can become a mandah, its quality, assessed by its sounds, surface and exposure to running water, becomes alive and relational. These attributes (sound, surface, strength) intensify during the grinding process, discussed next.

## Grinding as a process

The shared grinding experiences of Spiti amchi illustrate what Smith would call artisanal literacy, which is non-textual. Observing amchis' grinding methods and tool handling allows us to understand their material language, defined by Smith (2001: 76) as an intimate relationship with materials and the manipulation of materials. Spiti amchi are quite exceptional in their literacy in reading and writing Tibetan, despite primarily speaking Hindi and various Spiti dialects. But while they understand Sowa Rigpa texts and use classical formula texts for compounding medicines,<sup>10</sup> their menjor craft possesses its own language embedded in tools and emerging from oral transmission of medicine-making.

With increased experience, amchi become swift in their movements during the grinding process. They know how to efficiently grind ingredients of different textures. While grinding may look easy, these skills require years of training until they become ingrained in the artisans' body. Smith (2004: 6) argues that for artisans in Early Modern Europe, 'experience and the production of things were bound up with their own bodies'. Similarly, we can see that among amchi the stones shape the hand of the artisan, and the artisan's body shapes the form of the stone. Neither should be viewed as a separate entity in the process of grinding and making medicines. The amchi's body is part of the material process of menjor, with each practitioner having unique grinding movements resulting in embodied knowledge.

There is a significant amount of unwritten menjor knowledge passed on orally that emphasizes the importance of students watching and copying their teachers through a prolonged process of observation, imitation and repetition. This aligns with Tim Ingold's perspective on making: 'Making, in other words is copying; it is not the realization of a design that has been copied. ... Whatever variations may be introduced in the process lie in the dynamics of the making, not in errors of

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10 See Gerke 2018 for an analysis of classical Tibetan medical formulas.



**Figure 9.6** a) Iron barrel and pounder; b) Amchi Lobzang Tenzin with his mandah in Mane Gogma. 2023. Photographs by Stuti Singh.

transmission’ (Ingold 2000: 372). Each amchi has to find and develop their own grinding technique. For example, Amchi Lobzang Tenzin (Figure 9.6 b) explained that his technique depended on the pressure applied to his wrist and the way he thrust down the pounder on the ingredients:

I have been grinding medicines for ten years. Sometimes, I grind four to five formulas in a day. When my father taught me grinding on a mandah, he said that I have to apply pressure on my wrist while grinding with a dozul. The pressure should be applied both ways, outward and inward. While grinding, first grind the items for some time, then sieve them, then grind them again. This should be repeated until you obtain a fine powder. First, I struggled thrusting down the pounder [Figure 9.6 a] at a right angle. Now I can do it even if I am blindfolded. Now I can keep the barrel between my legs; I do not have to hold it with my hands. Now, it has become my habit.

Through a long process of observation, imitation and repetition, the apprentice transforms into an expert. Amchi Sunil Bodh compared the grinding performed by an expert with that of an apprentice trying to develop his skills.

Most raw materials are ground by *meme* [grandfather] as he is well versed with the grinding techniques. I grind the raw materials in the manual machine, and he grinds them over the mandah. Sometimes I try to do it but, when I do, I create a mess with my amateur moves on the mandah which throws raw materials here and there. When *meme* does it, he controls his movements in such a way that he does not lose any substances. *Meme* is very careful about not wasting materials while grinding.

The terms of his comparison gain in significance when the precarious economy of amchi and the preciousness of raw materials are taken into consideration. Expertise is defined in relation to ‘not wasting materials’, which offers us insight into the value amchi attribute to their raw *materia medica* substances and how this shapes their close and careful relationship with materials.

Thus far we have explored grinding stones and related skills to show the intimate relationship amchi develop with their tools and how their skills and the materiality of tools merge in the process. Amchi also acknowledged that grinding affects the *nüpa* of substances due to elemental interactions between materials. In the following, we discuss different grinding tools and their effect on the *nüpa* of medicine.

## Grinding skills, tools and their effects on *nüpa*

Amchi Sonam Dorje referred to a copy of the menjor text *Jewel Necklace of Immortality* (*'chi med nor bu'i phreng ba*) to select the substances for one formula. He placed all ingredients onto the mandah without weighing them (Figure 9.7 a), explaining that the main ingredient should be four times the amount of all additional ingredients. Then, he ground up his medicines and brushed them together with a fox leg (Figure 9.7 b).<sup>11</sup>

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11 Fox and rabbit legs were commonly used as brushes before plastic brushes became available. We saw them in both Spiti and Ladakh.



**Figure 9.7** a) Amchi Sonam Dorje from Ka grinds all ingredients of one formula together on his mandah, 2022. b) Amchi Sonam Dorje uses a fox leg to brush the ground-up medicine, 2022. Photographs by Stuti Singh.

While Amchi Sonam Dorje was grinding, it appeared to Singh as if the dozul was dancing over the mandah. He handed the dozul to Singh for her to try grinding herself. She initially presumed that the grinding stone was lightweight. However, holding it, she soon realized its heaviness. One surface was convex, the other plain and rough. Both were used: the convex surface for pounding the materials into smaller pieces and the plain surface for grinding. Operating under the assumption that a heavy stone would require more pressure, Singh's first attempt resulted in the materials bouncing off the mandah. She realized that it was not only friction between the stones that was grinding the materials, but also the immense strength applied to the stone along with her wrist movements. Developing such skilled moves, as explained by Amchi Sonam Dorje, would clearly demand years of practice and imitation: 'This only looks easy; it actually requires intense muscular strength that I project on the grinding stone. The skill comes after many years of grinding medicines.' Moreover, some amchi consider the act of grinding as having a significant effect on the substances and their potency or *nüpa*. Amchi Sonam Dorje talked about his own approach: 'I prefer the mandah for grinding as it does not affect the *nüpa* of the formula, whereas the heat generated by electric machines increases the heat of the formula, which also spoils the taste of the medicine.'

While acknowledging the superior fragrance, taste and potency of hand-ground substances, some Spiti amchi opted for machines to ease



**Figure 9.8** The electric grinding machine of Amchi Chhering Dorje, Kibber, 2023. Photograph by Stuti Singh.

their workload. For example, Amchi Nawang Tsering from Kibber, who occasionally employed an electric grinder, also thought that it increased the heat of the formula, warming the *nüpa* of the medicine. While observing medicine-making in Dharamshala, he noticed that freshly machine-ground medicines felt warm, which he thought affected their *nüpa*, which also became more ‘warming’. Amchi Chhering Dorje (Figure 9.4) inherited most of his tools but bought an electric grinder (Figure 9.8) in 2017 which he used when he had no time to hand grind medicines. Nevertheless, he underscored the importance of hand-grinding as a way to enhance the *nüpa* of his medicines when interacting with patients.

The nüpa-enhancing power of hand-grinding became evident during Singh's visit in July 2023. While attending to patients, Amchi Chhering Dorje took some medicinal powder (previously ground with his machine) from a steel container and re-ground it on his mandah. He said: 'This increases the nüpa of the medicine. It is good to grind the formula once more on the mandah before giving it to the patient. It is like adding a blessing.' He also explained: 'The lineage tools hold a lot of strength and power, which I believe contributes to the nüpa of the medicine.' After a few minutes of grinding, he packed the powder in a sheet of paper and handed it to the patient with instructions on how to take it. Here, integrating the process of grinding directly into a doctor-patient consultation setting intensified the potency of the medicines. This made us reflect on how the materiality of the mandah becomes even more relational in a situation where the amchi, his lineage, the nüpa of the substances and his patients all come together in the act of grinding, generating blessings.

Some amchi opt for a manual grinding machine as a compromise, aiming to retain potency while saving time. Amchi Sunil Bodh and Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk from Poh village purchased a manual iron grinding machine (Figure 9.9). They preferred to avoid electrical grinders as they believed they 'increase the heat of the medicine which results in less efficient medicines'. Amchi Sunil ground grasses and



**Figure 9.9**  
A manual grinding machine at the pharmacy of Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk and Amchi Sunil Bodh in Poh, 2023. Photograph by Stuti Singh.

hard ingredients in a manual grinder before further grinding them on the mandah.

Amchi employ machines to ease their work but acknowledge the importance of manual grinding in preserving the *nüpa* of the formula. Amchi Mindol Chhering summarized how the mandah produces the most potent and aromatic medicines compared to electric grinding machines. His villagers assisted him in manually grinding medicines, emphasizing that the mandah produces the most potent medicines when compared to modern tools. He said:

If we use the mandah then we can produce the best quality of medicine; the speed of a grinder burns the aroma. The medicines prepared on the mandah are the most potent. I also have an electric grinder, but I only use it to mix the harder fruits of Indian gooseberry (*amla*) and *myrobalan*.

To sum up, amchi carefully distinguished between manual, electric and hand grinding techniques, evaluating each in relation to the substances' *nüpa*, material characteristics and practical *menjor* time. These evaluations were also embedded in ideas of purity and cleanliness, collectively shaping the artisanal epistemology that guides amchi *menjor* practice.

### Purity and sacredness

For amchi the grinding stone is more than a functional device; it is also a sacred space where they recite mantras and visualize certain deities, infusing substances with blessings while grinding them. Similar to archaeological findings suggesting a material link to ancestors' lives through stone tools (Harrison 2010: 536), for amchi, the mandah manifests the continuity of lineage and heritage, believed to enhance the *nüpa* of the medicines. As we shall see, in this process, notions of cleanliness, purity and sacredness merge with understandings of *nüpa*. Some of these elements became clear during several discussions with Amchi Chhering Dorje in Kibber, who explained:

When I start to prepare medicine, I begin with worshipping in my temple. Then, I will clean my medicine room. I take out all the containers of the raw materials, then I sit in the centre and chant the



mantra of the Menla [Medicine Buddha].<sup>12</sup> I also offer a lamp to our village deities. While preparing medicines, I keep chanting mantras. ... Tools that we use for medicine making are kept in a clean place as they are something related to our Menla. ... [T]hey cannot be placed anywhere. ... We cannot disrespect them. I take extra care of my tools because my son will become an amchi in future. He will learn from me how to take care of our tools.

Amchi Chhering Dorje here tells us that the cleanliness of tools is important for amchi, not just in terms of sacredness, ritual practice and potency, but also because these tools are a tangible manifestation of the living archive of medicine making to be passed on to the next generation. Moreover, amchi clean their pharmacy to prevent formula contaminations that could negatively impact patient health. We detect two kinds of 'cleanliness' here, a spiritual purity and a sense of hygiene.

The senior Amchi Nawang Tsering of Kibber believed that the mandah is an embodiment of Sowa Rigpa knowledge and thus should be kept clean. He explained how cleanliness is connected to nüpa:

First of all, if I do not clean the mandah, I will commit a sin. The knowledge embodied in the Sowa Rigpa scriptures [*Four Tantras*] is consecrated in the mandah. The mandah has read all the words that were passed on by Menla. If it is not clean, then the nüpa of the medicine will decrease.

Singh found many amchi expressing the idea that clean and pure medicines are more effective for patients. But beyond this, the mandah is regarded as an embodiment of Sowa Rigpa knowledge. Not only is cleaning the mandah equivalent to worshipping the Medicine Buddha; the grinding stone itself is considered a material manifestation of all his knowledge. If the mandah is not clean, it is considered a transgression against Menla, impacting the nüpa of the medicines ground on it. Amchi Mindol Chhering from Sagnam related how he combines various purification practices:

When I have to make medicine then I have to clean the mandah, as well as perform a purification. First, I will wash it with soap

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12 Menla (sangs rgyas sman bla) is the (shortened) Tibetan name for the Medicine Buddha.

properly, then dry it with a cloth. Then, I will perform *sangshu* [fumigation]<sup>13</sup> by using *shukpa* [juniper].<sup>14</sup> If it is not available then I will use Potala [Tibetan commercial] incense. I also request Menla: 'Please purify my tools!'

Amchi Mindol Chhering understood the importance of cleaning and cleansing in menjor in terms of both hygiene and spiritual purity. In this regard, soap and incense become important materials for purification. Some amchi prioritized cleaning menjor tools with water over their ritual purification. For example, Amchi Lobzang Tenzin from Mane Gogma emphasized:

I wrap up the mandah when it is unused. Otherwise, insects and mice will urinate on it. ... It can be cleaned by simply washing it. We can use shukpa, but nowadays we can also wash it, then sun dry it. Cleanliness is important. How can I give medicine from an unclean mandah? Then the person will become more ill.

The menjor tools are kept covered when not in use and washed before medicines are prepared on them. Amchi Lobzang Tenzin's approach reflects a concern for potential contamination through unhygienic behaviour, prioritizing the well-being of his patients.

Other amchi pointed to the importance of both spiritual and material aspects of purification. Amchi Sunil Bodh, the grandson of Lobsang Gyatuk, explained the significance of using accessory tools to remove impurities from raw materials and reciting mantras to remove different kinds of impurities:

In Sowa Rigpa, we consider grinding tools including mandah, dozul and rabbit legs as very important. They are believed to remove all sorts of impurities from raw materials. As you know, raw materials may have all sorts of things which may be considered clean or

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13 *Sangshu* (*bsangs shug*) refers to smoke worship during which fragrant substances are burned to produce smoke, which is believed to purify the environment. In Tibetan this practice is usually known as *sang söl* (*bsangs gsol*), but the Spiti dialect utilizes the term for juniper (*shug*).

14 Juniper trees are called *shukpa* (*shug pa*); their branches are burned for purification.

not. These things will be purified by a mantra while grinding them over mandah.

A rabbit leg is used to brush ground-up powders across the mandah (similar to the fox leg in Figure 9.7 b) and can be used to sweep impure substances (e.g., dust, sticks, little stones, dirt) off the mandah. A dozul can also remove impurities, for example, when it is used for crushing calcite rocks. During cleaning, darker pieces in the calcite are separated from and brushed off the white calcite pieces (Gerke and Van der Valk 2022). However, there are other types of ‘unclean things’ that necessitate ritual smoke or mantra purification.

In sum, we note that spiritual smoke purification, mantras and concepts of hygiene and cleanliness—both in terms of cleaning the mandah and removing impurities from raw materials—are important to Spiti amchi to varying degrees. Tools, medicinal substances and amchis’ ideas about (un)cleanliness converge in these purification processes and in efforts to make clean medicines.

Some amchi also used medicinal leftovers to cleanse the environment. For example, Amchi Chhering Norbu from Sagnam village preserves left-over medicinal substances at his temple, which also serves as the medicine room in his house. He said that nothing should be wasted but can be used for a sangshu (smoke purification) (Figure 9.10). He encouraged his patients not to discard unused formulas, asserting that materials with healing properties can be offered in a sangshu and purify the environment.

Menjor tools endure through generations and pass through cycles of use and disuse. This raises questions about the purification practices associated with these tools. Amchi Chhering Dorje reflected on the ephemeral nature of the sacredness of menjor tools:

I think when amchi do not practise medicine they do not bear any obligations to keep their tools clean and take appropriate care of them. They are not chanting the Menla mantra near them; therefore, I think it does not affect them much. I take extra care of my tools because my son will become an amchi in future. He will learn from me how to take care of our tools. If he will not continue the tradition, then these tools will be kept somewhere. Gradually, the tools will become useless.

Here, purity and cleanliness obligations, as well as ritual purification, are tied to active Sowa Rigpa practice. Amchi are obliged to clean and



**Figure 9.10** Discarded raw materials used during smoke purification rituals by Amchi Chhering Norbu in Sagnam, 2023. Photograph by Stuti Singh.

maintain their menjor tools routinely only when they are actively practising Sowa Rigpa. Upon retirement or cessation of medical practise, an amchi is exempt from these obligations unless passing the tools on to the next generation. This shows that the power and nüpa of the Menla embodied in the mandah, not unlike all the purification practices discussed in this section, are also relational and dependent on a living and continuing practice.

Amchi also use some unique, inherited multipurpose tools during menjor. They are characterized by a material language that is not expressed in writing but through doing and making. For example, Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk inherited some rare animal horns. These were sealed at one end with a wooden cork and at the other end with a piece of cloth (Figure 9.11). He was storing precious raw materials such as amber in them. Such horns are also ground up and used as medicinal ingredients. These horns thus merge the medicinal properties and artisanal qualities of materials. In other words, materials can have various properties that artisans know how to harness for different needs.



**Figure 9.11** Inherited animal horns used for storing precious raw materials at the pharmacy of Amchi Lobsang Gyatuk and Amchi Sunil Bodh in Poh, 2023. Photograph by Stuti Singh.

## Conclusion

Our ethnographic examples of amchi grinding tools illustrate that materials and meanings both endure and change over time. Tools not only materialize craftsmanship but also lineage and the attendant potency of accumulated amchi knowledge. Every tool is embedded into different techniques and experiences of form and touch, skill and artisanship, and the material knowledge of their users and producers—all in the pursuit of making good medicines. Engaging with Pamela Smith's work on artisanship sharpens our methodological senses, pushing us to become more aware and astute in observing how amchi handle their tools and substances and how this affects their ways of knowing about menjor. At the same time, Sowa Rigpa is a living medical tradition, and our examples are of contemporary knowledge in practice. As ethnographers we were able to meet and talk with amchi and directly observe material aspects of their literacy. This chapter thus contributes a new angle to Smith's ideas on artisanal and material literacy.

As we have seen, amchi imbibe medical knowledge through various forms of literacy, which not only weaves oral and textual knowledge into materials but also attends to the merging of properties of medicinal potency or *nüpa* with properties of the tools through the materials themselves. Theories of potency, as well as elemental and 'humoral' conceptions of the body and the environment, reveal entanglements of materials and substances imbued with qualities that engage with the natural world in 'pre-enlightenment' ways, and are reflective of broader cosmologies. For amchi, tools are tangible objects that also have material and social agency and affect *nüpa* and lineage identity. The river stone's transition to a mandah and the grinding of a formula into a patient's prescription are not just linear processes of amchi practice, but a living archive of accumulated knowledge. Amchi bring forth and enhance the *nüpa* of medicines through continuous engagement with tools, substances and their spiritual practices. Taken together, these activities can be understood as assemblages of artisanal epistemologies. They emerge from long processes of watching, imitating and experimenting, and combine oral, textual and spiritual elements, as well as a deep engagement with materials in the natural world.

The relationship of amchi to their mandah is key to making medicines. It involves acts of purifying and honouring. As we have seen, they considered the mandah as a place where grinding, knowing,

making, praying and purifying all come together to create a potent medicine. The mandah is also a place where textual knowledge of the *Four Tantras* is inscribed and imbibed while grinding. We could almost call the mandah a mnemonic device, similar to the *Four Tantras* (Tidwell 2017), since it has ‘read all the words which were passed on by Menla’, in the words of Amchi Nawang Tsering of Kibber. As an ‘active reader’, the mandah emerges as a living archive of both textual and oral knowledge, where materialities coalesce in the act of grinding, thus empowering the amchi to make—and the substances to become—good medicines. Pills are work-intensive but might become forms of long-term storage to carry nüpa across distances to far away patients, while powders directly transfer nüpa through their freshness, are easy to consume, and also require less labour (see Surbhi and Van der Valk, this volume). Here material language emerges as assemblages of menjor techniques and tools to create the optimal and most potent medicine for specific geographical, climatic and economic labour conditions.

Nowadays, amchi in Spiti prefer plastics and steel over leather as materials for storing their substances and medicines to prevent mould and moisture. While they seem pragmatic in adapting plastic containers for storage, they seem less inclined to move from the mandah to an electric grinder. Some amchi use it to save time, but consider it a tool that changes the nüpa, just like the mandah with lineage power. Also, the habit of freshly grinding or re-grinding medicines in front of the patient as nüpa-enhancing is a ritual that emphasizes the doctor–patient relationship. This focus on individualized Sowa Rigpa formula making is still central to amchi practice in Spiti. However, the changing economy, in which increased living expenses make amchi hesitant to enlarge their pharmacies or invest in expensive electric grinders, also plays a role. In closing, we thus note the remarkable ability of amchi to adapt to shifting circumstances, their menjor tools remaining both a constantly evolving living archive and source of continuity for the making of potent medicines in a changing world.

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## Note on the authors

Stuti Singh (BSc Biomedical Science and MSc Anthropology), conducted her Master's dissertation on 'Traditional healing practices for snake-bite among Saharia tribe: A particularly vulnerable tribal group'. She published her findings through a review article 'Traditional healing practices for treatment of animal bites among tribes of India: A systematic Review' in the *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* (2023) and a book chapter entitled 'Indigenous populations, ethnomedicine and sustainability: An Indian Perspective' for the volume *Indigenous People and Nature* (2022). Subsequently, she served as a Scientist B at the Indian Council of Medical Research and was Principal Investigator on the project 'Amchi of old days and modern amchi'. In 2023 and 2024, she collaborated with Barbara Gerke on the project 'Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals'.

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## Appendix

Table 9.1: Additional notes on the amchi mentioned in this chapter (summarized by Singh)

**Table 9.1** Additional notes on the amchi mentioned in this chapter (summarized by Singh)

	Name	Age (in years, in 2023)	Lineage	Village	Valley	Generations known to practice Sowa Rigpa	Mentor (name or relation)	Winter migration site for medical practise	Current disciples (name or relation)
1.	Lobsang Gyatuk	85	Dotta Karbo	Poh	Sham	5	Elder brother	NA	Amchi Sunil Bodh and a student from Australia
2.	Sunil Bodh	41	Dotta Karbo	Poh	Sham	5	Grandfather	NA	NA
3.	Chhewang Namgyal	52	NA	Khar	Pin	NA	Amchi Kun-sang Dorje	Kinnaur	Younger brother
4.	Tsering Tashi	51	NA	Tangti Gogma	Pin	NA	Amchi Chhimed Choden	NA	NA
5.	Chhering Dorje	47	Ahwa	Kibber	Stod	8	Amchi Zotpa	NA	NA
6.	Lobzang Tanzin	38	Shukpachen	Mane Gogma	Sham	2	Father	NA	Elder brother
7.	Sonam Dorje	70	NA	Ka	Pin	NA	Father-in-law	Mandi	Amchi Chhering Norbu
8.	Mindol Chhering	50	NA	Sagnam	Pin	4	Father	Kinnaur	NA
9.	Chhering Norbu	42	NA	Sagnam	Pin	2	Father	NA	NA



# 10 Communicating Visual Literacy through Drawing Illustrations of National Dress, Buddhist Monastic and Ritual Attire in Bhutan

Mareike Wulff 

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**Abstract** This chapter proposes that ethnographic drawings in the form of technical illustrations can serve an important communicative function in material culture studies. Using examples of illustrations of clothing that I produced as part of an ethnographic study of a community Buddhist festival in Bhutan, it demonstrates the productive potential of using technical illustrations as a counterpart to text. The chapter is framed around the concept of visual literacy, defined as the human capacity acquired through socialization in specific cultural contexts to make sense of or ‘read’ the visual environment by seeing and interpreting it. I show how technical illustrations not only have the potential to reproduce emic visual literacy, but can also be designed to break down the layers of visual knowledge and meaning contained in items of material culture and communicate them to visually non-literate readers.

**Keywords** Bhutan, Tibet, Himalaya, Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Material Culture, Ethnographic Drawing, Illustration, Visual Literacy, Attire, Dress, Monastic Robes, National Dress, Ritual Attire, Digital Humanities, Visual Anthropology, Ethnography, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Visual Studies, Masked Performance, Visual Culture, Himalayan Art, Ethnographic Method, Ethnographic Practice.

## Introduction

We are surrounded by a natural and human-made environment that many of us visually sense and interact with on a daily basis. By seeing, as well as using our other senses, we intuitively evaluate forms, shapes, sizes, materials, textures, colours and ornamentation, and thereby make sense of and interpret them. We acquire this capacity through socialisation in specific social and natural environments, developing what can be conceptualised as ‘visual literacy’, that is, the capacity to see, process and decode the appearance of material things (Debes 1969). As an ethnographic researcher studying Vajrayana Buddhist tantric festivals in Bhutan, I have been interested in visual literacy as one layer of villagers’ everyday general knowledge. Accessing this knowledge requires visual literacy in the slightly different sense of ‘understand[ing] how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them’ (Baldessari, Rashid and Wong 2004, cited in Elkins 2007: 2). This raises an important question, relevant to the ethnographic study of material culture more broadly: How can we best communicate this visual layer of knowledge to audiences who have not (yet) acquired literacy in the material worlds that we study?

This chapter discusses the value of ethnographic drawing as a means to visually communicate research findings in the field of material culture studies. More specifically, it highlights the affordances of technical illustration as a subcategory of ethnographic drawing, showing how it offers novel ways to reproduce and thereby communicate the culturally contextualized sense experience of seeing and thereby making sense of visible things. I argue that ethnographic drawings have the potential to do more than simply complement academic written text. Drawings and text can instead be treated as counterparts and interrelated to represent and communicate the visual characteristics of material culture in ways that help to overcome the limitations of the written word. Written descriptions of material culture and its qualities evoke mental images, but these images do not rely solely on the level of precision and detail provided in the text. To a certain degree each mental image is determined by the life experience of the reader. If the reader has never seen or otherwise experienced a certain object, there is a relatively high risk that they might misconstrue its appearance in their mind. Adding visual images to an academic text can significantly reduce this risk, but there still remains a potential gap between how an image is ‘read’ by emic and etic audiences. As I will show, technical

illustrations can be designed to reproduce and unpack the layers of visual knowledge and meaning that an object contains, making these visible to visually illiterate readers.

The methodological intervention that this chapter makes is based on a discussion of the illustrations I designed for an ethnographic study of an annual communal tantric Buddhist festival in Bhutan (Wulff 2021, 2023), most of which depict the attire and masks worn by festival participants. The purpose of these illustrations was, first, to reproduce participants' emic visual literacy and, second, to communicate this to readers of my academic outputs. For Bhutanese festival participants, the items and costumes to which I refer in my work are part of their lived experiences; they have often been acquainted with each piece from early on in life. But for most non-Bhutanese readers these objects—and the layers of knowledge they contain—might be entirely unknown and, at best, only partially familiar. My illustrations translate and transfer used and living objects into two-dimensional technical line drawings with the aim of making relevant layers of information contained in the objects visible to the etic reader as a counterpart to my written text.

I start the chapter by providing some basic context on my ethnographic study and my engagement with the concept of visual literacy, before discussing why I chose to design illustrations rather than using photographs as the visual counterpart to my written text. The second part of the chapter provides a more detailed discussion of how I created and designed the illustrations and why. I lay out the technical process of producing the illustrations via a manual drawing technique combined with digital processing and vector graphic software, and then take a step back to address the more general decisions that I made about the aesthetics and style of my drawings. I finish with some specific examples that highlight what I see as the main affordances of this kind of technical illustration.

## The ethnographic study: A communal Buddhist tantric festival in Bhutan

The illustrations I discuss in this chapter were drawn by me as part of a long-term case study conducted in Bhutan between 2011 and 2019 for my doctoral research project, which documented and analysed a tantric Buddhist festival in the village of Korphu, Trongsa district

(Wulff 2023). Situated in the very centre of Bhutan, Korphu is a rural village in the southern foothills of the Black Mountain range in the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park. The immediate community consists of approximately three hundred permanent inhabitants, who speak Khengkha<sup>1</sup> and identify as Khengpa. The residents still mostly practice subsistence agriculture based on rice and corn farming, but also generate some income from cash crops such as cardamom and oranges. The extended community includes members who live in the capital or abroad, working (and studying) as civil servants or in private companies. A few community members reside as monastics in the surrounding state monasteries (*rdzong*) in Zhemgang, Trongsa and Jakar.<sup>2</sup>

The Korphu community celebrates an annual tantric Buddhist festival called the Korphu Drub (*sgor phug sgrub*; lit. Korphu Attainment). Communal festivals like the Korphu Drub are common throughout the entire Tibetosphere, with either monastic or lay Buddhist communities being the main convenors and participants. In general, these festivals involve Vajrayana Buddhist liturgical action or *choga* (*cho ga*), masked performances or *cham* (*'cham*) and in many cases various folk performances. Although there exists a huge variety in these tantric festivals, they mostly share common aims, namely to ward off potential threats to the community through apotropaic rituals, and to foster communal spirit and luck-generating dharmic activity.<sup>3</sup> The

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- 1 Khengkha is an East-Bodish language (van Driem 2001) and one of the twenty-four identified languages of Bhutan. It has no writing system and several local dialects. Its less than 40,000 speakers are spread across Bhutan along a horizontal belt covering the dzongkhags (districts) of Trongsa and Sarpang in the West, Zhemgang in the centre and Mongar in the East, the latter being where the majority of Khengkha speakers live.
  - 2 Terms provided in italics in brackets are Dzongkha, Bhutan's national language. Since written Dzongkha uses the Tibetan script, Dzongkha terms are transliterated following the 'Wylie' system, in line with the convention followed in the rest of this volume. Phonetic spellings of Dzongkha proper nouns follow the common Romanized spellings. Since there is no standardized phonetic transcription of Dzongkha terms, I generally follow the "THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan" (Germano and Tournadre 2003), with the exception of terms such as *kira* (*dkyi ra*) that have standard Romanized spellings.
  - 3 I use the term 'luck' here since this is the term generally used by English-speaking Bhutanese. It encompasses various kinds of 'lucky life circumstances' that



Korphu community festival lasts for up to one week and takes place in the winter months during the agricultural break. It starts on the fifteenth day of the eleventh month in the Bhutanese calendar, which usually falls sometime between mid-December and mid-January in the Gregorian calendar. The festival's liturgical actions are based on the teachings of the Bhutanese Nyingma *tertön* (*gter ston*; discoverer of spiritual treasures) Pema Lingpa and most of its cham masked ritual performances also relate to Pema Lingpa. The presiding tantric master (*rdo rje slob dpon*) is commonly a high-ranking monk from the Pema Lingpa lineage invited to the festival from outside. All other liturgies, rituals and performances are carried out by lay members of the Korphu community.

All community members are expected to participate in the Korphu Drub from early on in their lives until their deaths. The annual festival is therefore a life-long companion and a major recurring event in the individual's as well as the community's life (Wulff 2019). During the celebrations, the entire community is involved in preparing food and offerings for the Buddhist choga and communal meals or in one of the several groups of performers. The latter include those performing the Buddhist liturgies, the masked cham dancers, the women who perform folk dances and songs called the *mani amo*, a pair of historical warriors named *bepön beyok* (*rbad dpon rbad g.yog*) and the jester-like *atsara* (*a tsar a*) performers.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of the illustrations I produced in the context of my research depict the attire and masks worn by the participants and performing groups during the festival. These costumes include the national dress of Bhutan (*rgyal yong gyon chas*) worn by lay people, the Buddhist robes (*chos gos*) worn by monks and liturgy performing villagers, and the ritual garb (*'cham chas*) of the cham performers who embody local and Buddhist deities or other mythical and historical beings that appear during the festival. With the exception of a few characteristics that are Korphu-specific, all of this attire is common across Bhutan. The national dress is the formal attire worn by all Bhutanese lay people when entering government and public buildings or

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they might wish for when conducting the festival, including (among others) good health, fortune, a good career, a visa approval and a positive outcome in college exams.

4 For more information about the *atsara* and cham performers' attires see Wulff 2021.

participating in any official function. Although the Korphupa follow the Nyingma lineage of Pema Lingpa, their monastic dress is mostly based on the dress regulations of the Drukpa Kagyu state monk body. Most of the costumes worn for the ritual dances are also standardized and can be found in many places across Bhutan where cham performances are carried out.

## Visual literacy

Methodologically, my point of departure for using illustrations of material culture as part of my study was the question of how best to record and communicate a distinct way of knowing that I conceptualize using the notion of visual literacy. The main research objective of my ethnography was to understand how members of the Korphu community made sense of their community's and other Bhutanese festivals through material culture. Best described as an ethnography informed by phenomenological approaches, the study drew on the lived experiences of community members, who are lay Buddhist practitioners with mostly no training in Buddhist philosophy or tantric practice. It outlined their everyday knowledge, which is gained through socialization in the community and wider Bhutanese context through the active practice of the festival, rather than through formal education (Wulff 2023). This knowledge encompasses both 'everyday knowledge' (Berger and Luckmann 1991) and embodied knowledge.

In their influential book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1991) propose that academic, scientific or expert knowledge acquired through formal education is only a small portion of what we know. Most of our knowledge derives from primary socialization. The embodied knowledge that I looked to capture through drawing was the knowledge derived through participants' life-long practice of using the festival's material culture, including the costumes that participants wear. To give just one example, when the women present see a *kira* (*dkyi ra*)—a wrap skirt or dress that forms the main component of Bhutanese women's national costume—each knows what it takes to wrap and fold the garment around herself and her acquaintances, how the material feels on the body, and maybe even how to weave the fabric out of which the *kira* is made. In other words, I wanted to capture their visual literacy.

Visual literacy can be broadly understood as the human capacity to visually read and thereby make sense of the visual environment

by seeing it—both in the mind’s eye and as it plays out in real time—due to one’s socialization in a specific social and natural environment. Depending on disciplinary perspective and field of study, scholars and educators have produced different, albeit often complementary, definitions of visual literacy. Some have been primarily concerned with visual literacy as a set of competencies that can be formally taught, while others (including myself) are more interested in visual literacy as an ability innately acquired through personal experience and socialization (Peña and Dobson 2021: 1). A tentative definition was offered in 1969 by John Debes (1914–1986), a technical writer who worked for the Eastman Kodak company and conducted youth training in communication and photography (The Curved House n.d.):

Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. (Debes 1969: 27)

In the context of the Korphu Drub, visual literacy refers to the ability to discriminate and interpret the visible material culture of the festival, such as the costumes that people wear, but also the interplay between participants and their actions and configurations in space. The visually literate participant-observer for instance understands the social hierarchy among the entities present during the festival—who include both human beings and the intangible beings performed by the mask dancers—by ‘reading’ how they are arranged in the courtyard and their body language and gestures as they interact with each other, as well as their attire.

The usefulness of visual literacy as a term is under debate, since in everyday use the word literacy tends to connote competence or knowledge gained through formal education or training and is most commonly associated with the ability to read and write. As James Elkins (2009: 1) points out, there is ‘an unavoidable contradiction involved in saying that we “read” images’. I embrace this contradiction in the context of my research, as I understand the ability to ‘read images’ to be a counterpart to the ability to ‘read texts’. As noted by Debes (1969), ‘literacy’ alludes to the fact that specific knowledge has to be learned. In general, reading and writing are considered the most basic skills

we commonly acquire through formal education in early life. But we also develop other competencies through socialization, including the ability to read our visual environment and thus make sense of it.

Visual literacy in the Bhutanese context of (formalized) attire encompasses (among other things) the ability to identify standardized gender identities and the occupation, rank and status of the wearer through colour codes, particular pattern cuts, symbols and the types of fabrics used. For the most part, the process of learning to ‘read’ this attire is not formalized through school education or training in Buddhist philosophy, which both involve reading texts. Yet, it is one reason why and how the Korphupa have profound individual and collective knowledge of their festival. As Debes (1969: 27) points out, visual literacy does not stand alone, but involves the integration of other sensory experiences, such as the way that a kira feels on the body. It also involves the dimensions of time and memory, as highlighted by Sinatra (1986: 5) who defines visual literacy ‘as the active reconstruction of past experiences with incoming visual information to obtain meaning’. When a Bhutanese sees a piece of their material culture they relate events, sensations, places and people to the object in question.

The visual literacy of the Korphupa in Bhutan, which is built in and with their visual environment, is an ability that an outsider arriving in the place lacks—this is what made my study necessary in the first place. Since my aim was to lay open what Korphupa understood when participating in their festival, I needed to find a way to reproduce and communicate (in parts) what they ‘read’ when seeing the material culture of their festival. The ability to intentionally communicate or ‘write’ through visuals has been central to the concept of visual literacy among educationalists, who have defined it ‘as a group of skills which enable an individual to understand *and use* visuals for intentionally communicating with others’ (Ausburn and Ausburn 1978: 291, *emphasis added*). The idea that visual literacy encompasses the ability to visually write as well as to read the visual environment has important methodological implications. As I go on to discuss in the next section, it pushes us to ask how we can best communicate the findings of material culture studies to readers who are potentially visually illiterate in the material worlds that we study.

## Communicating visual knowledge

It is a skill to produce precise written descriptions of material culture, especially if this culture is (visually) unknown to the reader. We usually imagine the unfamiliar in correspondence with what we already know. A Bhutanese ritual garment that has nothing in common with the reader's horizon of visual experience is likely to be misconstrued in the reader's mind if they encounter the garment solely through a written description. It was therefore vital that I include in my study substantive visual material to accompany my written analysis. Moreover, my hypothesis and methodological approach were built upon the assumption, among others, that Korphupa who are socialized in Bhutanese society are able to understand a number of material aspects of the festival because they possess visual literacy. They are able to read their visual environment and know or understand the meaning of certain material culture through the sense experience of seeing it. Therefore, it seemed important to find a way to reproduce this visual layer of knowledge visually for the reader.

During my field research, I took thousands of photographs to document the material culture that I wanted to discuss. Initially, I thought to include this photographic documentation in my study. The problem was that most readers would probably not have acquired the same level of visual literacy in the Bhutanese cultural context as the Korphupa. Indeed, opening up this type of knowledge to the visually illiterate reader was one of the study's aims. Trying to reproduce the sense experience of the Korphupa solely through photographs presented two key challenges. First, photographs contain many layers of information that are difficult for the non-literate viewer to disentangle. A photograph of a performer donning festival attire, for instance, contains information about the individual social actor, the action, several garments and accoutrements worn together, the natural environment (e.g., time of day, weather), bystanders and physical arrangements and orientations, to name the main elements. When overwhelmed by so many visual impressions at once, the non-literate viewer has no means to discern which visual markers are important and which can be disregarded.

Second, photographs lack information that is 'visible' to any literate viewer, who naturally adds information in their mind based on their knowledge and experience. Through interviews and informal conversations, I found that when the visually literate viewer sees someone donning a scarf in a specific colour that demarcates a certain

rank in the Bhutanese administrative hierarchy, they know about the different-coloured scarfs for other ranks and therefore immediately understand how to categorize the person in front of them. One Korphu woman who sees another donning a folded skirt knows how it feels to wear the dress and how to fold it around her own body. On seeing a traditional home-made garment, a Bhutanese might complement the image with the experience of a weaving loom and the (paper) pattern of the garment in their mind, as much as they are aware of the given name(s) of the garment.

In short, in order to communicate the visual layer of Korphupa knowledge, I needed to reproduce the visual sense experience, but at the same time unpack the many layers of information it contained and add information that could not be visually seen. As I describe in the following section, I set out to achieve this by designing illustrations that would allow me to reduce the many layers of visual information stored in the ‘visual reality’ of a Korphupa and add information not visible in photographs.

## Designing illustrations for precise communication

In designing the illustrations, my aim was to create images that literally drew attention to and visualized the details of the material culture I was describing and analysing in my written text. The Latin term ‘*illustrare*’ can be translated as ‘enlighten’, ‘illuminate’, ‘light up’, ‘make clear’ or ‘elucidate’, but also as ‘embellish’ (Glare 1982: 375). Although I do not understand my illustrations as mere ‘embellishments’ (‘pretty, but irrelevant’, as my dictionary puts it), they only unfold their full potential in combination with the text, just as the text can only fully be understood together with its visual counterpart. The illustrations that I designed are more accurately ‘illustration sheets’, that is, compilations of several single two-dimensional illustrations assembled on one sheet, which refer to one topic or unit of meaning. As such they are close to the (old) meaning of a ‘plate’ or ‘Schaubild’ in German. In this section I describe how I designed and created these illustrations for the best communicative results.

To understand a garment and how it is made and worn, one needs to see it from different perspectives. Before drawing an object, I chose visual resources as models (see ① in Figure 10.1), selecting them from visual footage in my own photo and video archive, on the internet and in other publications, as well as any available objects. To produce one



1

- Selecting/searching for footage: photographs and objects
- (Understanding the object)



2

- Pencil Sketch
- Fineliner pen drawing on translucent paper



3

- Taping the drawing on a pure white A4 paper
- Scanning the drawing
- Cleaning the drawing and increasing contrast with AdobePhotoshop



4

- Converting the .jpg into a vector image in AdobeIllustrator

**Figure 10.1** The technical process. Illustration by the author.

illustration (or one illustration sheet) containing all the essential information for my description and analysis, I needed to compile selected information from many photographs, discarding other details shown in these images in the process. Aside from the conceptual process of understanding and deciding which details to draw, I had to take proportion into consideration. I used Adobe Illustrator to layer component illustrations of masks and garments on to naked ‘paper dolls’ (a technique to which I will return). Each component piece of attire had to match the proportions of my naked dolls and the other garments when worn together. That is why I decided to use transparent tracing paper, which I often taped to my computer screen with masking tape to trace the outlines of the dummy and then over draw it with the garment in question. I drew these sketches with pencil and then re-drew the main lines with black fine liner (see ② in Figure 10.1).

The next step was digitalization: I ‘cleaned’ the scanned illustration in AdobePhotoshop and heightened the contrast (see ③ in Figure 10.1). I then copied this AdobePhotoshop raster graphic into Adobellustrator and converted the image into a vector graphic (see ④ in Figure 10.1). Vector graphics have several major advantages: they can be scaled in all needed sizes and filled, and stroke colours can be added, changed and made translucent without quality loss. The aesthetic of the line drawings changes slightly during the conversion process. While the hand-drawn aesthetic remains, the images look still slightly ‘straightened’.

The first objective in designing the illustrations was the drastic reduction of complexity in order to achieve focus. I reduced the visual details and information to the details that I considered to be the ‘core essence’ of the represented material object, omitting any visual element that was not needed to understand the object (in terms of my own analysis). I disentangled the many layers of information by splitting these up into separate illustrations. We are all familiar with the idea that carefully chosen words can guide the reader along a thread of argumentation. Well-thought-out illustrations can achieve the same. For instance, when drawing the *go* (*go*), which is the main male garment in Bhutan’s national dress (see Figure 10.2), I reduced the defining lines of this piece of attire to its distinctive elements. *Go* come in many different materials, colours and ornamentations. In this respect they can look very different at first sight. But all have a common cut, neck collar and sleeve collar, each of which should be worn to specific lengths dependent on the rank of the wearer. Therefore, in my drawings, I show these details, but make no reference to colour, ornamentation or material whatsoever.





Figure 10.2 Reduction of complexity. Illustration by the author.

This process of singling out some details and omitting others ideally allows the reader to become literate in the decisive semantic elements of Bhutanese (ceremonial) attire. Additionally, I reduced the figures, garments and accessories to simple outline drawings, taking away much of their plasticity by omitting light reflexes and shadows. For reasons of comparability, figures and accoutrements were always drawn to the same scale. The human figures were also drawn in the same projection, namely standing straight from both a front and back perspective, although I sometimes added a profile view and top view in the same scale.

A challenge in producing the garment and outfit illustrations was the need to show multiple illustrations of one garment in several different combinations in order to visualize different types of outfits. Firstly, I required an image of the isolated garment so that I could describe and analyse that item by itself. Next, I needed an illustration of the same garment in combination with others, as it would appear as part of an outfit. Many of the garments appear as components of various different outfits (see Figure 10.3). If I were to have made separate drawings of the many usages of each garment, this would have created significantly more work. Moreover, it would have been a near impossible endeavour to draw identical versions of the same garment multiple times. I therefore followed the ‘paper doll’ or ‘dress-up doll’ principle.

The paper doll principle is derived from the eponymous child’s toy, which consists of a human figure cut from paper or card to which separate paper clothes can be attached using folding tabs. As shown in Figure 10.3, I drew a naked body (in this case male) standing straight and used this as the paper doll ①. Matching the proportions of the naked figure, I drew individual garments ② as separate illustrations. Using Adobe Illustrator I then layered the garment(s) above the figure, thereby ‘dressing’ the paper doll. Several layers of additional garments make up a complete outfit in combination ③ and can be combined differently ④. The complete illustration of the *durdak* (*dur bdag*) performer shown in Figure 10.3, for example, is an assemblage of fourteen individual drawings, which are shown separately in Figure 10.4.

For presenting the illustrations, I used three main colours: black, white and grey. I mainly used black for contour lines (see ① in Figure 10.5) and white for filling elements that I wanted to highlight ②. I used grey in different shades to de-emphasize an element. If I was focusing on a go worn by a male, for example, I would colour the man’s body grey ③, while leaving the go white to bring it visually to

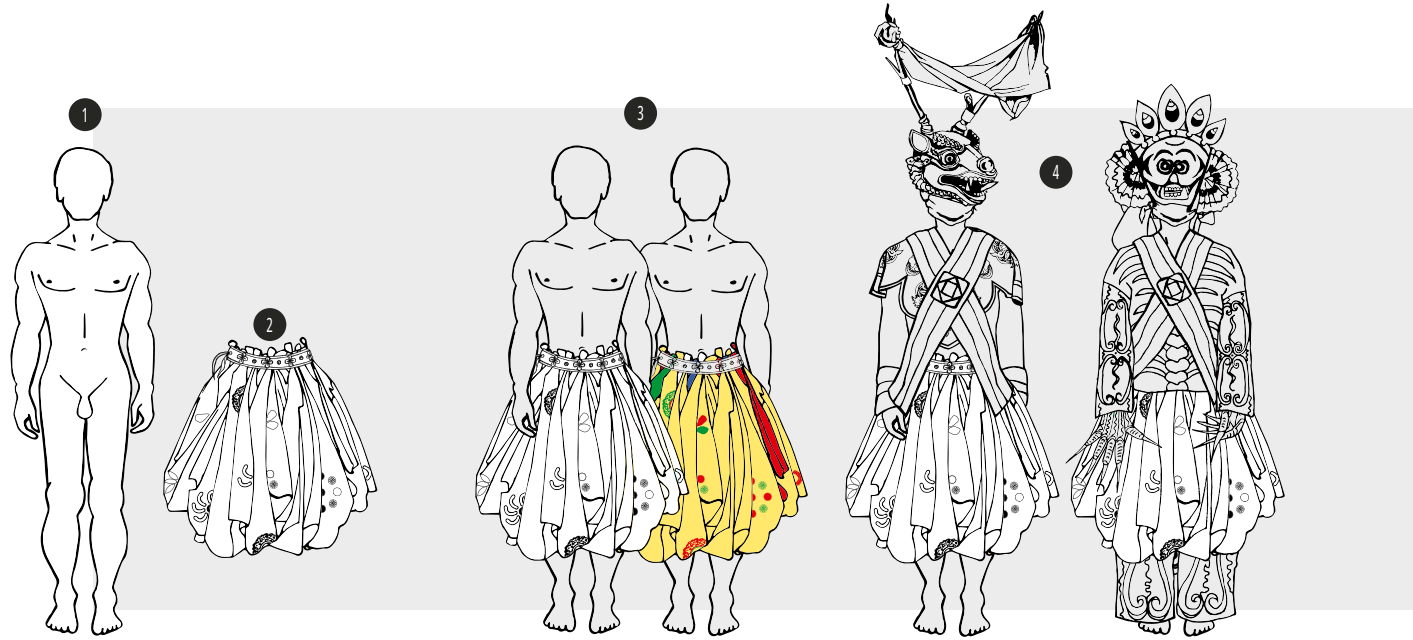


Figure 10.3 The 'paper doll' principle as a building kit. Illustration by the author.

### Fanned-out illustration layers

Fourteen individual drawings  
make up the *dur bdag* illustration

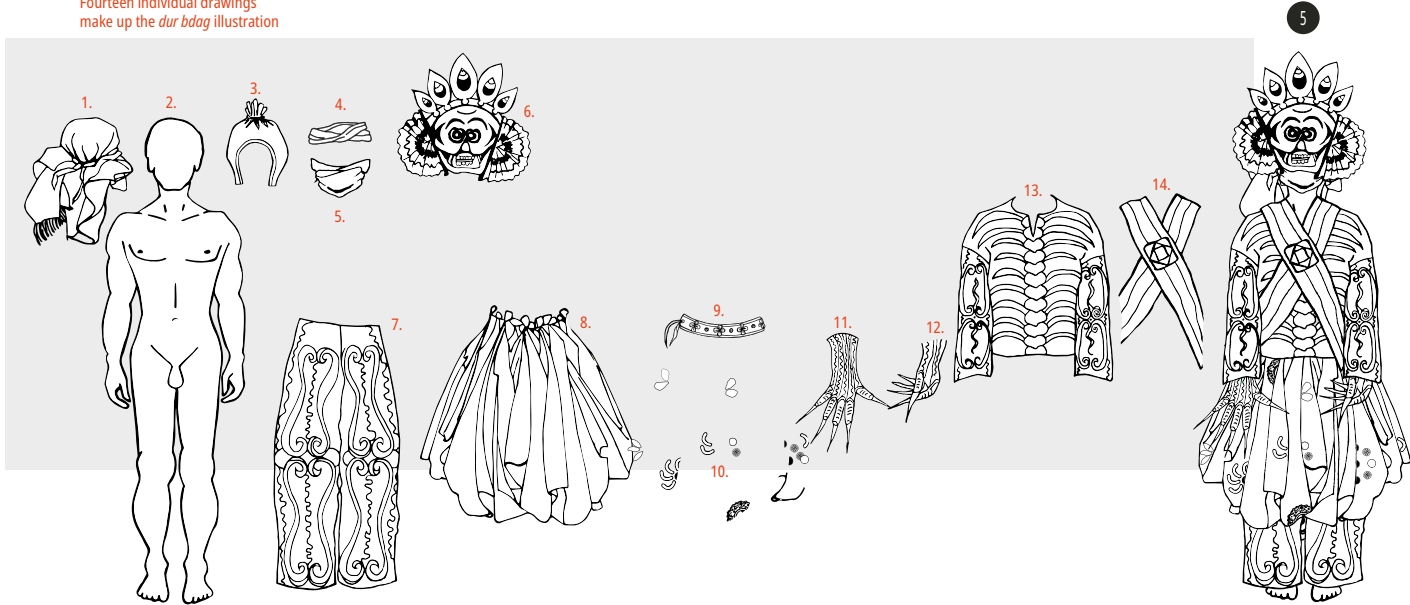


Figure 10.4 Fanned-out illustration of the *durdak* performer. Illustration by the author.

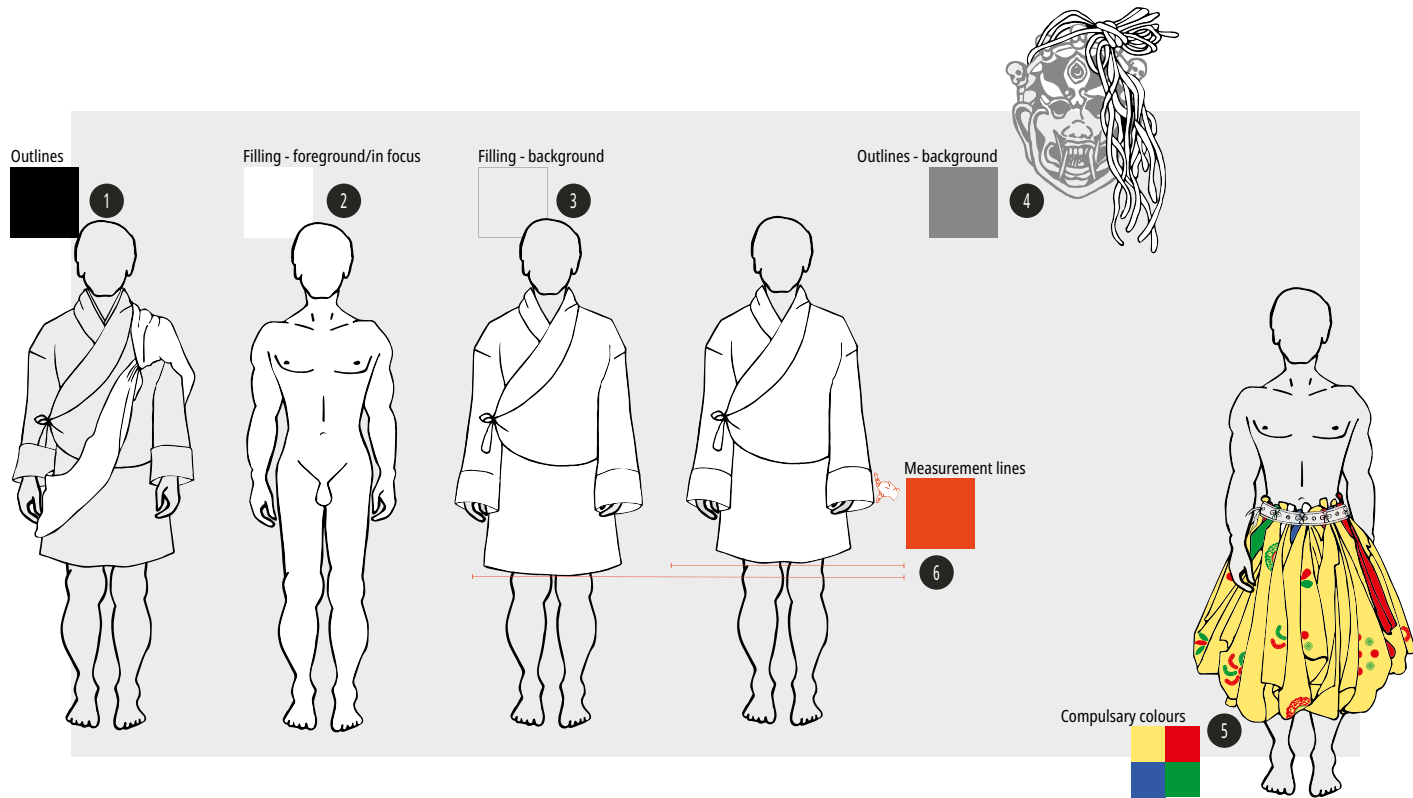


Figure 10.5 Reduction of colours. Illustration by the author.

the fore. To amplify the effect, I would underlay the entire figure with a grey background so that the human figure blended into it. In some cases, I used a darker shade of grey to de-emphasize lines, but I never let them completely dissolve into the background ④. Colours were applied in the illustrations only when compulsory for the garment and significant for the analysis ⑤. Garments can come in many different colours and colour combinations, many of which the wearer decides for themselves, for instance the upper blouse of the women's national dress, but some are not open to individual choice, such as the colours of the ceremonial scarfs that indicate rank worn by men. I used a dark orange-red to indicate specific measurements, such as the required lengths of a go for men of different statuses ⑥.

## Drawing the very thin line: Aesthetics and style of drawings

My illustrations are 'ethnographic drawings' in the broad sense, since they are part of how I sought to record, describe and communicate Korphupa culture and knowledge. However, during the process of creating the visual components, I started to refer to them as 'illustrations'. Ethnographic drawings can vary widely in terms of perspective, form and function. They are often produced during the data collection process as a method of recording or noting down what the researcher encounters in the field. Among the drawings of other ethnographers working in the Himalayas, the beautiful and vibrant drawings and paintings of Naga textiles by Marion Wettstein (2014) and Nepali architecture by Robert Powell (2001) stand out for their extraordinary craftsmanship. Their images have the aesthetic aspiration to be hyper-realistic—to be better at capturing reality than photographs. Very broadly speaking, they try to show the scene they are depicting from a three-dimensional perspective as the viewer would encounter it through natural sense experience, while mitigating some of the disadvantages of photographs such as perspective or colour distortions. My drawings, in contrast, are *technical* illustrations that I consider to represent 'ideas' in a broadly Platonic sense, rather than capturing particular ethnographic moments.

In his 'Theory of Forms/Ideas', Plato argued that each thing has a corresponding perfect form or idea. I am deliberately drawing on this as a general metaphor to explain the relationship between my

illustrations as drawn two-dimensional representations and their material counterparts. My illustrations depict the ideal version of a facet of Bhutanese material culture from a Bhutanese perspective. All of the garments and other objects I have drawn exist in uncountable variations and stages of life in individual object biographies, especially as they are not industrially produced but are mostly hand-made. The festival participants wearing them have different body shapes and sizes, and they wear and move in these garments differently. What I try to represent in my illustrations is an imagined ideal type, rather than an ethnographic snapshot of one person in one moment.

This ideal type is based on how Korphupa and other Bhutanese have explained to me how the garment should look in its best version and how this is formulated in monastic or lay dress etiquette manuals. The perfect lengths, the perfect drape, the right proportions—these were all conveyed to me in conversations whenever a Bhutanese helped me to dress in the woman's national dress, commented on others whose dress was not 'correct' or responded to my direct inquiries about the main principles of their attire. In the textual counterpart to the illustrations, I often refer to real life, but my illustrations do not show holes, damage or other traces of usage. This is because the analytical focus of my study was on the formal communicative functions of ritual and formal dress, which apply regardless of individual differences (at least the elements and aspects that I have examined). Since the illustrations are ideal types with the function of communication media, the male and female bodies of my 'paper dolls' do not have any facial features. Rather than illustrating individual social actors, they represent types put forward in emic publications and by Bhutanese with whom I talked. In contrast, my drawings of the masks that form part of the attire of cham performers show individual characters by default, since each represents a specific entity.

As technical drawings of ideal types, my illustrations are closer in style to the well-known illustrations of Tibetan Buddhist symbols by Robert Beer (2003) than they are to the abovementioned drawings of Wettstein and Powell. But while Beer's line drawings are perfect—in the sense of symmetrical figures with even lines—my drawings keep the black fine-liner's stroke and unevenness of hand-drawn lines. As proposed by Sullivan (1896) in his classic comment on design principles that 'form follows function', the design and gestalt of an object should be guided by its purpose. Although Sullivan was referring to architecture and industrial design, this principle also applies to my approach to the use of illustrations. The aim of my illustrations is

not to ‘beautify’ the text of my study of material culture, but to add a visual counterpart that enhances the communication of my research results. Yet, notwithstanding the technical function and importance of my illustrations, I decided to use hand-drawn illustrations that contain imperfections. Despite being digitized and processed with computer software, I have deliberately not levelled out lines that were not completely straight or levelled the overall composition of the image, for instance to make it perfectly symmetrical. Instead of constructing geometrical figures such as the garment patterns with Adobe Illustrator, I drew them by hand.

In short, I have tried to walk (or draw) the very thin line between precision and essentialism by attempting to create illustrations of ideal types that are technically precise but, at the same time, do not entirely look like computer-made technical drawings. The reason for this is that I want my drawings—like my ethnographic vignettes—to be understood as subjective perspectives, which can only display general validity up to a certain level. I want a piece of my subjectiveness as a researcher to be visually preserved. I feel this is more honest than producing technically flawless illustrations that suggest an interpretation beyond doubt.

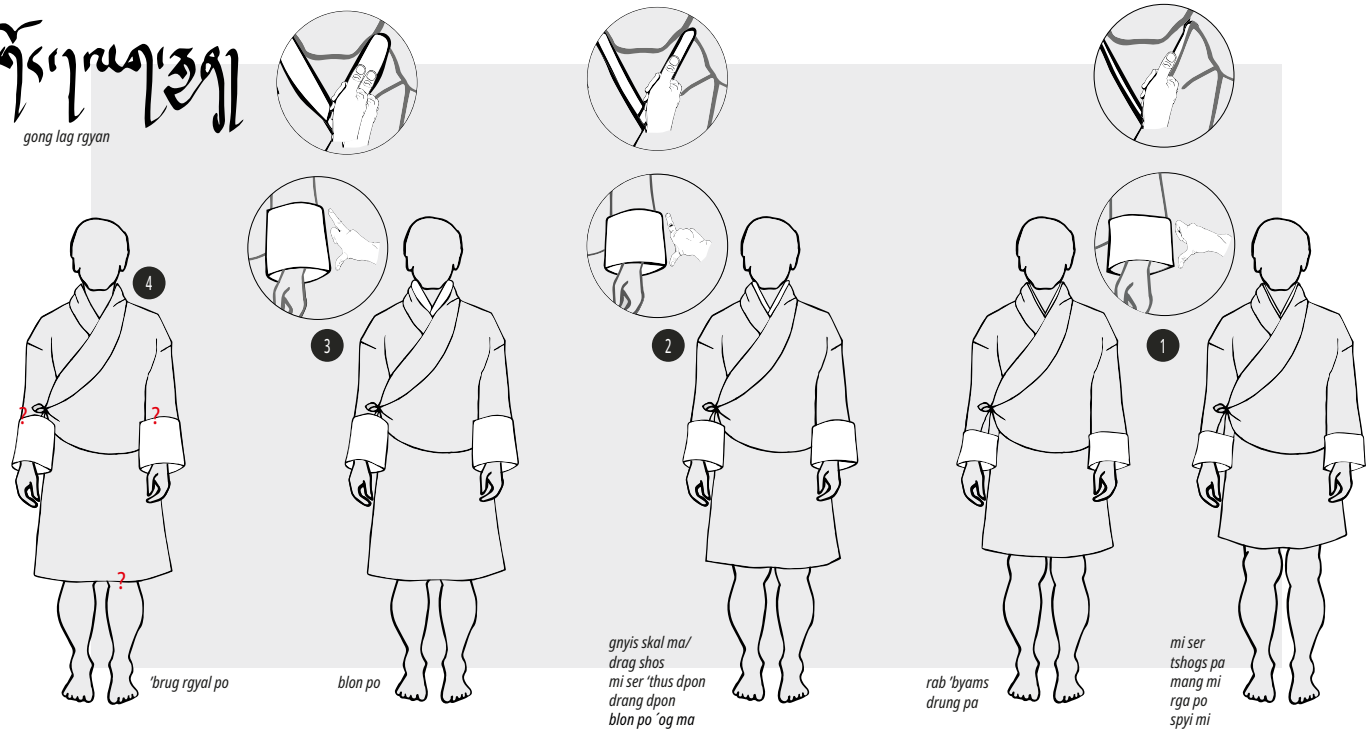
## Communicating layers of knowledge

To further elucidate the potential affordances of using illustration as a communicative tool within material culture studies, I now turn to some specific examples of how I applied my methodology and method. These highlight my two main considerations when drawing and putting together the illustration sheets, namely breaking down the many layers of visual information contained in an object and adding layers of information inherent to but not visible in that object.

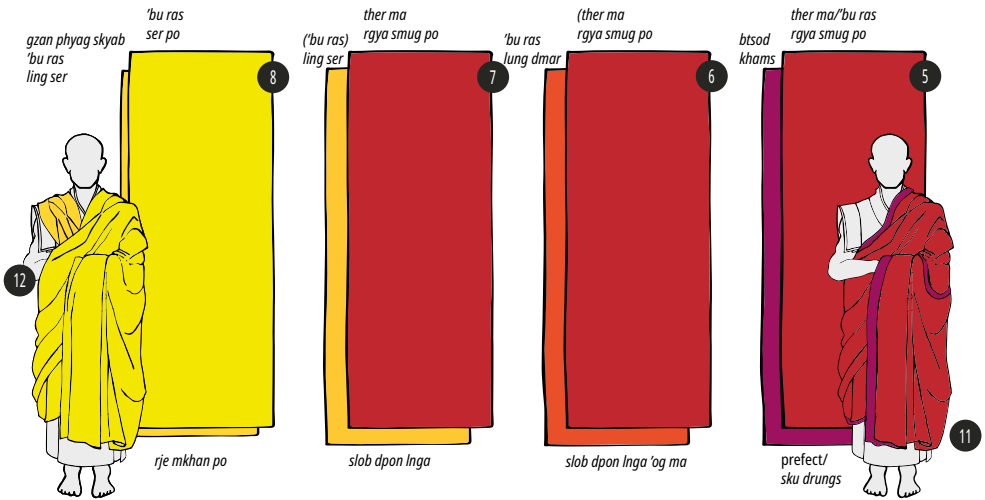
Each of the festival outfits I discuss in my study consist of several components, of which many are considered ritual garments exclusively used during the festival. These various individual pieces are worn in layers upon and entangled with each other. Moreover, the range of festival attire includes not only clothes, but also masks and other objects we usually call accessories. Using illustration as a method allowed me to deconstruct each outfit, breaking it up into its individual components and making these visible through individual illustrations. This includes garments that are usually hidden from view. When we see an outfit in real life or in a photograph, we usually only observe



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gong lag rgyan



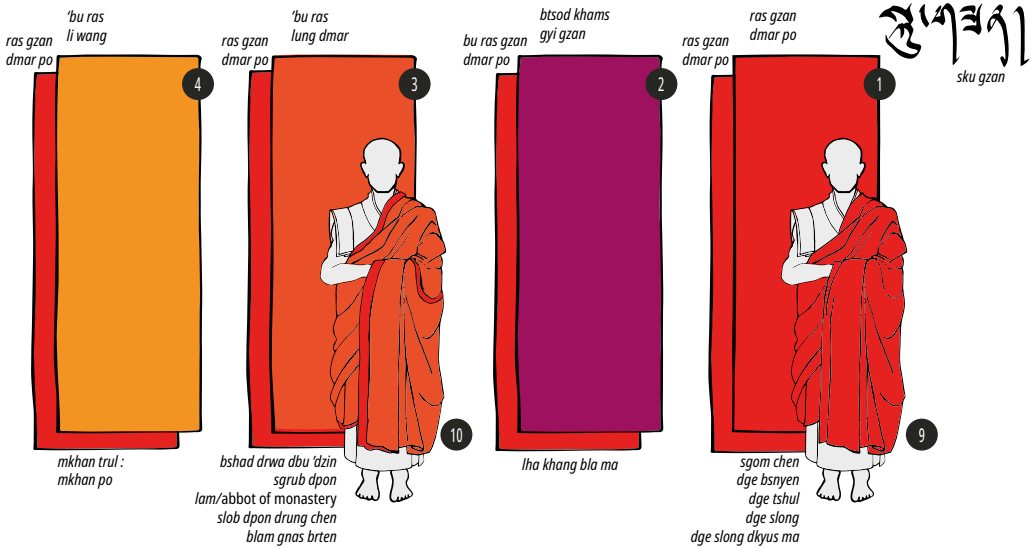
**Figure 10.6** An illustration sheet showing sleeve and collar widths and lengths of go, with measurements, for different statuses, from commoners (far right) to the king (far left). Illustration by the author.



the outer shell; undergarments and other layers beneath the outer garments are completely or mostly invisible. By always showing the garments I discuss in the same perspective and scale, my illustrations allowed me to present them both individually and in combination. For example, my illustration of the durdak performer costume, which I introduced earlier (Figure 10.4), shows its eleven separate component items,<sup>5</sup> which are worn on top of each other, as well as the final assemblage. I am also able to show how they are put on, one after another, and wrapped or folded around the body. Aside from this ability to dissect outfits into individual garments, illustrations have the potential to make visible the components of each of these individual garments by breaking them down into further smaller parts.

While one of the main affordances of the illustrations was to make visible these layers of information, another was the possibility of adding layers of information that are not visible in the material object itself. Here I am mostly referring to the inherent layers of knowledge that a visually literate viewer is able to read by seeing the outfits. The Bhutanese national dress, for example, conforms to

5 Of the fourteen drawings in Figure 10.4, these eleven components do not include the paper doll ⑤ or the ornaments on the skirt ⑩, while the gloves are counted as one component, even though I drew them separately ⑫, ⑬.



**Figure 10.7** Illustration sheets showing the range of differently coloured zen worn by monks of different rank and position, from lay practitioners and novices (far right) to the Je Khenpo (far left). Illustration by the author.

certain regulations,<sup>6</sup> such as variations in the lengths and widths of collars, sleeves and hemlines to represent different levels of status (Figure 10.6). This means that anyone socialized in Bhutanese society can read the social status of other Bhutanese by observing their outfits. The ability to identify and situate others by their clothing is of course not a kind of visual literacy unique to Bhutan, but it is based on knowledge gained through socialization in a specific cultural context. Illustrations allow me to communicate that knowledge.

Similarly, the Bhutanese Central State Monastic Body (*gzhung grwa tshang*) is structured hierarchically. The various ranks and positions of its (male) participants can be read through the colour hues of their outer robe, the *zen* (*gzan*). Some types of *zen* are also worn by lay Buddhist practitioners called *chöpa* (*chos pa*), who perform liturgies during festivals like the Korphu Drub or who are lay reincarnate lamas. There are eight different types of *zen*, ranging from that worn by the lowest rank of the simple novice monk or lay practitioner to the highest rank of the Je Khenpo, the abbot of the Central Monastic Body

6 Some of the dress regulations are no longer strictly adhered to at present.

(see Figure 10.7). Even though not all types of zen are worn and exhibited during the Korphu Drub, I drew the entire set in order to communicate how people socialized in Bhutanese mainstream society see and thereby make sense of zen. When visually literate festival participants see a chöpa wearing a zen, they not only understand that this specific zen is one of many different zen, but also that its particular colour represents a specific rank within a hierarchically structured, colour-coded system of Buddhist specialists.

## Conclusion

Drawing on my case study of Bhutanese formal attire, this chapter has shown how ethnographic drawings—and more specifically technical illustrations—can be useful communicative tools in material culture studies. My approach draws on the notion of visual literacy to conceptualize the human ability to make sense of the visual environment by having learned to read it through socialization. Among other aspects of their visual literacy, my research shows that participants in the Korphu Drub festival can immediately understand the status and position of the person in front of them by seeing and thereby making sense of their dress. By presenting the visual characteristics of this dress to readers of material culture studies through illustrations rather than relying solely on textual descriptions, this information becomes tangible and ideally improves the visual literacy of the reader too.

Photographs might suffice as visual representations for readers with emic perspectives and knowledge, that is for people visually literate in that specific cultural context and thus able to identify and make sense of particular objects. But, as I have argued, illustrations are more suitable for communicating to visually non-literate readers since they can be used to break down the layers of potential visual information into as many parts as needed. By describing the practical method of how I designed my illustrations and presenting examples, I have demonstrated what this processing and communication of results can look like. Through deliberate aesthetic decisions such as reducing the illustrations to simple line drawings and omitting colours, patterns and textures whenever these are not essential for the analysis, the focus can be directed to the details essential to the study. Furthermore, information about an object that is not visible, such as measurements or how a garment is wrapped around the body, can easily be added. Anecdotal evidence suggests that illustrations can even be a useful method

of communicating research findings to the visually literate. Whenever I have shown Bhutanese people my illustrations, I have received appreciative feedback. Despite their visual literacy, they have emphasized how information inherent to the objects is made visible through the illustrations. It can therefore be consciously perceived rather than staying in the realm of certain but often unconscious perception.

## Note on the author

Mareike Wulff works as a social and cultural anthropologist specialising in Bhutan and the Himalayas. Her research revolves around ritual, memory and material culture studies. She currently holds a postdoctoral position at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. For her interdisciplinary research project she documents the endangered languages and cultural practices of two indigenous minority groups in Bhutan, the Lhop and Monpa, with a focus on their ethnobotanical knowledge. She received her PhD from Humboldt University, Berlin, with a thesis on a rural highland community's Buddhist masked dance festival. Previously, she worked as a lecturer at the Royal Thimphu College in Bhutan and taught the first BA students in Anthropology in Bhutan. As a studied costume designer and trained dressmaker, she is particularly interested in the production processes, materials used and cultural contexts of man-made objects.

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# 11 Materializing Buddhist care through conservation at a Sikkim museum

Katia Thomas 

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**Abstract** This chapter explores what a Himalayan decolonizing museum practice might look like through the case study of the restoration of a consecrated Buddhist statue at Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in Gangtok, Sikkim. Focusing on the care ethics involved in this conservation work, which was carried out by an exclusively local team of professionals, I show how Himalayan conservation extends beyond the material care of objects to include their intangible religious aspects. The care that unfolded at NIT in 2018 included a complete Buddhist consecration ritual which was considered as (if not more) important than the material work of cleaning the statue, replacing broken parts, and restoring it to its original aesthetic beauty. Caring for Buddhist material objects in a Himalayan museum context thus involves privileging religious concerns and Buddhist beliefs over the secular scientific and aesthetic criteria that prevail in European and North American museums. It also involves addressing very local financial, environmental and ethical challenges. By bringing scholarly discussion on decolonizing conservation into dialogue with this example of how conservation is approached by a local team in Sikkim, this chapter offers insights for museum practice in both the Himalayas and beyond.

**Keywords** conservation, decolonization, Himalayas, materiality, museology, Sikkim

## Introduction

Situated in Gangtok, Sikkim, on the southern slope of the Himalayas, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) was founded in 1958 by the king, Chögyal Tashi Namgyal (1893–1963), and developed together with his son, Gyelsé Palden Thontup Namgyal (1923–1982).<sup>1</sup> NIT's primary focus has been its library, which contains many Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts. But it also holds a substantial collection of objects, most of them Buddhist, which are displayed in the institute's in-house museum. In 2018 and 2019, NIT implemented a major project to create a database of photographs and information on the objects in its collection. In connection with this, the museum decided that its most important object, a statue of Manjushri,<sup>2</sup> needed restoration. This triggered a number of problems and questions related to the consecrated nature of the statue and the issue of sacred Buddhist material objects in secular museum spaces more generally. At the heart of these was the question of how such objects can be restored while respecting their sacred nature.

This chapter explores NIT's restoration of the Manjushri statue, revealing what I argue is a Himalayan Buddhist way of caring for consecrated objects. 'Care' and 'caretaking' are key functions of museum practice, but for the purposes of this chapter I draw on political scientist Joan Tronto's understanding of care as

a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto 1993: 103)

Tronto makes it clear that her vision of care encompasses objects and that 'the repair person fixing the broken thing' is an actor in

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- 1 In Sikkim, chögyal (chos rgyal) and gyelsé (rgyal sras) are the respective titles given to the king and crown prince.
  - 2 The staff at NIT use either the Sanskrit name Manjushri or the Tibetan name Jampayang ('jam dpal dbyangs) to refer to this statue, depending on whether their interlocutor understands Tibetan or not. Since most visitors to the museum are Indian tourists, Manjushri is preferred by the museum staff when they present the collection to them.



‘care-giving’.<sup>3</sup> Nuala Morse (2021: 212–3) applies this definition of ‘care’ to museum practices and links it with the social role of museums, especially community engagement. She also broadens it through the idea of a ‘care-ful museology’ that brings together the different contexts of care in the museum: ‘care for things, care for stories, care for heritage, care for the issue, care for the people, care for the community, care for staff, care for the present and the past and care for the future’ (213). For her, ‘care ethics’ allow one to develop new forms of museum practice and institution.

In this chapter I explore the care ethics involved in NIT’s restoration of the Manjushri statue and the insights they offer for museum practice in both the Himalayas and beyond. As I will show, NIT’s restoration of the Manjushri statue involved a twofold practice of care that attended to both material imperatives, such as cleaning and repairing the object, and immaterial concerns related to how the statue connects with religious beliefs. The conservation work carried out in 2018–2019 included a complete Buddhist consecration ritual. To the Sikkimese museum professionals this was as (if not more) important than the material work of cleaning the statue, replacing broken parts and restoring it to its original aesthetic beauty. Lay and monastic museum staff worked together with local artisans and monks on the restoration, which was based above all on their Buddhist knowledge and skills. As a result, even though the statue is displayed in what might be considered a secular museum space, its consecrated nature still activated the Himalayan Buddhist care due to it as a consecrated object, offering an example of what decolonial Himalayan museum practice can look like. Before going on to describe and analyse this decolonial Himalayan Buddhist care practice in more detail, however, I first situate it within broader scholarly discussion on decolonizing conservation.

## Caring conservation and Himalayan collections

Over the past two decades the question of how to decolonize museum practices has begun to be raised and explored. Dean Sully (2007) argues that the decolonization of conservation allows us to explore and develop different (and hopefully better) approaches to conservation

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3 Tronto breaks down the notion of ‘care’ into four categories: ‘caring about’, ‘taking care of’, ‘care giving’ and ‘care receiving’ (1993: 106–7).

and ways of working. Whether ‘participatory conservation’, ‘community-based conservation’ or ‘context-focused conservation’, he insists that decolonial approaches must consider what is important for the community of origin of the object and keep a flexible mindset in terms of object conservation ‘to acknowledge the existence of alternative conceptualizations of cultural heritage’ (41). Similarly, Christina Kreps’ cross-cultural vision of curation opens the door to a ‘comparative museology’ that not only encourages us to study different forms of museum or object preservation systems, but also genuinely frees up our thinking on museological behaviour (2006: 458–9).

A key issue in discussions on decolonial museum practice is the place of the sacred in the museum and how religious objects are managed and displayed. François Mairesse (2019: 20–1) highlights the secular vision of the museum that dominates in Europe (especially France) and North America and how its scientific or aesthetic approach to the world confines sacred objects to ethnographic or historical study (20–1). However, as Crispin Paine (2013) discusses, some museums in both Euro-American and other contexts do leave some space for religious beliefs and even encourage worship (38–44), even if French museums are a “bastion of secularism” (77). Among the examples he gives are the creation and consecration of a Tibetan Buddhist altar at the Newark Museum and the ritual creation and destruction of sand mandalas by Tibetan monks within museum spaces (38–44). Moreover, some museums have started to engage with communities of origin and their curatorial practices and protocols as part of the curation of religious objects in their collections.

Sully (2007) and Kreps (2006) both discuss engagements with non-Western conservative practices drawn from the Oceanic context. Marion Bertin (2019) offers another example from Oceania in her detailed reflection on the management and display of sacred Vanuatu objects at the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) institute in Vanuatu, which is grounded in local cultural protocols. Other scholars have offered similar reflections and examples from North America. They have described, for example, what ‘traditional care or indigenous curation’ might look like when applied in American museums to Native American sacred objects (Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001), and explored how museum conservation standards in Canada can be combined with the care requirements of the First Nations, which include access, use and active participation to maintain the intangible aspects of their material heritage (Clavir 2002). These studies make it clear that diverse museological forms and practices exist and have become

increasingly important to museums engaged in decolonial and social justice work.

Taking a care-oriented perspective inspired by Tronto (1993) and Morse (2021), this chapter applies these discussions on decolonizing conservation to a Himalayan Buddhist context, asking: What do local communities see as vital to the preservation of consecrated objects in museums? How do local curators and conservators take care of these objects? How do they judge when and how restoration work is undertaken and what kind of restoration is needed?

The first of these questions has been addressed to some extent in the existing literature on the conservation of Tibetan Buddhist objects, notably in important studies that reflect on the opening of statues in museums outside of the Himalayas for the purpose of scientific enquiry. Chandra Reedy (1991, 1992) describes the violent opening of consecrated statues at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the ethical dilemmas this raised. These became apparent during her interviews with Tibetan Buddhist masters who commented on the murderous effects of opening a consecrated statue, which ‘not only desecrates it, but kills its very essence’ (Karma Gelek Yuthok, cited in Reedy 1991: 30).<sup>4</sup> Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, explained to her that:

A Tibetan Buddhist would avoid opening a consecrated statue unless there was a very important reason, such as the need to disassemble or move a statue during the renovation or repair of a temple. In such cases, specific rituals are performed before the contents are removed, and the image must be reconsecrated after they are placed back inside. (Cited in Reedy 1991: 20)<sup>5</sup>

The importance of consecration and the specific respect and care required when restoring a statue in a Tibetan or Himalayan Buddhist context has thus been clear for decades. Nevertheless, ten years later in 2001, a decision was taken at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London to remove the remaining objects inside a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha (inventory n°IM.121-1910) revealed by X-ray. According to Annie Hall (2002), this decision—made after much deliberation—was based

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4 The Los Angeles County Museum of Art requested a Tibetan Buddhist master to re-consecrate the statues and replace the offerings inside (Reedy 1991: 8).

5 Also quoted in Tythacott and Bellini 2020: 11.

on the fact that the sculpture had already been opened at a previous, unknown date, allowing the discovery of drawings from the thirteenth century, now preserved independently of the statue. Although the museum consulted a representative of the Tibetan community in the UK, the option of resealing and reconsecrating the statue with the objects placed back inside was rejected due to their art historical significance.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few years ago Louise Tythacott and Chiara Bellini (2020) reaffirmed the importance of consecration rather than location in making Buddhist objects sacred (11) and renewed the call for curators in the West to be aware of the sensitivities surrounding the modification (including opening) and placement of such objects. Nevertheless, it seems that the way that the consecration of Himalayan Buddhist objects is looked at in (at least some) Western museums has begun to change. Conservator Sabine Cotte (2013), for example, explores the conservation of consecrated tangkhas, developing some practical ideas for museum professionals on how to give appropriate care based on discussions with four Tibetan Buddhist monks and artists. In her analysis of the Buddhist display at the World Museum in Liverpool (opened in 2005), Louise Tythacott (2017: 123) gives an example of a Buddha statue commissioned by the museum that was desecrated while passing through customs in Nepal, but then reconsecrated at the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London before being exhibited.

These studies give us an insight into how recognition of the sacred aspects of Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist objects—in particular, the importance of consecration—has evolved in Western museums. Tythacott and Bellini (2020) briefly discuss the display of consecrated objects in museums in Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by way of comparison, drawing on examples from Ladakh. But within the existing research on Himalayan objects preserved in museums, there is a serious lack of studies taking into account the conservation work carried out by local teams in museums located in the Himalayas. Paying attention to this work is crucial for the kind of critical and comparative museology that Kreps (2006) advocates and its application to the conservation of Himalayan Buddhist objects.

In her groundbreaking work on ‘decolonizing methodologies’ Linda Tuhiwai Smith pushes us to think about how research is transformed ‘when Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the

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6 See also Malkogeorgou 2012 for a critical analysis of this case and the debates it has generated.

researched ... . Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms' (2022: 250). As this chapter will show, the same can be said for how museum conservation is transformed when practiced by a team that is part of the community of origin—in this case Himalayan Buddhist. By addressing how conservation is approached at a Sikkim museum in the Himalayas by an exclusively local team, the case study it details serves as a comparison to the types of conservation work more synonymous with European and North American museums. As we will see, the conservation practice of the team at NIT was derived from both museological training *and* Himalayan Buddhism and local artisanship. This allows us to discuss decolonial conservation as a practice at NIT.

## The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology: A local team for local collections

While NIT's main mission is to collect and preserve Buddhist texts from across the different Tibetan Buddhist schools, it has built a collection of objects through donations and purchases. This collection now comprises 474 works, most of them Buddhist objects such as statues, ritual objects, painted and embroidered tangkhas, manuscripts and masks, along with some non-religious objects like jewellery, musical instruments and coins. In the 1980s and 1990s, awareness of the importance of material heritage at the institute led to the development of an exhibition space with a museography that emphasizes the Sikkimese decorative style. However, the conservation of objects in a Himalayan context involves a number of challenges that are linked to environmental, financial, material and human resources. In this regard, NIT's museum is a rare example of a local initiative developed by a lay institution and not a monastery.

The team working on the restoration of the Manjushri statue consisted of both lay and monastic NIT staff. At various stages local artisans were engaged for their craftsmanship and local monks were brought in for their ritual expertise. In all, a dozen people from the institute were involved either in the decision-making process or in the material and ritual aspects of the restoration. If we add the external contributors, there were around twenty people involved in the project. Pema Kesang Sherpa was the museum assistant in charge of the

collection during the restoration. She was the first of NIT's museum staff to be trained as a conservator at the National Museum Institute in Delhi.<sup>7</sup> During an interview, she told me that she knew it would be challenging to work as a conservator in Sikkim because of the lack of availability of required materials and the lack of space and tools for preventive conservation operations at the institute. But she had made a point of returning 'home' after her training to 'take care of our objects' (interview, 6 April 2023).

As part of the project, research assistant Purbha Tsering Bhutia and archivist and research assistant Karma Sherab were able to photograph the Manjushri for the collection catalogue, since the statue had to be removed from its glass display case for the restoration. Though they had previous professional experience in making video documentaries and archival digitization, respectively, they were not professional photographers. Nevertheless, due to their ingenuity and capacity for self-training, they set up a temporary studio around the statue. They managed to take good pictures despite the large dimensions of the statue and were also able to document the restoration process.

I was involved in NIT's project to document their collection and create a database, which started before the restoration of the Manjushri in 2018. This meant that I was able to talk at length with the team about the restoration, but only after it had been completed as I was not present at the institute when most of the work was done. I was able to observe part of the restoration in person during April and May 2019; by that time the statue was receiving offerings on a temporary altar in an adjoining room, waiting for the auspicious date of its reconsecration to arrive. It is important to point out that I was not involved in any decisions relating to this restoration. As an art historian, my involvement with the NIT team focused solely on the creation of the database for the collection, based on my experience in several French museums. This point is crucial to my analysis, as it is all about observing, as an external witness, the choices and work of an exclusively local team.

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7 Pema Kesang Sherpa completed her training at the National Museum of Delhi in 2004. After working for some time at the Mehrangarh Fort museum in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, she joined NIT in 2008. Since 2020, she has been working at the Directorate of Handicraft and Handlooms on the opening of a Heritage and Handicraft Museum in Namchi, South Sikkim, which is where I interviewed her in 2023.

## A statue of Manjushri rooted in Sikkimese history

The large statue of Manjushri dominates NIT's museum space, positioned in the centre of the main display case and facing the entrance. The statue is a remarkable, precious and rare work. Made of copper alloy and covered with fine silver plates,<sup>8</sup> it embodies Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, seated in diamond (or lotus) posture on a lotus base (Figures 11.1 and 11.2). In accordance with the standard iconography for Manjushri figures, the statue wields with his right hand the sword that 'is the symbol of prajna, the supreme knowledge that cuts through the darkness of ignorance' (Cornu 2001: 353). But his left hand is unusual. The thumb and index finger form a wheel, evoking the teaching mudra, but the hand is placed horizontally in front of his lower torso with the palm turned upward toward the sky, whereas it would normally be held vertically, palm open toward the front. His left arm bears the standard blue lotus stem (Skt. *utpala*) on which a book is placed to symbolize knowledge, but in a departure from most Manjushri statues, this is sculpted and attached as a separate carved piece. The statue's face is gilded with matte gold and his hair is in a high bun. The ornaments and folds of his garment appear to be carved directly into the silver plating. However, some golden ornaments set with precious stones (coral and turquoise) have been added to the statue's crown, earrings and necklace. The statue sits on a throne formed of a square-based pedestal, decorated with two lions flanking a Dharmachakra (wheel of Dharma), and an arched back panel upon which are superimposed the standard chimeras, horsemen, makaras and nagas.

This statue of Manjushri has a unique history and status within the collection as it is linked to the royal family of Sikkim. Princess Pema Choki Yapshi-Yuthok Lhacham (1925–1969) donated it in 1961 on behalf of her father-in-law, Kalon Yuthok, who had served as the governor of Chamdo in Kham, eastern Tibet (Sinha 1984: 40). She was the youngest daughter of Chögyal Tashi Namgyal and married Yuthok Rigzin Tseten Namgyal (1928–1968) in 1950 (Travers 2006: 102). The statue was commissioned in Chamdo for the old Yuthok House, the residence of the Yuthok family in Lhasa (Sinha 1984: 40). The family, originally from Kham, had been propelled into the highest echelon of

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8 The demarcation between the copper alloy and silver plates is clearly visible at the neck, where small rivets are also visible on the sides.

the Tibetan aristocracy and adopted the name Yuthok when one of its members was recognized as the 10<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tsultrim Gyatso (1816–1837) (Tenzin Dickie 2016). This prestigious gift is testimony to the good relations between these two elite Himalayan families.

The gifting of the statue to NIT led to a reorganization of their display of Buddhist objects, as mentioned in the President's speech at the General Council meeting on 7 December 1961:

Princess Pema Choki has offered to install as a gift on behalf of Yuthok House, a very large image of Manjushri in the ground floor altar, where till last week we kept the two ancient stone images brought here in May 1960 by His Excellency Professor Kabir as gifts from the Government of India. (Cited in Tashi 2008: 71)<sup>9</sup>

It is worth noting that the word 'altar' is used to refer to the display case and that the choice was made to move two statues donated by Nehru in order to display the Manjushri statue.<sup>10</sup> Until 1987, the large hall of the present museum was occupied by the general library of the institute. Photographs taken in the 1970s clearly show the large statue of Manjushri on display well before the development of the museum. The staff thus see this Manjushri more as a protective deity than as a museum object.<sup>11</sup>

For a Himalayan Buddhist statue to be entirely covered with silver is rare.<sup>12</sup> As there is no information in any records of the institute to suggest otherwise, the younger NIT staff assume that the statue was gifted from Tibet to the institute silver-plated, but this might not have

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9 Humayun Kabir (1906–69) was an Indian-Bengali educationist and politician.

10 These two sandstone sculptures from the Sarnath Museum represent the Teaching Buddha and the standing bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (NIT.S.2008.129 A-B) and have been moved to the Ajanta room on the top floor of the institute, thus out of the museum's exhibition space. Sinha (1984: 38) dates them to the middle of the ninth century.

11 Some photographs are published in Tashi (2008) and Banerjee (1982). Others, unpublished, were kindly shown to me by the Deputy Director, Kelsang Choden during our interview in May 2019.

12 The only comparable work of which I am aware is a Vajravarahi sculpture, also covered in silver, which is preserved at Ogyen Choling in the Tang Valley of Central Bhutan; Françoise Pommaret showed me a photograph of this statue.



been the case. Blanche Olschak (1965: 114–16) provides a precious visual testimony of the ongoing installation of the statue at the beginning of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> In three of her pictures, a man poses next to the Manjushri statue in front of the bookshelves of the general library. The caption mentions ‘*der tibetische Künstler ruht neben seinem Werke*’ (the Tibetan artist resting next to his work), but the name of this individual was not found in the museum’s register and no one at the institute, including its senior members, could identify him. However, Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, a retired research coordinator who was working at the institute in the 1960s, suggested that the man might be the silversmith who had assembled the silver plates on the statue. Although he could not remember who at the institute had commissioned this silver work, he knew that it had been done in Kolkata (pers. comm., 10 April 2023).

Since its early years, NIT has had a history of instituting Himalayan practices of care and expressions of immaterial value that one would not find in a European or North American museum. As we have seen, the Manjushri statue was preserved and cared for as if in a monastery. It was placed on an ‘altar’ and (perhaps) adorned in silver plating. If the decision to cover it with silver was made at the institute, the purpose would not have been to increase the statue’s monetary value. Rather, the silver plating would probably have been seen as a precious offering that would result in the accumulation of merit.

Finally, one last element revealed during my discussions with Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang and other senior members of the institute sheds further light on the history of this statue. Younger members with whom I spoke assumed that the statue was newly made in Tibet as a special gift for the newly opened institute in 1958. As we have seen, the records tell us that it was in fact donated in 1961. Moreover, senior members mentioned that it was not donated alone but as a set of three statues: the Manjushri statue was gifted to NIT, a Jowo Buddha statue was gifted to Ngor Gumpa, a Sakya monastery in Gangtok, and a third statue was given to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. The description of this last statue differs from one interlocutor to another, so it is difficult to precisely identify and locate it today. Yet, this information demonstrates the importance of orally transmitted knowledge in documenting the history of the collection, especially

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13 The author heartily thanks Anna Balikci-Dejongpa (Research Coordinator at NIT) for kindly sharing this reference.

when the written records are limited. We can now assume (as the senior members of the institute do) that the donation of this set of three statues was connected to the political context in Tibet during the 1950s. Sending these statues from their place of origin in Tibet—now subsumed under Communist Chinese rule—to three institutions in exile would have been a way to protect them from the destruction that was taking place in Tibet at the time, which prefigured that of the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. Moreover, the exodus of Tibetan refugees—and along with them treasured objects—had started in the early 1950s (e.g., Koksvedgaard Zeitzen and Brox 2022: 1716–18), even if it gained momentum after the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959. Indeed, when Kalon Yuthok accompanied the Dalai Lama on his visit to India in 1956–7 he chose not return to Tibet (Dickie 2016); it was perhaps he himself who carried these precious statues into exile.

## Conservation and Himalayan ideas of care

How is such an important statue cared for in its Himalayan museum? The dimensions of the statue meant that it required special handling when it was moved, cleaned and photographed. When it was about to be moved in September 2018, the staff found that the wooden base of the display case had been damaged by termites and the insects were escaping through the holes. They broke off the damaged boards to reveal a termite mound roughly 70 cm high. As this lower part was a sealed box it had been impossible to monitor. This presented a unique situation in the history of the institute and was critical in terms of preservation because of the risk of infestation elsewhere. It was therefore deemed essential to have a joint consultation. Pema Kesang Sherpa, the director Rinpoche Tashi Densapa (1942–2021) and other senior members of the institute came together to determine what measures to take. They agreed that before anyone was allowed to touch or move the statue, they needed to ensure that the restoration would include a consecration ceremony. This process of decision-making reflects the moral values of the Sikkimese team: important decisions must be taken jointly in agreement with the oldest members, and religious concerns prevail over those of conservation even in the case of such an emergency.

Once the consecration ritual had been agreed, the material restoration of the statue could begin. Pema Kesang Sherpa had to close the Lepcha Gallery of the museum—a small connecting room attached to



**Figures 11.1 and 11.2**  
The statue of Manjushri at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology before and after its restoration in 2018–19 (inventory n°NIT.S.2008.117, 1.67 m high, 1.15 m wide and 74 cm deep). Photographs by Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. Used with permission.

the main hall—to secure a private space to proceed with the cleaning work, which lasted for about a month. Access was restricted to the team directly involved in the work, namely, the local labourers hired to help move the heavy statue and the monks who participated in the cleaning. As the process would be long and tiring, Pema Kesang Sherpa enlisted the help of monks working at the institute to carefully clean the statue, right down to its smallest nooks and crannies, from the folds of the garment to the intricate jewellery. Based on knowledge acquired during her conservator training, she chose to use a few drops of ammonia solution mixed into kaolin powder as a cleaning agent, and a simple cotton cloth as a rubbing tool to make the whole process as non-invasive as possible. Thanks to this long and meticulous work, the statue was restored to its full brilliance. Figures 11.1 and 11.2 illustrate the striking contrast between the dull state of the statue before the work and the luminous shine restored by its thorough cleaning.

During interviews conducted either just after the statue's cleaning in April and May 2019 or in March 2023, all of the people involved—from Pema Kesang Sherpa to the other lay staff and monks—clearly expressed the positive impact that the restored brightness of the statue had on its power, as well as on their own karma. This demonstrates how the religious and the material intertwine. Making this Manjushri shine again was about much more than its aesthetic effect. It was the material manifestation of a perceived need to regenerate the immaterial power of the statue, participation in which allowed them to accumulate merit. As striking as the restored brilliance of the statue might be for a conservator who does not share these religious beliefs, we have to remember that it probably resembled the original state of the statue. For comparison, there is a photograph of the newly installed Manjushri in Olschak's book on Sikkim (1965: 115). Even in black and white print, the brightness of the statue is clearly visible. In a Himalayan Buddhist context, the patina of ageing and agency that had discoloured the statue over five decades did not have the value that would be attached to it in other contexts. In an art market or a European museum, for example, a patina would add value to the object or be preserved as part of its history. But in the Himalayan Buddhist context, luminosity (*gsal ba*) and the immaterial religious power associated with it take precedence over everything else.

There were other material aspects to the restoration. The back half of the lotus base made of tin upon which the statue sat was corroded, so a local craftsman put in place a new metal plate and covered it with silver paint. The termite mound at the base of the display case was cleaned up and a new base was made from bricks and cement to replace the empty interior space under the statue. The structure of this solid base was reinforced with a mesh of thick metal rods to prevent the statue from falling. Such an accident would be interpreted as a bad omen; buddha and bodhisattva images should never touch the ground.

For the members of the institute who were monks or former monks it was unthinkable to proceed with a restoration that did not involve reconsecration. Tibetan Buddhist beliefs are grounded in the related concepts of karma (*las*; action) and merit (*bsod nams*; Skt. *punya*). Depending on whether an action is wholesome or not, it will, according to the law of cause and consequence, have some kind of positive or negative result in this or a later life. It is therefore important to accumulate merit by engaging in positive actions. Not respecting the consecrated nature of a statue would constitute a negative action and

thus lead to suffering in the future. Conversely, respectfully restoring the Manjushri statue to its original brilliance and including a ritual of reconsecration in the process of restoration not only restores the power of the object but also generates merit for those involved. As Brox (2022: 208) writes, the ‘promise of fruits, such as merit, blessings and good fortune is at the core of Tibetan valuations of efficacious Buddhist material objects’.

The lay staff members expressed similar motivations. Pema Kesang Sherpa, who oversaw the cleaning and material restoration, related:

I was born Buddhist, but I am a museologist. I combine these two things for my NIT work. Whenever I have to use any of the objects, I always do puja before touching it. I used to take permission of that particular god, then only I can do. If I was just a museologist, I would have [to] just pick it up and start cleaning. So this is how I combine my religion and my profession. (Interview, April 2023)

In concrete terms, the devotional practices that I witnessed Pema Kesang Sherpa performing at the museum (which she referred to as puja) included making offerings of bowls of water, flowers and incense in front of the Manjushri statue, and murmuring mantras and praying silently in front of statues and paintings representing buddhas and bodhisattvas (whom she referred to as gods) before touching or handling them.

In short, what might be seen as a simple conservation practice in a museum, such as moving an object, taking its picture or cleaning it, can be more complex in the Himalayan context where the sacred nature of the object is heeded by the museum staff who uphold certain values and Buddhist faith. This example shows us that Himalayan conservation goes beyond the material care of objects to include their intangible religious aspects, as well as respect for the museum professionals whose interactions with the object are imbued with their Buddhist beliefs. Like many museums in India, NIT has to make decisions based on scant available resources, both financial and human. Nevertheless, it draws on a wealth of local, particularly Tibetan Buddhist, knowledge and skills as part of its museum praxis. In the case of the Manjushri statue, the Sikkimese team chose to collaborate with Tibetan Buddhist monks and to include the required Buddhist ritual in the restoration process.

## Consecration as material preservation

In Buddhism, consecrated objects are the most venerated because they are considered receptacles for Enlightened body, speech and mind. The ritual of consecration (*rab gnas*) is also practised to invite a *lha* (deity), such as a buddha or bodhisattva, to be present in the statues and paintings made in their image. It is performed after the object has been completed and may be repeated every year or on the occasion of the visit of a great master. When an object needs to be restored a ritual called *arga* is performed, during which the *lha* is asked to temporarily reside in a mirror for the duration of the restoration (Bentor 1996: xx–xxi, 57). As Yael Bentor (1996) notes, consecration entails a transformation of the receptacle, which ‘is no longer a conglomerate of profane substances, as it was at the beginning of the consecration ritual. It has been transformed into an embodiment of the *lha*’ (294). Furthermore, the *lha* is requested to ‘firmly remain in the receptacle as long as samsara lasts’ (314). The consecration ritual thus transforms the object into a worthy receptacle for receiving offerings and thereby accumulating merit (21, 198).

In the case of a statue, the consecration ritual is also an opportunity to place offerings into the hollow centre of the object, created through the *cire perdue* or *repoussé* techniques used in the making of statues depending on their size. The bottom of the statue is then sealed and must not be reopened afterwards in order to preserve its consecration. During the restoration of the Manjushri statue, the replacement of the back plate of the base broke the seal. As we have seen, within European museums Buddhist statues have been opened on the grounds of scientific merit. At NIT, the more pressing concern was avoiding desecration of the object and preserving its status and efficacy as a Buddhist power object through its reconsecration.

From the viewpoint of NIT’s late director Rinpoche Tashi Densapa, its senior officers, the museum assistant in charge of the collection and the rest of the Sikkimese team, it was important to engage Buddhist monks in the restoration in order to respect Buddhist beliefs. From an etic perspective, this choice raises questions over the status of the place where the statue was situated. The institute is not a monastery or other sacred space; it is a government institute. However, it was created with the main mission of studying and promoting Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. Unlike a monastery whose library is focused on the texts of its school, the institute is a resource centre that gathers the texts of the

different schools of Mahayana Buddhism in one place. Although it is a government institute, Buddhism is thus at the very heart of its mission, which makes this choice of restoration less surprising.

Since its foundation, the religious and secular have been intertwined at the institute. While its foundation stone was laid by Fourteenth Dalai Lama on 10 February 1957, the institute was inaugurated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 1 October 1958 (D’Rozario 1973: 63).<sup>14</sup> It has been impossible to clearly separate its secular missions as a research institute and museum from its Buddhist context, within which the institutional model remains the monastery. Crown Prince Palden Thontup Namgyal expressed the dual status of the collection of objects owned by the institute at the General Council Meeting on 10 October 1960, saying: ‘Our collection is both a museum and a sacred repository with lamps burning round the clock’ (cited in Tashi 2008: 69). This reference to the burning of (butter) lamps, which are usually lit as offerings in Buddhist monasteries, illustrates how the objects entrusted to the institute exceed the status of a museum collection. Here, in the Himalayan context, they have found a place that also respects and cares for their sacred nature. Even today the museum is a hybrid space, secular or religious depending on the visitor. While many Euro-American tourists wander around as in any other museum, visitors from different parts of the Himalayas usually begin their visit by prostrating in front of the Manjushri statue and the staff place daily offerings (bowls of water) before him as a sign of respect. Although there has been a blurring of the boundary between sacred and touristic space within monasteries (Tythacott and Bellini 2020: 18), the status of the institute’s museum is less clearly defined than that of museums created within monasteries. As Tythacott and Bellini (2020: 17–18) point out, the latter are an integral part of the monastery as a consecrated space; as such the question of what ritual to perform if a divine image is moved from one place to another within the site does not arise.

In 2019, when I asked the director, Rinpoche Tashi Densapa, about the future of the museum and possible purchases to enrich the collection, he insisted on the ‘responsibility’ the institute has ‘to care, restore and display the objects in the most respectful way possible’ as ‘they were given to the institute to safeguard them’ (interview, May 2019).

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14 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama subsequently blessed the collection during his visits to the institute in 1981 and 2010.

He was referring primarily to the objects given by Tibetan refugees in the 1960s and 1970s. The relevance of the notion of respect when it comes to religious objects in museums has been remarked upon more generally in scholarship. Paine writes about how difficult it is to define this notion of respect and stresses the importance of the wishes of the religious object's community of origin:

'Respect' when applied to objects is a highly elusive concept, for all that it is so often demanded. Perhaps the most useful definition is 'to pay attention to, in a culturally appropriate way'. In practice, this normally means respecting the wishes of the communities from which the object came, even if this may mean the wishes of the modern-day leaders of the religion they represent. (Paine 2013: 57)

Paine then goes on to describe five practical categories related to 'respect' for works in practice (2013: 58). NIT's treatment of the Manjusri statue corresponds to the fifth, 'active honoring,' which refers to the practice of routinely subjecting specific objects to designated rituals in order to maintain their power or to honour them. NIT's restoration of the Manjushri statue offers an insight into what respect looks like in a conservation setting in the Himalayas where the consecrated nature of an object conditions the way in which it is cared for.

The process of (re)consecrating the Manjushri statue can be divided into four main stages. The first was to find skilled monks. NIT had a few monks among its staff members and relied on their local network to find monks qualified to perform specific parts of the reconsecration. Lama Khenpo Karma, a research officer at NIT who has been connected to the Sowa Rigpa section of the institute since 2021, was trained in the consecration ritual at Dzongsar Shedra in Himachal Pradesh. As he explained, it is always better to ask a fully ordained monk (*dge slong*) to place the new offerings inside the statue (interview, 31 March 2023). This is more auspicious and beneficial. For this, he sought help from a Rinpoche from Rumtek monastery. Monks from the neighbouring Deorali Chorten monastery, just up the hill from NIT, were invited to perform the other parts of the consecration ritual with the help of Lama Khenpo Karma and Lama Tshultim Gyatso, another research officer at NIT. These monasteries belong to different Buddhist traditions: Rumtek is Kagyu, whereas Deorali is Nyingma. But the collaboration between their monks was not an issue as the main intention was to give the best possible rituals for Manjushri; they are, after all, part of the same Sikkimese Buddhist community. Thus, the required



prayers and offerings were made before the Manjushri was moved and after its restoration so that the statue could be properly reconsecrated.

The second part of the consecration process was the first important ritual to be performed and deals with a crucial intangible aspect: keeping the energy of the deity alive. Tibetan monks at the institute referred to this energy during interviews as the *yeshé sempa* (*ye shes sems pa*).<sup>15</sup> The living energy of the deity must be temporarily transferred into a mirror to allow the statue to be moved, cleaned and restored. The ritual to effect this transferral lasted about one hour. After the prayers, the mirror was entirely wrapped in a ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*). It had to be kept in the same room, close to the statue, on a temporary altar where daily offerings had to be made. This step allowed for the material restoration to commence.

The third part concerns the material aspects of the restoration: in addition to the statue being cleaned and the damaged metal plate at the back renewed, monks also prepared new offerings known as *zung* (*gzung*) to be placed inside the statue before it was resealed. When the base of the statue was opened for repair, it appeared that the *zung* that had been placed inside during the original consecration were rotten. Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, a retired Research Coordinator who was a member of NIT in the early 1960s, told me that when the statue was originally consecrated the *zung* consisted of rolled scriptures (mantras), semi-precious stones (turquoise) and incense made of pine branches or *sang* (*bsang*). The new *zung* mainly consisted of new rolled mantra scriptures prepared by monastic members of the institute over the course of two to three weeks. The paper used for these mantras was special and had to be ordered from a monastery. Once received, it was soaked in saffron water before being dried and rolled tight. These rolled scriptures were then wrapped in pieces of cloth that tightened them even further. This process is related to the idea of purification while at the same time preventing insect infestation. The different parts of the statue required different mantras. In total, more than 100 rolled mantra texts were used to fill the cavity of the Manjushri statue. Thus, more offerings were prepared for this consecration than for the earlier one. Any old *zung* that were not damaged were put back in place along with these new mantras. To avoid any insect infestation in the future, the monks chose not to make the

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15 For more details about the invitation of the *yeshé sempa*, see Bentor 1996: 231–2.

usual sang offering but instead used cotton to completely fill the inner space of the statue.<sup>16</sup>

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2022) details the composition of zung and the importance in Buddhist practice of recycling old consecrated objects into new ones to increase the blessing power of the latter. Similarly, the reuse of old offerings by carefully placing them back in the Manjushri statue not only represented continuity from the original consecration but was also believed to increase the effectiveness of the statue's reconsecration. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa explains that materials that 'are subject to decay or disintegration, such as dairy products or incense, may be periodically replaced through renovation, or packaged and repackaged to prevent the contamination of other contents' (2022: 129–31). At NIT, the decision to replace the pine branch incense with cotton testifies to the fact that consecration is a living tradition that evolves. Although based on ancient written sources that describe the ritual stages with precision, the consecration was adapted to the contemporary conditions of a museum environment where insect pests should be avoided.<sup>17</sup>

Once the statue was filled and sealed, the face of Manjushri received a new layer of matte gold before the fourth and last part of the consecration process was performed. This is another intangible aspect since it involves sending the living energy of Manjushri, temporarily invited into the mirror, back into the statue made in his image (Figure 11.3). Once the statue had been put on its new base inside the display case, some offerings were placed in front of it: a butter lamp, incense sticks and bowls of rice and water. The temporary altar set up with the mirror was then brought in front of the deity so that the living energy of Manjushri could return to the statue. The ceremony lasted about two hours, during which the museum was closed to the public. Only NIT staff were authorized to attend; it was their private moment with Manjushri.<sup>18</sup>

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16 People usually believe that the statue must be completely filled with offerings as any void might be filled with negative energy. See also Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022: 129.

17 On the textual sources for the consecration ritual, see Bentor 1996. For further examples of contemporary adaptations to zung, see Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022: 131.

18 See also Tythacott and Bellini (2020: 3–4) who also highlight the importance of this consecration process.



**Figure 11.3** The resecration ceremony of the Manjushri statue in 2018–19 at the NIT museum. Photograph by Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. Used with permission.

Thus, the intangible and material are intertwined during the consecration process. For the Sikkimese team, the religious aspects were ultimately more important than the aesthetics of the restoration. The silver paint on the new plate at the back of the lotus base was not of the same quality as the rest of the statue, but the most important thing was to renew the offerings that would remain hidden inside. In this Himalayan context, Buddhist criteria prevailed over the usual aesthetic restoration criteria applied in European and North American art museums. The latter are often based on the idea that materials chosen for restoration should preserve the overall harmony of the work of art, while remaining visible and easily identifiable by the public. But when research officer Lama Tshultim Gyatso talked about the external qualities of the Manjushri statue, its brightness and its golden face, he noted that: ‘It is charming from outside, but the main thing is the zung inside’ (interview, 10 April 2023). The depositing of offerings inside the statue

is the material evidence of the ritual performed, which transcends the aesthetics of the exterior form. Although beauty in form—and luminosity in this case—are perceived to contribute to the power of the deity represented, Lama Tshultim Gyatso's remark clearly expresses the idea that, without the consecration ritual, this beauty and luminosity would remain ineffective. Even if it is of great aesthetic quality and is appreciated as such, the statue remains an empty, lifeless form without consecration.

As already noted, the Manjushri statue holds a special status at the institute due to its remarkable history and link with Sikkim's royal family. At first I thought that this explained the importance given to the religious aspects during the restoration process. However, my long-term collaboration with the NIT team over seven years helped me to understand that this restoration set a precedent for others. In the local context of a Sikkimese institute dedicated to the study of Buddhism, consecration is the first question raised when it comes to conservation. This is especially the case if there is an insect infestation as this means that the inner part of the statue has to be cleaned and, most often, the incense offerings made of pine branches removed. Respecting the sacred aspect of the statue really matters to the current head of the museum, Samten Choden Bhutia, who wishes to establish reconsecration as a policy for future conservation projects.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The restoration of the Manjushri statue at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok was carried out by a Sikkimese team that respected the consecrated nature of the statue, as well as the Buddhist beliefs of the people involved in the project, especially those related to karma and merit. There were thus different levels of respect involved: for the object, for the people who care for it, and for the long-standing Buddhist tradition of consecration and its continuity as part of NIT's present and future museum practice. This seems to correspond well to Morse's (2021) proposal for a 'care-ful museology'. As a case study, the restoration reveals not only the importance of valuing the work done by a local team, but also the impact of the local context on

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19 I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Samten Choden Bhutia for her support during the final research for this chapter.

conservation, and the importance of paying attention to oral knowledge and including the source community (in this case the current and retired staff of the institute; in others it might be the community of origin). It also serves as an example of decolonial conservation in that it tells us how sacred objects in a ‘secular’ museum space can nonetheless activate particular kinds of care.

There was no direct intervention in the Manjushri statue restoration by any European or North American curator, nor by Sikkimese staff trained in Europe or North America. The local team carried out the restoration according to their own knowledge and without taking standard European or North American restoration processes as a reference. Their work offers an example of ‘Himalayan Buddhist care’ for both the material and intangible dimensions of the object, based on Tibetan Buddhist knowledge (ritual texts) and skills (e.g., the making of the inner offerings). It demonstrates how religious rituals can find their way into the space of the museum when relevant, especially when an object is consecrated. It may provide food for thought for museum professionals in the Himalayas who would like to define a common framework for the restoration of sacred works kept outside monasteries. The young and upcoming generation of museum professionals trained in the Himalayas are very conscious and concerned about this matter.

Finally, this case study also shows European and North American museums that a model of restoration exists for Buddhist sacred objects in the Himalayas that diverges from their standard model. In particular it highlights the importance of consecration. The fact that a statue, painting, book or other object has been consecrated during its life preceding its entry into a museum’s collection must be taken into consideration when it comes to conservation. As Tythacott and Bellini (2020: 11) emphasize, it is the consecration not the location of an object that makes it sacred: “Once images, such as paintings and sculptures, are consecrated, they are forever considered sacred by Himalayan and Tibetan people, wherever they are placed—even if transported to the West and displayed in museums, sold by dealers or at auction.”

This pushes us to move conservation away from focusing solely on the object, its materials and its life in the museum to a broader approach to Buddhist materiality that establishes conservation protocols in relation to the object’s Himalayan (or other) Buddhist community of origin. The kind of decolonized conservation I envisage here would combine the conservation processes developed in Euro-American museums with the knowledge of the Himalayan Buddhist community of origin.

As a process, it would involve compromise as museum professionals and community members together define how best to preserve and restore an object with respect for its consecrated nature. Even if compromise proves impossible, this dialogic process would at least allow for differences in understanding and approach to be understood, named and clearly defined (Sully 2007: 225). NIT's restoration of the Manjushri statue thus provides an example of a respectful Buddhist restoration in the Himalayan context that may inspire museum professionals elsewhere who are dealing with consecrated objects from the Himalayas.

## Note on the author

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# 12 The material poetics and politics of the *patag*

## Bhutan's ceremonial sword as a heroic artefact

Dendup Chopel 

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**Abstract** This chapter examines the potency of the Bhutanese ceremonial sword or *patag* in the ongoing construction of the Bhutanese nation state. It does so through a study of the *patag*'s material, affective and symbolic qualities, and how these have been instrumentalized in Bhutan's national discourse and honours system since parliamentary democracy was introduced in 2008. I conceptualize the *patag* as a 'heroic artefact': a material object that, like a human hero, has the generative potential to foster in people the capacity to imagine themselves as capable of and willing to take heroic action. I argue that this potential is rooted in the *patag*'s material brilliance, which is inseparable from its culturally layered significance as a discursive object with fluid martial and religious meanings. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and a wide range of oral and written sources, this chapter foregrounds Bhutanese ways of conceptualizing and talking about the *patag* and its interrelated material and immaterial qualities. At the same time, it offers a new perspective on the understudied role of heroism in nation-building, shifting the focus away from narratives and images of human heroes to the affordances (and limitations) of potent material artefacts like the *patag* in fostering heroic imagination.

**Keywords** *Patag*, Bhutanese sword, heroic artefact, heroism, nation-building

The Bhutanese perception of authority, responsibility and honour is intrinsically linked to the material magnificence of the ceremonial parcel-gilt sword, known as the *patag* or *patang* (*dpa' rtags*; lit. heroic sidearm),<sup>1</sup> and the affective discourses associated with this object, whose bearers are reverentially stylized as *dasho* (*drag shos*; lit. the finest one; hero). Originally a martial weapon, the patag has particularly deep-rooted significance in certain areas of western Bhutan with historical martial traditions. However, as an honour conferred by the king, it is today a national symbol of authority. Since Bhutan introduced parliamentary democracy in 2008, the patag has been instrumentalized in ongoing nation-building through its invocation in national discourse and use in the national honours system. As this chapter will discuss, there has been a shift in its signification in line with ideals of democratic responsibility and public service. Recently, there have also been public debates about its continued relevance because of its association with the materialization of andocentric ideals. It nevertheless remains foremost among Bhutan's national symbols of heroism with its entangled material and other-than-material qualities to be emulated in service to the *tsawa sum* (*rtsa ba gsum*); the king, country and people.

This chapter examines the potency of the patag in the ongoing construction of the Bhutanese nation. In his influential work on nationalism, Anthony D. Smith (1991) emphasises the unifying potential of symbols, myths and traditions in the process of nation-building. More recently, attention has been given to the understudied role that heroism plays as an anchor in the construction of political communities (Kitchen and Mathers 2018a), including during periods of political transition such as democratization (Wawrzyński and Marszałek-Kawa 2018). We know that political institutions use narratives about and imagery of heroic individuals, groups and practices to encourage and

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1 Patag/patang is a generic name for all heavy Bhutanese blades. The more specific name for a long sword is *ben*. While the parcel-gilt ceremonial sword is collectively referred to as patag ben, in common usage it is referred to simply as patag. Terms provided in italics in brackets are Dzongkha, Bhutan's national language. Since written Dzongkha uses the Tibetan script, Dzongkha terms are transliterated following the 'Wylie' system, in line with the convention followed in the rest of this volume. The phonetic transcription of Dzongkha proper nouns and terms follows their common Romanized spellings. In their first appearance, terms have been italicized.

inspire people to act in politically and morally desirable ways, constructing ‘heroification discourses’ (Danilova and Kolpinskaya 2020) that foster particular kinds of ‘heroic imagination’, broadly defined as the capacity to imagine oneself as capable of and willing to take heroic action (Zimbardo, Breckenridge and Moghaddam 2013). Heroification is also practised through commemorative events, as well as national honours systems that, in countries such as Britain, have been expanded to include ‘everyday’ heroes with whom a wider public can identify (Harper 2020).<sup>2</sup> However, we still know very little about the potency of material artefacts in fostering heroic imagination and how their generative material and discursive potentialities have been instrumentalized in nation-building.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter seeks to open a conversation that can address this gap and expand the conceptual and methodological repertoire of the field through its exploration of the *patag* as what I call a ‘heroic artefact’, that is, a material object that, like a human hero, has the generative potential to foster heroic imagination. As this chapter will demonstrate, the *patag* is an object imbued with intertwined secular and Buddhist meanings and significance. As such, it can be identified as a semiophore in the sense that it is ‘endowed with particular sense and value beyond [its] material and functional value or potentiality’ (Rambelli 2017: 7). However, its symbolic power and discursive potential is inextricably connected to its tangible material qualities. This is

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- 2 Scholars have, however, argued that there remains a significant gap between the male-centric national heroification discourse in Britain and popular heroism (Danilova and Kolpinskaya 2020).
  - 3 There has been a recent upsurge in research on heroism with the emergence of the normative field of heroism science, which takes as its starting point the principle that all societies need heroism and seeks to promote an inclusive and inherently democratic framework of heroism that includes the ‘everyday heroism of ordinary people’ (Zimbardo, Breckenridge and Moghaddam 2013). Core concerns of this field are what defines a hero and heroism, how heroes are constructed and their social function, and what makes people engage in heroic action. While a detailed review of this body of research is beyond the scope of this chapter, it has ‘tended not to address heroism’s relationship to politics’ (Kitchen and Mathers 2018b: 12) and, to my knowledge, has paid little attention to the potency of material artefacts in fostering heroic imagination. For overviews of heroism science, see Allison 2016; Franco et al. 2018; Trotsuk and Subbotina 2023.

summed up in the customary expression: ‘One gets but a single shot at glory in life. There is but one shot at achieving the desired temper (*ngar*) for a sword.’<sup>4</sup> As I will show, this and other popular proverbs, along with songs, poems, texts and customary practices reinforce the centrality of the patag in constructing Bhutanese notions of national good, social distinction and a socially constructed national character defined by resilience and valour.

The sword has been ascribed other-than-material meaning and symbolic value in other cultures. In medieval Europe, for example, its political symbolism was of such importance that the relationship between papal and royal authority was contested through the biblical allegory of two swords, the ‘material sword’ (*gladius materialis*) and the ‘spiritual sword’ (*gladius spiritualis*) (Caspary 1979). As the shifting interpretations of this well-known Christian allegory exemplify, the ascription of meaning to objects is not predetermined or fixed. Similarly, the material composition of objects can also be diverse, complex and change across time and place. As this chapter will show, this fluidity in both material composition and discursive practice has helped the patag retain its place in contemporary Bhutan, despite significant sociopolitical changes.

Having grown up in a region of Bhutan where the patag holds deep cultural significance, I have been fascinated by them from a young age. However, my academic interest was sparked when I decided to commission one for myself in 2021. Commissioning a patag required me to engage (or in many cases, reengage) with the ironsmiths who make the blades, the silversmiths who fit the blades into ornamented scabbards, managers of the workshops charged with invigorating these ancient crafts, village elders who never tire of narrating the patag’s embodied lore, decorated individuals who have the privilege of bearing this insignia, local dealers whose entrepreneurship sustains the livelihood of the craftsmen, and international collectors who are meticulous in their assessment and appreciation of the patag. But I also met people who raised questions on the contemporary relevance of what they saw as an anachronistic and androcentric object. These engagements gave me both the motivation and resources to write this chapter as a

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4 Original Dzongkha: *mi thengs gcig lu gtam thengs gcig/ gyi thengs gcig lu ngar thengs gcig/*. Another related and popular saying is: ‘Keep a dagger and bowl ready at hand. Wine and trouble are a constant presence’ (*gyi dang phorp glo lu bzhang/ chang dang tham ga phyad med/*).

way of making sense of the *patag* as both a fine material artefact and discursive object in Bhutanese society.

The potency of the *patag* is rooted in its material magnificence. I therefore start by examining its forms and material characteristics as an assemblage of constituent materials and techniques. Since much of the related terminology has been transmitted through generations of sword makers and bearers but not systematically recorded, I have consciously chosen to include them here. I then examine the *patag*'s culturally layered significance by exploring its conceptualization and customary use in Bhutan, taking as my starting point the Bhutanese tradition of speaking about the *patag* known as *gishey* (*gyi bshad*). This brings attention to what we might call the material poetics of the *patag*, that is, the imagination that springs from contact with the sword as a material object, which is layered with fluid martial and religious idioms and imperatives. As Anita Lundberg puts it in her discussion of the material poetics of a Malay house, 'it is through the poetics of material, through things, places and environments that hold culture, that humans find a way of being-in-the-world. Artefacts are tools of and for the imagination, for our states of being' (2008: 13). I argue that this is essential to understanding the potency of the *patag* in nation-building. This brings us to the last part of the chapter, which considers the politics of heroism in contemporary Bhutan through the lens of the *patag*. It discusses the instrumentalization of the *patag* in Bhutan's national heroification discourse and honours system, along with accompanying debates and innovations connected to the process of democratization. I finish with some concluding reflections on what this study of the *patag* can tell us about the affordances (and limitations) of material objects in fostering heroic imagination.

## The *patag* as an assemblage of brilliant materials and techniques

Even though the Dzongkha term for the Bhutanese sword is now commonly written as *dpa' rtags* and Romanized as *patag* or *patang*, the honorific term *dri* (*gri*) is dominant in the available literary sources, while in colloquial language, the honorific form *chagshen* (*phyag shan*) is alternatively used. Despite being celebrated as integral to Bhutan's cultural heritage, the existing scholarly literature on the *patag* is rather scarce. Phuntsho Raptan (2001) presents the most detailed typology of

patags based on their conspicuous features, origins and etymologies. As part of their documentation of Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage, Sonam Yangden and Jigme Choden (2015) list blacksmithing (*mgar bzo*) as one of the thirteen typologized traditional crafts (*bzo rig bcu gsum*) of Bhutan and provide similar (albeit briefer) notes on sword types. In these works, patags are generally classified according to the material composition of their scabbard (*shubs*), the material characteristics of their blade (*rdog ma*) and their length (*ring thung*).<sup>5</sup> The sword makers and bearers who I interviewed used these same classification criteria.

These secondary sources and my interlocutors ascribed the origins of different kinds of sword to specific regions of the country. Historically, some patags seem to have been forged in southern and eastern Tibet specifically for the Bhutanese market.<sup>6</sup> However, it is apparent that many of the origin stories associated with the patag rely on fanciful etymologies to supply lost material facts. The actual provenance of different patag specimens can no longer be attested to in the absence of systematic documentation. Moreover, it is not possible to accurately verify the historical existence of some of the blades listed in the existing typologies. This difficulty of creating a neat typology is a feature shared with the study of better documented European swords. While confirming that swords are generally categorized by their constituent materials, aesthetic design and combat characteristics, Deutscher, Kaiser and Wetzler (2019: xviii) explain that 'at a second level, any typology is an attempt to bring theoretical order into the chaos of a perceived reality'.

Despite the variation in the material characteristics of different patag blades (Figure 12.1),<sup>7</sup> they are generally straight, single-edged and

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5 There are three types of patags according to length (*ring thung*): the *giring* (*gyi ring*) or long sword has a ceremonial and martial function, the *beydum* (*rbad dum*) or short sword is primarily a functional tool and the *rinmen thunmen* (*rin min thung min*) or medium length sword is mostly decorative.

6 See, for example, the sword labelled as *kongdi maja* in the catalogue of London-based antiques dealer Michael Backman (n.d.), which is said to have been made in Kongpo, a region of Tibet close to Bhutan, known for the great skills of its sword makers.

7 Rapten (2001) lists nine types of blades, namely *pagsam tenzin* (*dpag bsam bstan 'dzin*), *chukhab tenzin* (*chu khap bstan 'dzin*), *bumthang tsendri* (*bum thang btsan gri*), *nagphala* (*nag ph la*), *dungsam thungma* (*gdung bsam thung ma*), *barshongpa* (?), *thum* (*thung ma*), *chu chenm* (*chu canm*) and *lungdri*



**Figure 12.1** A private collection of patags showcasing different permutations of blades and mountings. Photograph by Brian Shaw and Felicity Shaw, 2009. Used with permission.

rounded to an oblique tip. They are traditionally made of forge-folded steel and exhibit a characteristic ‘hairpin’ pattern in the centre, named after the distinctive design created by layers of softer ‘female iron’ (*mo lcags*; also called *mnyen lcags*) and harder ‘male iron’ (*pho lcags*; also called *kha rdo*).<sup>8</sup> The lighter-coloured steel, which has a higher carbon

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(*rlung gri*). Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), who was skilled in blacksmithing before emerging as one of the most influential *tertöns* (*gter ston*; treasure discoverer), is the attributed maker of the bumthang tsendri. Rapten notes that: ‘It is believed that the first six swords were named according to the names of the blacksmiths and the locality where they were cast, and the rest, according to their appearances, designs and performances’ (2001: 95).

8 Unless otherwise referenced, the outline of the technical specifications of the forging and mounting of a patag that I provide over the next few paragraphs is based on a synthesis of relevant information from my fieldwork, the aforementioned secondary literature on the patag, text, images and videos posted by the Wochu Iron Craft Center on its Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/wochuironcraftcenter/>).

content, is used to make the hard parts of the sword, including the edge, while the darker, softer steel adds resilience to the construction. While other cultures, including the Japanese, have devised similar ways to make swords by layering different steels, experts argue that the hairpin pattern is a distinguishing feature of blades forged at high altitudes in the Tibetan and Himalayan region. It is produced not only by the folding of different steel layers but also by the effects of the altitude, which results in minimal heat input during the forging (see LaRocca 2006). The blades are often burnished to a mirror-like finish with the different layers standing out in slight relief. Generally speaking, the forging technique, design and aesthetics of the Bhutanese sword are consistent with its Tibetan counterparts. The *dao* (sword) of the Naga people in the Indian states adjoining southeast Bhutan also shows a similar piled construction technique in its blade.

The hilt and scabbard are fitted to the blade in a mounting process called *gishub drani* (*gyi shubs sbrag ni*). As shown in Figure 12.2, the wooden hilt is secured to the blade with a metal collar ⑤. The hilt has eight shallow flutes tightly wrapped in braided silver wire forming the grip ③ and beaded quillons at both the top ② and bottom ④. The pommel ① is usually made of pierced silver. It is damascened in gold to accentuate a central Buddhist motif surrounded by floral designs on its front façade, and a honeycomb-like design created by interlocking Y shapes on its backside. The top of the pommel has similar designs to those adorning the front façade. There are also pommels made from pierced iron known as *gobur chatroel chenm* (*mgo 'bur lcags dkrol canm*), which are very rare and highly valued nowadays. It seems that the technique of making them has become endangered in Tibet, where they historically originated. John Clarke (2006: 29) corroborates the specialization of damascening pierced iron (*lcags dkrol*) in various regions of the historical kingdom of Degé in Kham, where the craft is still believed to exist in a place called Apishang.

The scabbard is made by assembling various constitutive materials that form different permutations of five customary designs, namely *churi chenm* (*chu ris canm*), *ben chang* (*ben rkyang*), *belpa chenm* (*sbal lpags canm*), *hoshu chenm* (*lho shubs canm*) and *zangshen chenm* (*zangs shan canm*). The wooden core of the scabbard is made from the East Himalayan fir, which is used because of its light weight, durability

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[com/RMCCWochu](http://com/RMCCWochu)) and curatorial research and on-line collectors' data from museum and private collections of Tibetan and Bhutanese sword specimens.





**Figure 12.2** The constituent parts of a *patag*: ① pommel (*mgo 'bur*); ② top quillon (*mgo 'bur gdan*); ③ eight-fluted hilt (*brgyad bzhur*) wrapped in silver wire (*ngul skud*); ④ bottom quillon called *khaser*; ⑤ metal collar called *gonzho*; ⑥ blade (*rdog ma*); ⑦ upper section of scabbard (*kha shan*); ⑧ wave design (*chu ris*); ⑨ middle section of scabbard (*sbug shan*); ⑩ lower section of scabbard (*mjug shan*); ⑪ sword tassel (*khab shubs dar phod*); ⑫ sword belt (*thag leb*); ⑬ sash (*glo bsrel*). Illustration by the author, 2024.

and straight grain. The most elaborate scabbard assemblage is the *churi chenm*, which is mounted with a three-stage silver sheet that is engraved, chased and parcel-gilded on both sides. As illustrated in Figure 12.2, the upper ⑦ and lower ⑩ sections are plain. The obverse side of the middle section ⑨ is decorated with a parcel-gilt wave design or *churi* ⑧, after which the scabbard is named. The reverse side is decorated with parcel-gilt Himalayan scrollwork. The *ben chang*

is also fully encased in silver sheets but has no engravings. The *belpa chenm* is encased at either end by silver sheets, but the midsection is wrapped in ray skin that historically entered the country through trade with India according to my interlocutors. However, this sword type is referred to as *belpa chenm*, which means frog skin, since it was mistakenly believed that this exotic skin belonged to frogs (see e.g., Rapten 2001: 103). Snake and other exotic skins have been alternatively used with ray skin for such patags, but many such scabbards use readily available materials such as lacquered cattle skin. The *hoshu chenm* is two thirds encased with a combination of black and red lacquered skin. The bottom section is encased in silver sheet. The *zangshen chenm* is an inferior class of patag that was historically worn by the servant class of the courts and is fully encased in brass sheets. The historical existence of this class of patag, which is now obsolete, indicates that while the patag is today a symbol of service, it might also have been an object of hierarchy. Tied around the top of all scabbard types is a leather strap known colloquially as *lasha* secured with a gilt metal clasp called *yangchu*.

The patag is worn on the right waist. An embroidered, tie-like silk sash called *losel* (*glo bsrel*, Figure 12.2: ⑬) is worn on the left side and fastened to the waist by the *thagleb* (*thag leb*, Figure 12.2: ⑭), a custom leather belt with two brass rings that harness the patag and *losel* on the right and left side of the body, respectively. Today, Bhutanese male royalty, designated classes of public servants and decorated private individuals bear the patag as a formal ceremonial sidearm. As a formal insignia, the patag can only be worn by designated officials or decorated individuals who have a demonstrated record of service to the national good. However, it is also worn at village festivities and by court servants (*phyag sgar pa*) at state rituals according to customary norms. During such customary usages, the patag is usually worn concurrently with a sword tassel called *khashub darphoe* (*khab shubs dar phod*) on the right side (Figure 12.2: ⑪).<sup>9</sup>

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9 There is also evidence in the historical record of Bhutanese officials wearing the *khashub darphoe* during photo opportunities, presumably because it augments the visual splendour of the patag. For example, Bhutanese envoy Gongzim Ugyen Dorji (1855–1916), who resided primarily in Kalimpong and oversaw commercial and diplomatic relations with the colonial British officials, can be seen bearing the patag with a *khashub darphoe* in a photograph taken at his request by an English woman and her husband who had travelled

Although makers and connoisseurs often take poetic license in furnishing fanciful explanations for the material characteristics and compositions of different kinds of *patags*, in practice these are multifaceted and fluid. Similarly, when we examine how different permutations of mounts are paired with the various blades, we can deduce that there are no fixed requirements in such assemblage practices. In practice, any type of blade can be paired with any of the scabbard compositions. For example, the *pagsam tenzin*, considered the finest of blade types (Rapten 2001: 96), can be mounted with a *churi chenm* scabbard, but also with a less elaborate *hoshu chenm* scabbard. The pairing depends primarily on the material means and predilection of the owner. Due to the rarity of heritage blades, it is usual for these highly regarded blades to be remounted with updated fittings.

Purchasing a *patag* is prohibitively expensive for many Bhutanese. I acquired around one kilogram of silver and more than half a *tola* (5.33 grams) of gold to make my *churi chenm*. Heritage hairpin blades are becoming harder to find, while reproductions with comparable specifications and quality also cost a small fortune. By way of example, the *churi chenm* that I commissioned in 2021 cost me 180,000 Bhutanese Ngultrum, which at that time was equivalent to approximately half of the net annual salary of a newly appointed government official. The *patag*'s fine material qualities lend it generative potential as a heroic artefact. But to fully appreciate its potency, it is important to consider its culturally layered significance as an object of popular discourse and a living artefact in active use in customary practices. In the following section, I will examine how the *patag*'s material brilliance has inspired poetic expressions of admiration that continue to influence and regulate its customary and formal usage and significations.

## The material poetics of the *patag*

There is a Bhutanese tradition of speaking about the *patag*, known as *gishey*, which encompasses different oral forms of poetry and prose through which a narrator describes the qualities of his sword. *Gishey*

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to Kalimpong in 1891 (Donaldson 1900: 44, 46). In footage of Bhutan's admission as a member state to the United Nations in 1971, the Bhutanese delegate can similarly be seen wearing the *khashub darphoe* (Permanent Mission 2021: 0:56–0:59).

is the medium through which knowledge and appreciation of the patag has circulated and been transmitted through generations of Bhutanese men. I have heard and learned gishey of several forms and lengths, but despite this variation they tend to follow a common two-part structure that underscores the interrelation of the patag's material and immaterial qualities. They start with a description of the sword's pedigree and the magnificence of its material qualities, and then unfold the other-than-material potency of the sword as a symbolic object imbued with religious as well as secular symbolism.

This section explores the culturally layered significance of the sword as expounded in gishey. This is central to understanding the heroic material forms that the patag takes and the heroic ideas and figures that it materializes in society, and thus its generative potential in nation-building. While I refer to various stories, songs, texts and customary practices, I frame the discussion around an archetypal gishey that is part of a popular nineteenth century ballad-like oral composition, or *lozey* (*blo ze*), attributed to a legendary warrior, Pemai Tshewang Tashi.<sup>10</sup> While the tradition of gishey (and lozey more generally) is most popular in western Bhutan, and nowadays mostly recited by older people, the lozey of Pemai Tshewang Tashi is popular throughout the country and has even been adapted as feature and animated films.

### The patag's heroic material qualities

The potency of the patag as a heroic artefact is rooted in the brilliance of its material construction. The considerable pride taken in the possession of such a materially fine and expensive object often leads to poetic expressions of admiration for the patag's material composition. This is exemplified in the first part of the gishey attributed to Pemai Tshewang Tashi, which narrates the sword's provenance and material finesse.

I need not narrate the gishey of my sword.  
 If I am obliged to narrate the gishey of my sword,  
 this sword that is like the crossed-diamond thunderbolt

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10 It is important to note that such narrative ballad-like lozey are part of a much broader oral tradition of lozey, most of which take the form of allegorical or metaphorical discussions on a particular subject, chanted or sung as exchanges between opponents (Phuntsho n.d.)

is the noble sword of Lord Angdruk Nim.  
 When the quillon of the sword is seen  
 the quillon is like the sun's rays beaming from the mountains.  
 When the pommel of the sword is seen,  
 the pommel is like a crossed thunderbolt.  
 When the scabbard of my sword is seen  
 the ray skin is like the blossom of the hollyhock.<sup>11</sup>

The description of the sword in this *gishey* is highly metaphorical. Its material qualities putatively reflect the brilliance of wondrous natural elements like rays of sunshine, precious stones and flowers, as well as the power of the thunderbolt, which bears a special symbolic significance in Vajrayana Buddhism (a point to which I will return). To a Bhutanese listener, the poetic description of the *patag*'s material brilliance materializes the comparable brilliance and heroic qualities (bravery, courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice) of the *patag*'s bearer.

*Gishey* was a particularly apt form of eulogizing and transmitting the embodied lore of the *patag*. However, less figurative and more informative accounts transmitted through generations of men have also reinforced the *patag*'s attraction. An illustrative example of the pride taken in the *patag*'s material qualities can be found in an article by Tshering Tashi (2011) published in Bhutan's national newspaper, *Kuensel*. Tashi tells a story recounted by Dasho Boto Karp, who at the age of 93 was one of the then oldest surviving court officials. The old courtier's master, the second King of Bhutan (Druk Gyalpo) Jigme Wangchuck (1905–1952), had two boxes of swords, each of which contained fourteen or fifteen heritage swords that had been bequeathed to the king by his father. According to Boto Karp, even though he was tasked with polishing his master's swords almost every day, the king would often inspect and fondly clean the swords himself.

It is clear that the excellent material qualities and affective discourses associated with the *patag* have contributed to its position as

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11 This is my translation, based on the oral version of this *gishey* that I learnt growing up (for an alternative translation, see Ura 1966: 66): *mi nge gyi bshad rkyab mi dgo/ mi nge gi gyi bshad rkyab dgo zern/ gyi gnam lcags rdo rje pha lam 'di/ dpon am 'brug nyi ma'i phyag shan in/ nge'i gyi yi kha zer mthong ba'i tshe/ gyi yi kha zer gangs las nyi shar 'dra/ nge'i gyi yi mgo 'bur mthong ba'i tshe/ gyi yi mgo 'bur rdo rje rgya gram 'dra/ nge'i gyi yi gyi shubs mthong pa'i tshe/ shubs sbal pags ha lo'i mi tog 'dra/*

a Bhutanese object of admiration and prestige. These noble material qualities were—and are—seen as both reflecting and befitting of the noble virtues of figures who personify heroic ideals. Historically the patag was awarded to militia members or *pazaps* (*dpa' mdzangs pa*; lit. heroic men) and senior officials to recognise 'courage, valour and success' in battle (Karchung 2015: 117). Many prominent families, especially in the Wangdue Phodrang region, have inherited patags as family heirlooms. These can be used at festivals and state rituals according to customary rules (a point to which I will return). Nowadays connoisseurs can also commission their own patag depending on their resources and preferences. Some heirloom swords that have been previously granted as gifts by the Bhutanese government are also occasionally traded on the international antiques market. However, as already noted, it is only individuals of certain rank and distinction who are permitted to bear the patag as a formal insignia.

The honour of formally bearing the patag thus evokes heroic imagination and aspiration. This can be elucidated by considering the following passage from a popular Bhutanese song.

It is imperative to bear the noble sword, pagsam tenzin,  
it is imperative to not just bear it, but to do so formally in public.  
If I cannot bear it [formally] even once in public,  
alas, the great sword!  
It will be a pity to see it disintegrate on the hanger.<sup>12</sup>

This song, which references the finest type of blade (*pagsam tenzin*), conveys the desire to achieve social distinction so that an aspirant can formally bear his magnificent patag rather than see it disused and deteriorate as a household prop. But to achieve this distinction—to be entitled to bear the patag formally in public—one must emulate the heroic qualities that the patag embodies. This is key to understanding the potency of the patag as a heroic artefact.

As noted in the introduction, the literature on heroic imagination has focused on the use of narratives or images of exemplary persons. Here we see how a material object can similarly foster heroic imagination. To more fully explore the generative potential of the patag,

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12 *phyag shan dpag bsam bstan 'dzin btags dgo pas/ lan gcig mi khrom 'dzoms sar  
btags dgo pas/ lan gcig mi khrom 'dzoms sar ma btags na/ dba'i phyag shan 'di/  
gzar shing khra mo'i gu lu rgas pa phangs/*

however, we must also consider its entangled secular and religious symbolism as expounded in *gishey*.

### The *patag*'s symbolic potency

In the second part of the nineteenth-century *gishey* attributed to Pemai Tshewang Tashi, the narrator turns from the material brilliance of his sword to its sacred and spiritual potency:

When the sword is drawn across the sky  
it pleases both Lha Tshangpa [Brahma] and Jain [Indra].  
When the sword strikes against the earth  
it pleases Lu Tshukna Rinchen [the king of the nagas].  
When the sword is brandished through space  
it pleases Lha Sin De Gye [the eight classes of deities and spirits].  
(Trans. Ura 1966: 66; glosses added)<sup>13</sup>

As we have seen, the first part of the *gishey* associates the material qualities of the sword with the thunderbolt, a central motif in Vajrayana Buddhism that symbolises the irresistible power that cuts through ignorance. The poetic renditions of the *patag*'s power in the second part of the *gishey* reinforce the idea that the sword cannot be reduced to its mere martial functions. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the sword represents wisdom, which cuts through ignorance. When the narrator wields his sword, this pleases the protectors of the Buddhist teachings (Indra, Brahma) and worldly deities and spirits bound to the service of Buddhism because the *patag* is a weapon capable of cutting through various corporeal and affective impediments (e.g., ignorance) to spiritual awakening. As we will see, this symbolic meaning of the *patag* is invoked in the shifting Bhutanese configuration of heroism under the new constitutional polity.

The entanglement of Buddhist and martial idioms and imperatives in Bhutanese discourses on the *patag* corresponds closely to its Tibetan counterparts. The similarity between Bhutanese and Tibetan swords does not cease with the shared material characteristics of their hairpin

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13 *gyi 'phyar 'phyar gnam lu 'phyar ba'i tshe/ lha tshangs pa brgya byin thugs rang mnyes/ gyi thug thug sa lu thug sa lu thug pa'i tshe/ klu gtsug na rin chen thugs rang mnyes/ gyi bar snang khams lu gyug pa'i tshe/ bar lha srin sde brgyad thugs rang mnyes/*

blades. In Tibet, the patag was alternatively called the *reldri* (*rel gri*) or *padam* (*dpa' dam*), correlating respectively to parallel clerical and lay discourses on what was originally a martial accessory. Both major collections of studies on Tibetan arms and armour (LaRocca 2006; Venturi and Travers 2021) show that the technical and secular exegeses on the craft and material characteristics of Tibetan arms have been heavily imbricated with religious discourse. Commenting on the spiritual gloss of swords in Tibetan literary sources, Amy Heller (2006) argues that the Tibetan display of armoury has been most prominent in artistic depictions of protector deities (*dgon po*), who are portrayed bearing arms and armour to protect and promote the Buddhist teachings. Therefore, it seems that most of the surviving Tibetan (and Bhutanese) sword specimens are those that were deposited in a *gonkhang* (*mgon khang*), the temple in a monastery specifically devoted to the guardian deities.

Since historical Bhutanese textual sources are predominantly focused on religious subjects, it is Buddhist idioms and interpretations that are privileged, while the martial and social functions of swords and other weapons as worldly artefacts are almost entirely sidelined. One exception is a written text used during the New Year festival of Drubchoe (*sgrubs chog*), held annually in the historical capital fortress (*rdzong*) of Punakha (Figure 12.3). Drubchoe is held to propitiate the protector deities and commemorate the heroic services of the pazaps who functioned as the militias of the alternative historical state capital regions of Thimphu and Punakha, collectively known as Zhung Dhensa Phensun Nyi (*gzhung gdan sa phan tshun gnyis*).<sup>14</sup> The pazaps were Bhutan's original heroes for their devoted military and communal services in the country's often fraught state-making process.

During the festival, the supreme abbot of the state monastic body, the Je Khenpo, gives a commandment reading from a text called *tshog-tam* (*tshogs gtam*), which contains exhortations to the pazaps. A more elaborate version of this text, called a *chayig* (*bca' yig*) or guideline for militias,<sup>15</sup> is also read to the assembly of pazaps by a monastic

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14 Also known as Wang Tshogchen Gye (*wang tsho chen brygad*; the eight regions of Wang).

15 Although chayig are usually associated with monastic guidelines (see Jansen 2018), they also exist for groups or communities of lay people. In this case, the guidelines are specifically for the militias.





**Figure 12.3** Pazaps participating in the New Year martial festival of Punakha. Photograph by the author, 2023.

official.<sup>16</sup> This liturgical exhortation contains a succinct description of arms and instructions on bearing them, a code of conduct for the militias, and the heroic principles that they must uphold (see Appendix 12.1). It makes it clear that the express purpose of a martial display is to command absolute mastery over enemies and obstructive forces by intimidating them into submission through mere sight of the splendidly armed militias. It also identifies visceral and affective qualities of the ideal heroic pazap through highly figurative and stylized expressions and conveys to the pazaps the material and discursive significance of their arms and armour. This textual discourse invokes the traditional archetype of heroic service, within which defeat of the enemies of the state is entangled with the vanquishing of the enemies

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16 This monk official is called the Debi Sungkhorb (*sdeb pa'i srung 'khor pa*), an office that predates the establishment of the monarchy. Since 1907, the Wangchuck dynasty has rehabilitated and reinvigorated state institutions and ceremonies that were established in the seventeenth century but subsequently went into decline.

of the Buddhist teachings. Within this discourse, arms are both the instruments and symbols of heroic men who materialize ideals of national good in the form of military service.

### Materializing heroism: Customary uses of the patag

Although the patag is no longer used as a weapon, its generative potential as a heroic artefact is reinforced by its customary use in traditional festivals and sports. During the aforementioned Punakha Drubchhoe festival, the pazaps perform ritual reenactments of battles, wearing full battle regalia including the patag. This customary use of the patag is also found during the martial festival called *lo-ju* (*blo 'gyur*), which is celebrated in villages of the Wangdue Phodrang district,<sup>17</sup> which also has a vibrant pazap tradition (Figure 12.4). Lo-ju was probably established as a rural extension of the national Drubchhoe of Punakha (Chophel 2011: 84, 100). As previously discussed in my ethnographic study of lo-ju in Chungsekha village (Chophel 2011), performance of this martial ritual bearing the full Bhutanese battle regalia acts as a rite of passage for village boys and a form of heroism training. The boys are greeted upon their entrance to the village square by elaborately dressed young women bearing assorted food offerings in a reception ceremony called *shodrig* (*sho sgrig*). Brandishing heirloom swords, the boys recreate historical battle formations and invoke the village's warrior deity (*dgra lha*), fulfilling their ritual and societal services in the realm of the Palden Drukpa (the Bhutanese nation-state) as its veritable heroes (pazap). To borrow from Zimbardo, Breckenridge and Moghaddam's discussion on the fostering of heroic imagination, these martial festivals serve to make participating youths 'heroes-in-training' whose souls are stirred by invocation of heroic archetypes (2013: 231).

Similarly, every year, villages in the Wangdue Phodrang district stage a two-day archery competition called *chogda* (*phyogs mda'*) against neighbouring villages. The matches are a highly competitive demonstration of skill and strategy. Teams seek guidance from astrologers and earnestly calibrate match strategies such as taking hostile ritual recourse by casting magic spells on opposing team members. In

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17 Also known as the Shar (East) region as it is located east of the Wang Tshogchen Gye region (see note 14).



**Figure 12.4** A group of village pazaps in Chungsekha village. Photograph by Dawa Dukpa, 2023. Used with permission.

keeping with the competitive spirit, the archers bear heirloom swords accompanied by the *khashub darphoe*.

Like the oratorial tradition of *gishey*, these customary uses of the *patag* are found in villages in Wangdue Phodrang. However, today the cultural attraction of the *patag* extends beyond these communities where the material and symbolic significance of the *patag* has been historically ingrained through continuity of customary practice and oral lore across generations. *Patags* are now commonly purchased by connoisseurs even in areas where customary ownership and usage was uncommon. Even commercially organized archery competitions nowadays have participants bearing *patags*, replicating the customary practices of Wangdue Phodrang. As we will see in the next section, this wider appeal of the *patag* is reinforced by the national heroification discourse in which the *patag* is invoked as an embodiment of the heroic qualities of the Bhutanese people, as well as by its use as a marker of honour, prestige and service to the *tsawa sum*—the king, people and country, which are the three central foundations or roots (*rtsa wa*) of Bhutanese statehood.

## The patag and the politics of heroism in contemporary Bhutan

The patag has historically been a symbol of authority worn by male royals, designated officials and decorated individuals. Bhutan introduced parliamentary democracy in 2008 with the adoption of a constitution. As part of this political change, the country's honours system has been redesigned, institutionalized and expanded. As this section discusses, the patag has retained its centrality within the country's new honours system and has been instrumentalized to foster heroic imagination among the Bhutanese people. At the same time, there has been a shift in its signification in line with ideals of democratic responsibility and public service, as well as debates about its continued relevance as a materialization and marker of patriarchal authority and androcentric heroic ideals. As discussed in the politics of heroism literature (Danilova and Kolpinskaya 2020), a democratizing society needs diversity in its conceptions of what constitutes heroism and how heroism is incorporated and recognized in state structures and symbols.

### The patag as a heroic artefact

According to Article 2.16(a) of Bhutan's constitution, the prerogative of awarding the patag and other decorations rests with the King in 'accordance with tradition and custom' (RGOB 2008). The privilege of bearing the patag is accompanied by a corresponding entitlement to wear a distinctive design and colour of *kabney* (*bkab ne*), a formal scarf fashioned after a monk's robe, which drapes across the body from the left shoulder to the right hip. Bhutanese men wear a white, fringed *kabney* without a patag as part of their national dress, while the King and Je Khenpo wear the yellow *kabney*, which is reverentially referred to as *namza serp* (*na bza' gserp*). The design and colour of other *kabneys* mark their wearers as men of distinction or as belonging to a specific arm of the government (legislature, judiciary or executive) and rank.

Officials who receive their appointments and decorations directly from the king upon the recommendation of constitutionally designated nominating bodies are listed under Article 2.19 of the constitution. A red scarf (*'bu ras dmar po*) historically marked the wearer as belonging to the second-tier of officialdom (*gnyis skal ma*), but it is now an honour that can be awarded to any individual of distinction from

either the public or private sector for their outstanding contributions to the nation. This scarf is granted together with the *patag* and title of *dasho* by the king as a royal prerogative. Historically, only three common types of *kabneys* seem to have existed, namely white, red and yellow. However, as public service was professionalized and expanded to meet diversified needs, distinctive insignias, including differently coloured *kabneys*, were seen as a way of marking professional distinctions. Cabinet-ranked officials (*lhan rgyas*) wear an orange scarf, parliamentarians (*spyi tshogs 'thus mi*) wear a blue scarf (Figure 12.5), judges (*drang dpon*) wear a green scarf, government secretaries (*drung chen*) and other designated officials wear a white, fringeless scarf, and district governors (*rdzong bdag*) wear a red scarf with white stripes in the centre. All these officials, as well as other designated minor officials and staff members of the royal court, bear the *patag* as a formal insignia. Except for the red scarf *dasho*, they all revert to the common white scarf without a *patag* at the end of their terms.

Several interlocutors told me that the continued use of such decorations in Bhutan's modernizing public service is deeply imbued with generative pragmatic and symbolic potential. In instituting the *patag* as a publicly visible marker of professional distinction, they argue,



**Figure 12.5** Outgoing parliamentarians taking off their *kabneys* and *patags*. Photograph by the National Council of Bhutan, 9 May 2023. Used with permission.

the patag serves as a commemorative object that celebrates the dedication of the heroic forefathers who wielded the patag in troubled times to safeguard the sovereignty of the country, using it as both a walking stick through treacherous terrain and a martial weapon in wars.<sup>18</sup> This idea is reinforced by continued widespread circulation of the national discourse on the heroics of the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck (r.1972–2006). In 2003, he demonstrated the highest ideal of Bhutanese heroism when he personally spearheaded his small and under-resourced army in battles against highly armed and hardened Indian militants who were forcibly lodging in the country's territory undermining its sovereign interests. When rallying his small army, the King often referenced the aforementioned adage, inscribing the patag as a symbol of Bhutanese grit and determination in the national imagination.

This invocation of the patag as a metonym for the heroic qualities of the king and the people of Bhutan was echoed in 2021 in a famous National Day address made by the fifth and current King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (b.1980) in the courtyard of Tashi Chhodzong, the capital fortress. The king called for *ngar* in service of the nation. In Dzongkha, Bhutan's national language, *ngar* has the double meaning of the temper of a sword and heroic resilience of a person. Equating a sword's resilient material and affective qualities with a constructed national character embodying the highest ideal of heroism, he exhorted the people: 'The strength of our national character, courage, grit and fortitude must define every aspect of our national endeavour' ('Translation of His Majesty's Address', 18 December 2021). To bear the patag as a formal insignia is therefore to bear these heroic qualities in valiant and self-sacrificing service to the nation, whether that service be military, political, bureaucratic or in some other arena.

In Bhutan's national heroification discourse, as elsewhere, heroic individuals such as the fourth King are used as inspiring exemplars. However, the examples given here show how material culture is also instrumentalized to foster heroic imagination as part of contemporary nation-building. The patag is not only a weapon that was wielded by the heroes of the past and present, it is itself portrayed as an inspiring

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18 This argument references the popular Bhutanese maxim 'use the sword as a walking staff, strive to protect the kingdom' (*dpa' rtags 'kharw btsugs/ rgyal khab srung skyob 'bad*).

heroic object, the qualities of which the people are called upon to emulate for the national good. At the same time, these qualities of the *patag* are framed as inherent in the Bhutanese as a people, rendering heroism accessible to all.

### Democratizing heroism

The continued potency of the *patag* as a heroic artefact in Bhutan as a fledgling democracy has rested on the fluidity of its layered cultural meanings, allowing for shifts in its signification to reflect changing socio-political values, ideals and imperatives. Several of my interlocutors referred to the king's injunction that the 'patag should be perceived as a responsibility and not as an authority', indicating that heroism lies in public service, not entitlement. This marks a major reconfiguration of the discourse on the *patag* from one of traditional authority to that of constitutional responsibility. Reflecting the aforementioned entanglement of martial and Buddhist idioms and imperatives in the generative discursive potential of the *patag*, one of my interlocutors observed that in symbolic terms, the *patag* represents Jampelyang's *sherub reldri* (*shes rab ral gri*)—Manjushri's sword of wisdom. Bearing the *patag*, it is argued, therefore obligates public servants to exercise wisdom in skilfully undertaking their official functions.

This reconfiguration of the *patag* was reflected in remarks made by Dasho Ugyen Dorji, a former speaker of the parliament, who was conferred the red scarf and *patag* in 2011 along with the title of dasho:

In our spiritual nation, the *bura marp* [red scarf] signifies the robes of the Buddha. This means that those who wear it must serve the people with compassion, justice and integrity. The *patag* is a symbol of the will of the person wearing it to sacrifice his own life in the protection of the people and nation. (cited in Wangchuk, R. 2011).

These sentiments are reflective of the 'ethical self-actualization' that is a defining feature of heroism (Franco et al. 2018). They show how the *patag* as a material artefact continues to have a pull not only on connoisseurs of fine objects, but also on people motivated to serve the country through the generative power and politics of its entangled secular and religious symbolism and discourses.

Instrumentalization of the *patag* within the contemporary Bhutanese honours system and national heroification discourse needs to

be understood in the context of Bhutan as a resource-poor country, dependent on donor assistance for many of its developmental needs. The country has been facing an unprecedented loss of skilled personnel from its civil service and the private sector as they receive better remunerated positions from foreign employers, particularly in Australia where tens of thousands of Bhutanese now live (Ugyel 2023). Many of my interlocutors believe that material markers of distinction like the patag—and the moral responsibility and heroic imagination imbued in them—are one of the ways to retain high calibre citizens in the civil service and the country at large. This imperative also helps to explain why the contemporary honours system has been expanded and reconfigured through the creation of new insignia and medals oriented toward fostering heroic imagination among a wider range of citizens.

Bearing the patag has always been the privilege of distinguished men. Even though women have been rising through the ranks of the Bhutanese bureaucracy to senior positions, female officials were not entitled to a corresponding insignia to the patag (Dema 2013). Prior to 2008, two women had been awarded the red scarf and the title of dasho, the first in 1993 (Penjore 2006). Given the patag's symbolic association with androcentric heroic ideals, the possibility that women could also bear the patag does not seem to have been considered. However, after 2008, there was public debate about whether women should be awarded something equivalent in recognition of their status and contributions ('Patang' 2013).

On 7 July 2016, the fifth King instituted the insignia of *gyentag* ('*gan rtags*; lit. badge of responsibility) and granted it to the six women members of parliament, including the first woman minister, Lyonpo Dorji Choden. Accorded a symbolic status equivalent to the patag, the *gyentag* is inspired by the design of the traditional brooch pin or *thingkhab* (*thing khab*) and bears 'the national emblem of Bhutan in gold, with colours of the national flag incorporated in the lower portion and is inlaid with stones of jade and coral' ('The Gyentag' 2016). It is affixed on the bearer's *rachu* (*rags cu*), the women's equivalent of the kabney. New *rachu* had already been introduced for women officials that corresponded with the men's kabney in their design and colouration. In addition, various orders or classes of national honours with corresponding decorations were redesigned and instituted in 2008. Notable among these is the National Order of Merit, which was created to recognize the notable contributions to the state and society of individuals from all walks of life including farmers, drivers, artists,





**Figure 12.6** Gyentag, a new parallel insignia for decorated women. Photograph by the author, 2023.

doctors, athletes and scholars (see Zangmo 2015).<sup>19</sup> In short, there are now parallel insignias for men and women and various decorations that recognize different forms and degrees of broadly defined heroic services to the nation (Figure 12.6).

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19 Besides these formal decorations, there are various fora (including on social media) that highlight and encourage distinctive and dedicated service.

Such initiatives can be seen as affirmative political actions to democratize entitlement to insignias in a culturally sensitive manner. In an editorial in *Kuensel*, the introduction of the gyentag is described as ‘a masterstroke’ and ‘a sign of a progressive nation, where continuous efforts are being made to create [a] conducive environment for all Bhutanese to contribute and be recognised for their role in the national building’ (‘Gyentag is a Significant Achievement’ 2016). Read through the lens of the politics of heroism, we might also say that these initiatives are oriented toward fostering heroic imagination among citizens who have customarily not been entitled to bear the patag. As Danilova and Kolpinskava (2020) argue in relation to the British context, heroism can be more productively utilized as a political resource when it is inclusive. At the same time, the innovative and affirmative recalibration and institutionalization of customary decorations can also be read as an attempt among Bhutanese leaders to creatively diffuse social tensions and thereby rescue the patag from anachronism and androcentrism so that it can continue to materialize and incentivize nationally desirable ideals and actions.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has opened up a discussion on the potency of what I have called ‘heroic artefacts’ in processes of nation-building. As an assemblage of fine materials and affective discourses, layered with multi-faceted religious and political significance, I have suggested that we can think of the patag not only as a symbol but also as a materialization of heroic qualities. It has been instrumentalized in national discourse and the national honours system to encourage and inspire public servants and the Bhutanese public to act with courage, grit, fortitude and wisdom in self-sacrificing service to the king, country and people. Just as human heroes and their actions are used by political establishments to foster heroic imagination, the patag and its material, affective and symbolic qualities have been used to foster heroic imagination in Bhutan.

While this chapter has thus demonstrated the affordances of cultural artefacts in fostering heroic imagination, it has also pointed to some limitations. As Pål Kolstø points out, symbols, myths and traditions ‘rooted in a cultural past’ can be divisive depending on who they are associated with and how they are exploited in national discourses (2006: 679). Kolstø is primarily concerned with contestation

over culturally-rooted national symbols in new states, where ‘different ethnic and political groups often hark back to different pasts’ (ibid.). The Bhutanese case demonstrates how old and well-established nation states also have to negotiate potential contestation in their instrumentalization of potent cultural artefacts like the *patag* in contexts of ongoing sociopolitical change. As Veronica Kitchen (2018: 21) points out, heroism and heroic narratives can act as unifiers in the building of political community, but only if the community feels that those narratives reflect their values. The same can be said of heroic artefacts like the *patag* and the values and ideals that they materialize.

As a fledgling democracy, Bhutan is a newly reconfigured state engaged in an ongoing process of modern nation-building. Shifting discourse on the *patag* and debates prompted by its use in the honours system have been rooted in these sociopolitical changes, which have placed growing emphasis on constitutional responsibility and equality—principles enshrined in the 2008 constitution. The apparent contradiction between the continued use of the *patag* and democratic ideals has been negotiated through changes in the *patag*’s signification and the progressive introduction of new decorations and honours. But some questions still remain. Is it possible for newly invented insignia such as the *gyentag* to become heroic artefacts? What affirmative interventions will it take for the *gyentag* and other modern honours to have the same popular attraction as the *patag*, given the latter’s deep-rooted and culturally layered significance and material and discursive potentialities? What role do heroic artefacts play in the continued gendering of heroism and national values and ideals? These questions aside, the way in which the inherent brilliance and fluidity of the *patag* and its material poetics have been harnessed in contemporary Bhutanese politics might serve as inspiration for the leaders of other political communities, including nation states, who seek to preserve tradition while being receptive to new socio-political imperatives and ideals.

## Appendix 12.1: Extract from the chayig of the pazaps in Punakha

*The following translation and transliteration are based on the oral version of the chayig of the pazaps in Punakha as it was read during the Punakha festival on 28 February 2023.<sup>20</sup>*

For peace and happiness in the world, as well as timely rain [and congenial climate], votive and tithe offerings ... have been generously and wholeheartedly made for widespread harmony to manifest. Therefore, you, the favoured militias of the eight regions of Wang, should arm yourselves to overwhelm the enemies with your mere appearance, bearing befitting arms and armour such as battle boots, armoured jackets ... long swords, short swords, muskets ... and other such suitable articles that strike terror ... When you exit the dzong, the valiant exhortations of Lord Vishnu, warlord god of the pure realms, and the dexterity of Vajrakilaya, are your dual unfailing protectors, ferocious and fearsome ... So you should reprimand the enemies harshly and be compassionless and vicious, as if you can wipe out all beings of the three realms of existence. Moreover, you should demonstrate gruesome ingenuity and resourcefulness ... and eliminate the enemies of the Dharma, reducing them to dust without leaving even a speck. Once outside, do not lose composure or discipline ... As you march, you should relentlessly and thunderously let out war cries that rent the sky and earth to appease the war deity ... You should reverentially uphold your arms and armaments and never let them touch the bare earth, which would displease the war deity ... When re-entering the dzong having vanquished the evil forces, you should raise the victory banner of the pure deities up to the pinnacle of all the realms of existence ...

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20 I would like to thank Khenpo Nima Shar for his assistance in transcribing the video recording of this chayig, and Lam Singye Wangchuk of Canberra for his assistance in translating the text. The fieldwork for my research on the Punakha festival was conducted with Miguel Alvarez Ortega, Kyoto University. The transcript of the oral recitation and its translation is preliminary and contains omissions, since it was not possible to accurately transcribe from the recorded video. See Aris 1976 for more details of this festival and an alternative translation of the chayig.

*'jig rten bde zhing skyid pa dang/ char chu dus su bab pa'i gnyer dtad gyi ched du/ ... mchod 'bul rnams kyang bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i sgo gnas/ bgyis pa'i legs tshogs zab mo dang bstun/ khyed 'tsho chen brgyad pa'i dpa' mdzangs pa rnams rkyang/ dgra la ngom pa'i dpa' chas gos lham, stod gos ... gri ring gri thung me mda' ... la sogs pa'i dpal chas lha'i dmag dpon khyab 'jug chen po'i dka' bskul dang/ phur bu'i blo gros zung du 'brel ba'i sgo nas/ ... rnam shas rlangs pa mi sdug pa'i gzugs rjes su 'gro bas/ pha rol pa'i dgra la ngag mi snyan pa'i sgra khol ba/ sems snying rje med par gtum pas srid pa gsum po za bar chas pa lta bu/ dpa' rtsal sna tshogs pa'i sgo nas/ ... bstan pa'i dgra bgegs thams cad thal ba'i rdul phran bzhin du brlags pa'i sems dang ldan pa'i sgo nas 'gro dgos pa'i khar/ phyir 'thon nas kyang gzhan smod 'ur lang ma byed par/ ... skad gdang bar ma chad par/ dgra lha dgyes pa'i phywa dang hur gyis gnam sa gang ba lta bu'i tshul gyis 'gro dgos shing/ ... go mtshon phur gdan sa la bzhag pa sogs dgra lha nyams pa'i bya ba mi mdzes pa/ ... nang du 'dzul skabs kyang bdud kyi gyul las brgyal ba lha'i ba dan dkar po srid rtser bsgrengs te/ ...*

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# 13 Loga's *gau* in *Dreaming Lhasa*

## Film objects as narrative devices in contemporary Tibetan cinema

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**Abstract** This chapter uses thing theory to analyse a *gau* (protective amulet box) as a narrative device in the Tibetan film *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), directed by Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin. The film takes the viewer on a journey with the protagonists as they search for a missing fighter of the Tibetan guerrilla resistance force, Chushi Gangdruk, which operated from 1956 to 1974 with covert CIA support. The filmmakers centre the amulet box to drive the narrative of the film, an aesthetic choice that is located in a Tibetan politics of struggle and identity. We argue that the amulet box occupies a multidimensional affective and political space that intersects to reveal contested histories of the Tibetan armed struggle in exile. The chapter combines textual analysis with insights from interviews with the filmmakers to present an analysis that goes beyond the visual text to examine subject–object relationships in the personal, aesthetic and political choices that informed the making of the film.

**Keywords** film objects, thing theory, Tibetan cinema, narrative device

## Introduction

For thousands of Tibetans who fled Chinese persecution and oppression, objects they brought into exile have become material manifestations of their rupture from home and repositories of enduring ties with the homeland. Not everyone was privileged to carry beloved and revered objects with them. Tibetans who lived closer to the current borders of Nepal and India brought more things, including precious jewels, ornaments, religious articles and talismans, and identity documents. Others made it across the border with only the bare minimum for survival. As it became apparent to the Tibetan community that their exile would be protracted, their relationship with mundane objects began to transform. Objects carried from Tibet became an embodiment of the collective experience of displacement and a bridge to invoke and reconstruct the homeland in exile. Contemporary Tibetan cinema has a particular visual grammar that deploys these objects as narrative devices to project quintessential experiences of statelessness, struggle and identity crises in exile. Filmmaker Ritu Sarin explained this affective dimension of film objects in an interview with one of the authors. Noting how ‘objects are such a key part of everyday life’, kept in people’s homes, she observed that their value has partly to do with the state of being an exile: ‘You hang on to certain things. Those things have value more than just what they are. ... It is the emotion attached to the object that speaks to us (Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, interview with Gokul KS 2022: 35:46–36:17). As Mexican filmmaker and author Guillermo del Toro put it: “If you have a really great relationship with an object, if something happens to it, it is part of the story” (cited in Azevedo 2017: 3.33–3.37). In a visual narrative, the choice of a particular object and the stories and emotions woven around it register the voice of a community and have the potential to speak to a broader audience that extends beyond the film’s immediate cultural-historical context.

This chapter focuses on a Tibetan *gau* (*ga’u*; protective amulet box) in the 2005 film *Dreaming Lhasa*, made by the Tibetan–Indian filmmaking duo Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, which narrates the contested histories of the Tibetan armed struggle and exile. A *gau* contains sacred objects and serves as a protective talisman for good health and long life (Clark 2015: 277). These amulet boxes are integral to the sacral relationship that Tibetans have with protective deities. Specifically, during battle, the *gau* as a power object is revered and prized by



**Figure 13.1** The introduction of the gau in *Dreaming Lhasa*, which is shown in Dhondup's hands in a close-up shot from above (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

soldiers, since it is believed to provide them with a protective force. Documented instances of Tibetan soldiers using a gau as a protective talisman include the Younghusband invasion of Tibet (1903–1904) and the Tibetan uprising against Chinese occupation in the 1950s (Harris 2012: 60).

In *Dreaming Lhasa*, the gau is introduced as a revered object wrapped in a yellow cloth (Figure 13.1). Throughout the film, the characters handle the object with devotion. A portrait photograph of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is visible from the outside, surrounded by intricate carvings that make the object visually appealing at first glance. The amulet box is attached to a yellow belt, which helps people keep the gau attached to their bodies during wars and arduous journeys. The protagonists in the film—Dhondup and Karma—are on a mission to trace a person named Loga to return this amulet box, which once belonged to him.

Loga is a former resistance fighter associated with the Tibetan guerilla force called Chushi Gangdruk (chu bzhi sgang drug; Four Rivers, Six Ranges), which was active from 1956 to 1974. The gau becomes a catalytic object in the quest for Loga, gradually uncovering the history of Chushi Gangdruk and carrying the enduring memory of the Tibetan armed resistance. This object also drives the visual narrative by weaving in affective layers that speak to crises of belonging and prolonged exile and the hope of returning to the homeland, all of which are

integral to the Tibetan exile experience. We draw on Emma Hutchinson's work on 'affective communities' (Hutchinson 2016) to argue that political and emotional contexts have equal relevance in telling the story of Chushi Gangdruk. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, the aesthetic choices of the filmmakers reflect this mutually constitutive relationship in exile. The film does not present the history of armed resistance as a grand narrative. Instead, Sonam and Sarin adopt an approach that roots this history in memories, which are expressed through personal stories that represent the collective and everyday experience of the struggle. This storytelling choice subverts the linear narration of Tibetan history and provides the space to accommodate an iconography of individual experiences.

This chapter argues that by preserving and articulating Chushi Gangdruk history and revealing the complexities of exile experience in relation to belonging and identity, the amulet box in the film embodies the Tibetan nation, past and present. We unpack this argument using thing theory, developed by Bill Brown in literary studies (2001, 2003, 2015). Thing theory lays the conceptual foundation for our interpretation of the transition of the amulet box from a religious power object to an emotional thing within the film. The chapter begins with a historical sketch of Chushi Gangdruk to contextualize the text, followed by a brief exposition of thing theory. It then goes on to elaborate on the politics of the Chushi Gangdruk resistance as explored in the narrative through a close reading of the film as a visual text and by drawing on insights from conversations with the filmmakers. Finally, the chapter contextualizes the affective elements in the narrative within the larger Tibetan struggle, exploring the themes of identity, separation and belonging.

## Chushi Gangdruk

In the mid-1950s, major revolts against Chinese policies and reforms spread across Kham (eastern Tibet) and Amdo (north-eastern Tibet) (Goldstein 2019; McGranahan 2010a; Shakya 1999; Weiner 2020). As the People's Liberation Army brutally suppressed this popular resistance, many Tibetans from these regions fled to Central Tibet, anticipating further crackdowns by the Chinese forces. Chinese officials in Lhasa pressured the Tibetan government to deport the Khampas and stop the influx of Tibetans from the east (Shakya 1999: 166–7). This resulted in Khampa leaders, traders and others moving to Lhokha,

located southeast of Lhasa. Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya notes that the 'gathering in Lhokha marked the birth of a pan-Khampa resistance movement called *Chu-zhi Gang-drug* (Four Rivers, Six Ranges) ... the ancient name for Kham' (Shakya 1999: 167). Chushi Gangdruk received covert support, financial aid, arms and training from the US as part of the American policy to contain Communism in Asia. Under a programme code-named 'Operation Shadow Tibet Circus', more than two hundred and fifty Tibetans were trained in guerrilla warfare at a secret training facility at Camp Hale in Colorado. Of these, some were air-dropped onto the Tibetan plateau for covert operations. In the 1960s, the resistance movement was also supported by the Indian government, through its intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and by the Tibetan government-in-exile (McGranahan 2006).

In 1959, Chushi Gangdruk played a crucial role in safely escorting the Dalai Lama into exile. Between 1960 and 1974, the resistance fighters operated from their military base in Mustang in north-western Nepal, bordering the Tibetan plateau (McGranahan 2010a: 135–8). In 1969, the Nixon administration withdrew support for the Tibetan resistance against the backdrop of Sino–US rapprochement. Without US aid, the Chushi Gangdruk fighters struggled to continue their operations. Meanwhile, the Chinese government pressured the Nepalese government to shut down the Chushi Gangdruk base in Mustang. In 1974, the political climate in Nepal turned hostile to the Tibetan fighters and the government publicly declared the soldiers 'bandits' (McGranahan 2006: 124). Building tensions with the Nepalese army further deteriorated the resistance group's efforts to continue its activities. Consequently, the Dalai Lama sent a recorded audio message to the fighters, asking them to surrender their weapons to the Nepalese army (McGranahan 2006). This officially marked the end of the Chushi Gangdruk resistance. While some of the fighters remained in Nepal, most moved to India, where they lived in exile until the end of their days.

In 1988, the Dalai Lama set forth the 'Middle Way Approach', dropping demands for Tibetan independence and instead calling for genuine autonomy for Tibet within the People's Republic of China (PRC). The following year, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. After this, the international community largely began to hail the Tibetan struggle as an example of a peaceful and non-violent movement. In their struggle for the homeland, the Tibetan government-in-exile—now known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)—and the exile community

at large continued to privilege and strategize political activism built around the idea of non-violence. This shift in political approach towards the Tibet question has dominated public documentation of and official discourses relating to Tibetan histories of resistance, which effectively exclude ‘the uncomfortable episodes from the past, especially stories from the early two decades in exile’, including the history of Chushi Gangdruk (Choedup 2023: 501). Carole McGranahan argues that there were three reasons for the deliberate forgetting of the armed resistance.

First, this was a guerrilla war, covertly supported by four governments—those of India, Nepal, Tibet, and the United States primarily through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Aspects of such wars are necessarily secret, and it follows that much about the Tibetan resistance remains a secret (and not just forgotten) today. Second, under the leadership of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan struggle against the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a nonviolent one. Reconciling violence with a philosophy of nonviolence is not easy and is another reason the guerrilla war rests uneasily within current history. And, third, the guerrilla war did not succeed in regaining political control over Tibet for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government. Having failed, it has not been highlighted in Tibetan histories of this period. (McGranahan 2010a: 2)

Until very recently, within the Tibetan community in exile, memory of the armed resistance existed as a ‘public secret’, as McGranahan calls it, something known but not acknowledged (*ibid.*: 11). This has restricted the evolution of a public sociality around the Chushi Gangdruk resistance movement that can help process its simultaneously heroic and traumatic history. McGranahan conceptualizes this as an ‘historical arrest’, which she defines as ‘the apprehension and detaining of particular pasts in anticipation of their eventual release’ (McGranahan 2005: 571; see also McGranahan 2010a). The lack of official acknowledgement of Chushi Gangdruk history in national remembrance practices has marginalized the history of the armed struggle in collective memory. Against the backdrop of building a national history of the Tibetan struggle that conforms to the Middle Way policy and principle of non-violence, the Chushi Gangdruk episode remained absent from CTA discourse until its very recent incorporation into the ‘Resistance’ section of the new Tibet Museum in Dharamshala, which opened in 2022. This absence led to the political isolation of conflicting histories

of resistance. Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin foreground this discursive contestation as the main thematic element of *Dreaming Lhasa*. This feature film is part of their long-term commitment to document and give visibility to the personal stories of resistance fighters through audiovisual media.

Filmmaker Tenzing Sonam has a deep-rooted personal connection to the Chushi Gangdruk episode. The gau used in *Dreaming Lhasa* belonged to his father, Lhamo Tsering, who was a member of Chushi Gangdruk (Tenzing Sonam, pers. comm., 10 May 2022). Lhamo Tsering was the key liaison between the resistance army and the CIA. While serving as Chief of Operations, he documented every stage of the resistance movement with photographs, letters, maps and other materials. This personal archive inspired Sonam and Sarin to explore the history of Tibetan armed resistance. In 1998, they made a documentary titled *The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet*. Since 2019, they have been curating the exhibition *Shadow Circus: A Personal Archive of Tibetan Resistance (1956–1974)* as a follow-up to the documentary. The first Indian edition of the exhibition, held in April 2022 at the India International Centre (IIC), Delhi, began with a note on Chushi Gangdruk stating:

This chapter of Tibetan history has been largely forgotten, partly due to its clandestine nature and partly as an instinctive act of omission on the part of official Tibetan narratives, which, from the 1970s onwards, sought to highlight the essentially non-violent nature of the freedom struggle. (Sonam, Sarin and Ginwala 2022)

The creative process of *Dreaming Lhasa* is informed and underwritten by the filmmakers' experiences in bringing the *Shadow Circus* project to fruition. The plot of the film is based on the real-life instance of a missing Chushi Gangdruk fighter. In an interview, Sonam shared how the one-line plot of *Dreaming Lhasa* came to his mind.

While doing our research for *Shadow Circus*, we heard the story of a CIA-trained Chushi Gangdruk fighter who went missing after some years in the late 1970s. He did not leave any trace so that we could track him. I knew that person from my childhood days. The thought of what could have happened to him resulted in the film *Dreaming Lhasa*. Of course, other narrative layers got added to the film later, reflecting the then state of the Tibetan struggle. (Tenzing Sonam, pers. comm., 10 May 2022)

The film has two intertwined discursive arcs, both driven by centring the gau and its trajectory. Firstly, the gau unravels the subliminal histories of armed resistance that seek acknowledgement in the public space. Secondly, the object's journey from Tibet to New York bears a poignant resemblance to the experiential realities of the Tibetan community. Long separated from the homeland, the Tibetan community has been forced to negotiate the trauma of rupture, complicated by protracted exile. This affective dimension is established in the film through the spatial mobility of the gau and implied in the evolving dialogic relationship between the characters and the object. Amidst dealing with this iterative inner turmoil, Tibetans perform resistance and keep the fight for the nation alive to sustain the aspiration for an eventual return to their homeland. *Dreaming Lhasa* presents a portrait of these distinct emotions that resonate universally and, at the same time, remain innately Tibetan. Before unfolding this in more detail, we first turn to thing theory, the interpretive lens we deploy to engage with the film and access the aesthetic politics of filmmaking.

## Thing theory

Bill Brown, working primarily on American literature and culture, developed thing theory to foreground the interactive and dynamic nature of subject–object relationships as they unfold in all manner of texts (Brown 2001, 2003, 2015). Brown argues after Heidegger (1967) that an object becomes a thing when its intended use and purpose change due to its relationship with people in a particular time and space (Brown 2001). At that moment, either the object no longer serves its original purpose, or the meanings attached to it assume a new dimension. The transition from an object to a thing imbues the human–object relationship with a dynamic interpretive quality that Brown calls thingness.

I would say that the thingness of objects becomes palpable or visible or in some sense knowable where there is an interruption ... One way is certainly that they break. You go to pick up the glass, and it breaks in your hand. Suddenly, you notice it, and you notice lots about it. It is at that moment that the object becomes a thing. But if you are using a glass and you suddenly recognise this is a glass that your grandmother owned, it has a certain kind of value because of the genealogy of its use. That also, to me, would be a kind



of thingness ... So, on the one hand, something that's very physical, on the other hand, something that is very metaphysical. But in both instances, a real retardation of our interaction with the object. ('Big Think interview' 2012)

Objects do not exist in a vacuum; they exist, function and are used in specific socio-political environments in particular times and spaces. They have a history of their own to share, which Brown refers to as 'the historical ontology congealed within objects' (Brown 2015: 251). Thingness arises from the relationship built with a material object within an affective, historical, political or social context that acts on the object to produce new meanings for individuals and collectivities.

De-essentializing the subject-object binary, thing theory departs from the anthropocentric assumption that human engagement is the only decisive factor in subject-object relationships (Wasserman 2020). On the contrary, things exercise an agentic function in shaping lifeworlds, including the imaginations, understandings and perspectives inherent in socio-political processes. For example, Emily Sanders (2023), in her interpretation of the 2018 American miniseries *Sharp Objects*, highlights the use of high maintenance, expensive, imported ivory-coloured floor tiles in affluent white homes to narrate white supremacy. In the series, these tiles reveal multiple structures of oppression, including race and patriarchy, that condition the gendered domestic spaces of the deep South. Drawing on thing theory and object-oriented ontology, Sanders argues that 'as objects transformed through economic processes informed by white supremacy, the ivory tiles emerge as things that are able to speak back to white supremacy's structure' (Sanders 2013: 112–13). *Sharp Objects* demonstrates the centrality of objects as narrative devices in a visual text.

Visual storytelling intertwines film objects and characters to the extent that the separateness between the two vanishes completely, and narrative interpretations emanate from all elements in a frame. Elizabeth Ezra and Catherine Wheatley (2023: 1) note that: 'In occupying filmic space, objects are a key component of mise-en-scène, but they also have a narrative function and often carry symbolic or affective weight.' Films also curate a museum-like presence and absence of objects in order to delve into the cultural and political nuances of stories and locate them within specific spatial and temporal contexts. According to Olivia Landry, this is exemplified in the 2020 Turkish series *Bir Başkadır*, which she presents as a case for considering 'film as a museum' (Landry 2023: 116). *Bir Başkadır* captures the social

stratification in contemporary Istanbul at the cusp of the traditional and the modern. The series has a museal approach and centres on household objects, old photographs, archival film footage and souvenirs that evoke personal and collective memories of contemporary Turkey. The visual narrative provides scope for a parallel material reading of the series solely based on the carefully placed objects within and beyond the frames. For instance, an engagement ring covered in a chocolate foil wrapper, initially kept off screen in the opening sequence and later revealed at the end, signifies the series' central motif of the interaction and divide between tradition and modernity.

Thing theory, as deployed in analyses of visual texts like *Sharp Objects* and *Bir Başkadır*, thus highlights the inherent role of aesthetic choices in filmmaking that weave thingness into the thematic and subtextual layers of films. This chapter answers Ezra and Wheatley's (2023: 6) call to understand 'objects as the subjects of their own stories' and recognizes the role of filmmakers in imbuing objects with thingness in specific spatial and temporal contexts. Through a collaborative process of conceptualizing the aesthetic choices made by the filmmakers in creating *Dreaming Lhasa*, we offer an interpretation of the film that extends beyond the visual text. This approach, combined with our centring of a film object, offers a fresh contribution to the interpretation of Tibetan cinema.

## *Dreaming Lhasa* and remembering Chushi Gangdruk

*Dreaming Lhasa* is set in the early 2000s when more than two thousand Tibetans crossed borders every year to take refuge in India as political exiles. Many who came into exile during this period were former political prisoners escaping Chinese persecution in Tibet. Dhondup, one of the main protagonists in the film, is a former monk and political prisoner. His life takes an unexpected turn when his mother, Yangkyi, entrusts him with a mission on her deathbed. Her last wish is for Dhondup to go to India to return a gau belonging to a person called Loga. Dhondup has seen this gau, which his mother fondly keeps close to her, since his childhood. Even though he does not wish to leave Tibet, Dhondup honours his mother's wish to find Loga in India and give him the gau. The other main protagonist in the film is Karma, a second-generation Tibetan exile filmmaker from New York. She is making

a documentary film, interviewing former Tibetan political prisoners in exile, and meets Dhondup in Dharamshala as part of this project. During their conversation, Dhondup shows her the gau and shares his mission to trace Loga in India. Karma is intrigued and decides to accompany him on this journey to fulfil his mother's last wish. This journey takes them to different Tibetan locations in India, including Majnu Ka Tilla in New Delhi, Jaipur, Clement Town in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand and, finally, back to McLeod Ganj, where they find Loga living as a hermit in the mountains. Once they have found Loga, Dhondup returns to Tibet and Karma to New York. *Dreaming Lhasa* portrays their quest through an engagement with the affective landscape of exile interwoven with its political trajectory.

Over the course of his journey, Dhondup discovers that Loga is his father and was a soldier in Chushi Gangdruk—these are not things that he has been informed about by his mother, Yangkyi. This omission is a narrative technique that allows the audience to travel with Dhondup on his elusive quest as he uncovers both his personal history and the associated history of armed struggle, which is entwined with the emotional arc of the protagonists. As Dhondup searches for Loga, the narrative reveals details about him incrementally and somewhat parsimoniously. This signals a simultaneous secret-keeping and revelation to bring to the fore both the sacrifices made by the fighters and the lack of acknowledgement of their heroism within the dominant narratives of the Tibetan struggle in exile.

Sonam and Sarin tell Loga's story by centring the gau, a religious and personal power object that has shared significance for Chushi Gangdruk fighters as a protective talisman. Tibetan soldiers and resistance fighters wore gau, believing they would protect them from harm in battle (McGranahan 2010b). In an interview with the Tibet Oral History Project (2007), Ngawang Lobsang, a former member of the Chushi Gangdruk force, attests that they wore protective amulets blessed by lamas, which they believed helped the fighters escape death at the hands of the People's Liberation Army. By choosing this particular object as a narrative device, Sonam and Sarin bring attention to the association between Chushi Gangdruk and the sacred, covert and perilous in their defence of the homeland.

The filmmakers cast the amulet box in a catalytic role in the film to build trust between characters as they traverse the unstated exile political landscape, fraught with the marginalization of Chushi Gangdruk's history. The people Karma and Dhondup meet during their journey agree to talk to them about Loga only after seeing the gau,



**Figure 13.2** The gau as a catalytic object is at the centre of Dhondup's meetings with Tse Topgyal, Ghen Rabga and Loga (clockwise), and initiates the conversations between the characters by building a trust-based relationship. (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

which establishes a material connection with the historical truth of the armed resistance movement. As each of these characters encounters the amulet box for the first time (see Figure 13.2), the narrative shifts from a tentative relationship with Dhondup to deeper engagements, unlocking memories and associations with the gau. This, in turn, allows the characters to share their personal associations with Chushi Gangdruk in a relationship of mutual trust. These scenes point to the inaccessibility of Chushi Gangdruk experience and history to members of the exile community who are not bound by such trust-based relationships.

Similarly, the gau facilitates access to Loga's story as a resistance fighter, even as his own son remains unaware that this is his own story. We learn from different characters that Loga was a former monk who joined Chushi Gangdruk, underwent training by the CIA at Camp Hale, was parachuted into Tibet and fought the Chinese. We also learn that after Chushi Gangdruk was disbanded, Loga was accused of committing a murder in the Tibetan settlement of Majnu Ka Tilla, from where he fled to a monastery in another Tibetan settlement, Clement Town. When Dhondup and Karma approach Loga at his isolated hermit hut in Dharamshala for a conversation, the scene begins like all the protagonists' earlier meetings with strangers from whom they are seeking leads. As soon as Dhondup shows the amulet box to Loga, their

conversation turns to moments of revelation, emotional exchange and recollection, culminating in the resolution to the quest. Through Dhondup's possession of the gau, Loga understands that Dhondup is his son and that he received the gau from Yangkyi. Here, the object is crucial in uniting father and son for the first time.

Earlier in the film, when the protagonists reach a dead end in their search for Loga, they open the amulet to see if its contents might reveal a clue. Along with a blessed *khatak* (*kha btags*; offering scarf) and an image of the Dalai Lama, they find a strange object inside the box that is not usually associated with protective amulets. This object turns out to be a cyanide capsule, presumably given to Loga by the CIA at Camp Hale (Figure 13.3). A former Chushi Gangdruk fighter confirms the



**Figure 13.3** Opening the amulet box and revealing the cyanide capsule along with the white scarf and Dalai Lama portrait (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

historicity of this detail in the documentary *Shadow Circus*. Sonam and Sarin also mention that some of the CIA-trained fighters who were parachuted into Tibet between 1957 and 1961 ‘died consuming the CIA-provided cyanide capsule’ (Sonam and Sarin 2019: 19).

In the film, the cyanide capsule kept inside the gau as a precious object is an evocative lament for the emotional investment and faith Tibetans had in the resistance. Like the amulet box, the armed struggle was sacred, undertaken in defence of their deeply rooted religious faith and Tibetan identity. Elaborating on the significance of the cyanide contained inside the amulet, Tenzing Sonam explains: ‘Even though it was poison, it was a precious object that they had saved and carried, and so that was also put inside the amulet [box]. The idea of transferring that [memory] from one generation down to another generation ... comes down to this one object’ (Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, interview with Gokul KS 2022: 36:40–37:18). The cyanide, therefore, becomes a material representation of a struggle that demanded deep faith and a promise to sacrifice one’s life for the homeland.

The gau has a final secret to be divulged. As the cyanide capsule is revealed, the ensuing conversation between Dhondup and Penjor, a friend of Loga’s, unlocks the possibility that Loga is Dhondup’s father.

- Penjor: When the CIA dropped them into Tibet, they gave them these capsules. This must be Loga’s capsule... strange....
- Dhondup: What do you mean dropped into Tibet?
- Penjor: Loga and his team were trained by the CIA and parachuted into Tibet at a place called Chagra Pembar.
- Dhondup: That is where my father died.
- Penjor: Your father died at Chagra Pembar?
- Dhondup: Yes, he was killed by the Chinese. He was the member of a local resistance force.

At this juncture in the film, the amulet takes on the responsibility of narrating the sacrifice of the Chushi Gangdruk fighters and their families. Given its covert nature, families were often unaware of their members’ involvement in the armed struggle. As mentioned above, Tenzing Sonam’s personal background is part of this collective experience. When he was born, his father, Lhamo Tsering, was at Camp Hale in Colorado. However, his mother, who was in India, was unaware of this. Tenzing Sonam narrates this personal history in a book produced as part of the *Shadow Circus* exhibition.

I was born in January 1959 in a hospital in Darjeeling, the Indian hill station located close to the border of Tibet from where my parents had come. My mother was alone when she gave birth. My father had suddenly left home a few months earlier and she had no idea where he had gone or when he would be back. He returned some months after my birth but did not divulge the details of his travels or the nature of his work. All my mother gleaned was that he was engaged in a secret activity that was connected to the worsening situation in Tibet, where a fragile truce between the Dalai Lama's government and the occupying forces of Communist China was deteriorating. It was only much later that I discovered that my father was a key figure in the Tibetan resistance and its main liaison with the CIA, which had supported the resistance from the late 1950s. (Sonam and Sarin 2019: 2)

These personal stories of loss and separation in the service of the nation suffered a collective erasure or historical arrest. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, Sonam and Sarin subtly deploy the amulet box to resist this erasure of Chushi Gangdruk history from collective memory. While carrying the memory of Chushi Gangdruk and Tibetan histories of resistance, the gau has its own affective trajectory in relation to the characters and their emotions at different times and in different spaces. As the amulet moves between different locations in the story, each character relates to it on different terms, thereby redefining its emotional significance. It is presented in the narrative as a malleable repository of truncated family bonds and alienation from the homeland.

## Objects and affects: Separation, belonging and identity

The spatial trajectory of the amulet box in *Dreaming Lhasa* represents the metaphorical connection with the history of the Tibetan nation. The gau travels with the protagonists to Dharamshala, Delhi, Jaipur, Clement Town and, finally, New York. Its trajectory in exile narrates the life stories of members of the Tibetan community over the preceding two decades, from starting businesses in settlements such as Dharamshala and Majnu Ka Tilla, opening sweater-selling markets in different parts of India and joining exile monasteries, to migration to the West. These locations are representative exile spaces where the

hope for a free homeland waxes and wanes under varied circumstances and struggles. Sonam and Sarin present this emotionally complex and fractured story of the Tibetan exile community and its socio-political whirls through the journey of the gau as related to questions of identity.

The early 2000s was marked by deliberations within and beyond the Tibetan exile community on the question of Tibetan identity. The relationship to the homeland shared by recently arrived Tibetans was different to that of Tibetans born in exile whose parents had come from Tibet from 1959 onwards. Among the latter, those who migrated to and grew up the West felt disconnected from their language, traditions and politics. The film shows Karma, a New York-based second generation émigré, grappling with alienation from her Tibetan roots and starting to rediscover her Tibetan identity in India as she listens to the harrowing recollections of former political prisoners and spends time with the community, observing their everyday efforts to keep the Tibetan struggle alive. At the beginning of the film, when Karma sees the gau for the first time, it is merely a beautiful object to her, something to be admired for its aesthetic value. Towards the end, Dhondup entrusts Karma with the gau, which she will take back with her to New York as a treasured talisman. Here, the gau becomes a material manifestation of her Tibetan identity (see Figure 13.4).

Before bidding farewell, Dhondup gives Karma the gau, saying: 'It is in memory of what we went through.' Here, 'we' stands for the quintessence of the collective struggle of all Tibetans who fought for Tibet and all those in exile. As reflected in Karma's story, the character-object relationships in the film encompass different emotions central to the experience of being a Tibetan. In one scene, she says: 'The more I learn about Tibet, the more I feel like a complete stranger.' Karma's character is vocalizing a strain of alienation among many exile-born Tibetans, including Tenzing Sonam. According to Sonam, filmmaking is a meaningful gateway for him to rediscover his roots (pers. comm., 10 May 2022). Comprehending the larger emotional context of the visual narrative helps viewers understand the Tibetan community as united by historical experiences of exile and yet carrying diverse emotional and political arcs.

Separation is a dominant theme in contemporary Tibetan cinema due to its invasive and unmistakable presence in the lives of all Tibetans in exile. The amulet box in *Dreaming Lhasa* witnesses multiple separations and partings, from Loga bidding farewell to Yangkyi to the end of Karma and Dhondup's journey. Returning to the homeland and





**Figure 13.4** The amulet box in Karma's hands at the beginning and end of the film, respectively, symbolically marking her changed relationship with the object. (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

reuniting with family is a dream for many Tibetans. When it seems that the chances of realizing that dream are grim, this destabilizes individual and collective efforts to strengthen resistance. Uncertainties about the future and existential struggles in exile create a recurrent crisis of belonging. Separation from the homeland is then the beginning of a series of inner conflicts.

The film narrates this by circumventing any emotional closure as Dhondup and Loga meet and acknowledge each other as father and son. They do not celebrate this emotionally significant event as they do not imagine a future together. Loga continues to live in exile while Dhondup returns to Tibet. Dhondup and Loga's meeting symbolically represents the aspiration of the exile community to reunite with Tibet.

While political conditions forestall any such a reunion from happening soon, filmmaking opens a space for imagining and visualizing the emotional dimension of that dream becoming a reality. In addition, this narrative choice contributes to keeping the hope of an eventual return alive. Sonam and Sarin do not resort to a happy ending for the film, as the Tibetan struggle is heading in an uncertain direction. The gau, which travels to the West, reflects the state of outward migration of Tibetans from settlements in India, Nepal and Bhutan to other countries in different parts of the world since the 1990s. Many Tibetan filmmakers have chosen open endings for their visual storytelling to signify this political state. In an interview, filmmaker Sonam Tseten said:

[M]y thought here is that we are still not done yet. We are still here. We have miles to go. I can't show a happy ending in this story if you think from the larger exile perspective. Why do we need a happy ending when the reality is different? (Tseten and KS 2021)

The absence of resolution and emotional closure is an exile condition. The affective landscape of contemporary Tibetan cinema embraces the structural conditions in and of exile to stay close to reality.

## Conclusion

The gau in *Dreaming Lhasa* is a repository of the history of Chushi Gangdruk and its attendant politics of memory in the public domain. Instead of choosing a documentary approach to narrate the history of Tibetan armed resistance, Sonam and Sarin centre the amulet box as an object that facilitates storytelling. In the mid-2000s, when the film came out, Chushi Gangdruk history was still on the margins of public discourse. This is apparent in the narrative style of the film, in which both protagonists and viewers are initially kept at a distance from the history of the armed struggle and then drawn into a process of gradual discovery. This minimalist revelatory approach reflects how the discourse on Tibetan armed resistance exists in the public realm, distanced from the celebrated national narrative of a non-violent struggle for self-determination. Yet, despite its minimal presence in the conversations in the film, the armed struggle remains the focal point of the narrative at both surface and subtextual levels. The amulet box inextricably placed in the visual narrative facilitates this significant intervention by the filmmakers. As a medium of representation and

documentation, cinema allows Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin to reach relatively wide audiences within the Tibetan community and beyond, increasing the audibility of unheard voices.

Since *Dreaming Lhasa* was released in 2005, new spaces have opened up for the articulation and preservation of personal and collective memories of Chushi Gangdruk and for bringing these into public view, coinciding with greater democratization of the Tibetan exile polity. These include oral history collections, memoirs, extensive multi-volume writings detailing the experiences of resistance fighters, documentaries, exhibitions and installations. Notably, the recently inaugurated Tibet Museum, located inside the CTA complex in Dharamshala, foregrounds the Mustang resistance phase of the Chushi Gangdruk movement in its 'Resistance' section. Similarly, in his recent history of the Tibetan struggle, Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu (2023) provides an extensive personal account of the Chushi Gangdruk movement that factors in the contested political legacy of armed resistance. Lhamo Tsering, quoted in the *Shadow Circus* exhibition, strongly voices the need for this remembering: 'I don't see our armed resistance as something that was useful only in the past. We should look at it as one chapter in our continuing struggle for freedom, one that still has some meaning.'

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# 14 Postscript

## Weaving Materials into Tibetan and Himalayan Studies

Barbara Gerke 

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I have been following the making of this volume since I and my colleague Jan van der Valk were invited as discussants to the Tibetan Materialities workshop at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, in May 2022. This event was preceded and followed by several online meetings to discuss and give feedback on the participants' writing progress. In the summer of the same year, we all met again in Prague for a materialities panel at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) Seminar, where some of the papers were presented and I was again a discussant (together with Jan van der Valk).

From the outset, I was inspired by the collegial cooperation forged by this group, especially the innovative design of the Copenhagen workshop, which brought together junior and senior researchers on an equal platform. Each author had a full hour to discuss their writing project, followed up by supportive online feedback sessions. The collective methods this group developed were truly impressive and led to well-prepared, high-quality paper presentations at the IATS conference. The aim of all these endeavours was to create an international collaborative forum on Tibetan materialities that supported early career researchers (funded by the Asian Dynamics Initiative). *Among Tibetan Materialities* is the outcome of all these efforts and also includes several authors who joined the group at later stages. Being part of the book's making process, I am honoured to write its postscript, which offers some concluding and reflective thoughts in appreciation of the often invisible, skilled processes of (un)learning and thinking about materials over time. The threads of these processes

have been woven into this book to emerge as the text that you are now holding in your hands or reading on screen.

I want to begin by highlighting the value of temporality—the time that it takes to make things. Several chapters in this book show the importance of time and timing in the making of things, from the coordination of people, materials and environment in their production and the time taken to acquire materials and artisanal skills (Helman-Ważny; Lange and Hahn; Singh and Gerke; Stevenson; Surbhi and Van der Valk) to the significance and meaning that things can gain with time, even if they are worn out (Brox). Conference presentations of fifteen minutes are quite perishable in and of themselves, but they become a lot more enduring when we come together to create innovative models of building and sharing research over time, like this group has done. I want to use this metaphor of ‘making over time’ to invite readers to consider how the labour and skills involved in shaping collaborative academic writing can become more meaningful when including early career researchers in the process, even if it takes more time.

I have explored materials in the context of Tibetan medicine-making in my FWF-funded research project ‘Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals’ at the University of Vienna. That project’s forthcoming book *Crafting Potency: Sowa Rigpa Artisanship across the Himalayas*, co-authored with Jan van der Valk, Tawni Tidwell and Calum Blaikie, will also be published by HASP in 2025. Through our overlapping interdisciplinary interests and HASP’s open access policy, *Crafting Potency* and *Among Tibetan Materialities* both share new research approaches of working with materials in Tibetan and Himalayan worlds that our colleagues across and beyond the Himalayas can easily access.

In preparation for the Copenhagen workshop, we all read Tim Ingold’s article, ‘Materials Against Materiality’, in which he rightfully asks: ‘What academic perversion leads us to speak not of *materials and their properties* but of *the materiality of objects?*’ (2007: 3, emphasis in original). Ingold’s critique here is that conceptions of materiality within material culture studies are overly abstract and detached from the practical and lived reality of working with materials. He reminds us that materials are not static or inert. Rather, they are part of ongoing, generative processes within natural and social worlds—worlds that materiality studies often dichotomize through the nature/culture divide.

During the workshop, we discussed how materials are tangible, dynamic substances that make up the world, constantly undergoing



transformation through interaction with human and non-human agents in different environments. Discussing and reflecting on our research examples, we thought through Ingoldian perspectives. This does not mean that the frameworks used across the book's chapters are Ingoldian. While Mridul Surbhi and Jan van der Valk develop an Ingoldian concept of 'ritualized meshworks' to think through plant collection and medicine making, other authors employ theories and methods from other areas of anthropology as well as history, cartography, museum restoration, film making, science and technology studies, the history of science and the natural sciences. Many of us continue to use the more abstract term 'materiality' in various ways when expressing how people think about materials. However, *Among Tibetan Materialities* does have a clear focus on materials and their properties, from paper, grinding stones, swords, amulets and butter sculptures to statues, maps and plants, to mention but a few. In his chapter on the *patag* (*dpa' rtags*; ceremonial sword), for example, Dendup Chopel emphasizes how its material qualities are integral to the power that it wields as a national symbol of heroism in Bhutan. Perhaps because the authors are dealing with materials, they are also naturally practice-oriented, hands-on and even activist in their approaches.

I note that the contributions do not cite Tibetan artisanal written texts. Is this because 'things' are less 'textual'? Or is it that Tibetan artisans did not write extensively about their crafts—or, if they did, that we rarely have access to these texts? I am reminded of Matthew Kapstein's (2012) statement that metallurgy and architecture were among the most secret domains in Tibet, guarded among families or small professional groups and documented mostly in private notebooks, many of which have been lost.<sup>1</sup> I assume that the difficulty in accessing Tibetan texts on artisanship contributes to the fact that research on materials and artisanship has not (yet) found a more prominent place in Tibetan studies, which, as the editors clearly point out, has a tendency to privilege texts over other materials as legitimate sources of knowledge. I whole-heartedly support their call for assigning equal value to sources beyond texts.

Tsering Yangzom's 'On Tibetan Lives and Objects' sets the tone for this book with its moving prose and recollection of museum visits where the author saw objects that did not display their underlying, untold stories. Her simple yet powerful statements, such as 'all text

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1 I thank William McGrath for pointing me to this online lecture.

is potential', remind us of the responsibilities that come with writing. Tsering Yangzom's thoughts reverberate through this volume's introduction, in which the editors call for a fundamental rethinking of how material culture is approached within Tibetan studies, something they also return to in the last chapter. The historical domination of the field by textual analysis has sidelined the rich material aspects that permeate Tibetan and Himalayan societies. Contributors to this volume argue for a broader, more inclusive lens that accounts for both the physical and immaterial dimensions of Tibetan and Himalayan lives. Taken together, the chapters challenge scholars to move beyond traditional textual or object-centric analysis by showing the vibrancy of materials as entities that participate in the social, spiritual and political processes that define communities.

Moreover, the editors emphasize how our conceptualization of materials is inseparable from the power structures that shape how things are collected, interpreted and displayed. In this respect, materiality is not just a subject of study, but a political act. They also call for greater inclusivity and recognition of Tibetan and Himalayan voices within academic discourse. Materials, in this sense, can become a site for ethical engagement. However, this calls for an active rethinking across our disciplines so that materiality is not just conceived of as a subject of scholarly inquiry but also as a site for engaging with questions of colonialism, power and representation. Emma Martin explicitly pushes us to think about this in her chapter by showing how Tibetan material knowledge can be recovered from the colonial archive by focusing on the historical sites where artefacts were collected and the Tibetan and Himalayan individuals involved in these 'scenes of collecting'. Similarly, Katia Thomas' chapter leads us to reflect on what a Himalayan decolonial museum practice might look like through her study of the restoration of a statue at a museum in Gangtok by an all-local Sikkimese team.

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One of the central insights that emerges across the volume is the dynamic, embodied relationship between people and their material world. In several chapters, we see how things are brought to life through the practices and expertise of the people who interact with them, creating different types of non-textual 'literacy' that can be passed on through lineages and apprenticeship or socialization in particular social and environmental contexts. For instance, the chapter by Mareike Wulff

highlights how material culture, in this case Bhutanese festival attire, contains layers of visual knowledge that can be ‘read’ by those who have gained ‘visual literacy’ through socialization. Here, materiality is not only found in the material culture that we are studying, but also in its visual representation through layered illustrations that help others engage with and understand it. Similarly, in the chapter on Sowa Rigpa medicine-making that I co-authored with medical anthropologist Stuti Singh, we illustrate how forms of ‘artisanal literacy’ (Smith 2004) emerge from the intimacy between practitioners and their tools. In this context, grinding stones are not just passive instruments, but rather active participants in the creation of potent medicines. Imbued with ritual and care, these tools become extensions of the medical practitioners’ skills and knowledge—embodied forms of a living archive of medicine making knowledge that can be passed on to future generations.

The idea that materiality is a medium for knowledge transmission echoes throughout the volume. In Agnieszka Helman-Ważny’s exploration of Tibetan paper, we see how the materials used to make books—such as the plants from the Thymelaeaceae family—carry within them centuries of knowledge, tradition and local expertise. Raw materials, papermaking techniques and the final product are all deeply embedded in praxis. Paper is more than just a physical substrate for texts; it is a carrier of cultural memory. This theme of materials as a vessel for memory and continuity also appears in Brox’s study, where the wear and decay of prayer wheel washers does not diminish their value, but can instead give them new lives and forms of potency. I am left pondering how the lifeworlds of materials evolve over time, acquiring new meanings as they move through different stages of use and wear.

This collection of works therefore reveals that while attention to materials and their properties is crucial, materiality is not simply about things themselves. It is also about the ways in which they are entwined with processes of knowing, being in and interacting with the world. From religious rituals to political symbols, from everyday tools to sacred artefacts, materiality forms a solid foundation of cultural expression and identity in the diverse regions and cities covered in this volume: Amdo, Bhutan, Central Tibet, Chengdu, Dharamshala, Gandaki, Kathmandu, Kinnaur, Ladakh, Sikkim and Spiti—all clustered under the broad umbrella of ‘Tibet and the Himalayas’, which is itself a contested label that is difficult to define.

One of the volume’s most significant contributions is its critical engagement with the political dimensions of materials. Whether

examining the potency of the patag as a ‘heroic artefact’ in contemporary Bhutan or the politics of Tibetan identity revealed through a *gau* (*ga’u*; protective amulet box) in a film, the chapters demonstrate that things are often imbued with political meaning. Materials are never neutral; they reflect and shape the power structures within which they are embedded. Chopel shows how the patag is not just a sword; it is an assemblage of fine materials, techniques and symbolic and affective qualities that has been used in the ongoing construction of the Bhutanese nation. In Gokul KS and Sonika Gupta’s analysis of the film *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), the gau as a film object reveals contested histories and memories of Tibetan resistance and exile, driving the narrative and linking the characters’ personal stories to the larger political struggles of Tibet. Similarly, for those who are able to ‘read’ it, the Bhutanese festival attire discussed and illustrated by Wulff reinforces status and rank.

However, the materials presented are not only about power and politics; they are also about care and preservation. In Thomas’ chapter on Buddhist conservation practices at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim, we see how the care of sacred objects involves both material and immaterial aspects. The Institute’s restoration of a Manjushri statue required not just physical cleaning but also religious rituals to ensure the statue’s spiritual potency. We are led to think about how conservation in Himalayan Buddhist contexts demands a delicate balance between secular museological practices and religious beliefs—and how the materiality of statues cannot be disentangled from the rituals and practices that maintain their sacredness.

This intermingling of material and spiritual worlds is a recurring leitmotif throughout the volume. In Mark Stevenson’s study of the making of a Tibetan ‘butter sculpture’, we see how the temporal and collaborative nature of ritual art-making infuses it with layers of meaning. Created for the Losar festival at Rongwo Monastery in Rep-gong, this assemblage of figures and ornaments crafted from butter is not just an ephemeral creation; it is a material manifestation of ritual processes that involve a team of artisans and monks, each of whom has a specific role in the timely completion of the offering’s components and their assembly. Stevenson skilfully takes us through the five-day art-making process during which we witness how objects gain meaning not only through their physical form or through formal rituals of consecration, but also through the social interactions and the team’s synchronized making that bring them into being—in a process Stevenson calls pre-consecration. Reading his work prompted me to think

about how temporal elements become embedded in ritual sculptures through the process of their creation.

Several articles teach us how the materiality of things is also profoundly embedded in the environments and contexts in which they are created and circulated. Diana Lange and Oliver Hahn's material analysis of a Tibetan map of Mount Kailash exposes how the choice of materials—both traditional and synthetic—tells a story about the map's history and usage. This knowledge emerges from a close collaboration between the humanities and natural sciences, bringing together Lange's knowledge of Tibetan mapmaking and Hahn's expertise in scientific material analysis of colourants and writing and drawing materials. Here we are invited to think through how materiality is not just about what objects are made of, but how those materials interact with global flows of knowledge, technology and trade—themes addressed in Pamela Smith's (2019) edited volume *Entangled Itineraries*, in which the authors discuss how materials, techniques and knowledge circulate and change when they move through different 'relational fields', or contexts. Similarly, Martin's chapter on the 'scene of collecting' emphasizes the interpersonal and historical dynamics that shape the act of collecting. Both collecting and restoration are material process involving power relations, knowledge transfer and cultural negotiation.

What I learned from all these chapters is that materials are far from passive. Things, landscapes and tools in Tibetan and Himalayan contexts are agents of meaning that shape and are shaped by the people who use and interact with them. Whether through the embodied practices of medicine-making, the political instrumentalization of a sword or the collaborative creation of ritual art, materials form the connective tissue that links individuals to their environments, histories and communities.

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The various theoretical approaches employed by the contributors are worth briefly reflecting on since they represent a diversity in thinking and disciplinary perspectives that could enrich future research on materials, and demonstrate how Tibetan studies can benefit from interdisciplinary engagement.

Surbhi and Van der Valk draw on Tim Ingold's (2000) concept of 'meshworks', which highlights the fluid and emergent properties of material interactions, offering a compelling way to understand the

interwoven relationships between people, plants and landscapes. But they also critically engage with Actor Network Theory (ANT), borrowed from science and technology studies, which offers yet another layer of theoretical complexity by conceptualizing objects, people and their interactions as part of dynamic networks—quite contradictory to Ingoldian meshworks. ANT shows how power and meaning are generated through these networks, helping to deconstruct the traditional dichotomies between subject and object, but falls short of what Surbhi and Van der Valk highlight in terms of alive entanglements between environments, deities, rituals and medicine making in Spiti. Lorraine Daston’s (2008) notion of the ‘talking’ nature of things (Lange and Hahn) lets objects possess their own agency, while influencing and being influenced by human interaction. Bill Brown’s (2001) ‘thing theory’ from literary studies, here applied to film analysis (KS and Gupta), offers an inspiring conceptual framework for analysing, for example, the transition of an amulet box from ‘a religious power object to an emotional thing’.

Pamela Smith’s (2004) work on ‘artisanal epistemologies’, applied in this volume to medicine making (Singh and Gerke), foregrounds artisanal knowledge—gained through embodied practices—as critical for our understanding of how potency and efficacy are crafted. Smith’s framework brings to light the often-overlooked forms of knowledge that are transmitted through hands-on, skilled engagement with materials, which are infused with their own ‘artisanal literacy’. Alfred Gell’s (1992) theory of ‘art and agency’ extends this understanding by emphasizing how art objects, such as ritual sculptures (Stevenson), act as agents that mediate social relationships and religious practices, making a point about the active role of materials in shaping cultural and spiritual life. Similarly, the use of ‘object biography’ from archaeology and anthropology provides a method for tracing the life histories of things, charting their production, use, exchange, and eventual reinterpretation or what Schiffer (2013) conceptualizes as their afterlives, as explored by Brox.

Together, these diverse theoretical frameworks push the study of material culture beyond mere descriptions of things, inviting a more nuanced examination of the roles that materials play within social, political and spiritual contexts. While individual theorists might contradict one another, I found the variety of perspectives in this volume not only enriches the theoretical landscape of Tibetan and Himalayan studies but also opens up new ways of understanding the properties of things—whether sacred or mundane—and how they come to mediate

relationships, convey power and participate in the co-creation of meaning across different worlds.

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At the heart of this volume is a call to rethink materials in Tibetan and Himalayan studies, not as a static collection of artefacts, but as living processes that are deeply embedded in the physical, spiritual, social and political dimensions of lives in these regions. As I reflect and write on the insights gained from this volume, I think that one of its lasting contributions is the invitation to explore new questions. How do things go beyond being objects and co-create each other? How do Tibetan and Himalayan societies sustain themselves, adapt and thrive in interaction with materials? What other material practices have yet to be explored in Tibetan and Himalayan (con)texts? How might our scholarly engagement with materials further shape the future not only of Tibetan studies, but also of the related disciplines presented in this volume (anthropology, history, museum studies, cartography and so on)? *Tibetan Materialities* certainly, and positively, sets the stage for future scholarship that is more inclusive, critical and engaged with the material realities of the vast Tibetan and Himalayan regions and their diverse peoples.

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# 15 Critical Tibetan Studies

## A Turn to Materiality

Emma Martin , Trine Brox  and Diana Lange 

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**Abstract** This series of notes highlights a number of critical questions for the Tibetan studies community. It draws these from Tsering Yangzom's meditation on Tibetan lives and objects in the preface to this volume, the story of how *Among Tibetan Materialities* came into being, and our reflections as editors on the limits of what we have achieved.

**Keywords** Tibetan studies, critical turn, materiality, collaborative practice

Our work on this volume coincided with the publication of Tsering Yangzom's (2022) *We Measure the Earth With Our Bodies*. This fictional work weaves together the lives of a family forced to escape from Tibet and the intergenerational impact this had on their lives. Like many other readers, we were drawn to the affective qualities of one of the main protagonists, the nameless saint. Tsering Yangzom wrote this small wooden figure of immense strength and character into expansive Tibetan lifeworlds that challenge the narratives so often ascribed to Buddhist statues (*sku*) in Tibetan studies scholarship. We approached Tsering Yangzom and asked her if she would contribute to this volume. Perhaps she would write a reflective piece on the nameless saint? We initially thought of her contribution as a chance to reflect on creative practice as a method for understanding and situating Tibetan materiality, as well as a way to challenge the canon. However, Tsering Yangzom's essay goes far beyond this. It is a manifesto written for and to the Tibetan people. It is also a powerful critique of the discipline and the institutions and actors that uphold its position.

In this piece we raise a number of critical questions for the Tibetan studies community drawn from Tsering Yangzom's reflections, the story of how *Among Tibetan Materialities* came into being, and the limits of what we have achieved with this edited volume. We chose

to bookend the volume with Tsering Yangzom's essay and this final chapter as a counterpart, since these reflective pieces provide the critical, supporting framework for what is contained within. But we must emphasize that what follows should be understood to reflect our opinions as the editors of this volume and not those of the other contributors.

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Configured as a series of notes, Tsering Yangzom's piece moves through and between reflections on the creative writing process and the relationship between writer, character and audience, and what it means for Tibetans to write when most of the readership is not Tibetan. She sets out the shortcomings of Tibetan studies and the cultural institutions that hold Tibet's material culture at a distance from Tibetans. Her manifesto is a call for closeness, for collapsing distance and upending notions of scholarly objectivity.

Asking what it would take for museums to reframe their position on Tibet, to act in solidarity, 'to grieve when we grieve', Tsering Yangzom sets out a speculative future for museums in which Tibetans shape Tibetan materiality for the benefit of Tibetans. These musings are not just relevant to cultural institutions. The same questions can be levelled at the Tibetan studies community. To borrow from Carole McGranahan's (2022: 290) reflections on theory as ethics, we should all be asking how we can make sure that what we do 'benefits the Tibetan community in ways that are meaningful to them and not just to me or to academia'.

What then does it mean to build care, trust and collaboration into Tibetan studies? How do we conceptualize and theorize research so that it becomes a generative rather than extractive act, and so that Tibetan scholarship and expertise is recognized on its own terms and not only as a source for established scholars? We ask you, the reader, to join us in reflecting and acting upon these questions—in solidarity, in grief, in hope.

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Tsering Yangzom's introduction also offers a powerful point of reflection on the limits of what we have achieved in this volume. *Among Tibetan Materialities* began life as a commitment to carve out academic space based on principles of collegiality, generosity and friendship,

which actively encourage equal participation across status, position, institutions and national borders. Our aim as editors has been to support colleagues who have found it challenging to find a place within the current landscape of Tibetan studies, particularly within the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS), and whose research and practice did not sit comfortably within the classic fields of the discipline, namely history, religion, linguistics and art,<sup>1</sup> nor for that matter within the academy more broadly. A further layer to this has been our determination to support early career researchers in building networks and confidence in their research and expertise.

Our intention to build a community of practice began in 2016 in Bergen, Norway, at the 13<sup>th</sup> IATS seminar, the major triennial conference for the discipline. We recognized a synergy between our respective research areas and approaches, and this led to the beginnings of a research agenda. In 2017, we established the online platform Object Lessons from Tibet and the Himalayas (<https://objectlessonsfromtibetblog.wordpress.com/> [accessed 22 July 2025]), which provided us with a space to document early iterations of research with a particular focus on museum collections and material culture-focused case studies. This was followed by our first workshop in Manchester in June 2017, which brought clarity to our future direction.

The focus of this first workshop was on knowledge production relating to Tibetan material culture now in European museums. Our primary concern was to expose colonial-era acts of collection and the white men largely involved in those acts. In hindsight we can see that we were also privileging those acts and white men. Furthermore, all of the speakers were white. In his review of the workshop Thupten Kelsang warned against reducing Tibetans in the past to what he termed ‘Sherpas’ who only carry white scholarship:

Unless there is an active effort to counter this tendency on the part of researchers, the academic associations and networks will continue to function in a manner akin to the colonial paradigms which privileged the association of British Frontier Officers with Tibetan aristocratic or religious elites. (Kelsang 2017: 130)

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1 The IATS website singles out these fields of research as ‘prominent examples’ of Tibetan studies territory (IATS n.d.).

We continued to support these conversations and critical reflections and to heed this message through small gatherings, workshops and conference panels in Copenhagen and Manchester, which gave doctoral students, museum professionals and early career academics the opportunity to present work or draft chapters for feedback and reflection outside of the conference circuit.

IATS seminars continued to be important milestones in the development of our thinking, although not always for the reasons one might expect. When the 15<sup>th</sup> IATS seminar issued its call for papers, Trine Brox and Emma Martin conceptualized and convened the panel ‘Re-Narrating Tibetan Material Worlds: Other Ways of Reading Objects and Heritage’. The call for papers asked for contributions that used materially-led research to engage with questions related to the production, displacement, loss and potential recovery of different kinds of material knowledge, both in the present and in the past. On posting this call via social media channels, we received an immediate reply from an established Tibetologist: ‘Please, try to utilize Tibetan-language literature.’ This policing of the discipline was also felt by doctoral candidates presenting their research online during the COVID-19 pandemic. We witnessed senior colleagues dismissing students who presented visually and materially-led methodologies, insisting that they use texts in their studies as philological evidence for their arguments.

These experiences prompted us to attempt to create a positive space for discussion at the 16<sup>th</sup> IATS seminar in Prague by bringing together researchers who identify with materiality-centred research to create two panels. In addition to carving out space for Tibetan materialities as a field of study, our aim was to show a commitment to working collaboratively. We arranged multiple online feedback sessions and offered several rounds of guidance to support colleagues in developing conference papers and, from these, the chapters that are included in this volume.<sup>2</sup> In doing so we consciously rejected the lack of generosity and encouragement for new approaches and types of scholarship that we had witnessed, and which is emblematic of the wider challenges facing IATS.<sup>3</sup> This was particularly evident before and during the 16<sup>th</sup> IATS

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2 We would particularly like to thank Barbara Gerke, Mark Stevenson and Jan van der Valk for their continued and generous support of this process. We continue to learn so much from you and your spirit of collegiality.

3 During IATS seminars, there increasingly exists a wall between the scholars who practise ‘Tibetology’ and those who sit under the umbrella of Tibetan

seminar, where it was not possible to reach a consensus on the need for IATS to institute a set of ethical guidelines to prevent exploitative relationships. This should undoubtedly be at the core of the Tibetan studies community and the IATS ethos, but it was deemed unnecessary by a vocal minority who dominated the open debate.

Without question IATS needs renewal. What will it take for Tibetan studies to embed an ethics of care and mentorship—not to mention a code of academic conduct that recognizes the inequitable conditions under which research is produced? We call for recognition of the exclusions and biases that remain at the heart of the discipline, for equitable consideration for all methods and sources and for collective commitment to ethical conduct.

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Our desire to support change is not necessarily reflected in the final list of contributors to this volume. Along the way, a number of early career researchers and particularly researchers of Colour and/or who identify as of Tibetan and Himalayan heritage have withdrawn their chapters. We have seen contributors overwhelmed by the lack of institutional support and space to discuss the ongoing violence against the Palestinian people and by crises of confidence fuelled by the question of whether they are good enough to contribute to the field of Tibetan studies. In one case, an early career researcher decided to withdraw their chapter after an attempt to blacklist them was followed by coercion.

These intersecting points of extreme and crushing pressure felt by early career researchers are of course not unique to the field of Tibetan studies; they are prevalent throughout the academy. However, it is crucial to pay attention to the unrecognized but long term implications of such global and intimate acts of violence on the future trajectories of Tibetan studies. These trajectories will inevitably determine who gets to publish, build a career and, in the coming years, decide on the direction and principles of the discipline, as well as the types of research published.

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studies. The community has become a two-pronged discipline with one group of scholars, the Tibetologists, working on textual analysis and the other group more interested in applying other humanities and social science methods. There are very few scholars who manage to bridge the two.

While this volume represents a fractional step towards change, the absence of some of the innovative and inspiring research that we wanted to include exposes the inherent inequalities in the processes of academic research, publication and knowledge production. We ask you to join us in reflecting on how we might strive for greater inclusion despite the structural obstacles.

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Despite the limitations of this volume, we see it as a contribution to what we describe as a ‘critical turn’ in Tibetan studies, identifiable as a growing critique of the established methodologies and academic concerns privileged by the discipline.<sup>4</sup> This criticality can be traced back more than three decades to the postcolonial scholarship of Barbara Aziz (1987, 1988 [1985]), Melvyn Goldstein and Gelek Rimpoche (1989), Peter Bishop (1989), Tsering Shakya (1994, 2001), Frank Korom (1997), Donald Lopez Jr (1998), Clare Harris (1999), Peter Hansen (2003) and Martin Brauen (2004). Through differing conceptual frameworks, these scholars began to expose the colonial histories and Orientalist practices associated with the early twentieth century foundations of Tibetology and their ongoing implications for Tibetan studies in the present.<sup>5</sup>

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4 This chapter does not provide a comprehensive literature review. Following Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne who hold that ‘citation denotes those ideas that we want to bring along with us’ (2017: 11), we have made considered choices about who to cite and why.

5 From the nineteenth century onwards, the focus of Tibetology (the science of Tibet) was not Tibet per se, but primarily the philological study of Buddhist scriptures, which was conducted by white European scholars. This focus on texts meant that scholars of Tibetology did not need Tibet (Lopez Jr. 1998)—they did not have to travel there or to talk with Tibetans—as they needed only their Buddhist texts to produce ‘critical’ editions, translations and exegeses. As a recognized discipline, Tibetology was regarded as having a scientific and objective methodology characterized by the systematic study of text, for which one trained under a professor at a European or North American university to qualify as a Tibetologist. Tibetology still has the status of a singular discipline in this sense, something that one has to be trained in to properly master, yet the relatively high status of this expertise has been challenged by the arrival of alternative methodologies. This has broadened

In the 2000s a growing number of scholars relied on disciplinary frameworks other than philology and religious studies, including anthropology, gender studies, Indigenous language and area studies, histories of colonialism and international relations (Anand 2002, 2007; Gyatso and Havnevik 2005; Makley 2007; McGranahan 2010; Shneiderman 2006; Yeh 2007, 2013). This research spoke to the politics and contemporary realities of undertaking Tibet and Himalaya-centred research, evidenced by research questions that increasingly addressed political violence and upheaval, insurgency and uprisings, indigenous language suppression, human rights violations, travel and trade restrictions and, intersecting with many of these issues, China's continuing occupation of Tibet.

Of particular relevance to this volume is a more recent turn towards questions of ethics, positionality, indigeneity and W/whiteness, which sits alongside a growing acknowledgement of the academic responsibility that comes with undertaking research in places devastated by ongoing and encroaching colonialism, deforestation and mineral extraction, global warming and the suppression of human rights. In 2011, Tsering Yangzom and Dawa Lokyitsang founded *Lhakar Diaries* (<https://lhakardiaries.com/> [accessed 22 July 2025]), a blog that serves, among other things, to “demystify ideas about Tibet”, ushering in decolonial praxis among Tibetan youth well before the academic conversation in Tibetan and Himalayan studies got under way’ (Gayley 2023). More than a decade ago, Cristina Michelle Kleisath (2013) asked the Tibetan studies community to flip the analytical gaze away from Tibet and onto Tibetology itself by asking questions of researcher neutrality through critical race theory. Although Kleisath questioned the discipline's inability to recognize race in its scholarship, her work appears to have gone without comment from the Tibetan studies community. It took another seven years before researchers raised such questions in a public forum. Of note are the individual contributions made by Natalie Avalos, Matthew King, Nancy G. Lin, Dawa Lokyitsang, Karin Meyers, Annabella Pitkin, Sangseraima Ujeed and Riga Shakya during the Decolonial/Anti-Racist roundtable discussion at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference in Colorado in 2019, and later published in *Waxing Moon* (Avalos et al. 2020).

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the scope of the discipline, which is now more commonly understood as Tibetan studies.

Since then, notable publications include the special issue addressing marginalization and everyday lives edited by Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer (2023), a special edition dedicated to centring the Tibetan language in Tibetan studies for *Yeshe*, edited by Huatse Gyal and Charlene Makley (2024), Swati Chawla's call to foreground Tibetans in Tibetan studies in India (2024), Dawa Lokitsang's reappraisal of her earlier work on Tibetan Indigeneity (2024) and Jinba Tenzin's reflective work on what it means to be a 'native anthropologist' (2024). These publications have, in various ways, rejected the notion of objectivity and the idea that Tibetan studies is unhindered by racial and gender-based bias and geopolitical influence. They push us to instead think about the subjectivity and equitability of our research, as well as to critically reflect on what counts as a primary source and what types of analytical frame are valued by the discipline.

We write in solidarity with these recent collections and initiatives that question the neutrality of the discipline and consider whose knowledge is worthy of recognition, who gets invited into the academy and who has the privilege to access academic outputs. It is no accident that most of these recent works are open access publications. This was also a primary concern for us when it came to choosing a press for *Among Tibetan Materialities*. We did not want to hide the scholarship it contains behind paywalls or exorbitant price tags, or to disadvantage contributors who do not benefit from institutional funding that covers article publication charges. Although we recognize that there are still barriers such as language and infrastructure, our aim has been to afford greater equality of access to this publication and to increase the chances that each contributor's research is read, cited and acted upon.

We hope that you, as readers, use this volume's collective and individual attempts to explore what it means to critically and ethically engage with Tibetan materialities as part of the broader critical turn in Tibetan studies—and that you will consider where to publish, who to cite and who to uplift as we continue to shape the future of this discipline.

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*Among Tibetan Materialities* makes an intervention into Tibetan studies by critically engaging with material culture. It opens up new sources, methodologies and frameworks for studying, thinking and writing about material culture, materials and materiality in Tibet and the Himalayas. It highlights novel ways that Tibetan and Himalayan worlds can be made relevant beyond their local contexts. Spanning historical and contemporary contexts this collection of ongoing research disrupts current approaches to Tibetan and Himalayan materiality by considering socially constructed materiality and the materials constituting things, from their conception and production to their end of life and afterlife.