

Utilizing terror: On the adoption and refinement of skull cups in Tibetan Buddhism

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Abstract

This thesis examines the changing role of the *kapāla*, or skull cup, in the visual and material culture of Tantra. The transformation of the skull cup is related to the historical and religious conditions of its various ritual settings and applications in the region of northern India and Tibet. These cups are seen in depictions of terrifying or wrathful Tibetan Buddhist deities and associated with the Tantric/esoteric practices of their devotees. My paper explores the transformation of the skull cup from an object employed for its inherent quality of pollution in a marginal setting of the early centuries CE to its doctrinal and institutional value in Tibetan Buddhism of recent centuries. Integrating art historical and religious scholarship, I explore the history of skull cups and their refinement as well as their iconological resonances in Tibetan religious paintings and the arts of esoteric Buddhism.

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Introduction: What is a skull cup?

Introduction:

What is a skull cup?

Introduction to the kapāla

This paper introduces the skull cup, or *kapāla*, as a unique form of material and visual culture that integrates the ideas and ideals of various religious practices and ritual traditions in the Himalayan region. Over a period of approximately fifteen hundred years, *kapāla* have been transformed by different religious settings from crudely simple to highly refined objects. They have also become a vital part of a common visual vocabulary in the arts of India and Tibet. Skull cups are often seen in depictions of terrifying or fearsome deities, featured as a part of that deities' visual identity in their hands or within the composition. Here, I present *kapāla* as a ritual accessory for both practitioners and sacred figures: they represent the presence, transmission, and adaptation of various religious teachings. In this thesis, the skull cup is discussed as both object and image as a part of the visual and material artistic production of a religious community. The changing relationship between the ritual application of this object and its representation in images of deities acts as a barometer for the priorities being assigned the skull cup in changing visual and material traditions. The trajectory of my argument follows a roughly chronological development, beginning with the *kapāla* in later traditions of Tibetan iconography and moving backwards in time to explore the origins of its value, examining how it came to be incorporated into Tibetan visual arts.

A *kapāla* is a bowl or cup made from a human skull. In the earlier years of its production (before the tenth century CE), these cups were made from scavenged crania found in charnel grounds in India and were, for the most part, unadorned. More recently, they have been made

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with the remains of great teachers, monks or even revered family members in Tibet.¹ The skull is cut or broken so that the parietal and frontal bones are left intact and the natural shape of the cranium dictates the overall form. In some Tibetan examples, the bones are embellished with painting on the interior or exterior, carvings, or linings of silver or copper (Figure 1). They are also produced with a lid and triangular stand of copper or silver, sometimes augmented with gemstones, coral, pearls or ivory. Lids and stands are most commonly decorated with religious symbols related to the practices for which skull cups are produced. These symbols include the *vajra*, or four-pronged “thunderbolt/diamond” form, lotus flowers, or the syllables of specific *mantra*, recited during worship that might include the use of this cup. The *kapāla* from the Musee Guimet in Figure 1 shows the *vajra* made out of jade on the top of the lid, as well as letters and/or syllables in a band of Tibetan script beneath this. Often, there are three smaller heads decorating the base where the skull rests against the metal; two of these are visible in this Guimet example. These cups are used in rituals or visualizations to hold offerings of sculpted dough, alcohol, tea, or blood to deities. *Kapāla* are most commonly associated with Tantric beliefs or rituals in Tibetan Buddhism.

Tantra is an esoteric ideology that bridges Hinduism and Buddhism by placing an emphasis on the mode of worship, rather than its object or community. Tantric ideas were imported to Tibet from India in the eighth to eleventh centuries through the texts, trade, and practices that would establish Buddhism as the dominant religion there. At the heart of Tantra is the idea that deeper spiritual or metaphysical understanding is a product of the subjective insights derived from visceral ritual experiences.² The practice of using a skull is part of a complex

¹ W. W. Rockhill, “On the use of skulls in Lamaist ceremonies,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 14 (1890), xxv.

² Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 137.

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system of ritual behaviors most often meant to invoke an experience of the terrifying. The practice of creating *kapāla* as part of Tantric rituals was imported most fervently in the tenth to twelfth centuries when there was a high demand for Indian Tantric Buddhism by Tibetan aristocratic patrons.³ Tantra inspired many forms of visual and material culture in both Tibet and India, including ritual daggers, choppers, mandalas, and several traditions of complex figurative and symbolic imagery.⁴ This thesis will focus on skull cups to narrow a discussion of the relationship between a religious tradition and the objects it creates, adopts, or modifies.

Skull cups were first used as ritual objects by Hindu ascetics who harvested skulls from cemeteries and fashioned crude bowls with which they ate, drank, and performed rites. The earliest references for this practice come from Sanskrit texts of the third to fifth centuries CE.⁵ The objects created by these original users are, to the best of my knowledge, lost. Art historically speaking, these ascetics engendered a rich legacy of iconographical trends in the devotional imageries of esoteric communities that act as a major source for this project. Presumably, the earliest *kapāla* would have been perfunctory and plain given the resources of the producers and frequent testaments of their mendicant lifestyle in literature. By the seventh century, the producers of these bowls were commonly referred to as the Kāpālika or ‘Skull-Bearers’ in Sanskrit texts and were known to be most prominent throughout India in the eighth to

³ Robert E. Fisher, *Art of Tibet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 18.

⁴ see John C. Huntington, “The Phur-pa, Tibetan Ritual Daggers,” *Artibus Asiae, Supplementum* Vol. 33 (1975), 3-63. Huntington’s monograph on the *phur-pa* makes an interesting comparison to my project. Whereas he builds an iconographical comparison of these Tibetan ritual objects, I have chosen to examine the origin of the *kapāla*’s adoption, finding a formal comparison of surviving examples unnecessary for my purposes. Huntington states that the origins of the *phur-pa* are uncertain, having been observed in pre-Buddhist Tibetan religious traditions, as well as claims that it came from India.

⁵ David Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and Kalamukhas: Two Lost Saivite Sects* (New Delhi: Thomson Press Ltd, 1972), 13.

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thirteenth centuries.⁶ Their practices were highly influential to the formations of Tantric Buddhism in northern Indian regions during this period. Though the sect was had mostly disappeared by the fourteenth century, their practices and the imagery they inspired would have a lasting effect on Tantric teachings and visual arts. Their transgressive means of worship would be incorporated into regional visual cultures and continuously adapted to this day in the esoteric Buddhism of Tibet.

Existing scholarship on the *kapāla* rarely examines the history of the object or its iconic representation to great depth; as part of the ceremonial and visually complex pageantry typical of Tantric practices it can be easily overwhelmed. In many art historical texts or surveys of regional art, the *kapāla* is most often included as part of an illustrated dictionary, introducing it as an icon, yet another component of the visual regalia seen in Buddhist or Hindu deity worship.

Concerning the image of *kapāla* as a part of the visual arts in India and Tibet, scholars tend to treat it as an indication of the type of image in which it is seen (e.g. Tantric, wrathful deity, etc).

For example, Antoinette Gordon, in an illustrated typology for the many deities and their attributes seen in Tibetan visual arts, describes skull cups as a symbol of Tantric manifestations.⁷ She gives examples of the types of deities seen holding *kapāla*— protectors, wrathful females, fearsome types— and differentiates the skull cup from begging bowls seen in images of the more peaceful Gautama Buddha or Avalokiteśvara. In her work, skull cups are a means for distinguishing between different forms of the same deity. She does not discuss *kapāla* as a ritual object.

⁶ Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas, op. cit.*, 4.

⁷ Antoinette K. Gordon, *The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism* (Rutland VT: Charles E Tuttle Co, 1939), 14.

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Another approach has been to define the skull cup in terms of its symbolic meaning. Himalayan Art Resources, a website created and maintained by Jeff Watt, Senior Curator at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City, defines the skull cup as being used for Tibetan Buddhist practices related to Tantric wrathful deities, where the skull represents egolessness or the emptiness of a body without a soul.⁸ David Lorenzen, in his book on the Śaivite— worshippers of Śiva— originators of the *kapāla*, describes the cup as a symbol of social and religious transgression that emphasizes the worldly and profane.⁹ Other symbolic definitions discuss the skull, as image and object, as a reminder of *samsara*— the cycle of death and rebirth— or the authority of teachers in esoteric schools of thought. I believe these definitions are limited though this may be a matter of editorial necessity.

Few scholars have described the origination of the visual affect of the skull cup within its religious, historical, or political contexts. Using the artistic traditions of the South Asian and Himalayan regions, this thesis aims to do just this by examining the influence of *kapāla* and the ideas or communities that have used or promoted it as a ritual object. A key component of making this study is describing not only the object or its image, but what it represents to those that have created or used it, which means describing the religious, social, and political systems that shape the perspective of the objects' users. By discussing these various contexts and the conditions for artistic and cultural expression they provide, this thesis will explore the process of refinement and modification for the skull cup as a ritual object.

My goal is to demonstrate that this very specific and somewhat sensitive material, a human skull, can be interpreted as iconologically multivalent. Along these lines, Pratapaditya

⁸ “Skull cup”, Himalayan Art Resources website, www.himalayanart.org, Accessed 15 December 2010.

⁹ Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, *op. cit.*, 12.

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Pal— writing for a catalogue of Tibetan art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art— gives one of few definitions seen in an art historical text that provides an account of how the object is used, not just what it signifies. The scholar explains that the cups often serve as emblems for a deity’s terrifying manifestation, in addition to functioning as a part of Tantric rituals.¹⁰ The two ideas present in this definition give the viewer a sense of how to see the object in its context and how to interpret its shape as both a vessel and an icon in paintings or sculptures.

The scholar whose work resonates most strongly with my project is Robert Beer, who in his *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (1999) relates the *kapāla* to its history as a ritual object in various settings, gradually integrated into Tibetan Buddhism. Beer discusses the variations in iconography of the skull cup (primarily) in paintings and, in addition, he explores the class of Tantric ritual objects to which *kapāla* are related. Many of these objects also use human remains and all, he argues, are inspired by the Kāpālika and their interactions with Buddhists in the centuries of Buddhism’s establishment in Tibet.¹¹ In his definition, art history and religious history are drawn on in equal parts; both can and should be used to understand these ritual objects. By elaborating on the history to which Beer alludes in his definition, this thesis will examine more closely the mechanics of Tibetan Buddhism’s adoption of skull cups.

Synopses of the chapters

In the first chapter, the skull cup will be introduced via its iconic representation in an eighteenth century *thangka*, or Tibetan religious painting, in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. There are many *kapāla* in this composition, demonstrating a versatility in the

¹⁰ Pal, Pratapaditya, *Art of Tibet: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 243.

¹¹ Robert Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 249.

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application of the skull cup as an image. This painting's iconography also indicates certain trends and ideological lineages in Tibetan Buddhism as it was established by the eighteenth century. By this time, the Gelugpa, one of four monastic orders in Tibet, dominated the region politically and culturally. In this chapter, I argue that Gelug-influenced ideas and iconography are made prominent for political reasons having to do with the order's rise to power and its relationship with China's powerful Qianlong emperor (r. 1735-1796). By providing an historical, religious and political interpretation for this *thangka*, I demonstrate that the skull cup has a specific, though flexible, significance in Tibetan visual culture.

In the second chapter, I trace the significance of the skull cup as an indication of Tantric or esoteric practices and their integration into Tibetan Buddhism. Building on my interpretation of the *thangka* in the first chapter, I focus my discussion on the *Vajrabhairava* ('Diamond-Terrifier') *Tantra* as an example of a type of Tantric teaching centered on terrifying or wrathful deities. This tantra not only serves as inspiration for the imagery and ritual practices seen in the painting of the first chapter, it provides a useful example for examining how Tantra influenced Tibetan visual culture in general. Describing the *Vajrabhairava Tantra*'s transmission as a religious and ceremonial tradition provides a prototype for understanding the mechanics for the adoption of Indian Tantric ideas into Tibetan Buddhism and, by extension, its arts. The text itself is explained as a source for iconography over a period of several hundred years as Buddhism took shape in Tibet. The *kapāla* is examined as an example of these Tantric ideas manifested as object, attribute for a deity, and ritual accessory.

The third chapter focuses on visual representations of Tantra in India during the period of its greatest influence, roughly 700 to 1100 CE. During these years, the imagery inspired by prominent communities with practices using the skull cup were appropriated by monastic

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Buddhism. The drama and extreme methods of Tantric Buddhism as it was formed during this period will be examined as the influence of the Kāpālika and their practices. This chapter also describes the genesis of the types of images that have used the skull cup and the birth of Tantric visual vocabulary that includes terrifying images and sexual content. I examine the origins of the ritual use of *kapāla* by Hindu Tantric ascetics and how their use of the *kapāla*-object was integrated into portrayals of their chief deities to become the *kapāla*-image seen in Tantric-influenced arts thereafter. These earliest ideas of the *kapāla* as a ritual object will be described as predecessors to the similar ritual practices that inform, via texts like the *Vajrabhairava Tantra*, Tibetan arts like the *thangka* from Chapter One.

Finally, the last chapter looks at *kapāla* as an object that has been retained as a ritual accessory in Tibetan Buddhism to the present-day. The role of other Tibetan beliefs and traditions using human bones in their material expression are discussed as a key factor in the adoption and proliferation of the skull cup. As an imported form of material culture, *kapāla* had resonance with Tibetans independent of its Tantric or Buddhist applications and I argue that skull cups are an important device for the promotion of Buddhism in the region. As an effective form of ritual object in Tibet, *kapāla* have been cultivated as a significant part of visual culture and the nation's religious and historical narrative as expressed through its arts.

This paper is intended to sketch out the broadest of outlines for a discussion of the various significances of *kapāla* in different contexts in Indian and Tibetan religious practices, as well as the concepts of Tantric worship it evokes. Describing how or why the skull cup is represented in the visual arts of this region will be my motivating concern for interpreting this object and its history. It will also be important to define the skull in its cultural and historical context, in terms of hagiography, its use as a relic or as an indication of sin and pollution. My

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hope is to incorporate all of these factors as a condensed illustrated history of this unique form and to explore the permutations of *kapāla* in relation to communities that have created them.

This thesis is meant as a work of scholarship that unites art and religious history with inspiration by the fields of ethnography and anthropology in order to describe— though not define with certainty— the changing shape of *kapāla* and a ritual context that ranges from marginal and heterodox to highly refined and specialized.

Chapter One:

Kapāla as icon: Expressing authority in an eighteenth century *thangka*

Introduction

This chapter addresses the visual representation of the *kapāla*, or skull cup, and its iconology in Tibetan religious paintings, discussing the ritual object and the arts that reference it. Skull cups are frequently seen in Tibetan arts in the hands of wrathful deities or lamas performing esoteric practices or rites. This chapter will focus on an eighteenth century *thangka*, or Tibetan religious painting, from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA, Boston) that provides an example of the diverse possibilities for reading skull cups as part of Tibetan art. By introducing the skull cup via its painted image, I explain its role as an icon in religious art. My interpretation of this painting is based on religious politics at a specific moment in the history of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism as a primarily monastic-based institution. This chapter will argue that the presence of the *kapāla* is an indication of Tantric ideas and that those ideas are being prominently represented for political and historical reasons in the eighteenth century. The skull cup functions as an emblem of religious authority predicated on a sectarian concept of lineage and the specific kind of Tantra it represents.

Common histories of Tibetan Buddhism state that the religion was introduced to the Tibetan region at large in the seventh century, thanks in great part to the king Songtsen Gampo (r. 617-650) and his political aspirations.¹ Gampo was attracted to Buddhist concepts of divine kingship, as well as the religion's potential to cultivate trans-regional alliances.² The first

¹ *Sacred Arts of Tibet: Art from the Roof of the World* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum/Chung-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2001), 13.

² Robert E. Fisher, *Art of Tibet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 14.

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monasteries would be built in the eighth century and, after a brief period of persecution fostered by representatives of older religious traditions and their patrons, Tibetan Buddhism greatly resembled its present form by the twelfth century. Monasteries and the specific character of their unique teaching profiles are largely a product of the resurrection of Buddhism built on Indian Buddhist texts and ideas imported during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries during a period referred to as the Later Diffusion.³

Tibetan Buddhism's monastic system engendered sects that cultivated distinctions based on the lineage of doctrine being passed from teacher to disciple. The four main sects in Tibetan Buddhism are the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug. The last of these has its origins in an earlier Kadampa sect which originated, like the Kagyu and Sakya, in the Later Diffusion. (The Nyingma precedes the Later Diffusion as the oldest of these orders.) These sects are primarily divisions based on the lineage and interpretation of teachings, more than differences in the content of their ideologies or canonical texts.⁴ The Gelugpa supplanted the Kadampa in the fourteenth century and is derived from the teaching lineage of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419). The Gelugpa are responsible for the fifteenth century construction of the Drepung Monastery (the largest in Tibet) as well as the Potala Palace in Lhasa (begun 1645) and the religious training of all fourteen Dalai Lamas. The establishment of their political power and extensive promotion of Tibetan religious arts will factor heavily in this chapter's reading of one particular *thangka*.

³ Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 19.

⁴ *Sacred Arts of Tibet, op. cit.*, 10.

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An example of iconography in the Tibetan Buddhist artistic tradition

This project takes *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelugpa Lama* (Figure 2) as its point of departure for a discussion of the various significances of skull cups. This *thangka*, hereafter referred to as *Yama*, measures 52 centimeters wide by 88 centimeters high and was removed from its original Tibetan silk mount at some point before 1906 when the object was purchased by the MFA, Boston.⁵ The effect of this revision is the possible loss of information on the painting's provenance or patronage. It was purchased in Japan, likely having arrived there via China or Chinese collectors and does not seem to be part of a series, an otherwise not uncommon trend in the production of *thangka*.⁶ The Japanese mount that replaced the original has obscured the back of the painting, where inscriptions might have given more details about the circumstance of its manufacture. The painting's surface is darkened and worn with the accumulated grime of use and the quality of the substrate on which the image is painted indicates that this *thangka* is the product of modest patronage and/or a smaller workshop in Tibet.⁷ This type of painting would have been used, as many *thangka* were, as a teaching device or visual aid for rituals and meditational worship.⁸ The soiling of this painting's surface can be interpreted as an indication of its extended use as a devotional object.

According to the MFA, Boston's curatorial records for this *thangka*, *Yama* shows a lama from the Gelug order (distinguished by his yellow hat) seated in a charnel ground holding a skull

⁵ Curatorial file, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, (1906)

⁶ I am indebted to Jacki Elgar in the Asian Conservation Lab at the MFA for advising me on these issues via interview and personal communication in the Fall/Winter of 2010.

⁷ Jacki Elgar, Personal Communication, December 2010.

⁸ Ann Shaftel, "Notes on the technique of Tibetan *thangkas*," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* Vol. 25 No. 22 (Autumn 1986), 97.

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cup in his left hand and forming the ‘do not fear’ *mudra* in his right.⁹ Yellow smoke rises from the *kapāla* and around the figures of Yama, Lord of Death (on a bull), and Yamantaka, Conqueror of Death, with his consort (topmost). Other figures attend the scene, including six-armed Mahakala (several), the Gelug protectress Palden Lhamo (on a mule just left of center), and an ascetic playing a thigh-bone trumpet (bottom center). In the lower right hand corner of the painting, a bound and naked figure being eaten by vultures indicates a mortuary rite that disposes of the body by leaving it for wild animals.¹⁰ There is a large *kapāla* adjacent to the lama’s seat, centrally positioned in the composition (Figure 3). Like that in his hand, it is white and upturned, with seams painted to resemble the natural markings on a skull. It holds offerings to the wrathful deities: a flaming heart and red, angular *torma* (sculpted butter and barley flour). Several of the deities also hold *kapāla* as part of their iconic representation in Tibetan Buddhist imagery, which distinguishes them as wrathful or protective.

The skull cups that serve as attributes of terrifying deities are essential to their identity within the visual tradition of Tibetan Buddhism as it was established by the eighteenth century. In addition, the cup held by the monk indicates not only his relationship to the deities in this image in a specific ritual context as he appears to offer it to them but, I believe, a political statement as well. Within this one image, one can see the need for an exploration of the *kapāla*’s complex significance in the variety of its applications within a single composition. How can the skull cup in the hand of the lama be understood as different from that in the hands of the attendant deities? The argument here is that *kapāla* should be interpreted in terms of an integration

⁹ “Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelugpa Lama,” Official Museum of Fine Arts, Boston website, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/yama-and-yamantaka-rising-from-the-skull-cup-of-a-gelugpa-lama-8533>, Accessed 16 November 2010.

¹⁰ Bhagwan Singh, “149. Disposal of the Dead by Mutilation in Spiti (W. Tibet),” *Man* Vol. 33 (September 1933), 142.

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of esoteric traditions being assimilated into Tibetan Buddhism in order to fulfill certain institutional needs, insofar as the sectarian monastic system represents a religious institution. These needs include elaborate ritual practices, an emphasis on pedagogical and theoretical lineages, and a visual and/or material relationship with Tantra and the illustration of institutional attitudes towards those practices. A closer reading of this painting's iconographic content reveals this relationship between what is seen and why it was made.

Readings of the skull cup as a ritual component

Jeff Watt, Senior Curator at the Rubin Museum of Art and creator of Himalayan Art Resources, an online art historical database, has voiced a more specific and technical reading than that offered by the MFA, Boston's records. According to Watt, the lama is Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug order, making an 'inner offering' to the meditational deity Yamantaka Vajrabhairava, seen at the top of the composition just left of center (Figure 7).¹¹ The individuals that make up this specific grouping are determined by the ritual being performed. Accompanying Yamantaka Vajrabhairava are three protector deities: Outer, Inner and Secret Yama Dharmaraja (three figures closest to the largest deity). White Shadbhuja Mahakala (white skinned), Palden Lhamo (on her mule) and Black Shadbhuja Mahakala attended by a retinue of five figures (bottom left) are also seen in this composition.¹² This image of Tsongkhapa is one of many such illustrations of episodes in the life of the great lama, a monastic reformer whose teachings stressed the importance of meditational deities like Yamantaka Vajrabhairava.¹³ Watt's

¹¹ Jeff Watt, Personal Correspondence, 14 November 2010.

¹² For a more in-depth treatment of these figures as individuals, see Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt, *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond* (2004). In this project, I discuss them only as an ensemble though they each have a specific function and significance.

¹³ Watt, *ibid.*

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reading not only accounts for the specific identities of most of the figures in this composition, he implies a connection between the lama's gesture, including the use of the skull cup as a vessel for ritual offering, and the deities it conjures. The 'inner offering' is a Tantric-inspired esoteric devotional practice that cultivates visualizations of these deities using this *mudra* and the skull cup or its facsimile.¹⁴

Such scenes were common illustrations of great leaders in the Tibetan Buddhist hagiographic tradition and were considered a testament to their religious authority and proficiency with esoteric practices. Similar types of works can be found from both this period and earlier. Often these scenes will feature a monk or practitioner seated amidst several deities that are arranged schematically, according to the specific aptitude or practice the painting describes. For example, a painting of Tsongkhapa's commentator Khas grub dje in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (Figure 4) shows that such visualizations were crucial not only to a saint or great teacher's aptitude but the hagiographer's as well. There are several similarities in the compositions of both *Yama* and the Freer Gallery *thangka*, seeming to draw allusions between the roles of the two men pictured in them. Khas grub dje is seated similarly to the lama in *Yama*, being visited by visions of tutelary deities as well as Tsongkhapa himself, instructing him from the top left corner of the image. The importance of visualization and, by extension, its prominence as a topic for illustration in Tibetan visual arts, is an indication of the centrality of esoteric or Tantric practices and their place in Tibetan Buddhist doctrines. In both *Yama* and the Freer gallery example, the monk or practitioner is depicted as visualizing the surrounding saints and/or deities as a devotional experience. Also, in both images Tsongkhapa is depicted wearing the pointed yellow hat that distinguishes him as Gelug. It was Khas grub dje

¹⁴ Watt, *ibid.*

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who, in his fifteenth century *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, advanced Tsongkhapa's specific interpretation of Tantric practices as based on meditation and visualizations.¹⁵

Though it had existed as a kind of Tantric practice previous to his teachings, this emphasis on visualization as a method of worship is specifically related to Tsongkhapa as a reformer of the monastic system and founder of the Gelug order. It is what initially distinguished this sect from the other monastic orders. For Tsongkhapa, practices that visualized Tantric deities were central to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism, whereas many previous teachers had allowed for a more physically interactive approach to Tantric worship.¹⁶ Tsongkhapa's teachings also contrasted with other schools of Tibetan Buddhism that emphasized studying texts, recitation and commentaries as a vehicle for devotional practices, which was a less Tantric approach. Tsongkhapa encouraged the imaginative impact of visualization and meditational practices for connecting with deities and their spiritual strengths and insights.¹⁷ This was done in response to what Tsongkhapa felt was rampant evidence of transgression in the monastic system and the Buddha's teachings: the practice of Tantric rituals that violated vows of celibacy and abstinence.¹⁸ Paintings like *Yama* and the Freer Gallery example can be interpreted as testaments to the practitioners' (Tsongkhapa and Khas grub dje) proficiency in esoteric teachings as well as their embrace of Tsongkhapa— and the Gelugpa— as a religious authority. These illustrations of visualization practices can be interpreted as a promotion of the Gelug interest in orthodoxy. In

¹⁵ Mkhas-grub-rje, *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, trans. F.D. Lessing and A Wayman, (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc, 1980), 1.

¹⁶ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 235.

¹⁷ Powers, *ibid.*, 237.

¹⁸ *Sacred Arts of Tibet, op. cit.*, 16.

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Yama, the skull cup is depicted as a component of Tsongkhapa's practice, an aid to Tantric devotional exercise as it was proposed by this leader and his monastic order. The skull cup is an emblem for esoteric rituals in the larger context of Tibetan Buddhism but, here, a reminder for their specific character in Gelugpa teachings.

In support of this sectarian and ideological emphasis, a more developed reading of the grouping of deities and attributes provides information into why this image was composed or created in this fashion and why it was created at this time. Wolfgang Saumweber— a collector of Tibetan art for over twenty years and a translator of Tibetan Buddhist texts— has advised that this composition is known as the “Thirteen Deity Yamantaka” and is tied specifically to the *mudra* of the ‘inner offering’ as well as the teachings of Tsongkhapa.¹⁹ In his work *A Casket of Jewels: The Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*, Tsongkhapa describes exactly the visualization practice being illustrated in *Yama*. The text encourages the practitioner to picture his or herself as the principle deity in the *thangka* as a form of ‘instantaneous self-generation’, a superimposition of Yamantaka Vajrabhairava's identity onto that of the practitioner. The skull cup is used in this practice as an accessory to the ritual's meditational program. The image of the self as this deity includes holding Yamantaka Vajrabhairava's attributes of curved knife and skull cup. This visualization includes the embrace of the deity's consort, Vajravetali, or ‘Diamond Vampire’, in an imitation of previously widespread Tantric rituals consisting of actual sexual intercourse. Tsongkhapa instructs the practitioner to embrace a consort as a meditational activity, placing an emphasis on the consummation as a transmission of wisdom and the purification of ‘degenerated and broken

¹⁹ Wolfgang Saumweber, Personal Correspondence, 16 November 2010.

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words of honor'.²⁰ In *Yama*, all of these prescriptions for visualization can be seen as the lama, presumably Tsongkhapa himself, is illustrated practicing them. The fact that he is wearing a monk's garb while performing this offering is perhaps meant to emphasize Tsongkhapa's role as a monastic reformer and foundational leader of the Gelugpa.²¹

Tsongkhapa's text includes instructions on the ritual use of the skull cup including when its lid should be removed and when *mudra*, or prescribed gestures, should be used in conjunction with the presentation of the cup to the visualized deities. Throughout Tsongkhapa's text, the highly descriptive language leaves little ambiguity about what is imagined and when ritual implements— specifically the skull cup— should be utilized. The *kapāla* is consistently referred to as the 'inner offering cup'. The lama's position in *Yama* can be seen as an almost exact illustration of these words from Tsongkhapa's text:

Hold up the skull cup in your right hand with its front facing away from you. Stir or make the gesture of stirring the inner offering with the left ring finger three times clockwise. Then sprinkle the offering. . . to the deities of the mandala. . . to Dharmaraja, the oath bound protectors and to the dakas, dakinis and so forth... While making the inner offering, strongly visualize that the wisdom of bliss and emptiness is generated in the guests of the offering.²²

This text also details the appearance of all the deities seen in *Yama*, including their color, expressions, and attributes. Finally, the teaching specifies that the (imagined) setting for this devotional practice is the charnel grounds. This setting is indicated in *Yama* by the tied body in the lower left corner and the vultures that surround it. As I will discuss in the following chapter, this specificity in visualization practices will have a formative role in the production of arts

²⁰ Je Tsongkhapa, *Casket of Jewels: The Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*, trans. Wolfgang Saumweber, (San Jose, CA: Gyuto Vajrayāna Center, 2009), 12.

²¹ Wolfgang Saumweber, Personal Correspondence, 16 November 2010.

²² Je Tsongkhapa, *Casket of Jewels, op. cit.*, 33.

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associated with Tantric ideas and communities. The detailed complexities of these images, provided in texts, were integral to Tantra's success as a ceremonial tradition and inspiration for visual arts in both Tibet and India. Here, I have interpreted *Yama* as an introduction to this trend, where the skull cups next to or in the hands of the lama function as an indication of the methods for Tantra's influence.

As the chief deity pictured in *Yama* and the archetypal deity of *The Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*, Yamantaka Vajrabhairava should be briefly introduced. The deity is a composite of Yamantaka, 'Conqueror of Death', and Vajrabhairava, 'Diamond Terrifier,' both imported from Indian traditions via the Later Diffusion. Both Yamantaka and Vajrabhairava are considered wrathful emanations of the bodhisattva Manjuśri and for this reason they are often treated as a comprehensive identity, though Yamantaka has other forms.²³ Yamantaka Vajrabhairava is especially associated with the Gelugpa as one of their primary wrathful buddhas or meditational deities.²⁴ Yamantaka Vajrabhairava represents one of many archetypal or meditational deities evoked in esoteric practices, common to all lineages and monastic orders. However, this deity's special proximity to the Gelugpa and the teachings of Tsongkhapa involve him in the special declaration of the sect's superiority made in this painting.

The Gelugpa order and the Qing dynasty: Politics and religion

A complete art historical interpretation of *Yama* and its compositional elements requires answering questions about why this piece was made in its time. The historical context for this

²³ "Introduction to the Vajrabhairava Tantras," *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian Versions*, trans. Bulcsu Siklos, (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996), 5.

²⁴ Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt, *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2004), 215.

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thangka's production illuminates issues concerning the role of *kapāla* within the larger tradition of Tibetan Buddhism as a form of national identity. It has already been discussed that use of a skull cup in this *thangka* is a reference to Tantric ideas and practices, as well as the reform of these practices in the Tibetan monastic system. Tsongkhapa's teachings, however, were produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth century: the Gelug order was founded in 1403. What possible reason could there be for the patronage and production of an image celebrating the founder of the Gelug order in the eighteenth century? This concern shifts the focus of this interpretation to the relationship between the Gelugpa and China's Qing Dynasty and the order's wealth of political power and artistic influence in Tibet, centuries after its inception.

The office of the Dalai Lama originated in the relationship between the Gelug order and the Mongol dynasty that controlled Tibet in the sixteenth century. Sonam Gyatso (1543-1588) was the head of the Gelug order when the Altan Khan gave him the title 'Dalai Lama' during a state visit that would establish an alliance between the religious leader as a national representative and the Mongol political/military ruler.²⁵ Sonam Gyatso was named the third Dalai Lama and the previous two heads of the Gelugpa were given the title posthumously. This mutual recognition of authority between the Gelugpa and the Mongol *khan* was the beginning of Gelug political ascendancy that would culminate in the unification of Tibet by the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682). Mongol military power secured this consolidation of territory. The so-called 'Great Fifth' defeated the king of Tsang and the Kagyupa order in a military victory that guaranteed the Gelug and its officials a dominance of institutional hierarchies in religion and administration. In the eighteenth century, Gelug-inspired arts flourished with patronage in both Tibet and China, where the order's political traction caught the attention of the ascending Qing

²⁵ *Sacred Arts of Tibet, op. cit.*, 17.

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dynasty. The closeness between the Gelugpa and the Qing dynasty can be demonstrated with the personal relationship between the Qing's Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95) and the lama Rolpay Dorje (1717-1786). During this period, Tibet, through the Gelug ideas and representatives would establish a strong, though not always equitable relationship with the Qing rulers predicated on the spiritual authority of Tibetan Buddhism and its applicability for their neighbors.

Rolpay Dorje was a native of the Amdo region in Tibet and was sent by Gelug leaders to Beijing in 1724 after being recognized as the incarnation of a previous Gelug lama. He became the personal religious tutor in Tibetan Buddhism to the Qing emperors and in 1736, was declared the chief administrative lama of Beijing, their capital, on behalf of the Gelug order. During his time there, he would serve an important diplomatic role between the emperor and both Mongolia and Tibet. As part of his role, he facilitated the exchange of gifts of art between the Dalai Lama and the Qing, including images of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, the Buddha, and Tsongkhapa.²⁶ When the Tibetan region was subject to military turmoil in the eighteenth century and Qianlong considered intervention, Rolpay Dorje interceded on behalf of the Dalai Lama in order to maintain Tibetan autonomy. His arguments were grounded in the presumption of Tibet's spiritual authority.²⁷ Eventually his influence would inspire Qianlong to grant powers of government to the Dalai Lama including both religious and civil supremacy as well as financial patronage. The emperor's motives were not entirely selfless and he is recorded as saying that a close relationship with the Gelug— or Yellow Hats— would cultivate peace amongst his

²⁶ Wang Xiangyun, "The Qing Court's Tibet Connection: Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje and the Qianlong emperor," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 60 No. 1 (June 2000), 133.

²⁷ Wang, *ibid.*, 136.

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Mongolian rivals.²⁸ Recognition by the Qing dynasty enabled the Gelugpa to exercise their influence both domestically and trans-regionally.

Rolpay Dorje also functioned as an important teacher for Tibetan Buddhism and the Gelugpa, encouraging the construction of a monastery at the imperial summer palace with a decorative program that resembled that of the home monastery of the Panchen Lama at Tashilhunpo in Tibet.²⁹ He also influenced the redecoration of Buddhist temples in Beijing that received patronage during Qianlong's reign, including Yonghegong and Huangsi (both began construction in the seventeenth century). He promoted Gelug doctrinal authority and corresponding imageries that illustrated those teachings. Rolpay Dorje's influence is arguably responsible for the large collection of Buddhist cultural relics assembled in Beijing during the Qianlong reign (see Figure 17).³⁰ It is important to this discussion to note how far-reaching the Gelug influence was in order to understand how an image like *Yama* functioned as a visual re-affirmation of the Gelugpa's authority. Images of Palden Lhamo (protectress of the Gelugpa and Dalai Lamas) were promoted by the Qing dynasty in the eighteenth century in an effort to favor their new Tibetan allies.³¹ Rolpay Dorje's efforts are one influential example of the extension of Gelug ideas and imageries.

Further evidence for this political reading of *Yama* can be found in the decorative program of the Yonghegong temple in Beijing. Though this temple began construction late in the seventeenth century, its decorative program and refurbishment was very much the product of

²⁸ Pal, Pratapaditya and Hsien-ch'i Tseng, *Lamaist Art: The Aesthetics of Harmony* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), 12.

²⁹ Wang, "The Qing Court's Tibet Connection," *op. cit.*, 153.

³⁰ Pal, *ibid.*, 161.

³¹ *Sacred Arts of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 58.

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Qing leaders of the eighteenth century. The emphasis on Gelug leaders and iconographical programs is highly evident in the Tantra Hall, where Tsongkhapa is central in a line-up of nineteen sculpted deities.³² Tsongkhapa is shown with the attributes of Manjuśri, whose emanation he is sometimes thought to be, accompanied by Tantric deities favored in his teachings, including Vajrabhairava (also considered a manifestation of Manjuśri). There is also a rumored depiction of the Qianlong emperor as Tsongkhapa that has been lost, though it would have originally been at Yonghegong.³³ However, is a prominent example of the Qianlong emperor being depicted as Manjuśri, with Tsongkhapa painted directly overhead as a direct statement of ideological inheritance on the part of the Qing's Manchu rulers (Figure 5). This painting clearly shows the emperor's investment in the Gelugpa as spiritual authorities as well as an emphasized correspondence between the identities of Tsongkhapa as spiritual leader and Qianlong as politically powerful, where Manjuśri acts as a common ancestor for the two. Vajrabhairava is implicated in this scheme as Manjuśri's wrathful emanation.

In addition to a sculpted image in the Tantra Hall of Yonghegong, there is another hall in the temple dedicated to Vajrabhairava specifically. The imagery in *Yama* is thus even more closely related to its political milieu. The motivations for the Qing affinity for Vajrabhairava are multifaceted: first there is the phonetic resemblance of 'Manchu' to 'Manjuśri'; secondly there was the inter-regional political advantage of promoting a primarily Mongolian and Tibetan archetypal deity, which Vajrabhairava was thought to be.³⁴ In fact, the attraction to this wrathful emanation and the Tantric ideologies it represented may have inspired the Qing to design their

³² Ferdinand Diedrich Lessing, *Yung-ho-kung: An iconography of the Lamaist Cathedral in Peking, Volume I* (Goteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolao, 1942), 69.

³³ Lessing, *ibid.*, 70.

³⁴ Siklos, "Introduction to the Vajrabhairava Tantras", *op. cit.*, 14.

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capital in Beijing as an homage or even invocation of Vajrabhairava. In his translation of *The Vajrabhairava Tantras* (a text pre-dating Tsongkhapa's formulation of the deity's practice by centuries), Bulcsu Siklos posits that the entire city of Beijing was 'topographically identified' with the Vajrabhairava *mandala*, or metaphysical diagram, where the seat of the emperor within the city would have made him the equivalent of the deity.³⁵ If this idea had any resonance at the time *Yama* was painted, the image could be read as a deference not only to the authority of the Gelugpa, but to the Qing dynasty as well.

According to Marylin Rhie, the Gelugpa sponsored a great proliferation of arts and material culture beginning in the fifteenth century.³⁶ Political and administrative power enabled the sect to commission works sympathetic to their specific religious lineage, which includes an emphasis on their founder, Tsongkhapa, and favored deities, such as Palden Lhamo, Yamantaka Vajrabhairava, and Manjuśri. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Gelugpa inspired what Rhie refers to as the highest point in Tibetan religious creativity.³⁷ She notes that while the Gelugpa took advantage of their position to stimulate the production of art, they were not necessarily doing so with an agenda to eradicate other religious or artistic ideas. They remained indebted to previous centuries of religious teachings, iconography and artistic traditions as the heritage of Buddhism in Tibet.³⁸ One can see many prominent Gelug themes emerging during the eighteenth century — including those within the *thangka* from the MFA, Boston — that may be the result of patrons trying to curry favor within the religious

³⁵ Siklos, *ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ Marylin Rhie and Robert Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Arts of Tibet* (New York: Tibet House of New York, 1996), 262.

³⁷ Rhie, *ibid.*, 262.

³⁸ Rhie, *ibid.*, 262.

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administrative hierarchy. Considering the circumstances of the consolidation of Gelug political power with foreign and military intervention, there may be an element of self-promotion as well.

Conclusion

I consider *Yama* as a part of the general blossoming of Gelug patronage, facilitated by their perceived spiritual and administrative authority at this time. If the quality of its materials is to be trusted as an indication of the circumstances of its production, this *thangka* was most likely not made by a major workshop or famous master painter.³⁹ (The possibility of confirming this supposition is occluded by the Japanese mount that covers any inscriptions on the verso of the painting.) My assumption about this image is that it was commissioned and produced by a representative lower in the administration of the Gelugpa. This image was created in recognition of the authority of the Gelugpa at a time when it would have been politically advantageous. The representation of Tsongkhapa and his proficiency in his own teachings of devotional visualization and were possibly understood at the time as an affirmation of Gelug authority. *The Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*, with its emphasis on meditational visualization as a mode of Tantric practice, was a suitable subject for illustrating the reformation of Tibetan Buddhism with Gelug ideas. The reforms taught by Tsongkhapa promoted the reconstitution of monastic vows compromised by earlier Tantric practices that involved sexual intercourse and the consumption of alcohol or meat.

The *kapāla* in *Yama* are an indication of Tantra's influence and central importance to the character of Tibetan Buddhism. The skull cup's prominence in this *thangka*— in the hand of Tsongkhapa and next to him, oversized, at center— supports this interpretation: the skull cup is

³⁹ Jacki Elgar, Personal Communication, December 2010.

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an emblem for the superiority of the Gelugpa as teachers, practitioners and, by virtue of the historical context and extent of their iconographies, political representatives. However, this chapter has introduced only one facet of the skull cup as an iconic feature of Tibetan Buddhist imagery. Though my interpretation of *Yama* has stressed its specific Gelug iconographical context, there is a deeper reading of *kapāla* that puts it in the context of Tantra as a contribution to the greater visual artistic traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

To shift focus from *Yama* as a specific example to the larger issue of *kapāla* as an icon representing the integration of Tantric practices, we need only move our attention from the skull cup in the hands of Tsongkhapa, as a monastic reformer and religious leader, to that in the hands of the primary deity in this ensemble, Yamantaka Vajrabhairava. While this chapter has addressed *kapāla* as an indication of the prominence of Tantra— by way of Gelug teachings— in a painting created at a specific historical moment, Chapter Two will examine skull cups as the heritage of Tibetan Buddhism’s emphasis on lineage and adoption of Indian Esoteric Buddhism in the Later Diffusion. The details of the transmission of Tantric ideas, rituals, and ritual imagery as they were translated into Tibetan Buddhism will be the topic of the following chapter as I look specifically at the mechanics of their assimilation.

Chapter Two:

Kapāla as accessory: Vajrabhairava and the integration of Tantra into Tibetan art and culture

Introduction

My argument thus far has been that skull cups have an emblematic function, representing religious authority or esoteric practical applications founded on the presumption that a Tantric influence in the arts would have widely recognized by the audience. In the first chapter, I interpreted the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull cup of a Gelug Lama* ('*Yama*') as an extension of the political situation that colored eighteenth century Tibetan history. But, as a figure in this *thangka*, on what does Tsongkhapa's religious or historical authority rest? This chapter will argue that the use of skull cups in Tibetan Buddhism relates to their integration by way of teachings and practices imported from India in the hands and service of wrathful or terrifying deities during the Later Diffusion. At this time, *kapāla*, objects of Indian origin, would be imported as an accessory to esoteric teachings sought by Tibetan patrons and practitioners from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. It was during this period of assimilation that Tantra would become an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism and its monastic institutions. It was also during this period that many lasting iconographical traditions of Tibetan art would be instituted. The most desirable of these imported teachings were those of the most esoteric nature and it is from these that later applications like Tsongkhapa's teachings or *Yama*'s imagery would derive as a highly integrated visual vocabulary.¹

¹ Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 3.

Tantra and the Later Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet

By the eleventh century, the original period of growth for Buddhist teachings had slowed or disseminated into the pre-existing traditions of shamanism, ancestor worship, and/or Bon, with some Tantric influence.² In the tenth century, the western Tibetan sovereign Yeshe Ö decided to reinvest in the Buddhist canon by importing teachers and texts from India, where the religion was permeated by esoteric ideologies.³ Following this, there was a period of translation and dissemination of those ideas through texts and art from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, commonly referred to as the Later Diffusion. At this time, Tibetan aristocracy and formative institutions adopted the literature and practices of esoteric Buddhism then current in northern India— specifically from within the Pala kingdom and Kashmir— to reconstruct their authority and their organization.⁴ The result was a general reconfiguration of regional administration that was more a theocracy than the previous years of dynastic rule.

The mechanics of this promotion of Indian religion were given a specific character because of Tibet's geographical isolation. Because of its topographical situation, Tibetan Buddhism developed lasting trends in its iconic visual language: a mixture of later Indian esoteric Buddhist imageries and subjugated native deities or concepts. As Pratapaditya Pal writes in his catalogue on 'Lamaist' art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 1972:

Lamaism is not merely those forms of tantric or esoteric Buddhism that were transplanted from India between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. Rather, it is the result of the continuous acculturation that took place on Tibetan soil and is really an amalgam of early native, shamanist beliefs, Bon ideology, and imported

² Steven Miles Kossak, "Lineage Painting and Nascent Monasticism in Medieval Tibet," *Archives of Asian Art* Vol. 43 (1990), 47.

³ R.A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*, trans. J.E. Stapleton Driver, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 71.

⁴ Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, 2.

Buddhist concepts. Moreover, although esoteric ideas predominate in Lamaism, it must be remembered that in their zeal the Tibetans accepted with equal felicity earlier, non-esoteric forms of Buddhism. However, Lamaism is the specifically the *Tibetan* version of the Indian esoteric systems, and it developed a distinct liturgical and exegetical tradition of its own. Moreover, in addition to the imported concepts, the Lamaist pantheon evolved its own imagery of bewildering complexity.⁵

A prominent part of this ‘bewildering complexity’ is the Tibetan artistic specialization in terrifying, wrathful, or fearsome entities, such as the retinue featured in *The Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava* and its illustrations. The exceptional refinement of these terrifying images can be attributed to the syncretic character of Tibetan Buddhism described in the above quotation in addition to the stylistic inventions of generations of artists. Though Buddhism was rapidly adopted by Tibetans, there were older, auto-chthonic deities to contend with in terms of producing a cohesive visual vocabulary for the new teachings. Many terrifying figures that pre-dated Buddhism would emerge as sworn protectors or variations on Buddhist emanations and their imageries.⁶ These adoptions captured the imagination of Tibetan artists and, combined with the imported Indian deities of similar countenance, became the distinct specialty of their artistic production.

Yamantaka Vajrabhairava and the Tantric tradition as a source of imagery

It is also from this moment of integration whence the popular explanation of the deities’ appearance would emerge: the paradox of their compassionate nature revealed in a terrible or

⁵ Pal, Pratapaditya and Hsien-ch’i Tseng, *Lamaist Art: The Aesthetics of Harmony* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), 9-10.

⁶ Rob Linrothe, “Protection, Benefaction, and Transformation: Wrathful Deities in Himalayan Art,” *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2004), 15

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fearsome figure.⁷ As an example, I return to the figure of Yamantaka Vajrabhairava, whose eponymous text I will examine in detail. To reiterate, Yamantaka has several forms: Yamantaka's Vajrabhairava form was adapted from Indian sources that honored Bhairava, the wrathful emanation of Siva and he became known as 'Yamantaka' when he subdued Yama, the Lord of Death and his supporters.⁸ In later references, the deity can be referred to as simply 'Vajrabhairava' though generally his 'Yamantaka' aspect is implied.

According to the myth presented in tantras associated with the deity, when Vajrabhairava sought to vanquish Yama, the former adopted the attributes and appearance of the latter to a hyperbolic degree in order to demonstrate his superior wisdom, efficacy, and power. The destruction of Death can only be accomplished by someone or something better equipped than Death itself and Yamantaka is illustrated as such, having more limbs, weapons, and attributes. In this way, the fearsome, terrifying and wrathful deities that represent one of the most recognizable facets of Tibetan Buddhist art come to symbolize the achievement of 'becoming angry with anger' in order to enact a liberation.⁹ In a visualization practice, the implements seen in the hands of wrathful or terrifying deities represent the arsenal of methods available for vanquishing any obstacle on the practitioners' path to liberation or enlightenment. In the form of Yamantaka Vajrabhairava, in the MFA, Boston's *Yama* and elsewhere, the skull cup is prominently displayed in his left hand. On the frequent occasion that Vajrabhairava is shown with his consort Vajravetali, she too will hold a skull cup filled with brains in her proper left hand, offering it to her male counterpart.

⁷ Linrothe, *ibid.*, 4

⁸ "The Myth," *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian versions*, trans. Bulcsu Siklos, (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996), 68.

⁹ Linrothe, "Protection, Benefaction, and Transformation," *op. cit.*, 14

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Through the centuries, Tibetan artists have devoted attention and imagination to terrifying images and their permutations but variations in style and execution are subject to constraints dictated by religious tradition. These are contributed by the teachings and texts that have inspired the imagery being executed. In order to exemplify this close relationship between Tantric literature and the arts, it is easiest to remain with the figure of Yamantaka Vajrabhairava and the texts that most specifically conveyed his iconic details, teachings, ritual applications, and religious functions. The Tibetan version of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* have been compiled as a single volume and translated by Bulcsu Siklos. This compilation contains the texts of the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra*, the *Ritual Procedure of Vajrabhairava*, *The Myth* (of Vajrabhairava), as well as a *Three Chapter Tantra* on Vajrabhairava, a collection of rites using the musk shrew, and selected commentaries on the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra*. These teachings predate Tsongkhapa's own by at least four hundred years. While there are many Tantric texts that were adopted in the Later Diffusion, with their own menageries of images and iconographies, I have chosen to narrow the focus of this chapter to the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* in order to demonstrate how it might have been possible to communicate and promote a specific visual identity for the deities that were assimilated into Tibetan Buddhism and the objects that might have accompanied them.

The Tibetan version of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* traces its origins to Lalitavajra, a tenth-century scholar from northern India who received it from Jñānadakini, a supernatural figure who visited him during an extended meditation.¹⁰ Lalitavajra had travelled to Oḍḍiyāna (present-day Swat Valley, Pakistan) to receive teachings on Vajrabhairava— inspired by the deity's association with Manjuśri— and found the area saturated with Śaivite (Hindu Tantric) ascetics who

¹⁰ Bulcsu Siklos, "Textual Introduction", *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian versions*, trans. Bulcsu Siklos, (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996), 8.

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worshipped Bhairava, the terrifying emanation of Śiva. While in Oḍḍiyāna, within a community of primarily non-Buddhist Tantric practitioners and having the intent of augmenting the profile of a Buddhist entity, he received the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* as a revelation from Jñānadakini, who communicated on the part of Vajrabhairava himself. Non-Buddhist versions of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* most likely had existed before this direct transmission to the Buddhist teacher, having originated around the ninth century with the patronage of a regional sovereign who was attracted to Tantric methods for worldly gain.¹¹ However Lalitavajra's account of how he acquired the teaching of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* creates a layer of inaccessibility, which lent itself to the easy revision of the texts to recreate them as decidedly more sympathetic to Buddhism after his return to his monastery in Bihar. Lalitavajra's disciples would pass the tantras to Tibetan students during the Later Diffusion and through pedagogical lineage, it would become a part of canonical literature in Tibet.

These texts were saturated in the esoteric ideologies then current in Lalitavajra's religious community, from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources. These teachings had a decidedly ceremonial character in their rites and practices.¹² As a result, the texts of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* have a focus on ritual performance as well as the illustration and visualization of deities and diagrams associated with this teaching. For example, the chapters of the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* are as follows:

- Chapter 1: The Mandala
- Chapter 2: Performing Rituals
- Chapter 3: Assembling the Spells
- Chapter 4: Visualization
- Chapter 5: Painting the Images

¹¹ Siklos, *ibid.*, 7.

¹² Matthew Kapstein, "Weaving the World: The Ritual Art of the Pata in Pala Buddhism and Its Legacy in Tibet," *History of the Religions* Vol. 34 No. 3 (February 1995), 242-3.

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Chapter 6: Burnt Offerings

Chapter 7: Meditation¹³

From the titles of these chapters, there is a demonstrable emphasis on ritual action, production, and performance. When several such collections were being distributed in a given community, I think it is reasonable to deduce that this kind of ideological commerce would function as a stimulus for the production of arts and materials associated with these highly visual or ceremonial types of practices.

To demonstrate the level of specificity dedicated to the imageries promoted by the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, I offer this passage from the fifth chapter of the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra*, ‘Painting the Images’ (bolded emphases mine, throughout):

On the painting he has sixteen legs, thirty-four arms, nine heads; he is naked, black with right [legs] extended, with a terrifying form since he is the Causer of Terror, and he is ithyphallic. He is to be painted with his first head as a buffalo head, and the three wrathful heads on the right side— blue, red, and yellow. On the left side, his heads are white, smoke-colored and black. In between these one should paint a very red head. Above that one should paint a yellow Manjuśri head, slightly angry. In his right hands he has a curved knife, a single-pointed spear, a pestle, a small knife, a single pointed *vajra*, an axe, a lance, an arrow, a hook, a staff, a skull club, a wheel, a *vajra*, a *vajra*-hammer, a sword and a skull drum. In his left hands he has **a skull**, a head, a shield, a leg, a noose, a bow, intestines, a bell, an arm a cemetery cloth, a man impaled on a stake, a hearth, a **skull cup** with hair, a threatening gesture, a three pointed ornament and a cloth blown about by the wind. He is to be drawn holding fresh elephant skin in two hands. With his right legs [he treads on] a human, a buffalo, an ox, an ass, a camel, a dog, a ram and a jackal; and with his left legs a vulture, an owl, a crow, a parrot, a hawk, an eagle, a myna, and a crane. **Vajramahabhairava should be drawn standing like this.** Around him the great cemeteries are to be drawn. There one should see fearful things— ogres, field-guardians, ghouls, figures of people impaled on the points of lances. One should draw people hanging from the tops of fig trees and also people burning. One should also draw people run through with spears. One should also draw various birds, vultures, crows, dogs and jackals uttering ‘ha ha’. One should also draw practitioners in the cemeteries single-pointedly looking at the Lord, with hair dishevelled, adorned with the five

¹³ “The Vajramahabhairava Tantra,” *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian versions*, trans. Bulcsu Siklos, (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996

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symbols, holding skull-drums, **skulls** and skull-staffs, adorned with skulls on the tops of their heads and laughing.¹⁴

The teaching of *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* details the number of heads, limbs and types of implements required for the iconography of this deity to be produced accurately, leaving no room for ambiguity in content. As I will detail in the next chapter, these teachings had an impact on Indian arts that pre-date the Later Diffusion and its imagery proved especially resonant for Tibetan Buddhist visual culture as it developed after this period. Tibetan artists used these prescriptions later contributed stylistic innovations designed to heighten drama with color, line, and pose.¹⁵ They would also continue to refine earlier Indian representations of weapons and wrathful deities to incorporate the former as accessories or ritual objects and illustrating the potency of the latter.¹⁶ Tibetan artists, especially as part of the monastic system that evolved after the eleventh century, would provide crucial support for the dissemination of Tantric ideas by adopting the Tantric formulae for esoteric imageries and recreating them as their own. The above passage from the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* provided the foundation for Tibetan religious artistry, inspiring images like *Yama* and many other terrifying deities important to Tibetan Buddhism.

Before continuing my description of the visual and textual integration of Tantric ideas into Tibetan Buddhism, I would like to recall an original topic of this thesis: the skull cup as a ritual object. I have bolded the words in the above passage from the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* to draw attention to the conceptual acceptance of skulls as a visual component of Tantric

¹⁴ “The Vajramahabhairava Tantra,” *ibid.*, 42-3.

¹⁵ Linrothe, “Protection, Benefaction, and Transformation”, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹⁶ Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 252.

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teachings, as they were accepted and reformed by Buddhists. The *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* describes rituals that incorporate skull cups or drums, sometimes using them to summon people or deities depending on the intent of the practitioner.¹⁷ It is unknown what the earliest skull cups used in these practices looked like. The majority of extant skull cups come from later centuries (primarily the eighteenth and nineteenth) and much of the information on provenance ascribed to these examples is tentative. Often these cups came into Western collections in the twentieth century during periods of instability in Tibet, particularly after 1959 when many Tibetans left the country. Many skull cups and other ritual implements were sold to collectors out of financial desperation and little is known about the objects' lives previous to purchase.¹⁸ For these reasons, it is not possible to illustrate what skull cups looked like at the time of the Later Diffusion.

My hypothesis is that skull cups were produced in Tibetan Buddhist communities during the Later Diffusion and possibly even earlier in smaller quantities, due to the widespread influence of the Śaivite ascetic practitioners like the Kāpālikas who generated this form of material culture in earlier centuries. Though their influence on the Indian art and culture that provided transported to Tibet during the Later Diffusion will be described in the next chapter, observations of Kāpālikas' influence on Tibetan culture at this time to suggest that skull cups have been a part of Tibetan material culture at least as long as Tantra has. This has been particularly true in Western Tibet, with its proximity to the region where the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* were 'found' by Lalitavajra in a stronghold of Śaivite practitioners.¹⁹ The Bon religion

¹⁷ "The Vajramahabhairava Tantra," *op. cit.*, 35.

¹⁸ Many thanks to Laila Williamson at the American Museum of Natural History for providing me with this information, as well as access to unpublished notes on these objects written by Antoinette K. Gordon in 1937.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 271n4.

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also attests to the use of the skull cup by Tantric adepts, as well as its own priests, as inspired by the Kāpālika and other radical Śaivite sects that had spread into Nepal and other neighboring regions.²⁰ There is sufficient evidence for contact between Tibetan Buddhism and the Kāpālikas pre-dating the Later Diffusion, but it was only during this formative period that esoteric texts and practices were truly integrated into Tibetan religious culture. For this reason, I believe that skull cups as rarified objects are a product of Tibetan Buddhism as it was established during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.

Within the tide of Tantric knowledge imported to Tibet in the adoption of Buddhism, there are other texts that corroborate the hypothesis that it was the Kāpālika who introduced the skull cup to Tibetan Buddhist visual culture. In his introduction to the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, David Gray argues that the Kāpālika had a marked influence on many Tantric texts and practices.²¹ Similar to the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* describes rites set in a cemetery or charnel ground with similar ritual paraphernalia. The iconography promoted by this text, one of the most popular of the Later Diffusion, made a lasting mark in Tibetan art as a topic of illustration. This tantra dates to the eighth century and was part of the original infusion of Buddhist learning in Tibet, but its more radical practices might have contributed to the backlash against the religion in the centuries before the Later Diffusion.²² It is almost certain that the practice of using *kapāla*, as well as illustrating the deities associated with them were introduced earlier than the eleventh century. Only with the Later Diffusion did these objects and practices become accepted forms of worship and in the excitement surrounding these ‘new’ esoteric

²⁰ Claudia Muller-Ebeling, Christian Ratsch and Surendra Bahadur Shahi, *Shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 223.

²¹ David Gray, “Introduction,” *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: the discourse of Sri Heruka*, trans. David Gray, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 65.

²² Gray, *ibid*, 81.

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teachings, most likely skull cups were produced and their aesthetic criteria were developed, leading to a refinement of their form. However, since none of these early examples are available for a comparative formal study, I will continue to illustrate my point primarily with paintings to demonstrate the establishment of canonical forms during this period.

Reformation and organization in Tibet after the Later Diffusion

After the large influx of new ideas and images from the Later Diffusion, there was a period of adjustment for teachers and religious institutions who wanted to explain, as well as master, the imported religious material. What began, for many patrons, as an aristocratic fascination with the primacy of Indian Buddhist knowledge transformed itself into a power shift as the highly desirable religious knowledge was organized as an institution unto itself by religious figures.²³ The waning strengths of dynasties that supported Buddhism until the tenth century gave way to the dominance of the monastic system in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.²⁴ In effect, the Later Diffusion marked an end to the earlier period of Tibet's history and signaled the advent of an era of more or less theocratic administration that extended to the early twentieth century and Chinese occupation. Aristocrats and lay people alike became invested in the vitality of monasteries and their lineages, as the most important cultural institutions of the day. The balance of power shifted so that rulers became patrons to the monasteries and it was the latter that had greater influence in society.²⁵ Monasteries were built

²³ Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.

²⁴ Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance, op. cit.*, 85.

²⁵ R.A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*, trans. J.E. Stapleton Driver, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 70.

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and decorated with visual programs that suited the needs of their esoteric interest and specializations..

When Yeshe Ö stimulated the Later Diffusion, he did so by sponsoring Tibetan students and translators to go to India and return with religious knowledge. An eleventh century patron invited the great Indian teacher Atiśa (982-1054) to Tibet where he established the Kadampa monastic order. The importance of monastic institutions is credited to Atiśa's promotion of them, as well as the transmission of several forms of Tantric knowledge.²⁶ He was partially responsible for the adoption of the Yamantaka Vajrabhairava teachings into the Tibetan Buddhist canon as it was assembled by his disciples in the centuries after his death.²⁷ Atiśa was also an advocate of the visual expression of religious teachings and is known to have overseen the decoration of monasteries as well as having commissioned work from both Tibetan and Indian artists.²⁸ The Indian teacher was an important figure for the instigation of a Tibetan monastic system as well as its methods, teaching lineages, and artistic production. The Kadampa order that he founded would eventually become the Gelugpa after Tsongkhapa's reforms of the lineage in the fourteenth century.

The influx of foreign and esoteric ideas led to a reinterpretation and classification of Tantra within Tibetan Buddhism and it was largely through this effort that many monasteries and eventually distinct orders were founded.²⁹ There were, at times, tensions between the newer and older canonical texts and methods; young men were sent to India for religious training and came

²⁶ Pal, *Lamaist Art, op. cit.*, 9.

²⁷ Siklos, "Textual Introduction," *op. cit.*, 10.

²⁸ Jane Casey Singer, "Painting in Central Tibet, ca 950-1400," *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 54 No. 1/2 (1994), 108n60.

²⁹ Stein, *Tibetan Civilization, op. cit.*, 73.

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back with ideas of ritual sex and alcohol as an accepted part of Buddhist traditions.³⁰ Towards the end of the Later Diffusion, in the early fourteenth century, a canon of texts was edited by the scholar Bu-ston (1290-1364) as an effort to control the many recently imported ideas or teachings.³¹ At this time, Bu-ston classified the variety of Tantras into four categories: liturgical performance, praxis, yoga, and *anuttarayoga*, or highest yoga. This last group is intended for the most esoteric teachings— including the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*— where, according to Bu-ston, it is the experience of consciousness and its potential for transcendence that is manipulated.³² This system of fourfold classification is still widely used and recognized when distinguishing between Tantric practices.

As lineages established themselves and organized their institutional knowledge, different orders began to interpret Tantra in different ways. As teachers established their representations on these varied readings, their charisma cultivated student bodies to promote and sustain their teachings. Direct transmission of religious knowledge from teacher to student, the mechanics upon which the lineages and orders were built, is an imported model of Indian monastic pedagogy.³³ Different teachers acquired specializations and the cultivation of the Yamantaka Vajrabhairava teachings became the special achievement of the Kadampa monasteries. This continued for centuries and in the fourteenth, the Gelugpa inherited this affinity and Vajrabhairava became one of main *anuttarayoga* deities preferred by the order.³⁴

³⁰ Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, 122.

³¹ “Introduction”, *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, trans. F.D. Lessing and A. Wayman, (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc, 1980), 1.

³² Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 72.

³³ Kossak, “Lineage Painting,” *op. cit.*, 52.

³⁴ Antoinette K. Gordon, *The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1939). 49.

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Tsongkhapa is said to have performed rites dedicated to Vajrabhairava daily, in addition to authoring *The Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*.³⁵ The Gelug founder's ideas of 'highest yoga' were considerably more chaste than previous ideas of similar teachings. When Khas grub rje promoted Gelug ideology and interpretation in his fifteenth century *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, he maintained that references to copulation were references to 'illusory bodies' within the mind of the practitioner, aspects of wisdom and compassion.³⁶ Neither Khas grub rje nor later writers shied from the graphic sexual imagery promoted by many Tantric teachings, but he did make a point of shaping it for his monastic context. It was these reinterpretations that distinguished the Gelugpa from other orders and eventually led to their regional dominance. The adoption of imported Tantric ideas was completed by the process of organization and reclassification by Tibetan religious leaders and authors.

Vajrabhairava: the Tibetan artistic tradition

I will consider a few examples of artistic production in order to illustrate my arguments about the transmission of Tantra and its importance to Tibetan art and culture. A precise chronology for Tibetan painting before the fifteenth century remains difficult to produce but visual and material arts played a significant role in representing community ideas within the Later Diffusion as well as fulfilling ritual functions.³⁷ Art was a large factor in the religious and cultural commerce between Tibet and India at this time, when artists traveled between the

³⁵ Siklos, "Textual Introduction," *op. cit.*, 11.

³⁶ Mkhas-grub-rje, *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, *op. cit.*, 263.

³⁷ Singer, "Painting in Central Tibet," *op. cit.*, 92.

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regions to exchange ideas and materials. While the overall trend is that earlier Tibetan art is closer in style and iconography to older Indian examples, over the years stylistic variations arose as the patron institutions expanded into China and Central Asia.³⁸ From the period of the Later Diffusion, it is said that the Kadampa, inspired by Atiśa's example, produced the work most similar in style to Indian work at the same time.³⁹ However, stylistic distinctions of Tibetan art are of less interest to this discussion than iconographical trends demonstrating the close relationship between art and religion. For this reason, I would like to center my brief discussion on images of Vajrabhairava as an extension of my work thus far.

One of the earliest Tibetan painting of Vajrabhairava is a fourteenth-century version produced by the Kagyu order (Figure 6). In this example, the details provided by the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* match up: the number of limbs, heads, and attributes, as well as his posture and coloring are directly related to the text. What is notably missing from this earlier example, however, is the deity's consort, pictured in *Yama* and alluded to in Tsongkhapa's *Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava* (Figure 7). Images of Vajrabhairava with his consort as central figure in an ensemble of thirteen deities can be traced to an eleventh century teacher's revelation of a 'Thirteen-deity Vajrabhairava Mandala'.⁴⁰ Also featured in *Yama*, but missing in this early example, is the (illustrated) cemetery setting advised by the *Vajramahabhairava Tantra*. The deity's form in Figure 6 would be considered a foundation upon which later traditions would build. In the last centuries of the Later Diffusion, the effects of Tantra's integration into Tibetan Buddhism would inspire much of the iconography

³⁸ Chogyam Trungpa, *Visual Dharma: The Buddhist Art of Tibet* (Berkeley and London: Shambhala, 1975), 16.

³⁹ Heather Stoddard, "Early Tibetan Paintings: Sources and Styles (Eleventh through Fourteenth Centuries)," *Archives of Asian Art* Vol. 49 (1996), 37.

⁴⁰ Linrothe and Watt, *Demonic Divine, op. cit.*, 207.

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for later artistic productions.⁴¹ The painted image of Vajrabhairava in Figure 6 reflects a more literal of interpretation of the texts and traditions of visualization it references.

A curious and telling discrepancy between Figures 6 and 7 is the organization of Vajrabhairava's nine heads. Where the first example has three-three-three on a vertical axis, the second configuration (seen in *Yama*, Figure 7) of seven-one-one is said to have been revealed to Tsongkhapa directly in his frequent visualizations of the bodhisattva Manjuśri during his life (see Chapter One on the relationship between the leader, Vajrabhairava and Manjuśri).⁴² The rearrangement of the heads of the deity after the fifteenth century is notable because it brings the canonical image of the deity under the rubric of the Gelug leader's authority on Vajrabhairava. Though the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* are not specific about the arrangement of the deity's heads, the adjustment of their formation to Tsongkhapa's vision implies the superimposition of his reformed vision on a known image. The iconography has been adjusted to reflect the political and historical realities of Tibetan Buddhism after the foundation of the Gelugpa. A second example of this later, Gelug configuration of heads will bring this discussion of visually and culturally integrated Tantra to a summary conclusion.

The Thirteen-Deity Yamantaka Father-Mother (Figure 8) illustrates the Gelug affinity for Vajrabhairava, as inspired by the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* and centuries of further elaboration on the religious traditions founded in the Later Diffusion. While its title is related to Tsongkhapa's *Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*, the grouping of ancillary deities is different from *Yama*, and yet the two paintings identically represent the central deity and his consort. Both the detail from *Yama* in Figure 7 and Figure 8 display a specific emphasis

⁴¹ Kossak, "Lineage Painting," *op. cit.*, 49.

⁴² Jeff Watt, "Vajrabhairava (Buddhist deity) - with consort," *Himalayan Art Resources* website, <http://www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm/137.html>, Accessed January 20, 2011.

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on Tsongkhapa's teachings. In both images, Vajrabhairava is pictured with a consort, in accordance with Tsongkhapa's teachings, as well as the specific organization of nine heads associated with the Gelugpa founder's personal revelation (seven-one-one). In Figure 8, the five figures above the deities in the composition are the clearest illustration the longevity of concepts of lineage as well as the continued importance of esoteric Indian Buddhism in Tibetan art. Center, top-most is a two-armed, one-faced version of Yamantaka with his consort, Vajravetali. To his left is the original recipient of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, Lalitavajra, and to his left is Tsongkhapa, characteristically holding a sword and a book (traditionally the attributes of Manjuśri as well). On the right of Yamantaka is Jñānadakini who first revealed the deity's teaching to Lalitavajra and on her right side is another leader of the Gelugpa. Most likely this is the Fifth Dalai Lama or a high lama associated with the patronage of this particular painting.⁴³ By prominently featuring Gelug lamas and drawing its iconographical content from Tsongkhapa's *Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*, this top grouping exemplifies religious authority and sectarian emphasis.

This painting reveals several key points of my discussion thus far, including the transparent integration of Tantric texts like the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, the heritage of which is illustrated here with the figures at the top of the composition. The specifically Gelug aspects of this image are an indication of the thorough integration of Tantric ideas and imageries into Tibetan monastic politics. While the image remains true to its origins in text and historical or religious personas, the artists or patrons have created variations that represent the needs of their religious community, possibly by including a current leader as the second Gelug figure. This example, drawn from the vast imaginative pantheon of wrathful deities that populates Tibetan

⁴³ Marilyn Rhie, "The Thirteen-Deity Yamantaka Father-Mother," *Wisdom and Compassion* (New York: Tibet House of New York, 1996), 285.

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art, illustrates the evolution of one deity's iconographic traditions. I would like to suggest that similar examinations could be made of any of numerous Tantric, wrathful deities found in Tibetan Buddhism and their accompanying accessories or ritual elements.

Conclusion

By demonstrating the integration of Tantra into Tibetan Buddhism through the Later Diffusion, I have presented an overview of the adoption of forms of material and visual culture that reference the use of skull cups. The *Vajrabhairava Tantras* do this explicitly by advocating both the ritual use of the *kapāla* and the necessity of the skull cup in visual expressions of its teachings. My argument has been that the relationship between Tantric imagery, practice, and text gives a strong indication that the practice of using and producing skull cups would have been as constant a presence in Tibetan visual culture as the iconic deities evoked by their use. Furthermore, as the religious institutions that adopted Tantra established themselves and their respective interpretations of the Tantric Buddhism, *kapāla* became integrated as ritual objects in ways suited to the needs of Tibetan Buddhism and monastic organizations. Like the image of a terrifying deity, skull cups would have been adopted from esoteric Indian practices influenced by extreme Śaivites. The following chapter will detail the influence of the Kāpālikas or 'Skull-Bearers' on the art of India during the period before and during these exchanges in Buddhism's regional traditions that led to the prevalence and refinement of practices centered on terrifying deities.

Chapter Three:

Death, sex and terror: the legacy of the Kāpālika in the arts of Tantric Buddhism

Introduction

There is a plethora of terrifying, wrathful deities that populate Tibetan arts of painting and sculpture. The refinement of images of fearsome gods, buddha, protectors and guardians, their weapons and ornaments, and details of dismembered bodies, often paired with sexual imagery is the special achievement of generations of Tibetan artists.¹ In the centuries after the Later Diffusion, Tibetan Buddhism stimulated this artistic tradition of complex, elaborate and often highly codified images with a focus— like Figures 1, 6 and 8— on central, wrathful figures within retinues of similar entities designed to terrify the uninitiated viewer. Art historically, this prevalent compositional rubric is ascribed to the arts of the Pāla dynasty in northern India, where esoteric Buddhism was refined as a distinct religious movement between the eighth and eleventh centuries.² During the Later Diffusion, the visual arts and teachings of Indian esoteric Buddhism — also called Tantric or Vajrayāna— fueled the establishment of Tibet’s own monastic community and the heritage of ideas and images adopted during this period would form the conceptual backbone of Tibetan religious arts as they faithfully perpetuated Indian models.

In this chapter, I discuss not only whence these terrifying images were drawn but how or why they became a part of the Indian Buddhism that inspired Tibetan artists. Several factors

¹ Rob Linrothe, “Protection Benefaction and Transformation: Wrathful Deities in Himalayan Art,” *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond*, ed. Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2004), 4.

² Susan Huntington and John C. Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th centuries) and its International Legacy* (Seattle and London: The Dayton Art Institute in association with UW press, 1989), 284.

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contributed to the specific character of Tantric Buddhism in India but in this discussion I emphasize the visual and conceptual influence of ascetics devoted to the worship of Śiva, called Śaivites. Specifically, the practice of using a skull cup was generated by such a sect of ascetics and became an important representation of their mode of Tantric practice, integrated into images illustrating concepts of esoteric Buddhism. The religious, cultural, and political atmosphere of medieval India stimulated an exchange of ideas between these practitioners and Buddhism, a religion with a traditionally monastic focus. The influence of the Kāpālikas— a Śaivite ascetic order with practices centered around the use of skulls, dead bodies, sexual intercourse, and the graveyard— exerted a particular influence on images of wrathful deities and the rituals associated with them as they were adopted by Indian Buddhists in the formation of Vajrayāna. This chapter argues that the Kāpālikas' influence on medieval Indian culture was the foremost inspiration for the integration of skull cups and their contingent iconography into Buddhist art of the region.

The longevity of these visual trends and idioms is easily demonstrable in Tibetan arts, as is the evident relationship to earlier, Indian examples. For example, Figure 9 is a seventeenth century bronze sculpture of the Tantric deity Hevajra with his consort. Like Vajrabhairava in Chapter Two, representations of this figure are subject to prescriptions on iconography related to the teachings or Tantra they illustrate. This includes the number of limbs, the position of the body, facial expression, and accessories, weapons or decorations held by the deity (for an example of this type of instruction, see page 34 for a passage from the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*). Figure 10, a twelfth-century stone carving from the Pāla region, also depicts Hevajra and his consort. Like Figure 9— as well as Vajrabhairava in Figures 7 and 8— the deity embraces his consort in a dynamic pose and his body is lavishly decorated. In both the seventeenth and

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twelfth century renderings, Hevarja holds a skull cup in each of his hands. Though the latter example has a more nuanced material composition (details of enamel or stones, the use of a semi-precious metal) the overall composition and iconography is consistent. Though five centuries separate the two sculpted images, both exhibit sexual content and use of skull cups, as well as bodily ornament and energetic poses. More than iconographically related, both images relate the continuity of Tantric Buddhism's conceptual emphases in dynamic and codified depictions of wrathful deities, using the Tantric ritual elements of sex and attributes crafted from human remains. As seen in Figure 9, Tibetan artists have built on the precedents of Indian esoteric Buddhist art (Figure 10) and adapted and refined these terrifying forms as their iconographical specialty.

In this chapter, I discuss the generation of the ensemble of idioms and icons— skulls, images of bodily disintegration, dismemberment or decay, and sex— used in Tantric Buddhist visual arts to relate the content of religious and practical ideas that inform them. I believe that the adaptation of skull cups to esoteric Buddhism, within this class of terrifying imagery and the ideological system it illustrates, is directly related to the historical relationship between the Kāpālikas and Indian Buddhists in the centuries preceding the transmission of esoteric practices to Tibet. By exploring the various ways in which these two religious communities interacted, I demonstrate the cultural and material mechanics for the exchange of ideas that would shape the iconographical similarities seen in Figures 9 and 10 as well as a greater part of Tibetan religious art. The content of this exchange, as expressed in the arts of the Pāla dynasty, resulted in frequent representations of Tantric ritual objects, like skull cups, other indications of cemetery-centered practice, and graphic sexual content. It is these trends that this chapter will explore.

Chapter Three: Death, sex and terror: the legacy of the Kāpālika in the arts of Tantric Buddhism

The Pāla Dynasty and its cultural milieu

The influence of Pāla visual artistic traditions on Tibetan Buddhism was exerted through the high volume of trade in ideas and artisans between the regions in the centuries of the Later Diffusion. Atiśa, whose invitation to Tibet in the mid-eleventh century is considered a benchmark of Tibetan Buddhism's establishment, brought with him not only his religious training— centered in the region under Pāla control— but supporting materials for his ideas including arts of painting and sculpture and the craftspeople to build them.³ In the adoption of Indian forms of religious art, often charismatic religious figures, like Atiśa, played an active role in expressing their ideas visually in the decoration of the new sacred spaces they established in Tibet.⁴ Other historians have noted the Muslim invasions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as an impetus for the spread of Pāla-style arts into Tibet and neighboring regions as the Buddhist community escaped to sympathetic regions.⁵ The artistic tradition of Pāla-period esoteric Buddhism was preserved in Tibet not only as a matter of historical necessity as the great monasteries that cultivated Tantric or esoteric Buddhism succumbed to Muslim invaders but as a reaffirmation of the primacy of India as a source for Tibetan Buddhism as a religious tradition.

Pāla territory encompassed the region of Buddha's homelands including Bodh Gaya and several large monasteries, as well as Bengal and other parts of northern India. Many monasteries and religious sites grew considerably during this period as patronage flourished under the relatively stable political climate within the Pāla region.⁶ This region included areas with a high

³ Huntington, *ibid*, 291.

⁴Chogyam Trungpa, *Visual Dharma: The Buddhist Art of Tibet* (Berkeley and London: Shambhala, 1975), 18.

⁵ Roy Craven, *Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 219.

⁶ Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree, op. cit.*, 389.

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concentration of Tantric practitioners like Bengal, which had been important to members of esoteric traditions as early as the seventh century.⁷ The Pāla dynasty provided relative stability for patrons to emerge at all levels of society and the majority of material support provided during this period was not royal. Rather, it was a product of the rising social classes that were flourishing in the region's political climate.⁸ In identifying this period of religious and cultural expression, 'Pāla' should be understood as a denomination of geography and time rather than direct intervention by a royal family onto the constituent subcultures of its domain.

Religious identities in the historical and geographical perimeters of this project, including those of deities, are almost never absolute categories. Buddhist and Hindu Tantric traditions—particularly those associated with Śiva—were both very prevalent during this period and often shared monuments, in addition to aspects of their conceptual vocabularies like *samsara* or *nirvana*.⁹ Though I argue that Śaivite ascetics and monastic Buddhists represent different religious communities, I will add the caveat that these various traditions were hardly impermeable to the ideas, practices, or artistic forms of other practitioners. Indeed, a substantial part of this chapter relies on the idea that religious communities are highly permeable in regards to the material and ideological influence of their neighbors. Likewise, the paraphernalia of shared concepts or practices, like skull cups and images of terrifying deities, may have been consistently evident in different communities. A concept of the terrifying and its illustration has its roots in the Tantric practices that influenced Indian esoteric Buddhism in the Pāla period but

⁷ Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 7.

⁸ Devangana Desai, "Social Dimensions of Art in Early Indian," *Social Scientist* Vol. 18 No. 3 (March 1990), 16.

⁹ Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree*, *op. cit.*, 83.

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the process of appropriation changed the conceptual framework of the rituals and their components.

This visual conceptualization of Tantric deities is intimately related to the development of Vajrayāna Buddhism in India between the sixth and twelfth centuries CE. In his *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (1999), Rob Linrothe provides a useful model for examining the expansion of esoteric Buddhism in terms of its use and production of images of wrathful deities as they became increasingly individuated and prominent during these centuries. Linrothe presents a schematic model of esoteric Buddhism with three phases of development arranged roughly chronologically from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries, addressing the emergence of terrifying deities as a distinct category for Tantric or esoteric practice. In the first phase of this movement, between the sixth to eighth centuries, wrathful deities were primarily seen as subservient to bodhisattvas. After the eighth century these types of deities grew independent, establishing their own visual identity as well as increasingly elaborate conceptual identities. Most especially in eastern India after the ninth century— within the Pāla region— terrifying deities rose in status as a focus for practice, commentary, and illustration that rivaled the popularity of the Buddha himself.¹⁰

This chapter focuses on the later phases of esoteric Buddhism's development between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Linrothe details the general trends in images of wrathful deities and the teachings that foster these representations as increasingly specialized, using the visual arts to elaborate on changes within the doctrines of Tantric Buddhism. Building on Linrothe's work, this chapter will discuss, specifically, the influence of the Śaivite Kāpālikas' methods and ideological trends on images of terrifying or wrathful deities and practices devoted to them. This

¹⁰ Rob Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 9.

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influence becomes increasingly evident in arts produced in the Pāla period after the ninth century demonstrated by an increased presence of sexual imagery and cemetery elements.¹¹ I believe that the relationship between Buddhists and the Kāpālika generated a substantial part of the terrifying aesthetic found in esoteric Buddhist art and practice. It is through the proximity of these two religious communities that skull cups were introduced as a visual and material element of Tantric Buddhism.

The Kāpālika and their influence on the visual landscape of the seventh-eleventh centuries

For the Indian Buddhists that established or generated forms of wrathful deities during the centuries during or just before the Pāla period, many transitions in doctrinal, visual, and active practice happened in response Śaivite ascetic orders like the Kāpālika.¹² The Kāpālika—‘Skull-bearers’— were some of the most notorious figures in the medieval Indian religious landscape, and they often vilified in popular literature of the period as hedonistic charlatans.¹³ Their primary methods were living in charnel grounds or cemeteries, smearing their bodies with the ashes of the dead, and adorning themselves with bones and skulls. They carried skull cups for eating, drinking and ritual use as well as a staff decorated with bones and skulls called a *khatvanga*. They were primarily oriented towards a worship of Śiva-Bhairava, or ‘Śiva the Terrifying,’ and his consort. They were known for necrophagy, necromancy, intoxication by

¹¹ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion, op. cit.*, 223.

¹² Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: a social history of the Tantric movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 177.

¹³ David Lorenzen, *The Kāpālika and Kalamukha: Two Lost Śaivite Sects* (New Dehli: Thomson Press (India) Limited, 1972), 5. See also David Lorenzen, “A Parody of the Kāpālikas in *Mattavilāsa*,” *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 81-96.

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alcohol and practices centered on sexual intercourse as well as rumored human sacrifice.¹⁴ The practice of carrying the skull cup was derived from the penance for killing a brahmin, found in law texts as early as the second century CE. The punishment for this crime was living in exile for twelve years while holding the skull of the victim. Their voluntary adherence to this practice was an exercise designed to engender a connection with Śiva-Bhairava, who was the first to perform this penance when he cut off the fifth head of Brahman, another god, in a dispute.¹⁵ By embracing his punishment, the Kāpālika attempted to homologize themselves with Śiva-Bhairava by enacting his archetype, embracing defilement and the deity's representation as a transgressor. The goal of their practice, as with many Tantric practitioners, was a personal connection with their god through an elaborate, hyper-ritualized lifestyle.

The Kāpālikas left no texts of their own authorship and much of what is known about their behaviors and origins comes via interactions with other religious communities like the Buddhists or even less extreme Śaivite practitioners like their contemporary Paśupatas. The earliest textual references to the Kāpālika as a distinct religious type are seen in the third to fifth centuries CE; by the seventh century the sect was widely recognized and their practices were commonly known throughout the Indian subcontinent.¹⁶ Their mythology, though commonly acknowledged to be associated with Śiva as 'Skull-Bearer' was been recorded in various sources during the centuries of their expansion. By the seventh and eighth centuries, there were multiple versions of their history as a sect, as well as the generation of their primary deities. While this might convolute the efforts of a scholar who would seek to determine with certainty their

¹⁴ Lorenzen, *ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵ Lorenzen, *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ Lorenzen, *ibid.*, 16.

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foundational narrative, for the purposes of my project it is sufficient to observe that they sustained Tantric practices focused on death as pollution, had an ascetic lifestyle, and were commonly associated with the deity Śiva-Bhairava.

The Kāpālikas' extremist methods of Tantric practice sustained their notoriety as their influence grew in the early medieval period. Alexis Sanderson summarizes the perception of their devotional activities:

The initiate gained access to the powers of [their] deities by adopting the observance of the Kāpālikas. With his hair matted and bound up with a pin of human bone, wearing earrings, armlets, anklets and a girdle, all of the same substance, with a sacred thread made of twisted corpse hair, smeared with ashes from the cremation-pyres, carrying the skull bowl, the skull-staff and the rattle drum (*damaru*), intoxicated with alcohol, he alternated periods of night-wandering with worship in which he invoked and gratified the deities of the *mandala* into which he had been initiated. This gratification required the participation of a *duti*, a consecrated consort, with whom he was to copulate in order to produce the mingled sexual fluids which, with blood and other impurities of the body, provided the offering irresistible to [the Kāpālikas'] class of deities.¹⁷

Though they were not universally regarded as powerful ascetics, their reputation nevertheless generated material forms of support by patrons all over India.¹⁸ Tracing the exact relationship between patrons and the sect is complicated by their indeterminate public identities: they were often misidentified either by themselves or others.¹⁹ Their presence waned in the later medieval

¹⁷ Alexis Sanderson, "Saivism and the Tantric Traditions," *The World's Religions*, ed. Stewart Sutherland, et al (Boston: GK Hall & Co, 1988), 670-1.

¹⁸ Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, 30.

¹⁹ David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: 'Tantric Sex' in its South Asian contexts* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 154.

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period and by the fourteenth century they had almost entirely disappeared.²⁰ The Kāpālikas' highly recognizable and well-documented presence in the medieval Indian religious landscape leads me to argue that their practices were a significant contribution to the representations of terrifying deities that emerged and expanded during this period, especially in the Buddhist visual arts of painting and sculpture.

By 'terrifying', I am discussing a trend of images associated with Tantric practices focused on wrathful or fearsome deities. These images, like *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelug Lama* from Chapter One as well as many other illustrations used in this thesis, often have a charnel ground setting or references to corporeal death, including emaciated or dismembered bodies and bone or skull ornaments, as well as graphic representations of sexual acts or genitals. The class of images that I am invested in here are those that seek to present, like Figures 8, 9 and 10, a horrifying or highly codified visage to the uninitiated and communicate an ideal of the Tantric communities by or for whom they are created. Wrathful images and their terrifying aesthetic form the majority of Tantric and Tibetan Buddhism's imagery and the focus of its most esoteric teachings.²¹ The artistic implications of the use of skull cups as a religious concept can be addressed through this class of images and associated practices. The *kapāla* and other material expressions of terror demonstrate the precept of Tantric beliefs that seeks to confront death and cultivate a greater spiritual understanding by assimilating images and

²⁰ There are, however, small communities of practitioners living today in Varanasi where they maintain a standard of Tantric ritual practice very much akin to those of the Kāpālika. Their relationship to their predecessors in the cremation grounds may or may not be direct but their practices and appearance are very similar: living and having sex with lower caste women amongst corpses, using foul language, eating and taking shelter amongst the dead as well as carrying a skull cup as an all-purpose attribute of their lifestyle. See Jonathan Parry, "Sacrificial death and the necrophagous ascetic," *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 87.

²¹ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, *op. cit.*, 7.

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practices focused on bodily disintegration and mortality.²² Also, of the various Śaivite groups populating the landscape at this time, the Kāpālika were most explicitly linked to sexual practices, preferably also enacted in cemeteries or charnel grounds.²³

Exemplifying the kinds of images being produced in the period of the Kāpālikas' greatest artistic and doctrinal influence, an eighth-century carving of Kālī (Figure 11) has several characteristics of what were popularly considered attributes of a Kāpālika: emaciated from an ascetic lifestyle, sitting on a corpse as a seat of meditation (visible beneath her knee), holding a human head (at right) with her matted hair piled on her head and decorated with a skull. Many of these details can be seen in other examples of terrifying deities: the garland of skulls, seemingly *flamboyant* hair and other bone ornaments are seen in the Hevajra representations of Figures 9 and 10 as well as the depictions of Vajrabhairava Figures 7 and 8. Essentially, Kālī embodies the Kāpālikas' precedent for a most horrifying appearance having the greatest spiritual value, rendering her an ideal partner for sex in a mortuary setting.²⁴ In fact, Kālī is later described as 'the graveyard consort': a superimposition of the generative female principle and the destruction of the body.²⁵ The fresh head in her hand may signify her relationship to Śiva-Bhairava as Skull-Bearer where as an emanation of Devi, or 'universal goddess,' she was the embodiment of Bhairava's feminine counterpart and invested with a comparable authority as a divine figure.

Kālī's relationship with the Kāpālika can be illustrated not only through her role as an ideal consort but also through the texts that were being assembled during the seventh through the

²² Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, *op. cit.*, 112.

²³ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, *op. cit.*, 468.

²⁴ Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, *op. cit.*, 77.

²⁵ Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, *op. cit.*, 128.

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tenth centuries. One such text explicitly describes Kālī with the attributes of the Kāpālika, her devotees, and reflecting their practice of copulating in cremation grounds.²⁶ This image of Kālī demonstrates how explicitly the ideals of Tantric ascetic practice like the Kāpālika can and were illustrated. These types of images were increasingly popular during these centuries, an indication of the acknowledged presence of Kāpālika, as well as other Tantric or Śaivite practitioners. The visual idiom cultivated here figured more and more prominently in the arts of this period, a testament to the influence that Kāpālikas had on the producers of visual and material culture around them.

Reinforcing assertions about the increasing prevalence of the terrifying Tantric aesthetic, as well as the development of an artistic presence for Kāpālika ideologies are two temple settings from eastern India, within the region of Pāla control. The first site is Khajuraho, the exterior decoration of which Pramod Chandra asserts was influenced by Kāpālika practitioners in the region during the tenth and eleventh centuries when several of the temples at this site were constructed.²⁷ He cites the frequent depiction of *mithuna*, or ‘love-making couples,’ in proximity to ascetics carrying clubs— related to the Kāpālikas’ *khatvanga* or skull-staff— as evidence for Kāpālika presence at the site. Specifically, Chandra cites passages of exterior decoration on the Khandariya Mahadeo Temple from the eleventh century that feature naked ascetics associated with women in an illustration of a Kāpālika initiation ceremony.²⁸ This implicates the Kāpālikas’ popular reputation for sexual intercourse as religious practice. However, Chandra’s argument rests on documentation of the sect at Khajuraho rather than explicit evidence of their influence

²⁶ Sanderson, “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions,” *op. cit.*, 674.

²⁷ Chandra, “The Kaula-Kāpālika Cults at Khajuraho,” *op. cit.*, 104.

²⁸ Chandra, *ibid.*, 105.

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on either the iconography (an illustration of practices commonly associated with them) or patronage of the site. In carved images like Kālī's in Figure 11, the Kāpālikas' focus on bodily disintegration and regeneration are most obviously presented by the female deity's horrific and half-rotten appearance. At Khajuraho, Chandra argues for the implicit effects of having the Kāpālikas as active members of a varied community in the region. While this supports the idea that the Kāpālikas were recognizable to the communities around them and had a certain amount of prestige, if not notoriety, Chandra's work does not detail the explicit influence the sect's methods had on iconography at Khajuraho.

A more convincing argument, which may in fact augment the feasibility of the preceding scholar's, builds on temple imagery in Orissa, a primarily Śaivite area prior to the eleventh century.²⁹ Thomas Donaldson explores panels of exterior carvings from a variety of Orissan temples including three passages of bas-relief carvings from Madhukeśvara (Figure 12) and Someśvara temples (Figures 13 and 14) from the ninth and tenth centuries, respectively. He argues that the presence of Kāpālika-related imagery is a direct result of their strong iconographical influence on the program of these monuments.³⁰ This is corroborated by David Lorenzen who posits that Vaital Deul, also in Orissa, was an explicitly Kāpālika shrine from the eighth century onwards.³¹ Interestingly, Orissa has remained a pilgrimage center for Śaivite ascetics in recent centuries as well, a testament to the deeply rooted connection of these types of

²⁹ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, *op. cit.*, 650n18.

³⁰ Thomas Donaldson, "Bhikṣātanamūrti Images from Orissa," *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 47 No. 1 (1986): 51.

³¹ Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, *op. cit.*, 30.

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practices in this region of monuments.³² This continued importance may also reflect the perception of an ancient lineage by modern ascetics.

The scenes from the Orissan temples offer substantial evidence for the representation of Kāpālika practices: skull cups figure prominently, as well as ascetic nudity, male/female interactions, *khatvangas*, and scenes of worship directed towards fearsome deities. In Figure 12, skull cups are in the hands of a couple of Tantric practitioners and in Figure 13 there is a character who fits Alexis Sanderson's description of a Kāpālika ascetic (see page 54) with his dreadlocked hair piled onto his head, the skull in his hair, *khatvanga*, and the *kapāla* in his left hand, which he offers to his female companion. In Figure 14, one can see the relationship of the central, fearsome female deity to previous images of similar goddesses— such as Kālī from Figure 11— as well as her relationship with the practitioners to either side, oriented towards her terrifying form. All the figures in this scene of devotional practice carry *khatvanga* and Cāmuṇḍā similarly holds a skull staff, her body showing the corpse-like disintegration that distinguished the earlier image of Kālī figuring her as another permutation of the 'ideal consort': the terrifying female.

These images display a marked influence of Kāpālika ideology and material traditions, based on images of death and the visual idiom of terrifying behaviors or divinities. Also, they demonstrate a relationship between the use of skull cups or staffs by practitioners (Figures 12 and 13) and their use in depictions of terrifying deities (Figure 14). The depiction of the Kāpālika ascetic and his consort in Figure 13 is particularly resonant with later images of wrathful figures. For example, the Hevajra representations of Figures 9 and 10, the

³² Henry Balfour, "Life History of an Aghori Fakir: with Exhibition of the Human Skull Used by Him as a Drinking Vessel, and Notes of the Similar Use of Skulls by Other Races," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* Vol. 26 (1897): 345.

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Vajrabhairavas of Figures 7 and 8, as well the carving of Kālī from Figure 11 all exhibit the same ‘crown’ of matted hair and skull ornament. This ascetic, those surrounding Cāmuṇḍā, and the goddess herself hold the skull staff, have dreadlocked hair and are depicted as nude. These visual similarities are an important part of the establishment of the terrifying visual idioms that were so resonant for later makers of esoteric Buddhist arts in both India and Tibet.

These artistic expressions are an indication of the aesthetic force the Kāpālikas’ ritual traditions had on material culture at the time. Their representative images would have a lasting impact on the illustration of esoteric concepts in Buddhist arts of this region as the Vajrayāna movement was forming at this time. The specific conceptual vocabulary of the Kāpālika ideology persisted through the Buddhist incorporation of graphic sexual images, fearsome deities armed with implements of destruction, and allusions to dismemberment, decay, and corporeal death.

Kāpālika-Buddhist interactions: Adoption and Revision

At the same time that the presence of the Kāpālika was expanding its presence and forms of expression, Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism was forming into a cohesive religious movement. This form of Buddhism as a distinct trend may have its origins as early as the first centuries CE or last centuries BCE but it took shape as a popular movement and established conceptual system during the Pāla period.³³ Particularly from the seventh century onwards, the pantheon of this religious tradition grew substantially, incorporating complex visual and hierarchical schemes of male and female counterparts, bodhisattvas, guardians, and deities with characters similar to

³³ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India, op. cit.*, 154.

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those found in Kāpālika practice.³⁴ The growth of Vajrayāna was partially a reflection of a social taxonomy that categorized the rank and order of various groups, an effect felt in other religious traditions as well during the seventh to eleventh centuries.³⁵ Also, the proliferation of Tantric imageries might have emerged later than the practices or teachings to which they were related; illustration of concepts occurred only after these teachings had been circulated within the Buddhist community enough to glean support and adherence.³⁶ Inspired by the cultural and religious landscape into which it was growing in these centuries, Vajrayāna's Tantric methods and priorities would reshape Indian Buddhism into a more complex system of beliefs and practices, articulated by the multitude of deities it brought into the tradition. The religious vocabulary on which this ideological extension was based was most strongly influenced by Śaivite groups, particularly the Kāpālika, from which it drew many of its more extreme methods and esoteric teachings.³⁷

Though some scholars propose that similarities in vocabulary — for example, notions of *samsara* and *nirvana* — indicate an intimate conceptual link between the Kāpālikas as early as the beginnings of Tantric Buddhist texts, early references by Buddhist commentators to the Śaivite sect from the third to fifth century CE tend to be disparaging.³⁸ Quite possibly the two forms of Tantra — Śaivite and Buddhist — were developing simultaneously and interacting in significant ways before textual evidence of their connection was produced. In the seventh century, the popularity of Śaivite Tantra became an important factor for the monastic Buddhist

³⁴ Desai, "Social Dimensions of Art," *op. cit.*, 17.

³⁵ Desai, *ibid.*, 17.

³⁶ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, *op. cit.*, 244.

³⁷ Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, *op. cit.*, 202.

³⁸ Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas*, *op. cit.*, 14.

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community when the former's 'legitimation of otherwise illegitimate conduct' attracted the patronage of political and military leaders in an unstable and decentralized historical period.³⁹

The Kāpālika presented a model of conduct that could be understood as a consecration of the violent behaviors and debauchery of military operations. During this period, many monuments were built as the feuds between ruling families developed into regional expressions of religious and cultural identities. As the larger political bodies that had supported monastic Buddhism until this point gave way to smaller, more aggressive entities, the Buddhist community absorbed Tantra's forms and energy to build a more resonant model of their religious tradition for the time period.⁴⁰ Ronald Davidson asserts that the appropriation of Tantric images, rituals, and deities by monastic communities was more or less overt but always related to a perceived need to avoid irrelevance in the medieval Indian environment.⁴¹ The Buddhist pantheon grew and its elaborate visual expression became a necessity for the pedagogy and patronage of their ideas.

It was also during this period that the figure of the Buddhist *siddha*— or ascetic holy man — gained traction as a necessary counterpart to the religion's monastic foundations. Many of these peripheral figures would function as religious authorities, recognized by the monasteries as functionaries of interactions between non-monastic Tantra practitioners like the increasingly popular Kāpālikas and Buddhism. These *siddhas* were often indistinguishable from their Śaivite counterparts, with whom they would interact outside the monastery walls, wearing the same bone ornaments and acting as a new type of saint, more intimately tied to the medieval Indian

³⁹ Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, *op. cit.*, 177.

⁴⁰ Rob Linrothe, "Protection, Benefaction, and Transformation," *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2004), 14.

⁴¹ Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, *op. cit.*, 191.

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religious landscape than previous models in Buddhist hagiography.⁴² The Buddhist *siddhas* became popular advocates of their religion in part because of their resemblance to Tantric sects like the Kāpālika which gave them a potent religious charisma. They also worked with the decentralization of Buddhist institutions by navigating the exchange of ideas between communities of Tantric practitioners and facilitating the exchange of ideas that contributed to the expansion of the esoteric movement.

A combination of willing adoption by monastic authorities and ‘field-work’ conducted by the increasing number of Buddhist *siddhas* succeeded in integrating Kāpālika traditions with esoteric Buddhism. Though there was an atmosphere of mutual influence, Buddhist monumentalizing has given us a more complete sense of the Kāpālikas’ heavy influence on the formation of Buddhist Tantras. There is textual evidence of Kāpālikas’ ideological and ritual influence on Buddhist religious teachings as early as the eighth century, and the *Buddhakapālayogini-tantra-rajā* from the ninth century explicitly includes instruction in Kāpālika rituals and deity worship.⁴³ Likewise in the visual realm, it is in this period that images begin to incorporate Tantric idioms like overtly terrifying figures holding skull cups and wearing other bone ornaments borrowed from representations of the Kāpālika or their deities. It was through this exercise of appropriation that Indian esoteric Buddhism in the Pāla period would lay the foundation for its translation into the distinct character of Tibetan Buddhist arts.

Exemplifying this process, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* was composed in India in the eighth century and remained popular to this day within Tibetan Buddhism. Though explicitly Buddhist, this tantra focuses on deities associated with the charnel grounds and their practices— including

⁴² Davidson, *ibid.*, 169.

⁴³ Davidson, *ibid.*, 248.

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the use of skull cups and erotic imageries— as inspired by the Kāpālikas’ transgressive practices.⁴⁴ In the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, Mahabhairava (an approximation of Vajrabhairava) is explained as Buddhist, though at the time he was considered one of the chief deities of the Kāpālika.⁴⁵ Mahabhairava would be further Buddhicized through Lalitavajra’s efforts to record the revealed text of the *Vajrabhairava Tantras* at this same time (see Chapter Two), specifically in the substituent *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* of that collection. The text explicitly advocates the adoption of the Kāpālikas’ outward appearance including use of their ritual implements and their mortuary ornaments. It was through texts like the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* that terrifying deities were integrated into Buddhist ideologies. The images prescribed by the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* also demonstrate the influence of the Kāpālikas’ notorious practices, including the frequent application of *khatvanga*, sexual imagery, skull cups and fearsome appearances. The central deity of *Cakrasamvara* imagery is considered the Buddhist counterpart to the Kāpālikas’ Śiva-Bhairava, leaving the devotional practice and its artistic expression open to a process of translation into its new Buddhist context.

During this period, Buddhists developed a whole class of Tantric revelations that strongly resembled those practiced by the Kāpālika and other Śaivite sects. To borrow again from Alexis Sanderson on the process of Buddhicization of Kāpālika practices:

At the lowest levels of the Buddhist Tantric canon there is certainly the influence of the general character and liturgical methods of the Śaiva. . . traditions. But at the final (and latest) level the dependence is much more profound and detailed. . . [and] these Buddhist deities are Kāpālika in iconic form. They wear the five bone ornaments and are smeared with ashes (the six seals of the Kāpālikas). They drink blood from skull bowls (*kapāla*), have the Śaiva third eye, stand on the prostrate bodies of lesser deities, wear Śiva’s sickle moon upon their massed and

⁴⁴ David Gray, “Introduction,” *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: the discourse of Sri Heruka*, trans. David B Gray (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), xv.

⁴⁵ Gray, *ibid.*, 168.

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matted hair. . . Those who wish to do so may take on the long-term practice of the Kāpālika observance itself (*Vajra-Kāpālikavrata*), living in the cremation grounds, consuming meat and alcohol and offering erotic worship.⁴⁶

Many indications of these influences can be seen in the images based on the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* that would populate the Pāla examples and later inspire the Tibetan tradition of painting this deity's mandala. The process of translating the Kāpālikas' forms of Tantra was a gradual program achieved through teachings and their texts, practices, and material as acquired and recast in the Buddhist soteriological model. The central deities of these practices— Heruka, Vajra- (maha)bhairava, and many others— were translated as tutelary figures, subservient to the goals of Buddhism. On the surface, little would change and they would strongly resemble their Kāpālika-inspired forebears.

Even in the beginning, these innovations in esoteric teachings were not introduced without controversy from within the Buddhist monastic community (as they would later spark reforms in the Tibet). There was a movement in secondary literature about these teachings to explain the practices and deities so that they became an extension of a conceptual vocabulary that symbolically illustrated Buddhist ideas. These new forms of Buddhist worship were meant to invoke subjective insights that demonstrated the drama of spiritual formation and were deliberately diverted from anything considered quasi-heretical or magical, as the Kāpālika seemed to their detractors.⁴⁷ Tantra was a highly codified mode of worship and its interpretation created a dependence on an instructor. This served the Buddhists' interest in maintaining relevance and legitimacy in a fluctuating religious and social atmosphere. Likewise, the complex Tantric rites of consecration and initiation gave the monastic community a sense of control that

⁴⁶ Sanderson, "Śaivism and the Tantric Tradition," *op. cit.*, 678-9.

⁴⁷ Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, *op. cit.*, 137.

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helped them retain a presence in the medieval Indian paradigm of competition and cultural opportunism.⁴⁸ As these Tantric teachings were brought into the fold, gradually their content was adjusted to reflect the ideals of Buddhism: meat might no longer be offered to deities as this would be against the Buddha's teachings. The cremation grounds and its instruments— such as the *kapāla*— became a platform for the defeat of symbolic or spiritual enemies and distractions. Skull cups were transformed, in this period of appropriation, into tools for enlightenment after the Buddha's model, rather than an emblem for transgressive behavior in the hands of the Kāpālikas.

Pāla arts and the illustration of Vajrayāna

The Buddhist promotion of Tantra during the eighth to tenth centuries was a concentrated effort to reinvest in their methods and institutions in an uncertain time. Indian esoteric Buddhism was an expansion of earlier forms of monastic Buddhism, one that arose from a desire by that community to appeal to a larger audience at various levels of society and patronage, as well as a movement to revalue sources of spiritual authority. This effort resulted in increasingly complex imageries, ritual practices, and rites of consecration to accompany the newly developed and highly esoteric teachings of Vajrayāna.⁴⁹ It is in the illustration of these developments that Buddhists of the period, particularly those within the Pāla kingdom, used to generate the designs of terrifying or fearsome deities later elaborated on by Tibetan artists.

⁴⁸ Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, *op. cit.*, 217.

⁴⁹ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, *op. cit.*, 229.

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Images of terrifying deities were not necessarily new to Buddhism and an early example demonstrates the Buddhist application of forms borrowed from other Tantric traditions (Figure 15). This image of Harītī from the early centuries CE shows a form of the deity that seems to prefigure many later, terrifying representations that utilize Śaivite elements. In addition to the small children at her sides, which Susan Huntington argues indicates her role as ‘mother of Buddhas’, she has fangs at the corners of her mouth, a cup of wine in her left upper hand and a trident on the right. This last accessory is most commonly associated with Śiva and his followers though the wine might be an allusion to the consumption of alcohol also practiced by various Śaivite orders. Huntington alleges that this image may be an early articulation of Tantric Buddhist arts in its incorporation of Śaivite icons into the representation of a figure intended to be read as Buddhist.⁵⁰ The use of typically Śaivite paraphernalia might also be read as indication of her ‘conversion’ to Buddhism: Harītī was also known as a kidnapper of children and a dangerous female entity of the same order as Kālī before she was assumed her place in the Buddhist pantheon.⁵¹ This particular representation of Harītī may have been created to illustrate the latent threat that the protectress posed. While this work gives us the impression that earlier expressions of the fearsome or terrifying existed sporadically in Buddhism, it was only during the Pāla period’s profusion of artistic expression that these images were popularized and refined as wrathful divinities.

Also during this era, the conflation of production settings for religious images that represented various communities contributed to the formation of a visual idiom of the terrifying, emerging from both Śaivite and Buddhist motivations. While various religious traditions might

⁵⁰ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁵¹ White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, *op. cit.*, 63.

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have produced their arts in different workshops before the eighth century, by the ninth century many images were being produced by the same people, in similar styles, and possibly for the same patrons.⁵² Many Buddhist and Śaivite artifacts have been found sharing a site, the number of which— despite historical damages— is a testament to the general florescence of images with Tantric content in both traditions at this time.⁵³ For this reason, many paintings and sculptures produced later in the Pala period, while nominally depicting the deities of divergent religious groups, strongly resemble one another. Both communities were subject to an overall elaboration of forms during this period so that representations of these deities became increasingly ornate, with complex stylizations of forms and supernatural capacities: more flames, heads, arms, and weapons augmented their impressive displays. The Tantric paraphernalia that facilitated the worship of these deities were integrated into these images as attributes or weapons for spiritual conquest. As with the image of Cāmuṇḍā from Figure 14, the attributes of the deities reflected the ritual objects employed the practitioners in a mutual expression of their esoteric applications. It is during the later centuries of the Pāla period that more skull cups are seen in the hands of related deities as part of an increasing iconographic specificity, reflecting the specialization of the esoteric teachings being illustrated.⁵⁴ Images of terrifying Buddhist deities, using many implements and idioms gained from tangential sources like the Kāpālikas, proliferated and became increasingly popular as esoteric Buddhism gained prominence.

To finalize this point, I would like to offer a brief comparison between two objects with similar iconographic traits but ostensibly different religious identities, both produced within the

⁵² Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, *op. cit.*, 407.

⁵³ Huntingtons, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree*, *op. cit.*, 83.

⁵⁴ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, *op. cit.*, 329.

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Pāla milieu. Figures 16 and 17 provide an excellent illustration of how integrated the iconography and execution of these two deities became in these centuries, though they originally represented two very distinct religious communities. By this period, however, the identities of the two deities— Mahakala and Śiva-Bhairava— are so often conflated in various religious teachings that in some sources Śiva-Bhairava is called ‘Mahakala’ when he is referred to as the ‘Master of Time’.⁵⁵ These two works display similarities in the proportions of limbs and torso, depth and execution of the relief carving, ornamentation of figures and facial renderings as well as the relationship of the deity figure to the dimensions of the overall composition. Even the radii of the shadow cast by the navel indentation in the round belly is almost identical. Both figures display a complexity in their iconographies derived from the elaboration of Tantra and its ritualized expression.

Like other depictions of terrifying deities addressed in this chapter, these two figures have crowns of piled hair and head ornaments, garlands, and threads of jewelry with multiple limbs and ritual accessories that draw analogies to the enacted means by which the practitioner propitiates them including a skull up in the hand of Mahakala at his chest. There was evidence that monastic Buddhists were paying homage to Mahakala as early as the early seventh century but images such as these in Pāla Buddhist art attest to the growing popularity of this deity as a distinctly Buddhist concept.⁵⁶ The differentiation from Mahakala’s Śaivite counterpart is subtle: both carry the same *vajra*-topped club in their left hands, a possible permutation of the earlier Kāpālika *khatvanga* seen in the Orissan temple panels but Figure 17 exhibits *more* overall. Mahakala has more limbs, more (Tantric) ritual elements and more of an entourage in the various

⁵⁵ Huntingtons, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree*, *op. cit.*, 154.

⁵⁶ Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 122.

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smaller deities that surround the central figure. The Buddhist wrathful figure also tramples a figure beneath his active legs, a display of vanquishing power, over spiritual enemies or analogous deities in other communities.

Many aspects of the commonalities in these two works can be attributed to the intimacy between religious communities and the production facilities for their devotional imageries. In these Figures 16 and 17 there are fewer skull or bone ornaments and no sexual content but the proximity of the various arenas for artistic production is a demonstrable factor in the integration and popularity of terrifying or wrathful figures in esoteric Buddhist art. Returning for a moment to Figure 10, the Pāla-era sculpture of Hevajra, the same proportions of execution— softly rounded limbs, facial rendering, and dynamic pose within a (almost entirely missing) background — betray it as historically related to the production of Figures 16 and 17. Figure 10 builds on the complexity and stylistic expression of Pāla trends in rendering with the iconographical trends discussed in this chapter including sexual content, skull bowls, and garlands of skulls worn around the hips of the deities, seen in the image of Kālī in Figure 11 as well as previously cited images of Vajrabhairava (Figures 7 and 8). These iconographical traits would persist in depictions of terrifying deities, implemented and augmented by the Tantric conceptual systems they illustrated.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the distinct and recognizable presence of the Kāpālika had an effect on the arts of esoteric Buddhism during the Pāla period which in turn established important precedents for the visual and material culture of Tibet. The Kāpālikas' unorthodox methods of worship— including the use of the *kapāla* by which they were identified— had an

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impact on representations of deities affiliated with their practices. The wearing of bone ornaments and graphic sexual content in a necromantic setting would later characterize visual representations of the Buddhist Tantras like Cakrasamvara and Vajrabhairava. Though cemeteries had historically been sites for Buddhist meditation, their frequent representations in arts of the ninth to twelfth centuries is a product of the monastic community's interactions with the Kāpālika.⁵⁷ This chapter traces a lineage of material culture representing terrifying or fearsome ideas that originated with Śaivite ascetics and were gradually adopted and popularized as Buddhist. This was done during a period characterized by regional administrative stability that provided a buoyant milieu for artistic and religious patronage as well as a competitive uncertainty related to the reorganization of political power both before and during the Pāla period. It was through these developments that skull cups were introduced, integrated, and eventually reformatted to serve their new context in Tantric or esoteric Buddhism. The next chapter will deal exclusively with these objects, their forms, use, and resonance with teachings, practices and history of Tibetan Buddhism.

⁵⁷ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, *op. cit.*, 237.

Chapter Four:

Kapāla as object: Its form and function in Tibetan Buddhism

Introduction

The first three chapters of this thesis have established a chronology for the historical conditions that have shaped the ritual uses of *kapāla* for a variety of contexts and functions. These have included eighteenth century sectarian politics, the appropriation and institutionalization of Tantric Buddhism via its content (e.g., the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*) and the cultural circumstances (Pāla-period religious pluralism) of Tantric Buddhist arts. This final chapter will build on the history and establishment of the *kapāla* as a Buddhist ritual object to offer examples of the refinement and material value of the skull cup as a form of Tibetan religious art. Here, I examine a few examples of these cups made in recent centuries and accounts of their use and various significances in Tibet.

Throughout this project, I have maintained that the object is multivalent: it is firmly established as an historical part of religious traditions but it is also characterized by a certain flexibility in its application to variety of ritual and cultural contexts including both Śaivite and Buddhist Tantra. For this reason, this chapter will not advance a definitive art historical interpretation of the skull cup. Though many authors have provided a definition for the ‘meaning’ of skull cups in Tibetan arts (see Introduction), I do not believe that the significance of these cups or their symbolic content can be determined with any accuracy from an analytical or art historical perspective. In my research, I have found that doctrinal or liturgical references can vary by region or monastic sect. Even within a community, *kapāla* can be used in a variety of settings and ritual practices. *Kapāla* are, however, consistently linked with practices dedicated to

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wrathful or terrifying deities and the tantric teachings that promote them. It is for this reason that the first three chapters of this thesis have focussed on Tantric practices and images and their relationship to the larger tradition of Tibetan art. Even in terms of their primary material, skull cups are not necessarily unique within this Tantric religious/artistic setting; other ritual objects made from bones and skulls can be found in Tibetan Buddhism. The only role or significance that can be ascribed to skull cups with any certainty is that they mediate the relationship between practitioner and spiritual source. As Nancy Malville observes: “Human bones not only serve as reminders of the inevitability of death but are also perceived. . . as powerful ritual objects for making contact with various gods. . . [in] the rich pantheon of Tibetan deities and dangerous spirits.”¹ The mechanism by which the cups facilitate these interactions are conditioned not only by the praxis itself but by a variety of cultural, historical, religious and social factors.

This chapter explores many of these factors and their contributions to the versatile understandings of the skull cup within Tibetan Buddhist material culture and its various roles and formal characteristics. These issues include the *kapāla* as relic or material link between teacher and student in a lineage, ideas about the production of the cups, and their indexical value to the history of Tibetan Buddhism and its arts. Much of this discussion is based on the skull cups’ role in the Tantric traditions and practices examined in the first three chapters of this thesis. While the preceding chapters outline the circumstances for the refinement of the *kapāla* as a ritual object, the following examines the specific consequences of that long process for the skull cups’ appearance, function, and interpretation within Tibetan Buddhism.

¹ Nancy J. Malville, “Mortuary Practices and Ritual Use of Human Bone in Tibet,” *Interacting with the Dead: Perspectives on Mortuary Archaeology for the new millennium*, ed. by Gordon F.M. Rakita, et al. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 190.

Material and production

While the focus of this project is the history of the object and not formal analysis, it is useful to examine some of the consistent visual characteristics of surviving examples of Tibetan skull cups. The example in Figure 17, originally found in the collection of the Qing's Qianlong emperor (see Chapter One on the relationship between the Qing and Gelugpa), displays several common features of these objects. The lid and base are both of copper or copper alloy and the lid is fitted over the edge of the cut skull bone. The lid has a *vajra*, or diamond, shaped handle as well as gems and ornate patterning. The base is triangular with a flame motif and three heads support the base of the skull vessel. This specific ensemble of elements is most likely related to the cups' role in rites of consecration where a skull is set on a tripod over a mandala and covered with a bronze mirror while monks perform rites to empower it and consecrate anything that might be placed inside it.² The three heads that are often seen at points on the triangular base can represent vanquished spiritual enemies and/or various states of decay for the skulls: fresh, wet, and dry.³

The specific materials of the cup's decorative fittings are variable in terms of the use of gemstones and brass, bronze or silver. Even the skull can be substituted by a rock crystal or, as in Figure 18, a metal facsimile. These are not uncommon though they are less frequently seen than *kapāla* with human skulls. This is most likely related to the relative power of skulls as raw material or the resources of those who commission the cups. Variations in material are related to

² Malville, *ibid.*, 200. The citation refers to a rite of consecration from the Mani Rimdu festival, originating in the ninth century. The similarity in elements framing the skull— triangular base, round and somewhat flat lid— is striking enough to lead me to believe that the mirror and tripod element were eventually integrated into the shape of the object itself. Almost every skull cup I have seen has had some permutation of lid and triangular base.

³ W.W. Rockhill, "On the use of skulls in Lamaist ceremonies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 14 (1890), xxv. See also Robert Beer, "Skull-cup," in *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 263.

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the requests or resources of the patrons that invest in the creation of these objects.⁴ Likewise, the iconography that embellishes the metal elements of the skull cup can be diverse, though it is often worked onto similarly shaped lids and triangular bases. In Figure 19, the lid has more volume to accommodate the four images of wrathful and meditational deities worked into the copper.⁵ The tarnish on the copper leaf is a testament to the object's age and years of use before being added to a private collection in the early twentieth century.⁶

The metal elements and iconography are an elaboration of the earliest forms of these cups used by the Kāpālika in the first centuries CE. Ideas about the original ritual skull cup might only be imparted by an ethnographic drawing from the nineteenth century and the accounts of few modern necrophagous ascetics concentrated in cremation grounds along the Ganges. One such drawing is given here (Figure 20) and may give the reader an overview of the historical treatment of the skull as a material. Many of the examples in this drawing are the result of crude production processes; the ascetics used the skulls of corpses found in charnel grounds, shaping and cleaning them with only their fingers.⁷ These examples can be seen in the second and fourth images on the top row of Figure 20. To contrast— and demonstrate the drastic but gradual changes that have shaped these cups into their more recent, Tibetan form— I would like to discuss the mechanics of producing a Tibetan skull cup as a ritual object which would resemble the skull cup second from the left on the bottom row of this image and Figures 17 and 19 above.

⁴ Ann Shaftel, Conservator in Private Practice, Personal Communication, 8 June 2010.

⁵ Antoinette K. Gordon, “70.0-7676 (W. 645) Kapāla. T. *Thod-phor*,” Unpublished notes on the Whitney Collection, American Museum of Natural History, 1936-7, 27.

⁶ Thanks to Laila Williamson at the AMNH for giving me background information on their collection of Tibetan ritual objects.

⁷ Henry Balfour, “Life of an Aghori Fakir; with Exhibition of the Human Skull Used by Him as a Drinking Vessel, and Notes on the Similar Use of Skulls by Other Races,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* Vol. 26 (1897), 344.

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The ‘evolution’ or refinement of the skull cup is not necessarily chronological but rather, the result of institutional resources directed towards a lavish form, representing different values from the cruder examples made by ascetics.

Because of their intended ritual function, the properties of the skulls to be made into cups are prescribed in great detail in order to maximize the potency of the object.⁸ However, how or by whom *kapāla* are made varies because the guidelines for making ritual objects are often subject to amendments made by the different monastic sects and teaching lineages.⁹ Just as the tantras that recommend the use of a *kapāla* in practice can be diverse in their methods, so can the precise instructions for the construction or constitution of ritual objects associated with those practices. For this reason, a generalized description of the creation of skull cups is difficult to form. Regional variations in mortuary rites also contribute to the variable availability of skulls as material for ritual objects. Some cups are made from skulls scavenged from burial sites but some monastic practitioners believe these are less powerful than skulls procured from known sources like deceased religious leaders.¹⁰ Those made from the skulls of lamas are believed to be highly powerful but the prevailing form of burial for the highest lamas in some areas is mummification or cremation, for which the body remains intact and therefore the skull is

⁸ Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 258.

⁹ Ann Shaftel, Personal Communication, 8 June 2010.

¹⁰ Malville, “Mortuary Practices and Ritual Use of Human Bones,” *op. cit.*, 203.

inaccessible as raw material.¹¹ In yet other areas, the skulls of religious leaders are retained specifically for making these ritual objects.¹²

One translated text on skulls as material for Tantric ritual objects demonstrates how comprehensive the guidelines for creating *kapāla* are in Tibetan Buddhism. The particular text is drawn from a teaching devoted to Amitābha where the skull cup is used to make offerings to the deity; the translator makes no note of where this text is located, how old it might be or its Tibetan title.¹³ “Method for distinguishing good and bad skulls and how, by offering a *kapāla* to obtain worldly prosperity and create a wish-granting source” is a short text with graphic descriptions of the desirable and unfavorable traits of skulls to be used as ritual objects. Good traits include clear white or ‘unctuous’ yellow color, an equal overall thickness, strong joins and various auspicious markings like flowers, fruit, or an impression resembling the Ganges. Bad skulls are crooked with many indentations or come from women, bastards or children of incest. At least one other source, however, lists the skull of a child of incest as having a desirable potency because of its inherent transgressive nature; any skull that is product of a violent death is similarly favored.¹⁴ The list of both positive and negative traits for skulls addresses not only color, consistency, and formation but the circumstances of the skulls’ procurement and recommendations on how to read the position in which the skull is found in terms of its efficacy.

¹¹ Turrell Wylie, “Mortuary Customs at Sa-skyā, Tibet,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 25 (1964-5), 233.

¹² Malville, “Mortuary Practices and Ritual Use of Human Bones,” *op. cit.*, 190. See *Tibet: Treasures from the Roof of the World* ed. Robert Warren Clark (Santa Ana: Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, 2003), 116. This exhibition catalogue features a skull cup made from the cranium of the teacher Kedrup Chenpo, offered as a gift to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama by someone at the Drakyab Monastery in Eastern Tibet.

¹³ Rockhill, “On the use of skulls,” *op. cit.*, xxv.

¹⁴ Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 263.

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Regardless of provenance, the skulls are considered empowered by the rites that consecrate them as ritual objects as well as the life force that remains within the bones, through which the practitioner connects with tutelary or meditational deities.¹⁵ *Kapāla* are used in rituals of initiation as well as for meditational practices— in Chapter Two I discussed Tsongkhapa’s fourteenth century *Extensive Practice of the Thirteen Deity Glorious Vajrabhairava*— where they act as vessels for offerings to wrathful deities. These offerings might include substances (imagined or otherwise procured) from the physical body or five senses, alcohol, tea and other liquids, or the body parts of demons destroyed by wrathful deities.¹⁶ Depictions of skull cups as vessels for making offerings are often seen in paintings of these fearsome entities just beneath the central figure in the composition. As discussed in Chapter Three, it is the heritage of Kāpālika influence on esoteric Buddhism that has firmly linked the use and image of a skull cup with teachings devoted to wrathful deities. As faithful perpetuators of Indian esoteric traditions, Tibetan Buddhism has retained this ritual setting, refining its forms and methods in its arts.

The value placed on skull cups as a ritual component can be seen in the persistent use of the *kapāla* in Tantric Buddhism as well as its richly decorated surface and ubiquitous image as an accessory of wrathful deities. Its significance or symbolic value in a ritual context is more difficult to define exactly and this is a symptom of its esoteric application. The written teachings to which *kapāla* are related are often convoluted because of esoteric Buddhism’s reliance on oral transmission or explication and its emphasis on mystic experience or revelation.¹⁷ Skull cups can serve as a vessel for offerings or substances in rites of initiation as well as a reminder of

¹⁵ Malville, “Mortuary Practices and Ritual Use of Human Bone,” *op. cit.*, 197.

¹⁶ Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 265.

¹⁷ Rob Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 3.

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bodily death and impermanence but in general the precise meaning of *kapāla* is dependent on the specific rite being performed.¹⁸ The function of the cup can be examined with some reliability as a vessel, but the exact significance or symbolic content of the object is contingent on the teachings being practiced. While this may complicate an art historian's efforts to facilitate access to forms and images for audiences unfamiliar to them, I think it is a compelling facet of the mutually influential relationship between material culture and religious activity. The reliance of interpretation on specific teachings does, however, contribute to another aspect of the skull cups' greater significance as an intercessor between teacher and student, practitioner and tradition.

Illustrating continuity: the skull cup as relic and receptacle for a body of knowledge

The esoteric teachings that were disseminated through the Later Diffusion emphasized ritual and visualization, stimulating an elaborate iconographic vocabulary in the arts as well as a complex array of practices.¹⁹ Since their integration into esoteric Buddhism, *kapāla* have been produced in order to function within and support this highly ritualistic religious paradigm. Bones are considered a powerful material for crafting ritual objects because the mortal remains bring an immediacy to the practice predicated on the user's own mortality, referencing more than just symbolic notions of death.²⁰ Personal connection to the symbolic content of the ritual was also invoked by using skull cups with a memorial or metonymic aspect related to the body of religious knowledge being transmitted within a teacher's lineage. Utilizing both physical and

¹⁸ Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 263.

¹⁹ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, *op. cit.*, 229.

²⁰ Robert E. Fisher, *Art of Tibet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 93.

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ideological material, the skull cup can be seen as a relic passed from teacher to student, reinforcing the relationship between generations of a lineage.

Relic veneration has been practiced from the earliest centuries of Buddhist history and Tibetan Buddhists maintained this tradition after the religion's import from India.²¹ Eventually the classification of 'relic' came to include not only bodily remains but texts, clothing, cremation ashes and any memorabilia of venerated monks, saints or teachers.²² In Tibet, relics and reliquaries— most often seen as *chorten*, a small metal container analogous to the Indian *stupa* and containing a variety of relic materials, including bones— became common objects for practices of devotion. The skull cup fits into this model for worship as a permutation of the bodily relic; just as the reliquaries are consecrated by the relic they house and the veneration of practitioners, the skull cup accrues sacred value by generations of use as a ritual object in addition to its inherent power as a mortal remain.²³ Skull cups crafted from the crania of teachers or saints are part of the long Buddhist tradition of relic worship and this contributes to their efficacy as ritual objects.

Another aspect of the use of skull cups is the importance of the bond between a teacher or lama and his students. The nature of instruction in esoteric teachings is a significant factor for the central importance of the connection. The eleventh century Indian Buddhist teacher Atiśa, credited as father of the Later Diffusion, stressed discipline as well as strong relationships

²¹ Yael Bentor, "On the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dharanis in Stupas and Images," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 115 No. 2 (April-June 1995), 249.

²² Robert T. Hatt, "A Thirteenth Century Tibetan Reliquary. An Iconographic and Physical Analysis," *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 42 No. 2/3 (1980), 175.

²³ Ann Shaftel, Personal Communication, 8 June 2010. See also Hatt, "A Thirteenth Century Tibetan Reliquary," *op. cit.*, 176.

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between teachers and students as the central mechanism for transmitting religious knowledge.²⁴

Atiśa was also a key proponent of Tantric teachings and relic veneration and in painted or sculpted images and he is frequently depicted with a *chorten*.²⁵ Through Atiśa's teachings and the traditions established in the Later Diffusion, both relic veneration and the concept of pedagogical lineage would become integral to Tibetan Buddhism. Most especially Tantric practitioners— who are those using skull cups— were intimately tied to the lama or religious leader by whom they were initiated into the lineage of teachings they practice.²⁶ It is through the teacher and the methods of their practice that a student would access the esoteric ideologies and deities of that lineage.²⁷ Skull cups, passed from teacher to student or being made from the skulls of teachers and religious leaders for use by the community of their followers, emblemize a transmission of knowledge and reinforce the bonds of lineage. The role *kapāla* play in maintaining and cultivating these traditions in Tibetan Buddhism is, I believe, a significant factor in the use of rich ornament like precious metals or gems framing the skull. The wealth invested in the production of skull cups as ritual objects demonstrates the religious community's recognition of their value on more than one level.

Resonance and myth in Tibetan religious and artistic culture

Though Buddhism is dominant in Tibet, other traditions contribute to the religious landscape and share substantial amounts of their artistic and material cultures. Tibetan religions

²⁴ *Sacred Arts of Tibet: Art from the Roof of the World* (San Francisco, CA: Asian Art Museum/Chung-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2001), 15.

²⁵ Hatt, "A Thirteenth Century Tibetan Reliquary," *op. cit.*, 177.

²⁶ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 235.

²⁷ Chogyam Trungpa, *Visual Dharma: The Buddhist Art of Tibet* (Berkeley and London: Shambhala, 1975), 22.

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have generated other forms of ritual objects that use human bones or skulls, some of which are also the lasting legacy of the Kāpālika in Tantric practices. Buddhists' mutually influential relationship with the traditions that surround them have generated not only images and objects, it has also generated myths and legends to explain the superiority of Buddhism. Some of these myths contribute to the cultural resonance of skull cups as a distinctly Tibetan form of material culture by incorporating either the use or the image of *kapāla* by key figures in religious historical narratives. Skull cups have a flexible iconic character that allows their use and varied integration into a matrix of interconnected objects, rites, and mythology.

Both the Bon and shamanic religious communities have been significant to the history of Buddhism in Tibet. Though pre-Buddhist forms of ancestor worship might also be a factor in the popularity of ritual objects made from human remains in Tibet, these later traditions are more evidently responsible for maintaining this unique material trend: like skull cups, more later recent examples survive.²⁸ Wrathful deities are prominent in both Buddhist and Bon arts of Tibet and they share many aspects of their iconographies.²⁹ The Bon religion is often considered pre-Buddhist but recent scholarship has called this chronological assignation into question. Older scholars have attributed many of the Saivite practices assimilated by early esoteric Buddhism to the Bon religion, which was also heavily influenced by the Hindu Tantrics.³⁰ However, Per Kværne argues that Bon is distinguished less by any historical precedent and more by an ideological lineage that stresses its auto-chthonic religious authority, rather than Indian

²⁸ Fisher, *Art of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 92.

²⁹ Rob Linrothe, "Protection, Benefaction, and Transformation," *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond*, ed. Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2004), 4.

³⁰ Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 271n4.

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derivation.³¹ Shamanic practitioners, on the other hand, have traditionally been distinguished by their theatrical external paraphernalia of bone ornaments and masks but should be considered a type of religious figure rather than a distinct community independent of Bon or Buddhism.³²

Both Bon and shamanic practices share substantial amounts of their ritual and material vocabularies with Buddhism including the use of Tantric ritual imagery like skull cups, daggers, choppers, and other types of bone or skull materials. Shamans in particular have made varied use of the skulls and bones once found in abundance at sites for sky burial in Tibet.

Other objects made from human remains in use include bone trumpets, *khatvanga* (skull topped staffs), *damaru* (double-headed skull drums), and bone aprons (Figure 21). These are all used by both shamans and Tibetan Buddhists in various rites.³³ The *khatvanga* and *damaru* and their use in Tantric Buddhism are also linked to the integration of Kāpālika practices during the eighth to eleventh centuries in India.³⁴ Their incorporation into the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism is a part of the general adoption of charnel ground imageries and, like *kapāla*, these objects are often seen as the accessories of fearsome deities and their worship. The sounds of the bone trumpet and *damaru* are considered pleasing to wrathful deities and are used by Buddhists as well as Bon practitioners and shamans in various rites.³⁵ The materials of these bone or skull

³¹ Per Kværne, *The Bon Religion of Tibet: The iconography of a living tradition* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 10.

³² Todd Gibson, "Notes on the History of the Shamanic in Tibet and Inner Asia," *Numen* Vol. 44 No. 1 (January 1997), 41-42.

³³ Claudia Muller-Ebeling, Christian Ratsch, and Surendra Bahadur Shahi, *Shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas* (Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 195.

³⁴ Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 249.

³⁵ *Sacred Arts of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 49.

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derived ritual objects are subject to the same ritual prescriptions as skull cups and are used in esoteric applications or contexts.

The bone apron in Figure 21 is a less documented form of ritual object in Tibet in comparison with other types like the *phur-pa* dagger or even the skull cup. It is used by both Buddhists and Bon practitioners and most often observed as a component of sacred dances or rites of exorcism.³⁶ It is occasionally referred to as ‘human bone ornament’ and frequently seen in images of wrathful deities, worn around the hips of female consorts. This example from the British Museum has a lattice of beads made from human bone and larger pieces at the crossings with carved depictions of various fearsome deities and sacred figures, with a silk backing.³⁷ ‘Bone ornament’ is often mentioned as one of the typical adornments of the Kāpālika and their practices of charnel ground-inspired decorations.³⁸ Though I have never seen ‘apron’ or ‘lattice’ used in reference to a Kāpālika accessory, Alexis Sanderson mentions a ‘girdle’ of bone in his summarization of the ascetics’ presentation (see page 52 in Chapter Three). The derivation of other forms of ritual objects using human remains and the esoteric or specialized function of the bone aprons as well as their presence in depictions terrifying entities— often with sexual content— lead me to suppose that the bone apron is another legacy of the Śaivite influence on Tantric Buddhism.

Though I have discussed skull cups primarily in association with specific Tantric teachings like the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, *kapāla* are also used in depictions of religious leaders

³⁶ Malville, “Mortuary Practices and Ritual Use of Human Bone,” *op. cit.*, 200.

³⁷ H.J. Braunholtz, “A Necromancer’s Bone Apron from Tibet,” *The British Museum Quarterly* Vol. 5 No. 1 (June 1930), 29.

³⁸ Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 250.

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or mytho-historical figures. I will discuss two such figures here: the eighth-century saint Padmasambhava and Palden Lhamo, a wrathful protectress associated with the Gelugpa. Legends and images representing these two personae— as well as many of the myriad other saints, protectors, guardians, and deities seen in Tibetan arts— are influenced by wrathful, esoteric ideas derived from the Kāpālika and related practices. The two examples addressed here are personifications of Tibetan religious history and it is my observation that their respective popularities contribute to the cultural significance of skull cups and the teachings they embody. Likewise, the *kapāla*, as an established component of religious material culture, functions within images or stories of Padmasambhava and Palden Lhamo to emphasize their connections to Tibetan Buddhism.

Padmasambhava's relationship with wrathful or terrifying entities is often accounted for by his subjugation of demons in the eighth century, after his arrival in Tibet.³⁹ The 'demons' he tamed are sometimes explicitly described as Bon priests resistant to the import of Buddhism while in other versions the demons are 'local protectors', are brought into the service of Buddhism as guardians and represented in the arts as terrifying figures.⁴⁰ Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet from Oḍḍiyāna (present-day Swat Valley, Pakistan, whence the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*) because of his prowess with Tantric practices and he is credited as the founder of the Nyingma order, the first monastery, and is referred to by some as the first shaman.⁴¹ His popular historical importance has stimulated festivals in his honor, legends of his accomplishments, and an iconographical tradition in which he is typically shown wild-eyed with 'holy madness' and

³⁹ Gordon, *The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism*, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Sacred Arts of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 14.

⁴¹ Gibson, "Notes on the History of the Shamanic," *op. cit.*, 50.

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holding either a *khatvanga* or *kapāla*. Padmasambhava's attributes reflect his early training with the Kāpālika and these biographical details are retained in Tibetan images of the saint as an illustration of his spiritual authority in the Tantric practice with which the demons of Tibet were subdued.⁴² While the saint might have introduced Kāpālika practices or ritual objects to Tibet as early as the eighth century, it is only through the firm establishment of esoteric Buddhism via the Later Diffusion that these attributes would have been recognized as a sign of spiritual authority. At the same time, Padmasambhava's role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet gives an aura of legitimacy and power to the objects or practices with which he is associated.

Palden Lhamo occupies a different niche of the religious and historical narrative of Tibetan Buddhism as a protector introduced to Tibet around the eleventh century.⁴³ Her appearance (Figures 22 and 23) is fierce and she is always shown riding her mule, with a staff and skull cup, often using a human skin as a saddle blanket. Legendarily, the skull and the skin are those of her own son, who she killed in order to punish her husband, the king of the cannibal demons of Sri Lanka.⁴⁴ According to her legend, she killed their child in order to evoke an experience of empathy in her husband and then used the skin as a saddle blanket when she rode north to the Himalayas, where she assumed her new role as a champion of Tibetan Buddhism. Her cult, however, has precedent in India and her representation in Buddhist arts borrows heavily from Indian worship of goddesses like Kālī and was similarly inspired by the Kāpālikas' extreme practices.⁴⁵ She would later come to be associated specifically with the Gelugpa as

⁴² Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 250.

⁴³ *Sacred Arts of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 57.

⁴⁴ Valrae Reynolds, *From the Sacred Realm: Treasures of Tibetan Art from the Newark Museum* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 1999), 210.

⁴⁵ Fisher, *Art of Tibet*, *op. cit.*, 63.

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evidenced in Figure 23 by the yellow-hat monk pictured above her central image and in Figure 22 by her association with Tsongkhapa and his teachings as they are illustrated in *Yama* (see Chapter One). The frothy red brain matter in her skull cup represents her inner heat, her active capacity to destroy opponents to Tibetan Buddhism or its institutions.⁴⁶ Palden Lhamo's popular role as protector to Tibetan Buddhism's most powerful monastic order and, in recent centuries, the Dalai Lama as the nation's leader, are a testament to the integration of terrifying images and symbols like the *kapāla* into the arts and traditions of Tibet. The skull cup is not being used by Palden Lhamo as a symbol of spiritual authority, instead it represents an aspect of the mytho-historical narrative that supports Tibetan Buddhism's central institutions. Featured prominently in Palden Lhamo's imagery, *kapāla* can be seen as an integral part of not only religious practice or esoteric lineages but as an emblem of deep-rooted cultural traditions and national perseverance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how Tibetan skull cups are decorated, used, and understood in their various religious and cultural applications. This has included an examination of the materials of *kapāla*, similar uses of bones in material culture, the artistic expression of religious ideas and the various communities that use these ritual objects. I have also examined, in part, popular episodes of historical narrative that I believe contribute to the recognizability of the skull cup as a distinctly Tibetan form. It has never been my intention to reduce the skull cup's presence in Tibetan religious arts to a singular symbolic meaning. Rather, I have sought to communicate a part of the complex cultural and religious paradigm within which these ritual

⁴⁶ Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, *op. cit.*, 266.

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objects are produced and used in order to demonstrate their multivalent character. While the development of the shapes and formal conventions of Tibetan skull cups might remain elusive because of a lack of surviving early works, recent centuries have seen the production of lavish, ornate examples. The wealth of additive materials alone— precious metals and gemstones— is a testament to the special reverence showed these ritual objects and their importance within the artistic traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

Conclusion: Refinement, religion and material culture

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To the extent that human life is by its very nature embodied, physical, and material, the study of religion therefore must involve itself with the study of the material expression of the religion.

—John Cort, “Art, Religion and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method,” (1996)

The above statement was taken from an article criticizing the primarily text-based research that has characterized not only the study of religion but, says the author, the history of art as well. Cort, as seen in the above quote, asks that scholars consider its ‘material expression’ as a source for a study of religion. His recommendation, as a scholar of Jain art and practice, is not to disregard texts altogether but to consider the interplay of written word, ritual practice, and the illustration of religious concepts as crucial for an understanding of any of the contingent parts of a religious system. It is in this spirit that I have written this thesis with a method that integrates religion with art history in order to understand not only *what* is a skull cup, but *how* or *why* it came to be. Because it is a ritual object, the religious context has been of utmost importance for determining the treatment of skulls as material.

A lack of extant skull cups pre-dating the eighteenth century might have complicated this project but, taking Cort’s advice to consider text and the dynamics of ritual as mutually influential to religious material culture, I have drawn from texts and other forms of art to piece together a history of the *kapāla* as a ritual object. My aim is not to define the skull cup in terms of its present use, nor to compare the styles of its early history to those of more recent centuries. My goal has been to describe and examine the historical, religious, and cultural conditions of the development of the skull cup as a unique form of material culture. This effort has produced an

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overall history, an architecture into which more specific ideas on ritual use or the appearance of *kapāla*— as an object or an image— might be inserted.

In the first chapter, I examined the iconography of the skull cup in an eighteenth century *thangka* from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In this composition, there were many skull cups but the specific function I examined— the object as a symbol of a ritual practice that connoted spiritual authority, possibly for political reasons— was that of the cup in the hand of the Gelug lama. In the second chapter, I looked into the foundations for the spiritual authority expressed in the *thangka* from Chapter One by exploring the integration of the chief Tantric deity being propitiated in that painting. Chapter Two also discussed the specific roles that Tantric teachings play in the illustration of the practices they inspire. In Chapter Three, I looked at the origins of the skull cup as a ritual object and how it was integrated, via practices and an ‘aesthetic of the terrifying’, into esoteric Buddhism at a crucial moment for that religious movement’s transmission to Tibet. Finally, in my last chapter, I examined a few of the ways that *kapāla* are created, used, and interpreted in Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to remain sensitive to the historical complexity of the circumstances and community dynamics I have been using to explain these objects. More work could certainly be used in detailing the varieties of skull cups and other ritual objects I have considered as well as their systematic or metaphysical dimensions. Many sources remain to be tapped and other methodologies employed. However, it is my hope that this thesis can be seen the story of a collaboration between the histories of art and religion in an extended process of ritual, mutual influence, and material refinement.



Figure 1: *Kapāla*, or skull cup, Tibet, 18th century, Musee Guimet, France



Figure 2: *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull cup of a Gelug Lama*, Tibet, 18th century, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figure 3: *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelug Lama*, Detail showing the large *kapāla* at center
The skull cup in the monk's hand can be seen at top right.



Figure 4: *The Vision of Khas—grub—dje with Tsongkhapa appearing to him on an elephant*, Tibet, 19th century, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



Figure 5: *Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor as the Bodhisattva Manjusri*, Qing (China), 18th century, Freer Gallery of Art



Figure 6: *Vajrabhairava*, Tibet, 14th century, private collection



Figure 7: *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelug Lama*, Detail of Yamantaka Vajrabhairava with consort



Figure 8: *The Thirteen-Deity Yamantaka Father-Mother*, Central Tibet, late 17th-early 18th century, Zimmerman Family Collection



Figure 9: *Hevajra*, Tibet, 17th century, Cleveland Museum of Art



Figure 10: *Hevajra*, Pala (India), c. 12th century, Indian Museum, Kolkata



Figure 11: *Kālī* or 'Black earth mother', India, c. 8th century



Figure 12: *Couple eating from kapālas*, Orissa (India), mid-9th century, Madhukeshvara temple



Figure 13: *Kapālika ṛṣi as Bhikṣātana*, Orissa (India), early 10th century, Someśvara temple



Figure 14: *Cāmuṇḍā flanked by Kapālika ṛṣis*, Orissa (India), early 10th century, Someśvara temple



Figure 15: *Hariti*, Kusana (Pakistan), 1st-3rd century CE, Peshawar Museum



Figure 16: *Bhairava*, Pāla (India), 10th century, Indian Museum in Kolkata



Figure 17: *Mahakala*, Pāla (India), 9th century, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Figure 18: *Kapāla*, 18th century, originally from the collection of the Qianlong Emperor (1711-1799)



Figure 19: *Bronze skull cup*, Tibet/China, c.19th century, American Museum of Natural History



Figure 20: *Kapāla*, Tibet, c.19th century, American Museum of Natural History



Figure 21: *Drawing of skull cups*, found in Balfour, “Life of an Aghori Fakir,” (1897)



Figure 22: *Bone apron*, Tibet, date unknown (pre-20th century), British Museum



Figure 23: *Yama and Yamantaka Rising from the Skull Cup of a Gelug Lama*, Detail of Palden Lhamo with skull cup



Figure 24: *(Shri) Palden Lhamo*, Tibet, c. 1750-1850, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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