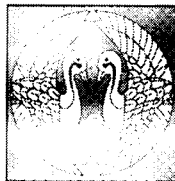


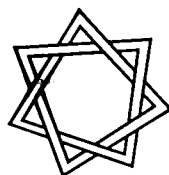
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A TIBETAN TEXT ON THE RITUAL USE OF HUMAN SKULLS

The use of human bones and skulls in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism is a well-known practice, and it has been the subject of both textual and field research. It was also noticed that a large portion of information on these exceptional religious objects was transmitted orally from practitioner to practitioner and from craftsman to craftsman.

A detailed study of the subject based both on Tibetan texts and field research is given in A. Loseries-Leick's "The Use of Human Skulls in Tibetan Rituals" [1]. This article also contains a useful bibliography and illustrations, therefore, here we shall limit ourselves to only general notes on the subject. What is known much less is the iconography dealing with the ritual.

Rosaries of skulls are the common attributes of fierce deities. The human and animal skulls rituals are abundantly described in the illustrated work entitled "The Secret Visionary Autobiography" which was written by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag-dbang blo-bzang rgya-mtsho (1617—1682). A manuscript of this most distinguished esoteric work of the Fifth Dalai Lama is held at the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies [2]. The illustrations to this work in the manuscript from the collection of Lionel Fournier in Paris were exhaustively studied by Samten Gyaltzen Karmay [3].

A rather recent case dealing with the human skulls religious ritual is attested with concern to Gombojab Tsybikov (1873—1930), a well-known Russian Tibetologist and traveller of Buriat origin. According to a Mongolian custom, after his death his body was not buried but placed on the ground in a solitary area. However, an unexpected thing had occurred: his head was soon stolen. It was because Tsybikov's skull most likely met the requirements of human skulls ritual [4].

It should be noted that Russian chronicles contain records related to the ritual use of human skulls. Thus we know from the story about Kievan Prince Svyatoslav (d. 972), one of the first rulers of Russia, that after he had been killed in the battle by the Pechenegs, a Turkic-speaking tribe on the steppe borders of the Russian state, the Pechenegs made of his skull a bowl overlaid with gold [5]. Human skulls were generally employed by Turkic tribes in ceremonies. Such kind of stories are numerous in Russian chronicles and histories. According to the information kindly provided by Professor Christopher Beckwith, the using of human skulls was a widely spread element of ancient and medieval Central Eurasia culture. The practice is especially noteworthy among the nomadic peoples of the steppe region.

To return to the iconography of the subject, interesting illustrations are also contained in one of the Tibetan manuscripts held in the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies (call number B 16 470), which draws special attention. It is a Tibetan text containing seven folios (44.7 × 8.7 cm) dedicated to the use of human skulls. This small composite manuscript must have been copied by a Buriat *lama* in Eastern Siberia, as it is written on paper of Russian manufacturing and has a remark in Mongolian. The anonymous *lama* was most probably a composer of this book. Its Tibetan title is *Ka pa la mchod tshul bzhugs so* ("A Method of Skull-Offering"). The book consists of three parts:

1. The text proper (fols. 1—4a : 2) called *Thod pa rin po che'i dngos grub 'byung ba'i mchod pa* ("Offering of the Precious Skull [Creating] the Source of Attaining Prosperity") (fol. 1b). This text is written in the style characteristic of a canonical Buddhist work, with a Sanskrit title at the beginning. It is ascribed to "Nāgārjuna, the master of skull-offering" (*thod-mchod slob-dpon Klu-sgrub*). The text represents a version of the work translated by W. W. Rockhill [6]. It comprises instructions and *mantras* for performing the ritual of skull-offering to obtain long life and prosperity. No such work is found in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. In the *bsTan-'gyur* (Beijing Edition, No. 2590), there exists a small anonymous work the title of which — *Thod pa mchod pa'i cho ga! Kapāla-pūjā-vidhi* — seems to be very close to that of our text. However, the contents of both the writings are entirely different.

2. Instruction for the performance of the same ritual as transmitted by Tibetan teachers (fols. 4a : 2—5a : 3). This text is provided with a small colophon which runs that it was written by a certain dge-slong 'Jam-dpal who could not find a complete book on the subject and compiled his work on the basis of several new books.

3. Pictures of different kinds of human skulls with some explanatory notes (fols. 5b—7b). Eight skulls are marked with a *swastika* (figs. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18). A note in Mongolian also says that these are the "eight good skulls" (*naiman sayin gabala*). On fol. 7b there are thirteen small pictures of different signs present on human skulls as well as an explanatory text to fig. 11.

The pictures of skulls are the most interesting part of this small work, since they give an idea of the approach towards the examining of human skulls by practitioners of the religious ritual. These pictures are reproduced here with the original Tibetan explanatory notes.

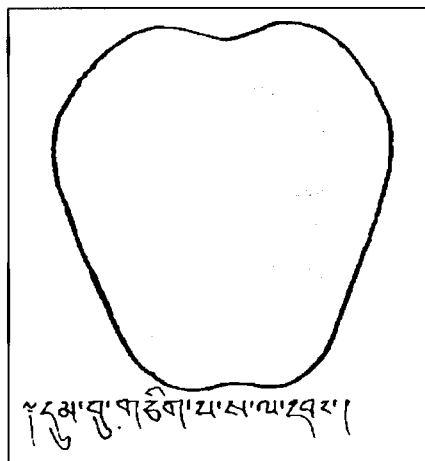


Fig. 1. One-sectioned skull; [the one who possesses it] will rule the earth [7].

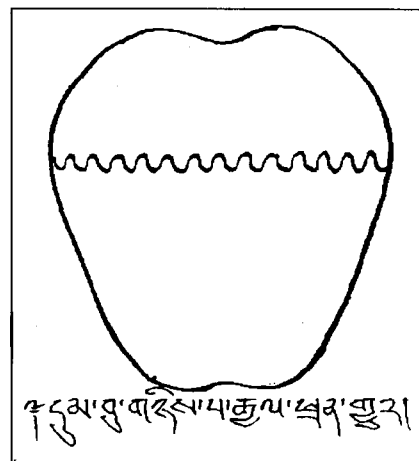


Fig. 2. Two-sectioned skull; [the one who possesses it] will become a local ruler.

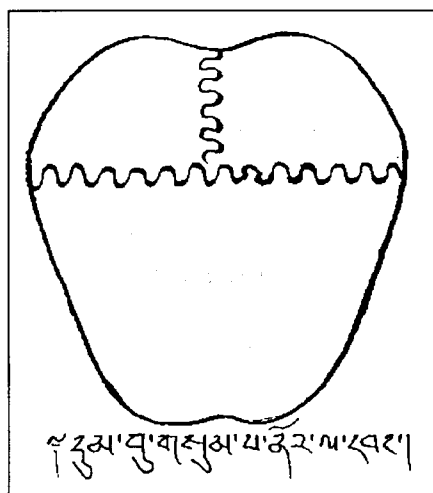


Fig. 3. Three-sectioned skull; [the one who possesses it] will obtain wealth.

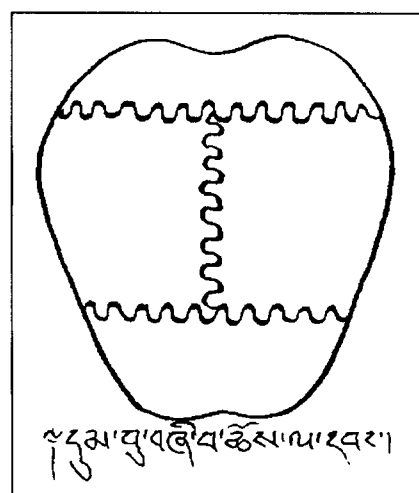


Fig. 4. Four-sectioned skull; [the one who possesses it] will be powerful in Religion.

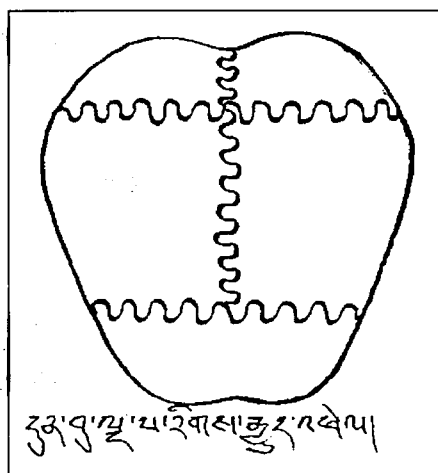


Fig. 5. Five-sectioned skull; the posterity [of the one who possesses it] will spread.

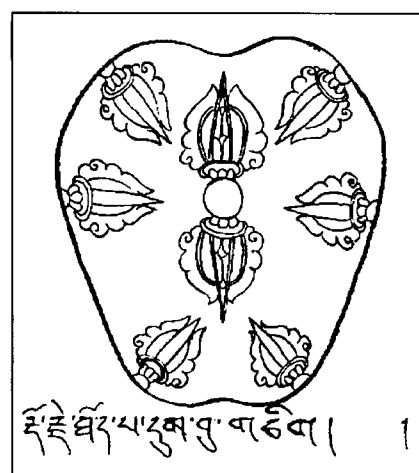


Fig. 6. One-sectioned "vajra skull".

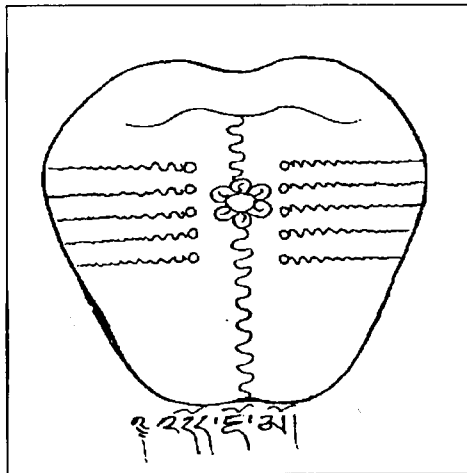


Fig. 12. [Skull with the image of] the wish-fulfilling cow (*kamadhenu*).

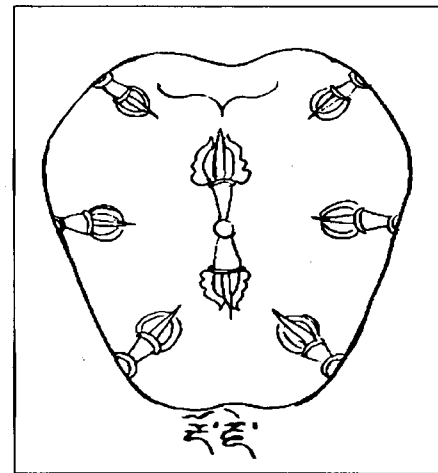


Fig. 13. [Skull with the image of] the vajra.

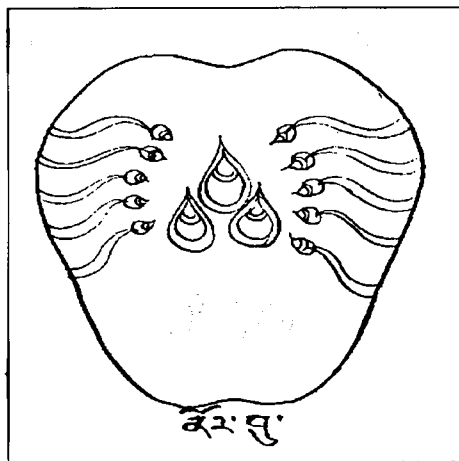


Fig. 14. [Skull with the image of] the jewel.

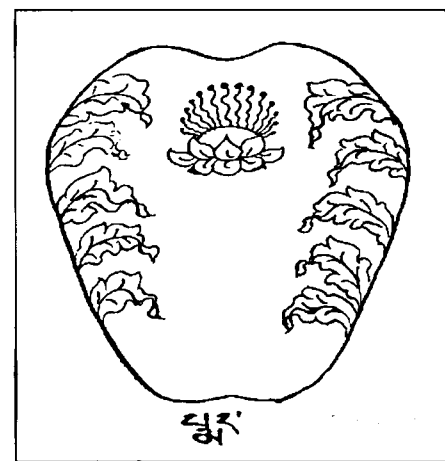


Fig. 15. [Skull with the image of] the lotus.

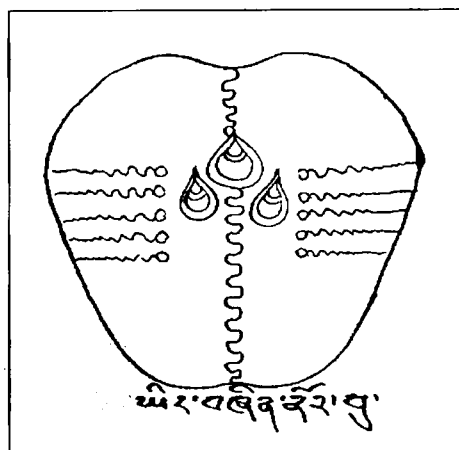


Fig. 16. [Skull with the image of] the wish-fulfilling jewel (*cintamani*).

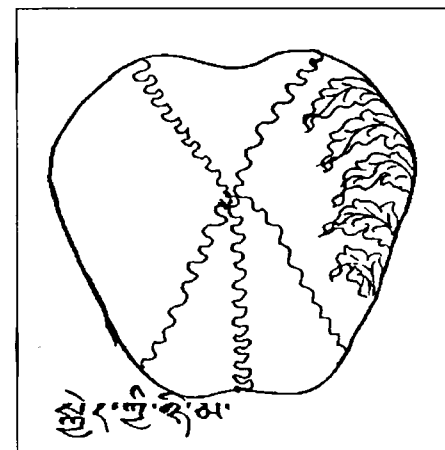


Fig. 17. [Skull with the image of] the radiant Sun.

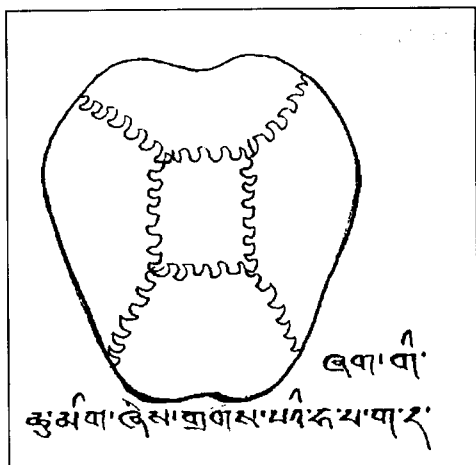


Fig. 18. [Skull with the image of] melted butter spring [9].

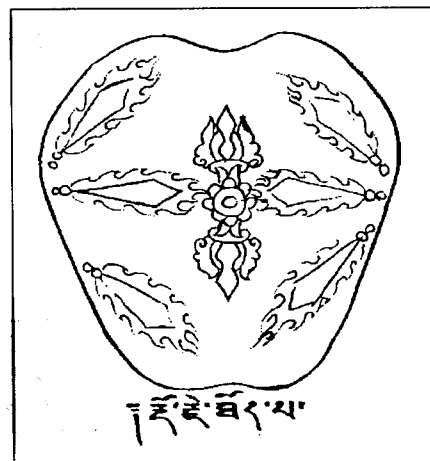


Fig. 19. Vajra skull.

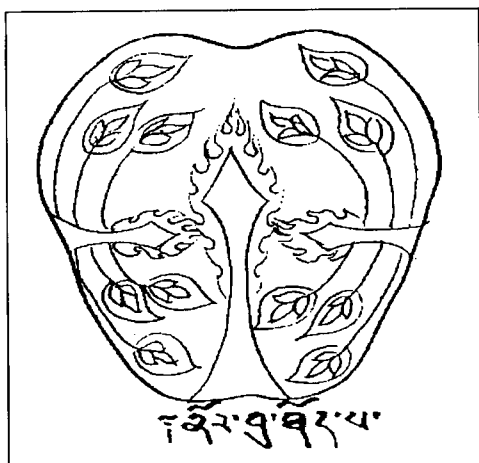


Fig. 20. Jewel skull.

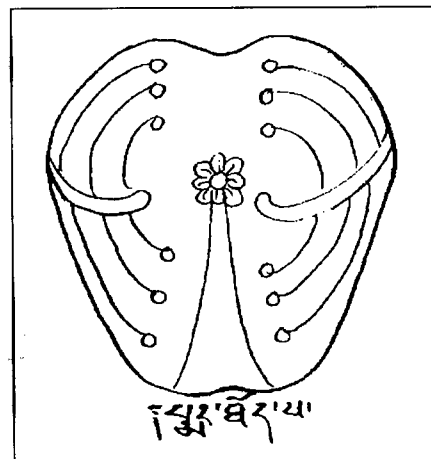


Fig. 21. Lotus skull.

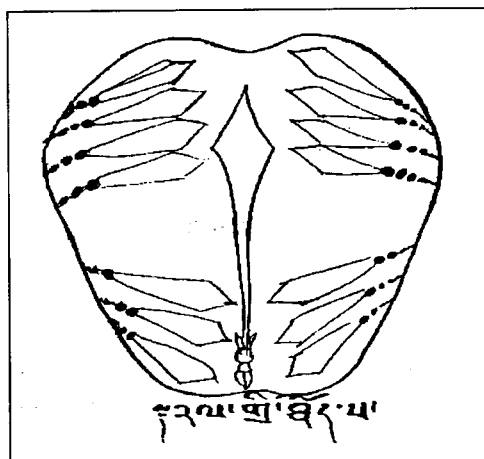


Fig. 22. Sword skull.

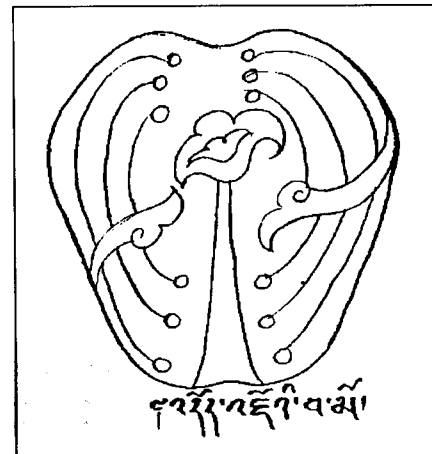


Fig. 23. [Skull with the image of] the wish-fulfilling cow (kamadhenu).

Notes

1. See A. Loseries-Leick, "The use of human skulls in Tibetan rituals", in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989* (Narita, 1992), i, pp. 159–73.
 2. For the description of the manuscript and the work, see V. Uspensky, "The illustrated manuscript of the Fifth Dalai Lama's "Secret Visionary Autobiography" preserved in the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies", *Manuscripta Orientalia*, II/1 (1196), pp. 54–65. See also the St. Petersburg manuscript on CD-ROM: *The Secret Visionary Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama*. Publication with Introduction by Vladimir Uspensky. St. Petersburg: Thesa Publishing Co., 1996.
 3. See Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama: The Gold Manuscript in the Fournier Collection* (London, 1988).
 4. Sergeĭ Markov, *Obmanutyte skital'tsy* (Deceived Strangers) (Moscow, 1991), p. 35.
 5. *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopiseĭ* (All Russian Chronicles) (Moscow—Leningrad, 1959), xxvi, p. 20.
 6. W. W. Rockhill, "On the use of skulls in Lamaist ceremonies", *Proceedings of the American Oriental Society* (1888), pp. XXIV—XXXI; the translation of the corresponding passage of the text is found on pp. XXIX—XXXI.
 7. For the powers bestowed by different kinds of skulls, cf. Rockhill, *op. cit.*, p. XXVIII.
 8. For a more detailed variant of this skull division, see Loseries-Leick, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
 9. This translation is tentative; I was unable to identify the word *ha-pa-ga-da*.
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