

ARMOR, BAUBLE, HEIRLOOM: THREE CASE STUDIES ON TIBETAN JEWELRY

By

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TECHNICAL NOTE

All Tibetan in the main body of this thesis is presented in simplified phonetic spellings with Wylie transliterations in adjoining parentheses on first occurrence. The phonetic scheme employed is based on that of the Tibetan and Himalayan Library. Following Matthew Kapstein's usage in *The Tibetans*, most of the phoneticized letters can be pronounced according to their common English values, with the following exceptions:

ö and *ü* are pronounced as in the German *e* and *é*, which are both pronounced like the French *é*, the accent being used here only at the end of words to remind readers that a final *e* is not silent: e.g. *dorjé*
z and *zh*, which resemble *s* and *sh*; thus *Zhalu* sounds rather like *Shalu*¹

¹ Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), xvii.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1992 issue of *Chö-yang*, a journal published by His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs, we find the following summary of gemstones and jewelry in "Tibetan Society":

In Tibet, a distinct line was always drawn between the sacred and the secular. For the monks and the spiritual masters, jewels were those which adorned the deities they meditated on, those they mentally offered to the merit field, reflecting the light of spiritual accomplishment. In solid form, they were offered to statues as the symbols of the world beyond cyclic existence. For the laity, they represented wealth, worldly prestige and status.¹

According to the article's authors, Kim Yeshe, Roseanna Pugh, and Emily Phipps, a study of bodily adornment in Tibet has no place within the field of religious studies. The authors posit a clear division between the meaning of jewelry for monks and lay people. For the former, jewels are not worn but rather ritually offered, whereas for the latter, the adorning ornament signifies his or her continued adherence to worldly concerns.

Such a reading of jewelry is not limited to Tibetan studies, but rather reflects popular theories of adornment to be further discussed in the following chapters. The stakes of acknowledging the religious significance of lay jewelry in Tibet are perhaps unique. As Martin Mills has noted in his study of wealth and prosperity within the ceremonial formations of Tibetan Buddhist life, the "almost Franciscan image of the poor but saintly Tibetan refugee remains for us a strong one, and has a profound influence on international understandings of the cultural politics of Tibet."² Mills posits that this stereotype arises from a Weberian view of Buddhist societies, wherein such populations are seen as uninterested in European capitalism due to their

¹ Kim Yeshe, Roseanna Pugh, and Emily Phipps, "Precious Jewels of Tibet," *Chö-yang* 5 (1992): 70.

² Martin A. Mills, "King Srong btsan sGam po's Mines – Wealth Accumulation and Religious Asceticism in Buddhist Tibet," *The Tibet Journal* 31, no.4 (Winter 2006): 89.

deep commitment to otherworldly monastic ideals. As a result, the notion persists that wealth accumulation lay outside of the realm of Buddhist ethics in Tibet.³

Though pristine when gracing the cold metal of the icon, or when held as an object of meditation by the spiritual master, the vain enterprise of decorating the fleshly lay body wrenches ornamentation from the “world beyond” and drags it back into the quagmire of cyclic existence. Thus emerge two diametrically opposed functions of jewelry, as divine offering and ostentatious trinket. In this thesis, I challenge such polarized readings of Tibetan jewelry by unpacking their historical antecedents and opening alternative avenues for understanding bodily adornment in Tibet.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw rich historiography on the cross-cultural phenomena of bodily adornment around the world.⁴ An upsurge in archaeological excavations and influx of ethnographic booty from European colonies in Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia brought gem-laden specimens of the ‘Other’ into the purview of the social theorist. As Spyros Papapetros has noted in his study of theories of ornament during this period:

For a moment, the world appeared reunited by its ornament, as if the core and substance of the universe was concentrated on its glittering surface...Sartorial theorists of culture from Carlyle to Humboldt and from Semper to Warburg, assayed to fathom that new texture by dissecting its mobile edges – the inorganic appendages of clothing, adornment, and fabric accessories. Their over extensive yet minute investigations are as reflective as the gleaming articles they scrutinize.⁵

³ Nancy G. Lin’s work on the court of the Fifth Dalai Lama and its celebration of material wealth and aesthetic abundance argues for place of wealth display and accumulation within Tibetan political and monastic institutions. See, “Recounting the Fifth Dalai Lama’s Rebirth Lineage,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibetaïnes* 38 (February 2017): 119-156.

⁴ Notably, women’s contemporary fashion rarely entered into these discussions, for they “only evoked notions of vulgar commerciality and valueless, ephemeral style.” Lou Taylor, “Doing the Laundry? A Reassessment of Object-based Dress History,” *Fashion Theory* 2, no.4 (1998): 341. See also, Valerie Steele, “Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition,” *Fashion Theory* 12, no.1 (2008): 7-30.

⁵ Spyros Papapetros, “World Ornament: The Legacy of Gottfried Semper’s 1856 Lecture on Adornment,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57/58 (2010): 309-310.

In the following decades, surveys, catalogs, and traveling exhibitions “attempted to trace the trafficking of decorative treasures around the globe and to diagram patterns of development.”⁶

However, the social theorist’s acclaim for ornament was short-lived, quickly followed by the abolishment of the “decorative” from modernist art and architectural practice.⁷ Adolf Loos’s infamous essay “Ornament and Crime,” published in 1908, perhaps best encapsulates ornament’s dramatic turn of fate. Loos writes:

The enormous damage and devastation caused in aesthetic development by the revival of ornament would be easily made light of, for no one, not even the power of the state, can halt mankind’s evolution...But it is a crime against the national economy that it should result in a waste of human labor, money, and material...a crime is committed through the fact that ornament inflicts serious injury on people’s health, on the national budget and hence on cultural evolution.⁸

Loos’s remarks illustrate the economic ethics underlying critiques of ornament. For scholars like Loos, decorative elements of objects, clothes, buildings, and even food reeked of an undue indulgence which threatened the very evolution of mankind. Though this early twentieth-century reform movement did not necessarily represent mainstream views and practices at the time, its impact was felt in the decades to come. Thus, from its heralded pedestal, the ornament fell—reduced to a garish bauble embodying economic burden and impracticality.

However, since its recession in the wake of Loos, ornament has recently received a resurgence of interest, evidenced in the work of art historians like Vidya Dehejia, Jonathan Hay, Spyros Papapetros, and Finbarr Barry Flood, to name a few. Attentiveness to ornamentation has not been limited to art and architectural history, but is now reflected in literary theory,

⁶ Papapetros, “World Ornament,” 309-310. The universalizing methodologies operative in the nineteenth-century theories of bodily adornment continue to color the study of jewelry. The most recent exhibition on jewelry at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Jewelry: The Body Transformed* operates on a similar comparative presentation of jewelry under the conceptual umbrella of “the most personal and universal of art forms.”

⁷ Papapetros, “World Ornament,” 310.

⁸ Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 21.

anthropology, and most recently religious studies.⁹ While these recent contributions offer new and expansive readings of ornamentation, reductionist approaches have lingered in the study of bodily adornment. Wendy Doniger’s latest work on myth, *The Ring of Truth and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry* (2017), for example, explores a vast collection of mythology across time and cultures. These far-reaching sources are united through themes rife with what Doniger calls “the eternal triangle of jewelry, sex, and money.”¹⁰ Doniger asserts women’s historic financial dependency on men as central to understanding jewelry cross-culturally. Doniger’s project demonstrates the lingering inclination to understand bodily adornment as an unchanging and timeless act, readily captured by the eternal triangle.

Very little has been published on Tibetan jewelry, and the scholarship of John Clarke, a curator of Asian art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, constitutes the largest contribution to this mostly overlooked topic. Without Clarke’s work, this thesis would not have been possible, and his numerous publications provide important context for understanding jewelry practices in Tibet. Clarke’s findings are fundamental to how Himalayan jewelry has been presented within museums and exhibition catalogues around the world. However, Clarke’s analytical framework operates on the assumption that ornaments are objects of reflection, “tiny mirrors” reflecting the wealth and social position of the wearer.¹¹ Clarke’s treatment reproduces foundational nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theories of ornamentation, wherein the decorative object was shown as an extension or reflection of the socioeconomically determined self.¹²

⁹ Stephen F. Teiser, “Ornamenting the Departed: Notes on the Language of Chinese Buddhist Ritual Texts,” *Asia Major* 22, no. 1 (2009): 201–37.

¹⁰ Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 293.

¹¹ John Clarke, *Jewellery of Tibet and the Himalayas* (London: V&A, 2008), 15.

¹² See Chapter 2.

As Robert Sharf has noted, scholarly inquiries into Buddhist objects have become overly functionalist: “in the recent rush to historicize and contextualize, the decidedly artful aspects of Buddhist material culture have taken a back seat.”¹³ Sharf’s comments touch on a larger issue currently jeopardizing studies of visual culture and materiality in the study of religion. Namely, that the goal of such methods—to reveal something new about religion and practice—is lost when our objects of study only ever illustrate social context.¹⁴ In “Things Happen,” Christopher Pinney argues that materiality studies has emerged as a new Durkheimianism, which subordinates objects and images to culture and history:

Because it has decided in advance that these images are a visual manifestation of an ideological force, it is unable to catch hold of the ways in which the materiality of representation creates its own force field. Consequently, a very straightforward Durkheimianism emerges in which the image somehow draws together and exemplifies, as a social representation, everything which can be identified as potentially determining it, and which the historian wishes to have deposited in the image as validation of his or her supposition.¹⁵

If Tibetan jewelry functions merely as a tiny mirror for its historical moment, why consider it at all? What is the point of attending to material culture if objects are taken as intrinsically empty, waiting to be filled by the significance of context? Perhaps most importantly, how do we allow the image to shape its surroundings rather than simply be determined by them?

Pinney and Sharf’s critiques of functionalist approaches to material culture pose a particular problem for jewelry objects, which are frequently understood as “non-functional” and “purely decorative.”¹⁶ When scholars have granted jewelry a function, it has generally been either talismanic or related to wealth display.¹⁷ Neither of these readings account for the

¹³ Robert H. Sharf, “The Buddha’s Finger Bones at Famensi and the Art of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism,” *The Art Bulletin* 93, no.1 (March 2011): 53.

¹⁴ Christopher Pinney, “Things Happen: Or, From Which Moment Does That Object Come?” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 256–272.

¹⁵ Pinney, “Things Happen,” 261.

¹⁶ See introductions to Chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁷ See Chapters 1 and 2.

aesthetics of ornamentation, only their perceived protective qualities or economic worth. While the following chapters explore the “work” of adornments, which could be seen as a functionalist reading, my analysis resists reductionist arguments inattentive to the material specificity and agency of the object. Grappling with the functionality of jewelry—its persistent and often-unpredictable interventions in the embodied lives of its wearers, consequently transforming the way they move, fight, dance, or prostrate themselves—is crucial for troubling jewelry’s reputation as superfluous.

Though the objects discussed throughout this thesis can be found resting on the altar of the home shrine, inset on a stupa, refashioned into the bejeweled image of a deity, or housed in the treasuries of the Potala, my analysis focuses primarily on the ornament as it graces the moving human body. While my main site of inquiry is the jewelry object, at times my discussion of adornment will expand to include clothing, particularly in the final chapter. Historically, theories of clothing and jewelry both often overlapped and also have been subject to disjunctive treatment in the museum and in scholarship. The quintessential family heirloom, jewelry is often associated with notions of timelessness and material endurance, whereas fashion evokes constant change, consumerism, and ephemerality. Paradoxically, unlike clothing, seen as a necessity for everyday life, jewelry has often represented excess, and undue opulence, rendering it a non-essential accessory. By jewelry and ornament, I refer to objects typically composed of metals and gemstones and designed with the human body in mind (as opposed to architectural or culinary ornamentation).¹⁸ Many of the jewelry pieces discussed within this thesis could be presented under a different name, such as talisman, reliquary, or shrine, to name a few. However, I label

¹⁸ The term “designed” should be taken liberally here, as loose gemstones worn in the hair also fall within my definition of jewelry.

each as “articles of jewelry” in order to insist on the far-reaching significance of this ill-reputed category.

In this thesis, I argue that the long-standing and varied practices surrounding bodily adornment in Tibet, luxurious and otherwise, cannot be explained away by a single social function or motivating factor, nor can a “distinct line” be drawn “between the sacred and the secular.” Chapter one explores the European encounter with Tibetan soldiers wearing amulet-boxes in the early twentieth century. My analysis centers on jewelry worn into battle, where protective adornment can mean the difference between life and death. In addition, I consider Tibetan perspectives on amulets and amulet-boxes, in part by drawing on sixteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist debates about their efficacy. Chapter two shifts focus to the foreign reception of Tibetan women’s ornamented bodies in nineteenth-century travel accounts. I counter the dismissive and othering rhetoric of these narratives by considering the lush and embodied descriptions of adornment in the autobiography of Jamyang Sakya, a twentieth-century aristocratic Tibetan woman. These first chapters engage foundational theories of ornament and dress in order to unpack lingering presumptions about jewelry, which continue to color our readings of bodily adornment. The final chapter zeroes in on the role of bejeweled heirlooms in the court of the Fifth Dalai Lama to explore the mnemonic capacity of jewelry and costume.

Though the adorning articles addressed in each chapter are at times of the same variety (the Tibetan amulet-box for example appears throughout my analysis), the “work” of these objects significantly varies depending on context. As we shall see, however, the ornaments are not passive in these diverse environments, but rather intervene in ways both cosmic and minute. The following pages show jewelry caught in crossfire, bedecking more than one goat, at home,

and embroiled in the complex temporalities of rebirth. In conclusion, I return to the question of the place of jewelry within Buddhist studies.

CHAPTER 1

On Goats, Guns, and Gau: Tibetan Amulet-Boxes in the Line of Fire



Figure 1. Gau, twentieth century, silver with inset coral and turquoise, copper body and back plate, height 14 cm, Collection of the Newark Museum.

Introduction

In December 1903, Lieutenant Colonel Francis Younghusband and his British forces invaded Tibet with the intent of fortifying India's Northern frontier against Russian control and establishing British presence in the region.¹ An amateur anthropologist and collector, Laurence A. Waddell, accompanied the mission and callously described the inefficacy of amulet-boxes adorning Tibetan soldiers at the Guru fortresses in western Tibet:

Every one of the warriors who opposed us at Guru had these new charms hung round their necks in amulet-boxes. But it all failed pitifully. Neither the Lamas' chorus of

¹ Alex McKay, "'Truth,' Perception, and Politics: The British Construction of an Image of Tibet," in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rather (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 68.

curses, nor their charms, had the slightest effect. On the contrary, as if in bitter irony of fate, many at Guru received their death-wounds through their charm-boxes.²

In the days following the defeat, one British soldier even wrote home about this “bitter irony of fate,” noting how several Tibetans walked unafraid into the line of fire, certain their amulet boxes or gau (*ga'u*) would shield them.³ As anthropologist and art historian Clare Harris has shown, British forces not only observed gau adorning Tibetan soldiers at Guru, but also regularly stole them from the dead bodies of their opposition, as gau were prized for their value to collectors abroad.⁴



Figure 2. Gau, twentieth century, gold silver, turquoise, pearls, glass, height 12 cm, width 13.7 cm, depth 3.2 cm, Private Collection London.

Gau are boxes made from metal or wood, often ornate, that enclose an assemblage of materially distinct and ritually potent objects, consisting of anything from a Buddhist image,

² L.A. Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries: with a Record of the Expedition 1903–1904* (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 174-175.

³ Clare Harris, *Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 60.

⁴ See Clare Harris, *Photography and Tibet* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

bodily relic, or scrap of food, to a powerful speech formula written on paper, or even a gemstone. Beyond the battlefield, gau have historically been used to protect traveling pilgrims, displayed as portable shrines in the home, and inset on the stupas of Dalai Lamas. The ubiquity of gau in Tibet, as objects worn for centuries by all strata of society, lay and monastic alike, has unsurprisingly resulted in a vast diversity of styles. Though gau often include precious metals and gemstones, as in Figures 1 and 2, they can also appear in simpler compositions. The shrine gau, shown in Figure 3, illustrates another popular style. Designed to house large icons, the gau's small window allows the image to be both viewed and protected. I will return to the varying designs of gau in the final section of this chapter.

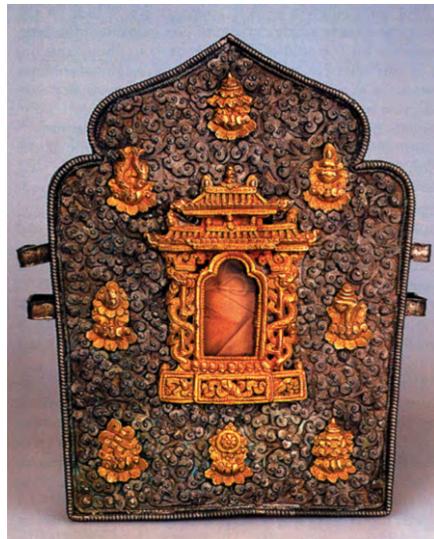


Figure 3. Shrine gau, twentieth century, silver and silver-gilt, height 17.8 cm, width 13.7 cm, depth 7.1 cm, Heinrich Harrer Collection, Ethnography Museum of Zurich University.

Recent publications on Himalayan jewelry suggest that the use of gau in Tibet shows the persistence of a “pre-Buddhist animist worldview” and a flourishing of “fear and superstition.”⁵ Within these works, gau are consistently categorized as “objects of popular practice” as opposed

⁵ Jane Casey Singer, *Gold Jewelry from Tibet and Nepal* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 49, 50.

to those of “religious authority.”⁶ The materiality of gau’s exterior, their gemstones and precious metals, mark only social and economic status, whereas their contained amulets suggest “religious preoccupations and beliefs.”⁷ Thus, an empty gau passively reflects the wearer’s opulent tendencies. As three-dimensional hollow objects with alluring surfaces, gau are pregnant with concealed interior. Jonathan Hay has noted that “surface” is the “single most obvious characteristic of decoration.”⁸ I follow Hay in considering “surface” as not merely superfluous but rather a sensuously powerful entity that intervenes sooner than it reflects. By “depth,” I refer to the hidden enclosure of gau, their interior chamber out of view.

This chapter investigates the confrontation between Tibetan gau and foreign bullet, through the lenses of adornment and amulet practice. By amulets, I refer broadly to the panoply of objects found within gau.⁹ I borrow Fabio Rambelli’s description of amulets as “condensations of cosmic power.”¹⁰ I argue the dismissal of gau as frivolous decoration results from the unfounded bifurcation of gau into its interior and exterior components, through which gau are presented as mere container for powerful items concealed. Where the potency of amulets ends and gau begin is unresolved, and the tension between amulet and amulet-container lies at the crux of my analysis. This study will focus not on the potential “contagion” between the two entities, but rather their physical and aesthetic dynamic. How are amulets contained, by what design? How does this design engage the contained amulets through concealment and display?

⁶ Valrae Reynolds, Janet Gyatso, Amy Heller, and Dan Martin, *From the Sacred Realm: Treasures of Tibetan Art from the Newark Museum* (New York: Prestel, 1999), 55.

⁷ Reynolds et al., *From the Sacred Realm*, 55.

⁸ Jonathan Hay, “The Passage of the Other: Elements for a Redefinition of Ornament,” in *Histories of Ornament* ed. Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 65.

⁹ Paul Copp has pointed out that we must attend to the specificity of each amulet, and not ascribe them “homogeneous sacred power that differ only in the form of its manifestations” in *The Body Incantatory: Spells and Ritual Imagination in Medieval China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), xxii. That is to say, material incantations, images, and relics are distinct in their efficacies and relationships to gau. While the nuances of each amulet are central to my argument, at times I privilege the amulet/amulet-container relationship, thus referring to amulet practice in a general sense.

¹⁰ Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 122.

By pivoting my analysis on gau into the line of fire, I hope to complicate how scholars of religion imagine decorative objects in terms of their perceived functionality or lack thereof. I situate gau in the violent and ruinous environs of warfare, in order to force a reckoning with the inseparability of aesthetics from the ritual and protective function of gau. As I will show, while from the perspective of the invading British the use of gau on the battlefield was irrational, for Tibetans gau represented a viable and organized form of militant action. Wearing gau enabled soldiers to carry their amulets into combat, thus rendering the body impenetrable to bullets. In the shadows of the battlefield, Tibetans tested the efficacy of gau through singular and sometimes fatal means. These tests arose from a query into the object's efficacy across bodies and in the face of new adversaries.

We can begin to form a rudimentary understanding of the uses and appearance of gau in early twentieth-century Tibet by filtering the plentiful but biased colonial descriptions through a critical understanding of Protestant preoccupations.¹¹ The image of gau as the paragon of Tibetan delusion and indulgence permeates these early accounts. Because the materialities of Buddhist practice were such regular targets of Protestant distaste and, as we shall see, violence, gau often figure prominently in discussions of Tibetans' wrong-minded practices. For example, Waddell writes: "Their inveterate craving for material protection against those malignant gods and demons has caused them to pin their faith on charms and amulets, which are to be seen everywhere dangling from the dress of every man, woman, and child."¹²

The first two sections of this chapter consider repeated instances since the sixteenth century where the salvific efficacy of amulet and gau are tested across species. Will an amulet-

¹¹ John Bray, "Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Missionary Images of Tibet," in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rather (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 22, 43.

¹² Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, 571.

adorned goat die when shot at? The following section looks at the advent of specifically British bullet-protecting amulets and gau in the early twentieth century. These two sections explore how amulet wearing is imagined to transform the body, human and animal alike, into a bulletproof and radiant entity. Through an exploration of concealment and display, in the final section I argue for an integrated approach to gau which reconciles functionality with aesthetics.

The Soteriology of Goats and Gau



Figure 4. Albert Shelton's Tibetan companion with the dead goat and his mangled amulet, Kham, between 1905 and 1920, gelatin silver print.¹³

From 1903-1910, Albert Shelton, an American doctor and Protestant missionary, lived and proselytized on the Tibetan plateau. In *Pioneering in Tibet: A Personal Record of Life and Experience in Mission Fields* (1921), Shelton reports a disturbing narrative. Eager to explore the “badlands” of Tibet, Shelton ventured into Northwest Batang, Kham in present-day Sichuan

¹³ Image reproduced in Harris, *Photography in Tibet*, 86 figure 62.

province, accompanied by a Tibetan man dressed in numerous gau. The devout Protestant questioned his companion on the benefit of such things, skeptical that gau could offer protection. The Tibetan responded “Oh yes it will, I have been shot at seven times and have never been hurt yet. The bullets can’t go in. They will sometimes penetrate my clothes...but they never go in.”¹⁴ Dubious, Shelton proposed to buy the gau should it prove effective: “You stand out there and let me shoot at you once.”¹⁵ Hesitant, the nameless Tibetan suggests a goat be used in his stead to Shelton’s perverse delight:

Well, it was only about ten seconds before he was gathering up the remains, for I had smashed the charm box as well as killed the goat. He was the most disconsolate man I had ever seen. He sat fingering over the different pills, pieces of cloth, etc., that had been contained in the charm box, the very picture of despair.¹⁶

Shelton photographed his companion holding the dead goat and broken gau, documenting the failure of Tibetan “charms” (Fig. 4). The image is grimly textured, testifying to the diverse and layered materialities of gau. The Tibetan looks directly into the camera, tenderly lifting the slain goat’s head so it too faces the lens, slack-mouthed. His gau sits open at the goat’s feet, and the formerly enclosed amulets are strewn across the ground, some entangled in the animal’s hair. Shelton explains to his readers that his intent was not to ridicule his companion’s religion but to demonstrate the “charm boxes” were irrefutably false.¹⁷

Shelton’s reaction to the gau is perhaps unsurprising. It typifies Protestant dismissal of material objects as outside of “True Religion.”¹⁸ From Shelton’s perspective, gau epitomized

¹⁴ Albert L. Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet: A Personal Record of Life and Experience in Mission Fields* (New York: F.H. Revell Company, 1921), 114.

¹⁵ Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet*, 115.

¹⁶ Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet*, 116.

¹⁷ Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet*, 118.

¹⁸ As Donald S. Lopez has noted, colonialists viewed Tibetan Buddhism as in need of change from the outside: “Whether Tibet was to be cured by the restoration of true Buddhism or by conversion to Christianity, the cure seemed to be in the possession of the West...” *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 40. See also, Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 13.

wrong-minded superstition and thus were deserving of reproach, here by violent means.

Shelton's assumption of the distinction between religion and superstitious materiality is clear throughout his writings. The account of the missionary not only discredited the power of Tibetan objects but also challenged local religious authorities, who consecrated and disseminated amulets for gau.¹⁹ Missionary literature often emphasized the corruption of Tibetan monastic leaders in order to further justify the need for Christian enlightenment.²⁰

Though the veracity of Shelton's account of the goat is unclear, ethnographic evidence suggests other instances in which gau are tested on livestock. In Carole McGranahan's interviews with veterans of Tibetan resistance against Chinese troops in the 1950s, her informants note the popularity of gau (here referred to as "tson-sung") amongst the soldiers. As one veteran claimed, "Back then if you shoot out someone's chuba, lots of tson-sung would fall out!"²¹ McGranahan mentions the penchant for the soldiers to try the efficacy of their tson-sung on animals, albeit more successfully than Shelton's companion:

Many soldiers could not resist testing their tson-sung. I was told several stories of men putting their amulet onto a yak or sheep and then shooting at the animal from a distance. Although some animals were hit by the bullets, never once, so it is claimed, did an animal die.²²

McGranahan's ethnographic insights suggests that Shelton's unnamed companion too may have been interested in testing the indestructability of his gau, and thus was a willing participant in Shelton's game.

By strange coincidence, this altercation with gau and the goat is prefigured in sixteenth-century doctrinal debates between the Old School (*rnying ma*) and its critics, though with

¹⁹ Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet*, 118.

²⁰ Bray, "Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Missionary Images of Tibet," 26.

²¹ Carole McGranahan, *Arrested Histories: Tibet, The CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 123.

²² McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 123.

strikingly different consequences. By comparing these two temporally distant encounters, I hope to elucidate what it means to wear powerful objects in the Tibetan sphere, and what the implications are for amulet and gau. As we shall see, in either instance the allegations against the object's efficacy take form in the transfer of amulets across species, from human to goat.²³

Shelton's goat wears a gau which contains amulets, whereas in the sixteenth century, amulets are adjoined to the goat by a simple fastening mechanism. In either instance, the body is transformed through the adornment of amulets.

Liberation through Wearing

Since the fourteenth century, doctrinal debates in Tibet have abounded concerning the possibility of "liberation through wearing" (*btags grol*) amulets.²⁴ In his recent study, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*, James Gentry considers aspects of this debate as articulated in the texts of sixteenth-century ritual specialist Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen. In *Thunder of Scripture and Reasoning*, Sokdokpa argues for the efficacy of objects, such as amulets, in Tibetan religious life in light of recent critique. The anonymous critic reportedly asserted that amulets only serve a mnemonic function, as props for mental cultivation, thus eliciting neither transformation nor liberation.²⁵ As evidence to prove his argument, the critic cites the example of "goat, dog, and so forth" that will die, unliberated, regardless of wearing an amulet or ingesting a pill, due to the

²³ Amulets serve a plethora of purposes, both worldly and otherwise. Liberation-through-wearing amulets specifically promise freedom from samsara as a whole. Though the amulets mentioned in Shelton's account, are not those related to liberation, the rhetoric surrounding liberation through wearing in Tibetan doctrinal debates offers insight into Tibetan understandings of amulet, container, and wearer, which are relevant to gau.

²⁴ Liberation through wearing is a constituent of the Tibetan Old School's broader claim of Buddhahood without meditation, that one can achieve liberation simply through holding, wearing, or otherwise physically encountering the material object of an amulet. James Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism: The Life, Writings, and Legacy of Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 238.

²⁵ Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*, 240.

animal's "non-comprehension."²⁶ Sokdokpa rebuts that despite its non-comprehension, the goat will nonetheless be freed from samsara, as liberation "is a matter of carrying a single meager link...it is [an instance] of the compassion of the Buddha's skill in means."²⁷

Sokdokpa further justifies his defense of amulet-wearing by referencing *Mahāpratisarā-vidyārājñī*, a text that indirectly addresses liberation-through-wearing amulets. The passage reads:

Great Brahmin, whoever writes down this queen of incantations and fastens it around their wrist or neck should be understood as one who is blessed by all tathāgatas. He should be understood as the body of all tathāgatas. He should be understood as a great vajra body. He should be understood as possessing the essence of the relics of all tathāgatas. He should be understood as possessing a blazing and radiant body. He should be understood as possessing indestructible armor.²⁸

This passage illustrates how the simple act of fastening results in the possession of the "blazing and radiant" Buddha bodies. It highlights the powerful act of "putting on," evidencing the transformative potential of dressing oneself in amulets.

The transformation of body into armor, discussed by Sokdokpa, is echoed in the materiality of gau. As we will see in the following section, the same metalworking techniques used to create gau were employed in the production of battle armor. As in Shelton's account, the efficacy of wearing amulets is tested on the survival or demise of a goat, amongst others. Both British and Tibet sources presuppose that the act of wearing amulets is what activates them. In either instance, the goat's fate is not determined by the simple presence of amulets, but rather the fact that the goat is dressed in them.

²⁶ Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*, 275. While in Sokdokpa's rebuttal he refers to the ingestion of a pill, the critic uses an amulet wearing goat as his example of the inefficacy of amulets.

²⁷ Quoted in Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*, 275.

²⁸ Gergely Hidas, *Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvidyārājñī: The Great Amulet, Great Queen of Spells* (Delhi: New Delhi International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 2012), 133-134, and Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*, 242.

The meaning of a dead goat diverges depending on context. For Sokdokpa the goat is dead, but nonetheless liberated. For his critic, the goat is dead and unsaved, inevitably dragged into another rebirth. Finally, for Shelton the dead goat vindicates his Protestant crusade against objects of superstition. The comparison between Shelton and Sokdokpa demonstrates the soteriological possibilities that are opened by the very portability of amulets, made possible by the presence of a container. The ability to fasten or wear an amulet allows for the potential transfer of its power across bodies and even species.

Gau on the Battlefield

Where does this leave Shelton's Tibetan companion, who solemnly sits between shattered goat and gau? Before the goat was killed, the Tibetan forbade the use of nickel bullets stating that the gau may not work against such metal.²⁹ Ultimately, Shelton did not use nickel bullets, however this made no difference in the goat's fate. Though not explicitly stated, the Tibetan's attention to Shelton's ammunition may indicate that his gau contained objects meant to protect from specific kinds of bullets.

At the advent of British invasion into Tibet at Gyantsé (1903-1904), amulets protecting "against almost every known material used in war" were issued from Lhasa to Tibetan soldiers.³⁰ The discovery of this new form of protective amulet, which guarded specifically against British bullets, is attested to in numerous colonial accounts.³¹ In *Lhasa* (1905), Perceval Landon, who accompanied the Younghusband expedition and wrote extensively on Tibet's capital city, quotes an injured Tibetan soldier on the distribution of bullet-protecting amulets:

²⁹ Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet*, 116.

³⁰ Perceval Landon, *Lhasa: An Account of the Country and People of Central Tibet and of the Progress of the Mission Sent There by the English Government in the Year 1903-4* (Varanasi: Pilgrims, 2000), 232.

³¹ Waddell corroborates the wearing of bullet-protecting amulets in *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, 174-175.

We did not know in Lhasa what metals we should guard ourselves against: lead and iron, and steel and copper, and silver, none of these could have hurt us; but we did not even know that there was a metal called nickel; *therefore no charm was given to us to protect against your bullets* (italics mine).³²

The Tibetan soldier describes the new amulet's inadequacy in material terms: the flint only protects against "lead and iron, and steel and copper, and silver." Shelton's unnamed Tibetan companion elucidates the protection offered by bullet-protecting amulets, to re-quote him: "I have been shot at seven times...The bullets can't go in. They sometimes penetrate my clothes, but they never go in."³³ The body is made impenetrable through the inclusion of flint in gau. Additionally, Landon documented the contents of gau, noting the recent addition of bullet-protecting "charms":

...and round their necks the people carry amulet boxes, without which no Tibetan ventures far. These are packed with a cheap little image of clay, a few grains of sanctified wheat, two or three written charms and a torn scrap of a sacred katag, originally thrown over the shoulder or head of some famous image. Pills, too, may be found in the box, red pills certified to contain some speck of the ashes of the Guru Rinpoche. For the special purposes of this year, one often found a small, sharply triangular piece of flint. This was guaranteed to be a perfect protection against the bullets of the foreigner.³⁴

Landon's description belies the perceived paltriness of gau and its contents by foreigners. However, it also illustrates the diverse assemblage dwelling within gau, and an innovative approach by Tibetans, and potentially even the Lhasa government, to protect against new adversaries through the distribution of materially potent objects such as flint amulets.

The arrival of new adversaries on the Tibetan plateau necessitated a new form of amulet usage, which in the eyes of the British, failed. The flint amulets were unable to meet the requirements of the situation, repelling nickel bullets. Reports on amulet practice not only reveal a concern for the materiality of amulets, but also evidence a rationale and strategy for amulet use

³² Landon, *Lhasa*, 232.

³³ Shelton, *Pioneering in Tibet*, 114.

³⁴ Landon, *Lhasa*, 355.

in warfare. Beyond reflecting “personal religious beliefs,” the inclusion of flint in gau hints that amulet practice was embedded in a larger network of political bodies and agendas. As Carole McGranahan has shown, battlefields in Tibet were places of war, survival, and religion.³⁵ Many soldiers consulted their lamas before going into battle and prayed throughout the battles in which they fought.



Figure 5. Square silver badge with embossed gau, Bhupendra Narayan Shrestha Collection.³⁶

The organized prescription of amulets perhaps foreshadows the standardization of Tibetan army uniforms. Prior to 1912, Tibetan troops were not formally outfitted, each dressing “as suitably as he could and his means would allow.”³⁷ Following the Younghusband invasion and under the rule of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, a new Tibetan army was organized, introducing both British drills and official uniforms into the regiments. Badges of Tibetan design were

³⁵ McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 123.

³⁶ Wolfgang Bertsch, “Tibetan Army Badges,” *The Tibet Journal* 26, no.1 (Spring 2001): 61, fig 19.

³⁷ Bertsch, “Tibetan Army Badges,” 35.

manufactured to accompany the new uniforms, attached either to the helmet or shoulder.³⁸ In his study of these badges, Wolfgang Bertsch notes that many were made from silver and occasionally embossed and engraved: “a technique which was known in Tibet for many centuries and used for the manufacture of items like gau.” Not only were the badges produced in the same manner as gau, many of them also incorporated the symbol of gau in their design.

A square silver badge found in the Bhupendra Narayan Shrestha Collection features two snow lions facing each other, representing Tibet as a nation, and a small turquoise set between them (Fig. 5). A faceted jewel can be seen at the apex of the badge. Below the lions is the outline of a gau wherein is embossed the letter “pa” and the *gter sheg* punctuation mark followed by the number 2, indicating that the badge was likely worn by the commander of the second unit of the *pa*-regiment.³⁹ Notably, gau are only reproduced on the badges of high commanding officers and custom made by silversmiths under the guidance of the officer.⁴⁰

Bertsch argues that the combination of Buddhist and nationalist elements in badge design are evidence that the wearer “understood himself and his regiment as defenders of both Buddhism and Tibet.”⁴¹ This leveling of religion and nation is epitomized by the embossed gau, whose amulets and relics have been replaced with the identifying symbol of the wearer’s regiment. No longer three-dimensional, nor materially diverse, the gau is flattened to pure symbol. Perhaps finally, in this iteration of gau devoid of depth, can it be claimed that the object only reflects status and position as the army badges reduce gau to surface. Thus far, gau have been shown to facilitate the wearing of amulets by humans and goats and on the battlefield. My discussion has therefore been limited to gau as a means of carrying. In the following section, I

³⁸ Bertsch, “Tibetan Army Badges,” 36.

³⁹ Bertsch, “Tibetan Army Badges,” 43.

⁴⁰ Bertsch, “Tibetan Army Badges,” 36. See examples 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 24.

⁴¹ Bertsch, “Tibetan Army Badges,” 41.

leave the battlefield to explore the interplay of concealment and display in Tibetan amulet practices.

Surface and Depth

How does the inclusion of flint, discussed in the preceding section, differ from the other objects contained in gau? What does this inclusion tell us about the relationship between surface, depth, and wearing? The transformation into impervious, bulletproof body offered by flint differs importantly from faculties of other items found in gau. Buddhist images, pieces of cloth, and ash-containing red pills are powerful because of their pictorial representations or previous contact with important religious bodies, through consecration and other means. The corporeality of these contents is attested to in Dorje Yudon Yuthok's (1912-1988) autobiography, *House of the Turquoise Roof*, wherein Yuthok recounts the naming ceremony following the birth of her first child, remarking on the necessity of multiple gau to accompany the newborn:

For this important occasion, we had to prepare three small silver boxes each containing a tiny image of the Buddha. The covers of the boxes were of glass so that the images could look out. Through the hooks on the sides of the boxes, a heavy thread was drawn, and the boxes were tied by a special narrow cloth string around the shoulders of the servant who carried the baby in a blanket on her back. In this way, the images of the Buddha were to rest on the back of our baby.⁴²

Yuthok's description of the tiny Buddha image's agency is strikingly different from the bullet-protecting amulets employed by Tibetan soldiers. The contained Buddha has eyes. It sees. This contrasts with the inclusion of flint, which renders the soldier's flesh into armor. The transparent surface in Yuthok's story, the glass cover that allows the Buddha images' sight, varies from the impermeable body of the amulet-adorned soldier. While the glass cover physically protects the image, it also reveals it to the onlooker, adding a transparent yet impenetrable layer between exterior and interior.

⁴² Dorje Yudon Yuthok, *House of the Turquoise Roof* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 175.

The passage also emphasizes the importance of the baby's contact with gau. The servant carries both gau and infant so that the Buddha images can "rest" on the baby's back. Yuthok's child is bundled up and costumed in gau and the onlooker is met with the peering Buddha image, staring out from behind glass. The baby too has been rendered impenetrable, protected by the powerful gaze of the Buddha. For both the soldier and the newborn, it is the adorning gau which elicits this bodily transformation. Though the Buddha image and piece of flint have diverse agencies, the act of wearing and placement of the image mobilizes their powers and presences.

A keen attentiveness to the concealment or display of amulets is illustrated in *Tibetan Amulets* (1983), wherein Tadeusz Skorupski catalogues types of amulets derived from a nineteenth-century Tibetan text. For example, "amulets against weapons" should be drawn with the blood of a man killed with a knife and then deposited into a red silk pouch, "while worn it should adhere to the warmth of the body and it should not be seen by other men."⁴³ It appears the nuances of adornment, here an amulet kept warm by human contact and cached within a silk pouch, are paramount to its efficacy. The prescription of "amulets against weapons" also stipulates against the visibility of the object, i.e. the amulet "should not be seen." Contrastingly, the instructions for other types of amulets require that they be exhibited. "Amulets against demons who cause losses" are affixed to gates and must face outwards.⁴⁴ This short sample of amulets addressed in Skorupski's text demonstrates a clear link between the concealment or display of an amulet and its purported function. Moreover, there appears to be a concern for precisely how and where an amulet is concealed, tucked away on the body beneath animal skins or hidden within the home.

⁴³ Tadeusz Skorupski, *Tibetan Amulets* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2009), 16.

⁴⁴ Skorupski, *Tibetan Amulets*, 36.

Might these conditions surrounding an amulet's concealment or display illuminate the relationship between container and amulet? According to the text analyzed by Skorupski, amulets against weapons are functionless if not enclosed, kept warm and out of view. In this sense, the very structure of an amulet's efficacy necessitates both container and contained. The materiality of the container is also of note; perhaps the red silk pouch called for by "amulets against weapons" is more conducive to transferring bodily warmth than other materials. These examples evidence how the material specificity of amulet-containers, their precious gemstones and metals or fine fabrics, even their color, are not superfluous to an amulet's power, but rather constituent of it. The container provides not only protective enclosure, at times moving the amulets out of sight and into hidden depth, but also dynamic surface.



Figure 6. Gau with clay figure of Śrī Śmaśāna Adhipati and painted box, eighteenth century, wood with pigments, silver with turquoises and silk lining, silver shrine: height 8.2 cm, width 6.6 cm, depth 1.5 cm, The Barbara and David Kipper Collection.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See Madhuvanti Ghose, *Vanishing Beauty: Asian Jewelry and Ritual Objects from the Barbara and David Kipper Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 41 figure 5.

The Śrī Śmaśāna Adhipati with consort (*dpal dur khrod bdag po*) and Dorjé Jikjé (*rdo rje 'jigs byed*) gau (Figs. 6, 7) demonstrate the aesthetics of framing as a play between surface and depth. In each case, a design choice has been made as to how to display or conceal the image via the gau. In Figure 6, the silver gau, which houses the clay deities, is itself enclosed within a painted wooden box. The interior of the gau has been bisected into two compartments to accommodate Śrī Śmaśāna Adhipati, mother and father deities known for guarding against thieves and for the production of wealth. The gau is designed so the vibrant scene within can be completely or partially concealed. When opened, the dancing Lords of the Charnel Ground are crowned by silver and turquoise filigree. The combination of wooden box, gau, and clay image results in a scene of complex materiality. While the skeletal deities take visual lead, the stage is set by the gau's metal frame, and by the backdrop composed of bright red string. Though the exact circumstances under which such a gau would have been worn remain unknown, the layers of containing mechanisms evidence a keen attention to the concealment and display of the objects' various components.



Figure 7. Gau with Dorjé Jikjé, nineteenth century, copper and parcel gilt silver, height 11.5 cm, Private Collection.

Turning to Figure 7, again we see a design approach attentive to the power of the obstructed view. When encased, the full wrathful impact remains almost entirely out of sight. We see only a glimpse of his buffalo visage and the back of his consort's head. The addition of the intricate gold screen to the metal gau cover further hinders the beholder's vision, and one is left pondering what lies behind the fine metalwork. In this sense, the layering of metalwork contributes to the effects of concealment. The contrasting shine of gold, copper alloy with the darker sheen of Dorjé Jikjé further accentuates his recess in the shadows of the gau. Once released from his enclosure, Dorjé Jikjé's full form is magnificent. The gau design plays with the terror of its contained deity, lending it a newfound dynamism and vibrancy.

In light of this visual analysis and the amulets discussed by Skorupski, it seems clear that some gau are designed with specific images or amulets in mind, which must be displayed, hidden, or somewhere in between. Both Figure 6 and Figure 7 illustrate how the framing performed by gau is not just practical, but also contributes to the overall aesthetic and affective impact of the amulet, whether displayed or concealed on the body. To solely engage the practical dimensions of the amulet-container ignores the fact that "framing" is not an aesthetically neutral activity. While Shri Shmashana Adhipati and Dorjé Jikjé can be removed from their gau, when encased the shape and liveliness of the images is transformed. The additional surface and depth provided by gau contextualizes the images. Particularly for the Dorjé Jikjé gau, it is the juxtaposition of the image's partial concealment with its dramatic reveal that is so breathtaking.

Conclusion

This chapter has advocated for a reconceptualization of gau as complex layered entities composed of diverse media, frames, and sets of conditions, rather than as single objects. The preceding sections explored the powerful act of adornment in early twentieth-century Tibet, such

as the use of gau in combat, a milieu where decoration is anything but superfluous, and where an adorning object can mean the difference between life and death. As we saw, in Tibet wearing amulets transforms the body, rendering it impenetrable to bullets and other malign forces. The suggestion that gau, and jewelry more broadly, function solely as “tiny mirrors” projecting the wearer’s wealth and status into the world, misses the interdependency of amulet and container, and the various means by which gau attend to the personalities and needs of their contents, framing and engaging the amulets through concealment and display.

My discussion of adornment within this chapter has solely pertained to the bodies of men and goats. As we saw, Tibetan soldiers were violently ridiculed by their British opponents for wearing gau. Within this encounter, the jewelry practices of Tibetan men in battle were seen as evidence of a continued reliance on superstitious beliefs. Contrastingly, during this period, the ornaments of Tibetan women were viewed as impractical indulgences demonstrating her economic dependence on her husband. In the following chapter, I address the treatment of the ornamented Tibetan woman in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foreign travel accounts and its legacy in recent scholarship.

CHAPTER 2

“Practical Despite Her Pearls”: Reframing Women’s Jewelry in Tibet

Introduction

In the first volume of *Women of All Nations: A Record of Their Characteristics, Habits, Manners, Customs, and Influence*, published in 1915, we find a short caricature of the “Tibetan Woman.”¹ Provocative section headings like “can enjoy a plurality of husbands,” “wife-murder a trivial offense,” and “a land of mystery” litter the entry. The last, “practical despite her pearls,” begins with the following observation: “It is interesting to find that a Tibetan woman, even when she loves finery, does not lose her practical spirit.”² Why do the authors find this tidbit so remarkable? What were the ethnographic sources consulted for this portrayal, and how have remnants of these representations persisted in recent scholarship? Finally, what alternatives exist for conceptualizing adornment in Tibet?

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorizing on fashion decried ornament as a threat to the rational order of civilization.³ As Llewellyn Negrin has noted, within this framework:

A well-designed object was one whose aesthetic form was determined by its practical function. Utilitarian considerations were primary while those aspects which did not contribute to the more efficient functioning of the object were deemed unaesthetic, i.e. beauty became equated with or reduced to utility, the two being indistinguishable.⁴

¹ T. Athol Joyce and N.W. Thomas, *Women of All Nations: A Record of Their Characteristics, Habits, Manners, Customs, and Influence* (London: Cassel 1915), 153-160.

² Joyce et al., *Women of All Nations*, 160.

³ Llewellyn Negrin, “The Self as Image: A Critical Appraisal of Postmodern Theories of Fashion,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no.3 (1999): 100.

⁴ Negrin, “The Self as Image,” 102.

The anti-ornament movement carried with it a moralistic thrust towards the liberation of female bodies from the golden handcuffs of adornment. In the late nineteenth century, American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1859-1929) coined the term “conspicuous consumption,” which refers to the idea that “expensive, rare, and highly visible commodities are acquired for social rather than utilitarian purposes.”⁵ The tip of the spear on this crusade against ornament, Veblen outlined his economist reading of fashion and luxury in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), where he asked: “Why is it that the contemporary dress of women more intensely embodies the principles of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous waste and conspicuous consumption than that of men?”⁶ Veblen concludes that women are not free agents but property of the household, used “by powerful men as counters in competition for social status.”⁷ On the plight (and burden) of the ornamented woman, he writes:

It has in the course of economic development become the office of the woman to consume vicariously for the head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this object in view. It has come about that obviously productive labor is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and therefore special pains should be taken in the construction of women’s dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact (often indeed a fiction) that the wearer does not and can not habitually engage in useful work...The high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset...are so many items of evidence to the effect that in the modern civilized scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man.⁸

For Veblen, the ornamented woman could function only as proof of her husband’s wealth and power, and thus was both “useless and expensive.”⁹ The flashy articles of bondage incapacitated

⁵ Stephen Edgell, “Veblen’s Theory of Conspicuous Consumption After 100 Years,” in *History of Economic Ideas 7* (1999): 101.

⁶ Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 171.

⁷ Michael Carter, *Fashion Classics: From Carlyle to Barthes* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 48.

⁸ Daniel Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader* (University of Minnesota Press: 2004), 284.

⁹ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

her body from its “full exertion,” hence the surprise of the authors of *Women of All Nations* at the Tibetan woman’s practicality “despite her pearls.”¹⁰

According to Veblen, the study of dress falls within the scope of economic theory, for it functions “as an index of the wealth of its wearer – or, to be more precise, of its owner...the dress is the index of the wealth of the economic unit which the wearer represents.”¹¹ Veblen’s contributions to fashion theory continue to color our understanding of dress and social behavior. The underlying assumption of his argument and analytical framework—that behaviors of elaborate bodily adornment necessarily materialize out of economic drives related to status display and class competition—have proven particularly influential in how women’s jewelry in Tibet has been understood in recent scholarship. While bodily adornments do indeed tell us something about the social positions of their wearers, this point has perhaps been overstated in scholarship on Tibetan jewelry.¹²

Though scholarship on Tibetan jewelry generally acknowledges a kindred male interest in bodily adornment, the decorative acts of men are granted political or religious significance, whereas women’s jewelry is always embroiled in wealth display and competition. On the topic of gau, for example, John Clarke writes, “while most women’s gau retain their function as relic holders, all without exception, have a more obvious function as pieces of jewellery than do men’s and make greater use of precious or semi-precious stones in their decoration.”¹³ Elsewhere, Clarke contends: “Men never wear bracelets or traditionally feminine materials such as pearls, conch shell, or precious stones.”¹⁴ According to Clarke, “a woman was judged by the

¹⁰ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 171.

¹¹ Thorstein Veblen, “The Economic Theory of Women’s Dress” in *Thorstein Veblen on Culture and Society*, trans. Stjepan Mestrovic (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2003), 121.

¹² Carter, *Fashion Classics*, 41.

¹³ Clarke, *Jewellery of Tibet*, 15.

¹⁴ Clarke, *Jewellery of Tibet*, 18.

quality and quantity of her ornaments,” and this amplified decorative details signifies the minimization of religious value.¹⁵ For Clarke, as for Veblen, acts of bodily adornment, specifically when performed by aristocratic women, stem from either a desire or duty to flaunt her social position. Due to this emphasis on jewelry as symptom, and as marker of externality and economic determinism, women’s interiority is erased and adornment emerges as a uniform practice motivated by a single cause.

In this chapter, I investigate how aspects of Veblen’s theory of women’s fashion and adornment have been operative in European and American portrayals of Tibetan ornamentation since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The first section delves into travel accounts of Tibet, published between 1883 and 1909, whose authors are shocked and dismayed by Tibetan women’s seemingly paradoxical pairing of bountiful ornaments and dirt. In the final section, I turn to descriptions of jewelry in the autobiography of Jamyang Sakya, a twentieth-century Tibetan aristocratic woman, in order to explore the embodied experience of adornment.

Diamonds and Dirt

The image of the jewelry-laden Tibetan woman, who is equally ornamented as she is filthy, is a fixture in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century European travel accounts of the Himalayas. Explorer and British officer William Gill riddled the Tibetan woman with the following paradox: “The damsels were dressed in their best, which included a considerable amount of dirt, and were covered with beads and jewelry.”¹⁶ The likeminded L.A. Waddell professed that despite their “repulsive coating of material dirt, both men and women cover

¹⁵ John Clarke, “Ga’u,” 61.

¹⁶ William Gill, *The River of Golden Sand: Being the Narrative of a Journey through China and Eastern Tibet to Burmah* (London: J. Murray, 1883), 201.

themselves with jewellery.”¹⁷ In a similar vein, missionary William S. Carey hailed the Tibetan woman as ‘a drudge’ and ‘a queen,’ who accessorized her dirty sheepskins with a profuse of costly ornaments.¹⁸ Yet another example can be found in Sven Hedin’s *Trans-Himalaya: Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet* (1909):

Their clothes are always black with age, dirt, and soot. The women pay most attention to their head decoration, and the higher they are in the social scale the more profusely they deck their coiffures with bows, pendants, and jewelry. The hair is frequently so closely entwined with all this finery that it can scarcely be let down every night, but only when it becomes so entangled that it must be put straight.¹⁹

European travelers like Gill, Waddell, Carey, and Hedin were shocked by what they perceived as a prioritization of bodily adornment over bodily hygiene in Tibet. This play of extremes—flashy dress and fleshly squalor—was not limited to the female body but rather typified foreign descriptions of Tibet as “a mix of confused filth and imposed order; childlike innocence and also petulance; ignorance and ancient wisdom; sexual chaos (polyandry, polygamy, monogamy co-existing) and monastic renunciation.”²⁰ For the European traveler, irresolvable contradictions plagued Tibet and its people.

As historian Tom Neuhaus has shown, “Western” superiority over the “inner East” often manifested itself in discussions of soap and cleanliness.²¹ During this period, rhetoric around bodily hygiene and its absence promoted the advance of the British Empire, and re-affirmed confidence in European civilization as “rational, democratic, ordered and, above all, clean.”²² Between 1870 and 1890, cleanliness was transformed into a crucial signifier of Christian

¹⁷ L.A. Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, 101.

¹⁸ William S. Carey, *Adventures in Tibet: including the diary of Miss Annie R. Taylor's Remarkable Journey from Tau-Chau to Ta-Chien-Lu through the heart of the 'Forbidden land'* (Boston & Chicago: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1901), 114.

¹⁹ Carey, *Adventures in Tibet*, 308.

²⁰ Peter Bishop, “Reading the Potala” in *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Toni Huber (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1999), 375.

²¹ Tom Neuhaus, *Tibet in the Western Imagination* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 48.

²² Neuhaus, *Tibet in the Western Imagination*, 51.

respectability and health.²³ In her chapter, “Purifying America,” Kathryn Lofton argues that in the late nineteenth century, “soap offered not only sanitation but explicit salvation.”²⁴ A civilizing force, the absence of soap had racial overtones, and while scholars of comparative religion like James Frazer “plotted the evolutionary development of humanity from magic to religion, religion to science,” others “tracked humans from filth to cleanliness.”²⁵ In a climate preoccupied with racial classification, difference in costume and jewelry styles informed European projects to demarcate and catalog Tibetan populations.²⁶

As previously noted, in late nineteenth-century Western social theory, luxurious and oppressive ornamentation was attributed primarily to the sedentary woman. Here, the bejeweled wife was necessarily the idle wife bounded by the sterility of the household. Dirt, in addition to evidencing poor bodily hygiene, also signified the industry of the Tibetan woman: “The nomad women carry their heavy gold and silver ornaments all day long whether milking their Dzo (female yak) or gathering yak chips.”²⁷ Here, the Tibetan woman, described as both bejeweled and industrious, troubles the presumption that extravagant dress immobilizes the body. Whereas the “Mongol bride becomes the household drudge,” in the “priest-ridden” country of Tibet, women “enjoy freedom and independence...they not only trade freely, carry on businesses, and take a full share of all commercial enterprises, but are allowed to manage them.”²⁸ According to some authors, the Tibetan woman’s work ethic developed out of a necessity to cope with the “masculine effeteness” that resulted from a religious tradition “calculated to deaden every virile

²³ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 85-86.

²⁴ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 93.

²⁵ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 93.

²⁶ See Clare Harris, *Photography and Tibet*, 34.

²⁷ Marion Herbert Duncan, *The Yangtze and the Yak: Adventurous Trails in and out of Tibet* (Alexandria: Self-published, 1952), 83.

²⁸ Joyce et al., *Women of All Nations*, 156-158.

impulse, and to turn men into lazy, indifferent, lookers-on at life.”²⁹ From these dismal conditions arose the anomaly of the Tibetan woman as both ornamented and functional, “thrifty housewives, bedecked with barbaric jewellery.”³⁰

The European traveler’s apparent disgust with Tibetan ornamentation, however, did not keep him from desiring to possess the exotic artifacts.³¹ This calls to mind Loos’s remark that “modern man uses the ornaments of earlier or alien cultures as he sees fit. He concentrates his own inventiveness on other things.” Under Gill’s prying eyes, opulent jewelry was simultaneously viewed as ridiculous on the Tibetan body and a desired souvenir for the curio cabinet.³² For example, in *The River of Golden Sand* (1883), Gill wrote the following of his Tibetan host:

She seemed to sleep with her jewelry on, for, no matter how early or how late, if we ever caught a glimpse of her she was still covered with these uncomfortable-looking accoutrements... We wanted to buy the complete set, but she would not part with them, because she said it would be like dying before her time.³³

Painfully palpable within these early twentieth-century accounts is the distant and classificatory gaze of the foreign ethnographer, explorer, and diplomat who reads physical characteristics and costume as reflections of cultural identity and morality, or lack thereof.

Marion Herbert Duncan’s account of female ornamentation in *The Yangtze and the Yak* (1896) testifies to the violent intrusiveness of the foreigner’s gaze, noting how a Tibetan woman “seen by an outsider not wearing these signs of wealth would abash them more than if found

²⁹ Joyce et al., *Women of All Nations*, 160.

³⁰ Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, 207.

³¹ Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, 348. The alienness of Tibetan jewelry rendered them ideal objects for the museum. As was discussed in the previous chapter, British expeditions into Tibet in the early-twentieth century saw significant looting of Tibetan art and objects, later sold into museum collections. The ethnographic material produced during this period provided frameworks for identifying, contextualizing, and organizing these purchased and pillaged goods.

³² Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 24.

³³ Gill, *River of Golden Sand*, 202.

stripped to the waist on a hot day.”³⁴ Might we catch a note of Tibetan women’s voices in Gill and Duncan’s passages, even if heavily mediated through foreign observers? If so, then Gill and Duncan’s remarks evidence their subject’s deep attachment to personal jewelry. Indeed, in Tibet, jewelry and household items composed “female wealth” (*mo nor*), whereas male wealth (*pho nor*) referred to house and property.³⁵ Notably, however, the women described by Gill and Duncan do not voice their attachment to the objects purely in terms of economic value, but rather something more visceral. Within Gill and Duncan’s passing remarks, we catch a contorted glimpse of the embodied experience of adornment.

Charlene Makley notes that many studies of Tibetan women have concentrated on their monolithic status as constituted by external social institutions, rather than “locally situated subjectivities.”³⁶ Consequently, these scholars

produce hyperbolic conclusions about the status of Tibetan woman – she is in the end either extraordinarily liberated or shockingly oppressed... and this status is seen to be emblematic of the peculiarity of Tibet. The tendency in these representations is then to look for a single origin of such remarkable difference as manifested in Tibetan woman’s status: polyandry, shortage of men, geography, feudal patriarchy, or the influence of Buddhism.³⁷

I would argue that past treatment of female ornamentation in Tibet has also been characterized by this problematic search for a status and “single origin.” Though the image of the dirty but sparkling “damsel” has been thoroughly expunged from recent presentations of women’s jewelry in Tibet, other portrayals of the ornamented Tibetan developed in these early accounts persist. In the following section, I turn to the autobiography of an aristocratic Tibetan woman in order to

³⁴ Duncan, *The Yangtze and the yak*, 83.

³⁵ Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 199.

³⁶ Charlene Makley, “The Meaning of Liberation: Representations of Tibetan Women,” *The Tibet Journal* 22, no.2, Women of Tibet (Summer 1997): 6.

³⁷ Makley, “The Meaning of Liberation,” 6-7.

challenge past emphasis on external signs and forces, and instead pivot my discussion of jewelry on the embodied experience of adornment as expressed by the author.

Princess in the Land of Snows

The first Tibetan woman to immigrate to the United States, Jamyang Sakya chronicles her early school days, family life, marriage, and escape from Tibet in *Princess in the Land of Snows*. Born in 1936 in Eastern Tibet, Jamyang Sakya received extensive education in reading, writing, and Buddhist philosophy, often the only girl in a classroom of monks. Today, Jamyang Sakya is considered a respected lama with many students around the world. Her teachings and empowerments most frequently involve the goddess Tara, and she has founded centers dedicated to the deity in California, Hawaii, Arizona, and Mexico City.

Prior to escaping Tibet, Jamyang Sakya married Jigdal Dagchen Sakya, the Head Lama of the Sakya order, allowing her access to the luxuries of aristocratic life.³⁸ Government edicts regulated the costume of Tibet's elite.³⁹ Additionally, festive occasions, such as weddings or seasonal celebrations, called for special attire.⁴⁰ Jamyang Sakya's autobiography offers an intimate first-hand account of her experiences in Tibetan high society, and accordingly references to the social utility of jewelry and costume abound. These remarks arise out of complex narratives, which complicate simple readings of bodily adornment as solely economically determined.

³⁸ In her autobiography, Jamyang Sakya notes how after the wedding ceremony, her in-laws furnished her with beautiful garments and jewelry befitting of her high status as a lama's wife. In order to accommodate the new belongings, Jamyang sorted through old clothing and ornaments, keeping a few articles for sentimental reasons, donating some to the poor, and finally preserving a few pieces for historical reasons. Here, we see the bevy of desires, pressures, and humdrum decision-making that goes into curating one's wardrobe. Sakya, *Princess in the Land of Snows*, 90.

³⁹ Valrae Reynolds, "Overview of Tibet," in *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion, East Asia*, ed. John Vollmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 261. For an overview of regional variations of Tibetan dress, see Reynolds, "Overview of Tibet," 264-266.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, "Overview of Tibet," 262.

In her youth and adolescence, Jamyang Sakya participated in a dance troupe, frequently performing at weddings and other social events. Often splendidly costumed for the festive performances, Jamyang Sakya recounts the following of her colorful ensemble:

I wore a full-length chuba and often three blouses of different colors with sleeves of varying lengths, all covering my hands. When I waved my arms gracefully, a rainbow of colors appeared. My chuba was lined in lambskin and trimmed with otter fur and brocade of gold and silver design. I wore three or four necklaces of varying lengths, strung with turquoise, onyx, and coral jewels. In my hair, I wore pieces of amber, coral, and turquoise, indicating I was single...In the winter it was bitterly cold and our fur-lined garments were none too warm. We had to keep standing and moving about to be warm enough. Sometimes in the winter we would dance around a huge bonfire. The colors of our best blouses flickered in the firelight.⁴¹

In this passage, Jamyang Sakya discloses how bejeweled hair signified her status as an unmarried woman. This status is not explicitly linked with her economic standing, thus illustrating how jewelry can signify multiple kinds of social positions. Jamyang Sakya's lushly described experience of extravagant dress and adornment overwhelm this small function of her jewelry. The recollection reveals the moving feeling body of the ornamented dancer, who is graceful, fur-lined, cold but alight, and lastly, single. Jamyang Sakya describes the spectacle of her beauty, designed to delight the other dancers and audience. Additionally, she also relishes in the aesthetic pleasure of her own ornamented body. While social status as signified through ornament participates in this vision, it constitutes one aspect which alone cannot capture both the visual and embodied impact of adornment.

As this chapter and those preceding it have noted, previous conceptualizations of adornment—specifically on the female body—have often been situated outside of the realm of Buddhism. Jamyang Sakya's recollections counter this appraisal by evidencing the ways in which jewelry was involved in devotional practices, and could be transferred across bodies,

⁴¹ Jamyang Sakya, *Princess in the Land of Snows: The Life of Jamyang Sakya Sakya in Tibet*, ed. Julie Emery (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1990), 30.

male, female, fleshly and metal. An avid jewelry enthusiast and designer, Jamyang Sakya writes that while knitting was considered beneath her rank, “jewelry-making was permissible, since it was not menial labor and had religious connections.”⁴² While in this passage Jamyang Sakya does not elaborate on jewelry’s religious significance, we find possible insights into her meaning elsewhere in the text when she describes collecting gemstones for a Tara statue:

While at Kazang, I purchased eight prized pieces of coral from a nobleman...I would make a life-size statue of the deity, Tara, before my death. This coral would be perfect as an ornament for my Tara, and would make good necklaces for me until the Tara was built.⁴³

Jamyang Sakya’s remarks testify to the fact that gemstones could be transferred across surfaces human and divine. Additionally, this passage evidences the multiplicity of motivations behind purchasing jewelry and the multi-functionality of a single luxurious object.

That the same piece of jewelry could be used to adorn both Tara and her human devotee confounds the “distinct line” between “sacred and secular” asserted by the authors of “Precious Jewels of Tibet,” whose passage opened the introduction to my thesis. As we may recall, these authors posited that while for “monks and spirituals masters” jewels were those that adorned deities, for the laity they represented “wealth, worldly prestige, and status.”⁴⁴ Beyond positing an oversimplified dichotomy between sacred and secular uses of jewelry, these authors also neglect the vast uses of gemstones in Tibetan cultures. For example, turquoise possesses strong protective, medicinal, and even life-giving qualities.⁴⁵ Tibetan women have historically prized coral for their headdresses, as the stone is believed to strengthen blood and aid menstruation.⁴⁶

⁴² Sakya, *Princess in the Land of Snows*, 265.

⁴³ Sakya, *Princess in the Land of Snows*, 159.

⁴⁴ Yeshe et al, “Precious Jewels of Tibet,” 70.

⁴⁵ Clarke, “Ga’u,” 51.

⁴⁶ Clarke, “Ga’u,” 51.

The breadth of efficacies with which gemstones are endowed in Tibet evidence their powers unrelated to personal wealth display.

In denying jewelry a place within religious studies, we also deny important aspects of women's devotional activities. In addition to collecting gemstones to furnish icons of deities, Tibetan women are also known to have donated their most precious ornaments to the funerary stūpas of the Dalai Lamas.⁴⁷ The reliquaries of the Fifth and Thirteenth Dalai Lamas, for example, display vast collections of personal jewelry inset into their golden surfaces. While this devotional aspect of jewelry illustrates its involvement in Buddhist practice, I worry that by emphasizing this specific use of ornamentation, the jewelry-object is only redeemed from its opulence once it is removed from the female body. The suggestion that jewelry only enters the realm of Buddhism once it has been inset into the icon reaffirms the superfluity of the ornamented human body.

The tone surrounding Jamyang Sakya's descriptions of adornment stands far outside those of the authors reviewed in the previous sections of this chapter. Rather than betraying an all-consuming drive for wealth display, Jamyang Sakya's vignettes of ornamentation are personal, everyday, and embodied. For example, she writes of how upon returning home after a long pilgrimage away, her favorite dog "sniffed me and nuzzled me, jumping up on my silk dress and nearly catching my necklace."⁴⁸ Elsewhere, she reminisces on spending afternoons with a new female acquaintance "sharing religious experiences." At the event of Jamyang Sakya's departure from the locale, the two women "exchanged rings in a gesture of deep friendship."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jane Casey, "Ornaments of Faith: Himalayan Jewelry and Jeweled Objects" in *Vanishing Beauty: Asian Jewelry and Ritual Objects from the Barbara and David Kipper Collection*, ed. Madhuvanti Ghose (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), 36, 39.

⁴⁸ Sakya, *Princess in the Land of Snows*, 157.

⁴⁹ Sakya, *Princess in the Land of Snows*, 142-143.

Though Jamyang Sakya's financial standing and marital status are relevant to her discussions of jewelry, as they affect the caliber of objects and gemstones to which she has access, they do not determine the ways in which she experiences and engages bodily acts of adornment. Here, we see what Adorno calls the "dual character" of luxury, articulated in his critique of Veblen's approach to consumption:

Luxury has a dual character. Veblen concentrates his on one side of it: that part of the social product which does not benefit human needs and contribute to human happiness but instead is squandered in order to preserve an obsolete system. The other side of luxury is the use of parts of the social product which serve not the reproduction of expended labour, directly or indirectly, but of man in so far as he is not entirely under the sway of the utility principle.⁵⁰

Adorno's reformulation of luxury legitimizes the aesthetic pleasures experienced through bodily adornment. Moreover, he recasts human interest in the decorative as both serious yet nebulous, serving different sets of needs unrelated to practicality and function. Jamyang Sakya's recollections on adornment, in their minutiae and multivalency, cannot be fully subsumed under Veblen's economic theory of women's fashion. Though these small moments are perhaps specific to Jamyang Sakya's aristocratic and privileged milieu, it is their very intimacy which troubles the grand theories of adornment put forward by scholars like Veblen, and which continue to be influential to the study of jewelry.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the gendered implications of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conceptualizations of adornment, both in scholarship and in the European encounter on the Tibetan plateau. As we saw, the foreign traveler was both disgusted and confused by the ornamented Tibetan woman, who prioritized her "conspicuous consumption"

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Veblen's Attack on Culture," in *Prisms*, ed. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 84.

over bodily hygiene. Though critiques of men's indulgence in the decorative also exist, they appear with significantly less frequency. When mentioned, men's "decorative impulse" is found less abhorrent than women's. For example, in *Lhasa and its Mysteries* (1905), Waddell writes:

The love of jewellery is indeed one of the leading traits of a Lhasaite. He is a poor man who does not sport a long earring with a pearl and turquoise pendant, massive silver bangles, a huge bone thumb-ring and amulet box in addition to a turquoise inlaid prayer wheel. It is, however, his women-folk who lavishly indulge this taste. They are literally loaded from top to toe with massive trinkets.⁵¹

What makes the ornamented female body different from the ornamented male body for Waddell? Is it merely a matter of degree, or something more insidiously related to how we imagine female consumption? I suspect that notions of female ornamentation developed by late nineteenth-century social theorists like Veblen, and echoed by Waddell and others, have continued to haunt scholarly presentations of bodily adornment.

Though the image of the dirty but sparkling Tibetan "damsel" has been thoroughly expunged from recent presentations of women's jewelry in Tibet, other portrayals of the ornamented Tibetan developed in these early accounts persist. The rhetoric surrounding luxurious female consumption betrays contempt for the feminine. As Negrin has noted: "the ornamental has been associated with feminine duplicity and decadence. Ornament has often been dismissed as being trivial, superficial, lacking in substance, irrational – all features which have been attributed to the feminine."⁵² As a result, dismissive critiques of bodily adornment "partake in the denigration of that which has traditionally been associated with the feminine."⁵³

By shifting the focus from the ornamented woman as a spectacle observed by foreign traveler to the embodied description of adornment as articulated by women themselves, this chapter has offered alternative readings of jewelry which account for both economics and the

⁵¹ Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, 347-348.

⁵² Negrin, "The Self as Image," 108.

⁵³ Negrin, "The Self as Image," 108.

wearer's interiority. My inclusion of female voices to understand jewelry practices in Tibet has problematized the monolithic presentation of adornment in previous scholarship. Further ethnographic and autobiographical data would surely enrich my findings, however, due to the constraints of a Master's thesis, I have been unable to pursue these additional resources. In the following chapter, I continue to challenge the limited scope of past readings of ornament by considering the mnemonic capacity of jewelry to conjure distant epochs. Turning to the seventeenth-century court of the Fifth Dalai Lama, I argue that objects of adornment not only embellished political power, but also shaped it.

CHAPTER 3

Songtsen Gampo's Heirlooms in the Court of the Fifth Dalai Lama

Introduction

In 1672, on the day of the “King’s New Year” (*rgyal po lo gsar*), the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) instituted the custom of Rinchen Gyencha (*rin chen rgyan cha*, lit. “Precious Ornamentation”). Rinchen Gyencha refers to the practice of outfitting high officials in the elaborate and purportedly authentic costumes of Tibet’s ancient kings. The antiquated garments known as the ringyen (*rin rgyan*) consist of silk sashes, brocade blouses, a small hat, and a collection of jewelry including several types of earrings, and large circular gau set with turquoise.¹ Frederick Spencer Chapman, a British army officer, attended the ceremony in 1937 and photographed the officials (Fig 8). Chapman offers the following description of the costume, (referring to himself in the third person):

Chapman went unofficially to the Potala early this morning to photograph a gorgeously bejeweled costume that is worn by thirteen young officials on this day only. It is supposed to be the actual raiment worn by the former kings of Tibet. Over somewhat tattered silk robes each wore two long necklaces, one of amber, each stone being bigger than a golf ball, and the other of coral. In the center of the breast was a circular gold and turquoise ornament about six inches in diameter. From each side of the head were suspended more ornaments; one, a bar of gold about 18 inches in length studded with a row of ancient Tibetan turquoises so heavy that it had to be supported in the hand.²

Nine years later, British diplomat and Tibetologist Hugh Richardson also observed the Rinchen Gyencha. Richardson’s portrayal of the ringyen is equally as extravagant as Chapman’s, though it betrays the scholar’s suspicions on the true origin of the ancient ornaments:

¹ Ian MacCormack, “Buddhism and State in Seventeenth-Century Tibet: Cosmology and Theology in the works of Sangyé Gyatso,” (PhD diss., Harvard, 2018), 228 fn 38.

² Spencer Chapman, *Lhasa Mission, 1936: Diary of Events, Part XIV* (London: British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, 1936), 4.



Figure 8. Lhasa officials wearing the ringyen “Ancient Ornaments” during the King’s New Year, 1937.³

Accompanying the Dalai Lama’s procession were thirteen officials in special dress reputed to resemble that worn in the time of the ancient kingdom of the seventh to ninth centuries A.D. . . . The leaders wore ornaments of unusual size – great circular golden, turquoise-studded charm boxes, a heavy turquoise pendant earring in the right ear and in the other a long golden bar, covered in slabs of turquoise. . . . These precious possessions were seized by the Fifth Dalai Lama from the palace at Nedong, of the effete Phamodru family. They are known as ringyen, “the Ancient Ornaments,” and are kept in the Potala treasury.⁴

Apparent in both accounts is the ringyen’s aesthetically palpable link to the imperial period. Both the cumbersome size and lavishness of the ornaments set them apart; they possess some precious otherness recalling times of yore. Richardson suggests the Fifth Dalai Lama forcibly took the ringyen from the Pakmodrupa, upon the rise to power of the Ganden Podrang (*dga’ ldan pho brang*) in the seventeenth century. Richardson goes on to argue that by institutionalizing the

³ Photo by Frederick Spencer Chapman, reproduced in Hugh Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year* (London: Serindia Publications, 1993), 16.

⁴ Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year*, 16.

Rinchen Gyencha, the Fifth Dalai Lama promoted his status as a reincarnation of King Songtsen Gampo (*srong btsan sgam po*, 604–650), the celebrated founder of Tibet.⁵

In this chapter, I consider how the court of the Fifth Dalai Lama constructed a mythos around the ringyen to cultivate their prestige as heirlooms from the Yarlung dynasty, and in addition, as the rightful property of the Ganden Podrang. I argue that the aura of the heirloom, as shaped in the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography and Potala mural paintings, carried aesthetic force in the social present. The Ganden Podrang paraded the ringyen to conjure the splendor of a distant epoch. Though the Fifth Dalai Lama was not the first sovereign in Tibet to wield the power of costume and ritual in order to conjure the aura of the ancient kings, his grounds for doing so are unique. Whereas previous regimes cherished the ringyen as clan heirlooms, the Dalai Lama's possession of the ornaments was legitimized through inheritance by reincarnation. Through the power of period costume and ritualized re-enactment, the mythic people and places of the Yarlung dynasty were made vividly and materially manifest on the day of the King's New Year, thus substantiating the Fifth Dalai Lama's privileged relationship with Songtsen Gampo and his ancestral claims to the imperial period.⁶

In 1642, the Fifth Dalai Lama became the first *trülku* (*sprul sku*), or reincarnating lama, to govern Tibet.⁷ The following decade saw concerted efforts by the Ganden Podrang government to promote the Fifth Dalai Lama's status as a reincarnation of Songtsen Gampo. These efforts took diverse forms, including the Fifth moving into the Potala, sited in the same

⁵ Hugh Richardson, "The Fifth Dalai Lama's Decree Appointing Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho as Regent," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 43, no.2 (1980): 24.

⁶ The Fifth Dalai Lama was born in the castle of 'Phying ba stag rtshe in Yar lung to an aristocratic family, his father was a military official at the Phag mo gru pa court, and his mother was from an influential family with strong links to Tāranātha and the Jo nang pa sect. See Samten Karmay, *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama* (London: Serindia Publications, 1988), 3. See also Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 135.

⁷ Samten Karmay, "The Fifth Dalai Lama's Reunification of Tibet," in *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myth, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, ed. Samten Karmay (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998), 72.

location as Songtsen Gampo's mythic Marpori palace.⁸ In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama recalled that upon visiting the tomb of Songtsen Gampo "five-colored clouds in the shape of the eight auspicious signs depicted in Buddhist paintings filled the sky, astonishing everybody, and flowers also rained down."⁹ The Dalai Lama posited that these remarkable events arose because of his proximity to his former incarnation.¹⁰

In addition to claiming the "Ancestral King" within his rebirth lineage, the Fifth Dalai Lama also named Songtsen Gampo's royal ancestors and descendants as previous incarnations, such as Tri Songdetsen (*khri srong lde btsan*), Relpachen (*ral pa can*), and Nyatri Tsenpo (*gnya' khri btsan po*), the semi-divine progenitor of the Yarlung Dynasty.¹¹ By co-opting the prestigious bloodline through the genealogical strategy of a reincarnation lineage, the Fifth Dalai Lama was able to claim the embodied qualities of kingly rule as his own.¹² The ceremonies performed during the King's New Year revived this illustrious stratum via the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage, and by illustrating the sovereign's kinship to the well-dressed "religious kings" enhanced his prominence as a new ruler.

During the sixteenth century, the Regency of the Tsangpa (*gtsang pa*, 1565–1642) failed to defeat the rising power of the Gélukpa monastic establishment who, in collaboration with Gūshri Khan, "succeeded in establishing its hegemony in 1642, thus realizing the ideal of a country under one ruler, the Dalai Lama."¹³ As Per Sørensen has shown, the rivalry between the Tsangpa regents and the Ganden Podrang in the years preceding Fifth Dalai Lama's successful

⁸ Yumiko Ishihama, "On the Dissemination of the Belief in the Dalai Lamas as a Manifestation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara," *Acta Asiatica* 64 (1993): 53.

⁹ Translated in Ishihama, "On the Dissemination," 54.

¹⁰ Translated in Ishihama, "On the Dissemination," 54.

¹¹ Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 36.

¹² Nancy G. Lin, "Recounting the Fifth Dalai Lama's Rebirth Lineage," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 38 (February, 2017): 120.

¹³ Georges Dreyfus, "Cherished Memories, Cherished Communities: Proto-nationalism in Tibet," in *The History of Tibet: The Medieval Period: c.850-1895, The Development of Buddhist Paramountcy* ed. Alex McKay (London: Routledge, 2003), 504.

accession as leader of Tibet utilized the warfare tactics of “symbolic ideology,” rather than the control of new territories. He writes:

No doubt all parties involved were avid for the symbols of legitimacy since perhaps more important than the physical control of an area remained the spiritual-genealogical legitimacy and cultural prestige of its insignia that underpinned and justified – in the eyes of others – one party’s or a candidate’s claim of prerogatives. In such disputes, token, symbols, insignia and physical representations that embodied divine values as found manifested and invested in numinous statues and images wielding the divine power were as much key issues of strife as they were instruments in the prolonged disputes.¹⁴

Here, Sørensen refers specifically to religious images dating to the imperial period, such as the Jowo statues and Ārya Lokeśvara icon. While the ringyen are also entangled in this web of “spiritual-genealogical legitimacy” and “cultural prestige,” as heirlooms of adornment rather than freestanding and self-contained sculptural objects, the ringyen’s aura of antiquity is of a different order.

As has been emphasized throughout this thesis, the things with which we ornament ourselves carry specific intimacy, existing on the margin between biological and social being unlike other material cultures.¹⁵ The corporeal immediacy of dress, the way in which a shoe or ring can alter how we step or type on the computer, shake a hand, run or walk, is decidedly closer to the living, moving human body than the cold metal of an icon. When such things of wear are passed down, does the ghost of a body remain? Unlike other forms of dress, jewelry and gemstones, in their sublime material resistance to decay, perhaps embody the quintessential heirloom object. Though both gemstones and silks comprise the ringyen, this chapter focuses primarily on the jewelry aspects of the ensemble.

¹⁴ Per K. Sørensen, “Restless Relic: The Arya Lokeśvara Icon: Symbol of Power, Legitimacy, and Pawn for Patronage,” in *Pramanakirtih: Papers Dedicated to Ernst Steinkellner on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Birgit Kellner and Ernst Steinkellner (Wien: WSTB, 2007), 858.

¹⁵ Finnbar Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 61.

In the first section of this chapter, I consider portions of the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography wherein he outlined the history of Rinchen Gyencha and its institution at the 1672 New Year's celebration in the Potala's White Palace. I supplement these readings by looking at a contemporaneously produced mural painting depicting the inception of the ringyen, also housed in the halls of the White Palace. Through pairing textual and visual analysis, I argue that the Fifth Dalai Lama sketched a prestigious genealogy for the ringyen, which transformed the objects into heirlooms of both ancient Tibet and his own personal incarnation lineage. The following section explores the Fifth Dalai Lama's appraisal of how earlier sovereigns employed the ringyen, thus demonstrating his keen attention to the dress of past kings and their attending officials. In the conclusion, I reflect on the legacy of the Rinchen Gyencha in Tibet.

The Aura of the Heirloom

On the day of Rinchen Gyencha's institution in 1672, the White Palace of the Potala bustled with lively performances.¹⁶ According to the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography, the festive occasion commenced with benedictions on the Three Jewels from Depa Darpa Lotsāwa (*sde pa 'dar pa lo tsā ba*) and Gyurmé of Langbu (*glang bu nas 'gyur med*), followed by assorted music and dance.¹⁷ Next, the Fifth Dalai Lama presented the history of the Rinchen Gyencha to the diverse crowd of attendees, spinning a tale of both destruction and revival spanning over a millennium.

The Dalai Lama began his history of the Rinchen Gyencha in the seventh century during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo. He introduced his audience to the character of Relpadzin, whose generous acts on behalf of the realm spurred the tradition of "Precious Ornamentation":

¹⁶ MacCormack, "Buddhism and the State in Seventeenth-Century Tibet," 226.

¹⁷ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Rgyal dbang lnga pa Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2009), vol.6 (cha): 177.

The interior minister Relpadzin is famous for having brought seven loads¹⁸ of turquoise from the land of the Turks, and at the time of Tibet's Dharma King Ancestor¹⁹, there was a custom of donating many precious ornaments, such as turquoise earrings, *la (bla)* turquoise, and so forth.²⁰

The Fifth Dalai Lama went on to relate the turbulence in the “Land of Snow” during the fall of the Yarlung dynasty, and consequent restoration once Khubilai Khan granted Drogön Chögyal Pakpa (*'gro mgon chos rgyal 'phags pa*, 1235–1280) the three regions of Tibet.²¹ He applauded past leaders in Tibet, such as Jangchup Gyeltsen (*byang chub rgyal mtshan*, 1302–1364), founder of the Pakmodrupa (*phag mo gru pa*), who preserved the ancient costumes within his regime by consulting reliable sources. Through telling the genealogy of the ringyen, the Fifth Dalai Lama illustrated his alignment with previous dynastic rulers who, like him, cherished the traditions of Tibet's founding kings.

The discussion then shifted to recent activities undertaken by the Ganden Podrang to revive the ancient costumes. The Fifth Dalai Lama remarked that though the ringyen once flourished in Tibet, the tradition had lapsed under Gūshri Khan (1582–1654). Consequently, in the preceding decades, the objects were remembered in name only. In order to recover the ringyen history, the Ganden Phodrang conducted an investigation into the traditions of areas previously ruled by the Pakmodrupa:

From this detailed investigation came costumes²² in the traditions of Neudongtse and Latö Chang. Thirty-five precious ornaments were completed, arranged according to that

¹⁸ The usage of *rdzing* in this context may be obscure. Here, I follow the translation of the term in Per Sørensen, *Thundering Falcon: An inquiry into the History and Cult of Khra-brug, Tibet's first Buddhist Temple* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005), 35.

¹⁹ *bod chos rgyal mes dbon* may refer solely to Songtsen Gampo, or alternatively, refer collectively to time of the three Dharma Kings—Songtsen Gampo, Trisong Deutsen, Tri Ralpachen. Elsewhere in the Fifth Dalai Lama's textual corpus he suggests that Relpadzin donated the precious stones specifically to Songtsen Gampo. See Sørensen, *Thundering Falcon*, 26.

²⁰ *nang sger ral pa 'dzin gyis gru gu'i yul nas g.yu rdzing bdun drangs par grags shing bod chos rgyal mes dbon gyi dus su g.yu'i rna rgyangs dang bla g.yu sogs rin po che'i rgyan ci rigs sprod srol yod 'dug* / Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009, vol.6 (cha): 177. Also, see Sørensen, *Thundering Falcon*, 26 n.9.

²¹ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009, vol.6 (cha): 178.

²² *tsi gos* may refer to a form of regulated dress, here including both jewelry and clothing. However, the exact meaning of *tsi* in this context cannot be confirmed until further research is conducted. Nancy G. Lin, personal

and by making use of blue-green cloaks in the traditions of the two regions of Shigatse and Gyantse.²³

Thus the Fifth Dalai Lama's account reveals that the ringyen were refashioned in the seventeenth century, an issue which I will return to in the following pages. Once finished, the restored garments and fineries outfitted the Dalai Lama's attending lay ministers, who accompanied him throughout the day's festivities.

Yet, one aspect of the Fifth Dalai Lama's origin story remains contentious. According to him, the inception of the ringyen turquoise ornaments began with the Interior Minister Relpadzin's generous donation to King Songtsen Gampo. However, Per Sørensen suggests an alternative history, contending that Relpadzin kept the ringyen in order that they be passed down through his clan as heirlooms, and ultimately treasured at Neudong under the sovereignty of both Jangchup Gyeltsen of the Pakmodrupa and Tsokyé Dorjé (*mtsho skyes rdo rje*, 1462?–1510) of the Rinpung, the latter of whom was a descendent of Relpadzin's clan.²⁴ Thus, some scholars have argued that the Fifth Dalai Lama "sacked" the ringyen from Neudong when the Ganden came into power.²⁵ The notion that the Fifth Dalai Lama somehow looted the ringyen testifies to the importance of their status as clan heirlooms, therefore suggesting that the ringyen do not belong to him as a matter of birthright.

communication, May 17, 2019. The Chinese translation of *tsi gos* as *zhifu* 制服 suggests some kind of regulated dress. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho. *Wushi dalai lama zhuan* 五世达赖喇嘛传, translated by Chen Qingying, Ma Lianlong, and Ma Lin, 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe, 1997), 2.

²³ *zhib dpyad de sne'u sdong rtse dang la stod byang pa'i lugs la tsi gos yong yang gzhis rgyal gnyis kyi lugs la ral gu sngon pos go gcod pas de dang bstun nas bsgrigs pa'i rin chen rgyan cha ba sum cu rtsa lnga tshar*. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009, vol.6 (cha): 179.

²⁴ Sørensen, *Thundering Falcon*, 142 fig 90.

²⁵ See Valrae Reynolds, "Historical Evidence: Tibet," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion, East Asia* ed. John Vollmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 46. Also, see Clarke, *Jewellery of Tibet and the Himalayas*, 22.

The “Turquoise Minister” Relpadzin appears elsewhere in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s textual corpus; however, earlier references do not specifically link him to the ringyen.²⁶ For example, in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s history of Tibet’s ruling families he describes Relpadzin simply as the interior minister who “brought a load of precious turquoises” to Tibet.²⁷ We find an elaborated rendering in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s *Bod kyi deb ther* (completed 1643), where he indicates that Songtsen Gampo ordered Relpadzin’s turquoise voyage.²⁸ Though these early descriptions of Relpadzin connect him to both turquoise and Songtsen Gampo, neither explicitly mentions the ringyen. The Relpadzin biography presented by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1672 explicitly names him as the original bearer of the ringyen, the first turquoise laden official. On the day of the King’s New Year, Relpadzin’s legacy finds rebirth in the Ganden Podrang officials who reprise his role.

As we’ll recall, the Fifth Dalai Lama’s presentation on the history of the ringyen took place in the White Palace of the Potala.²⁹ When entering into this space, one immediately encounters a mural painting depicting Songtsen Gampo at his mythic Marpori residence (produced between 1645–1648), sited on the same land where the Potala stands (Fig. 9).³⁰ Though no archeological evidence for Marpori exists, the wall painting reconstructs the ancient royal residence.³¹ In the portrait, we see Songtsen Gampo, adorned in a turquoise embellished gau, seated before his many-tiered Marpori palace. Three officials stand to his right, the last of which wears the ringyen costume. Could this be Relpadzin, the original “Turquoise Minister”?

²⁶ For more on Relpadzin’s clan history see Sørensen, *Thundering Falcon*, 26 fn 9.

²⁷ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *The Song of the Queen of Spring (dpyid kyi rgyal mo’i glu dbyangs)* trans. Zahiruddin Ahmad (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 2008), 126.

²⁸ Sørensen, *Thundering Falcon*, 26.

²⁹ MacCormack, “Buddhism and State in Seventeenth-Century Tibet,” 182.

³⁰ Michael Henss, *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet*, 98. For historical sources on Marpori see MacCormack, “Buddhism and State in Seventeenth-Century Tibet,” 179-180.

³¹ Michael Henss, *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet: The Central Regions* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 98.



Figure 9. Mural of Songtsen Gampo with Relpadzin in front of Marpori, located in the entrance vestibule of the Potala's White Palace.³²

The mural reveals the Potala Palace's previous life as the mythic Marpori, where Songtsen Gampo and his polished retinue once ruled, thus visually overlapping the architectures and residents of the Marpori and the Potala. On the day of the King's New Year, the Ganden Podrang revives this historic scene through the ritualized adornment of the Yarlung dynasty's heirlooms. The mirrored costumes of Relpadzin and the thirteen Ganden officials extend the Fifth Dalai Lama's incarnation lineage onto the courtly body, enlisting the ministers to participate in the narrative of his illustrious past lives through the transformative power of costume. This mimesis of costume from the pictorial Relpadzin to the bodily surface of the court official, this illusion of sameness, stages an encounter with the mythic past blurring the limits between discrete bodies and the passage of time.

However, as the Fifth Dalai Lama divulged in his presentation, a new set of ringyen were produced for the purposes of the 1672 New Year. Indeed, no evidence exists corroborating that any similar ornaments were worn during the Yarlung dynasty. Eighth- to ninth-century wall

³² Himalayan Art Resources, item no. 6122.

paintings at Dunhuang show Yarlung kings wearing red turbans with high crowns and white long-sleeved robes, but no items resembling the ringyen.³³ Moreover, the metalwork on the seventeenth-century ringyen is unlike anything that has been recovered from the imperial period.³⁴ Thus, the attire of Relpadzin depicted in the White Palace mural was likely designed to match that of the Fifth Dalai Lama's ornamented officials, rather than to reflect historically accurate costume. Like the Marpori palace, for which no archaeological evidence exists, the Turquoise Minister and his attire were left to the imagination of the Ganden Podrang.



Figure 10. Ringyen gau, seventeenth century, turquoise and gold, diameter 12.5 cm, Ex Gerd-Wolfgang Essen Collection, The Museum of Cultures Basel.

The appearance of the “Turquoise Minister” in a portrait of Songtsen Gampo authenticates the seventeenth-century ringyen’s imperial origin, promulgating their physical link to the Yarlung dynasty and the bodily person of Songtsen Gampo. The stylistic consistency between the pictorial ringyen and the physical ringyen suggests that no time has passed since their inception in the seventh century. In this sense, the mural imbues the ringyen with a

³³ Reynolds, “Tibet,” 43. The earliest depiction of Tibetan court dress can be found in scroll paintings attributed to Yan Liban (627-673).

³⁴ See Clarke, “Ga’u,” 46.

powerful mnemonic capacity. Shown to have once clothed the original Turquoise Minister, the objects accrue the precious residue of antiquity and the aura of the heirloom. Despite the temporal expanse of the ringyen's genealogy as told by the Fifth Dalai Lama, the ornaments show no signs of age or patina. The interface of pictorial gau and material gau transforms the ringyen into ageless heirlooms, aesthetically likening the imperial kings with the Ganden Podrang court through the image.

The Fifth Dalai Lama's telling of the ringyen's genealogy reshapes the objects into ancestral treasures from the Yarlung dynasty, which began with the praiseworthy service of an official to his king. By reinstating the Rinchen Gyencha, the Fifth Dalai Lama reenacted this relationship within his court. Whereas his status as an embodiment of Songtsen Gampo necessitated neither costume nor guise, his thirteen officials become the Turquoise Ministers, if only for a day, through the transformative act of dressing up. Rather than a tale of pillage and looting, the Fifth Dalai presents his acquisition of the ornaments as a kind of ancestor worship which preserves, honors, and revivifies the customs of Tibet's founding sovereigns. Through this process of narration and storytelling, the ringyen accrue value and the aura of the heirloom (and its ghosts) is cast.

Mimesis and Alterity

In his study of imitation, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993), anthropologist Michael Taussig writes:

Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is

engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.³⁵

Taussig's insights into the play of alterity and mimesis in the act of imitation help illuminate the Fifth Dalai Lama's employment of the ancient costumes of his previous lives. As explored in the previous section, during the seventeenth century, the Ganden Podrang claimed to restore the mythic rule of Songtsen Gampo and the Yarlung dynasty on the Tibetan plateau by placing the Ancestral King's incarnate on the throne. However, as Taussig tells us, this grand assertion of sameness was necessarily coupled with difference. Though the Fifth Dalai Lama resided on the same ground as Songtsen Gampo, and costumed his ministers in the heirlooms of the Yarlung dynasty, he himself never donned such period attire. Unlike the Yarlung Kings draped in gemstones and jewels, the Fifth Dalai Lama presented himself as a simply dressed monastic leader.

In order to further unpack the Fifth Dalai Lama's mimesis and alterity as leader of Tibet, I turn to his appraisals of earlier Tibetan sovereigns, specifically in regards to their personal clothing styles and use of ancient costumes. Within these assessments of his predecessors, the Fifth Dalai Lama acknowledged the visual delight of a simply dressed sovereign surrounded by an ornamented entourage, thus illustrating his concern for the appropriate comportment of a regent and his officials. References to the importance of a regent's dress and the impressive optics of precious ornamentation proliferate in the Fifth Dalai Lama's textual corpus. Often, these comments on clothing habits of Tibetan royalty are coupled with remarks on their respective reputations as rulers. For example, in his history of Tibetan political institutions and ruling families (completed in 1643), the Fifth Dalai Lama shares the following failures of a fourteenth-century Pakmodrupa sovereign:

³⁵ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), 129.

He put a straw hat on his head, Mongolian clothes on his body and Mongolian shoes on his feet. While he was being given (monastic) names, he sang and danced. He slept till midday and whiled away his time in just these intemperate activities. Great harm was done to the PHag-Mo-Gru-Pa's administrative establishment.³⁶

Here, the Fifth Dalai Lama creates a causal relationship between unsuitable dress, laziness, inappropriate carousing, and finally injury to the realm.³⁷ Rather than the sheer non-Tibetan-ness of the ensemble, the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebuke sooner concerns the stylistic mixing of the Pakmodrupa king's costume, unfit for his royal status.

Fortuitously, the Pakmodrupa's good name was rectified in the eyes of the Fifth Dalai Lama by a later descendent, Drakpa Gyeltsen (*grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1365–1448) whose restrained style and administrative savvy he found worthy of high praise:

What more shall I say about his other deeds, both religious and secular? Even his everyday activities (followed) the ways of his great and exalted good ancestors. For instance, he dressed in unassuming hat and clothes. With regard to all the rules and regulations, the example (he set) of not putting these into practice until he had weighed them up in the balance of practicality and found them to be, without any constraint, to his liking, was extremely good.³⁸

Notably, the Fifth Dalai Lama also credits Drakpa Gyeltsen with instituting the custom of Rinchen Gyencha at New Year's Ceremonies, and is described as having provided court officials with precious ornaments, such as earrings “beautifully inlaid with a number of precious stones.”³⁹ Thus, while the Fifth Dalai Lama applauded Drakpa Gyeltsen's “restrained style,” he also celebrated the sovereign's interest in propagating imperial costume and adornment.

Within his own lifetime, the Fifth Dalai Lama had firsthand experience of the impressive spectacle of a simply attired leader surrounded by turquoise-clad officials. In his autobiography,

³⁶ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *The Song of the Queen of Spring*, 99.

³⁷ On neglect of dress under the Tsangpa see Shakabpa, *One Hundred Thousand Moons*, 364.

³⁸ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *The Song of the Queen of Spring*, 116.

³⁹ Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *The Song of the Queen of Spring*, 116.

he relates his first meeting with a dzongpon, or governor, Lozang Thutob Chögyel at the age of thirteen:

He was well dressed in red and yellow and his officials were wearing turquoise headdresses and earrings from Kongpo. They were all well arrayed in Tibetan traditional costumes. It was a good and genuine custom of the leaders in the old days and was pleasant indeed.⁴⁰

From a young age, the aesthetic impact of traditional Tibetan dress and ornamentation stirred the Fifth Dalai Lama. In his descriptions of the dzongpon, it is the juxtaposition of an ascetically costumed sovereign with a heavily ornamented entourage which he finds striking. While Songtsen Gampo and his descendants, so highly revered by the Ganden Podrang, are remembered as laden with precious ornaments, the Fifth Dalai Lama refrained from continuing this legacy. Rather, following the models of more recent leadership in Tibet, the Fifth Dalai Lama displaced the opulent ornaments onto the bodies of his attending officials, who lavishly surrounded his monastic-clad person.

In his study of ascetic hairstyles, Benjamin Bogin shows how religious identities were formed and articulated through the transformative act of dress and coif in seventeenth-century Tibet, thus challenging “assumptions that locate religious identity in some immaterial interior.”⁴¹ Bogin’s study aligns with recent writings on pre-modern dress which open the possibility that “clothing permeate the wearer, fashioning him or her within. This notion undoes the opposition of inside and outside, surface and depth. Clothes, like sorrow, inscribe themselves upon the

⁴⁰ Samten Karmay’s translation in *The Illusive Play: The Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, 92. Earlier the biography states that he is a scion of the Lhagyari family. Almost forty years later, Lobzang Thutob Chogyal, the well-dressed Dzongpon, was named Desi under the Fifth Dalai Lama, and is praised for helping restore the traditional dress. See Richardson, “The Fifth Dalai Lama’s Decree Appointing Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho as Regent,” 24 and Shakabpa, *One Hundred Thousand Moons*, 365, 41.

⁴¹ Benjamin Bogin, “The Dreadlocks Treatise: On Tantric Hairstyles in Tibetan Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 48, no.2 (November, 2008): 86.

person who comes into being through that inscription.”⁴² In the case of the Fifth Dalai Lama, we see this identity take shape through a play of contrasts, which clearly demarcates lay bodies from monastic ones. The lush extravagance of the ringyen officials highlights the Fifth Dalai Lama’s own austere wardrobe and identity as a religious leader, while also demonstrating his commitment to preserving Tibetan traditions and access to renowned historical heirlooms.

A number of scholars have argued that Jangchup Gyeltsen similarly utilized the ancient costumes and ornaments in order to “recapture the lost glory of the empire.”⁴³ Based in Neudong, the onetime seat of the Yarlung dynasty, Jangchup Gyeltsen “cast off the remnants of Mongol hegemony by returning to the ceremonial practices of the old Tibetan empire, including the reuse of the ringyen.”⁴⁴ While the ringyen carried strategic importance for earlier Tibetan sovereignties, the stakes of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s display of the ringyen are of an ontologically different order. By surrounding himself with an entourage of heirloom-clad officials, he at once demonstrated his celebration of the wealth and splendor of the Yarlung kings while also reifying his status as an incarnation of Songtsen Gampo. Though Jangchup Gyeltsen also sought to conjure the aura of the Yarlung dynasty, he did not claim to be a living embodiment of the ancient kings.

As we will recall from the previous chapter, Thorstein Veblen theorized that bodily adornment functions “as an index of the wealth of its wearer – or, to be more precise, of its owner...the dress is the index of the wealth of the economic unit which the wearer represents.”⁴⁵ Veblen’s theory pertains specifically to the ornamented wife, whose baubles index the fortune of her husband. Here, the displaced ornament, which adorns the property (wife) of the owner

⁴² Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

⁴³ Dreyfus, “Cherished Memories,” 504.

⁴⁴ Reynolds, “Historical Evidence: Tibet,” 45.

⁴⁵ Veblen, “The Economic Theory of Women’s Dress,” 121.

(husband) rather than ‘owner’ himself, continues to act on his behalf. Though as we saw, Veblen’s economic theory is problematic for numerous reasons, its basic premise of distributed personhood may help elucidate the Fifth Dalai Lama’s dispersal of Yarlung heirlooms to his attending officials. Like the bejeweled wife, whose opulent wear announces the wealth of her suit-and-tied husband, the ringyen-clad officials speak to the Fifth Dalai Lama’s power and prestige. Again, however, Veblen’s economic theory is limited here. For while the ringyen ornaments, in their turquoise luster and golden charm, certainly illustrate the wealth of the Ganden Podrang, they first and foremost serve as conjurers of the distant past. The opulence of the ringyen testify to the splendor of the Yarlung dynasty.

Rather than simple wealth display, the ringyen evidence the Fifth Dalai Lama’s privileged access to the imperial period, its sovereigns as well as its objects. The Ganden Podrang wielded the ringyen’s aura of pastness to materially manifest the Fifth Dalai Lama’s unique ties to the Yarlung dynasty. The Fifth Dalai Lama’s identification with the early kings of Tibet was only one, albeit central, aspect of his extensive incarnation lineage, which was also comprised of innumerable layers of past lives. As Ian MacCormack has argued in regards to the Ganden government’s commandeering of the past: “it did not simply draw tradition and divinity around itself like a mystifying cloak, effectively collapsing all distances into its own apotheosis.”⁴⁶ Rather, the court of the Fifth Dalai Lama wielded the auras of myth and history in order to create a “tensive relationship” with the present.⁴⁷ Thus the ringyen’s antiquarian aesthetic was pastiched with other styles. By ornamenting his officials in the ancient heirlooms, the ascetically dressed Fifth Dalai Lama promoted the prestige of his previous lives while maintaining the centrality of his identity as a monastic religious and political leader.

⁴⁶ MacCormack, “Buddhism and State in Seventeenth-Century Tibet,” 170.

⁴⁷ MacCormack, “Buddhism and State in Seventeenth-Century Tibet,” 170.

Conclusion

The persistence with which the ringyen are dated to the seventh century proves the success of the Fifth Dalai Lama's ringyen history. Dundul Namgyal Tsarong, who participated in the Rinchen Gyencha in 1946, recalls the extensive procedures surrounding the ringyen. He writes:

They were taken out every year and on special occasions by the council of ministers together with the Dalai Lama's representative. There had been occasions when the Dalai Lama was personally present during the opening of the Namsey Genzoe... Items were delivered [to officials] one by one with a detailed list of the costumes with precious ornaments. Even cracked or chipped stones were recorded on the list. After the ceremony, they were taken back, making sure that everything was intact. If damage or loss of any part was found, the wearer was responsible for replacing them. If someone had lost turquoises, they sometimes had to get into debt to replace them.⁴⁸

Tsarong's remarks evidence how the ringyen came to be deeply cherished and preserved into the twentieth century. Indeed, later Tibetan histories detailing the inception of the Rinchen Gyencha revere the ornaments as authentic heirlooms of Songtsen Gampo, who is credited with initiating distinctively Tibetan styles of adornment and dress, though archaeological and textual evidence supporting this claim has yet to emerge.⁴⁹

The grandeur of the refashioned ringyen makes an argument for the splendor of the Yarlung dynasty and its ancestral kings. The size and lavishness of the precious ornaments prompt the viewer to imagine the world in which such opulent objects circulated. The second day of the Tibetan New Year, the "King's New Year" as it were, choreographs a glimpse into this distant period through the powerful optics of costume and ritual. The aura of the heirloom, its material connection to the seventh century as constructed by the Ganden Podrang, mediates this brush with the past offering a brief encounter with a crucial moment in Tibetan history and the

⁴⁸ Clare Harris and Tsering Shakya, *Seeing Lhasa: British Depictions of the Tibetan Capital 1936-1947* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003), 21.

⁴⁹ Sreg shing Blo bzang don grub, "Bod dbus gtsang khul gyi pho mo'i rgyan gos dang de snga'i sku drag shod drung ji yod skor." in *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha bdams bsgrigs* 23 (2003): 173-174.

previous life of the Dalai Lama. Coinciding with the broader project of my thesis, this chapter has challenged approaches to jewelry as inanimate reflections of socioeconomic status. The history of the ringyen makes plain how the theatre of adornment and dress can stage an encounter with the long-deceased, revivifying the splendor of imagined worlds which lay beyond the archaeological record.

CONCLUSION

Past scholarship on jewelry has focused on the talismanic or economic function of ornamentation. Neither of these readings account for the embodied experience of adornment, nor the materiality of the objects. Moreover, emphasizing the talismanic aspects of jewelry tends to engage the rhetoric of superstition, thus undermining the functionality of the object. Likewise, as we saw, the economically determined function of jewelry was found to be a glaring non-function by theorists like Veblen and Loos, who disparaged bodily adornment as a hindrance to “the rational order of civilization.” Despite these supposedly functionalist readings of adornment, the jewelry object remains not only a mere accessory, but more insidiously, a backwards indulgence threatening the very well being of humankind.

In the three case studies on Tibetan jewelry presented in the preceding chapters, I have attempted to open new possibilities for understanding what bodily adornment *does* by attending to the materiality and aesthetics of ornamentation. In chapter one, I investigated the use of gau on the battlefield, exploring what it meant to wear amulets on the bodily person in Tibet. While my analysis addressed the protective properties of gau in Tibet, I argued that the aesthetic dynamic between amulet and container was crucial to this efficacy. The following chapter critiqued late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel accounts of Tibetan women’s jewelry by contextualizing them with contemporaneous theories of ornament and histories of cross-cultural encounter. Pairing this critique with thick descriptions of embodied adornment in the autobiography of Jamyang Sakya, I argued that while the gemstones trimming Lhasa’s elite undoubtedly conveyed information about their economic standing, this external sign constitutes but one aspect of the “work” of adornment. The final chapter considered the bejeweled heirloom

as a powerful conjurer for distant times and people, wielded by the Ganden Podrang to promote the Fifth Dalai Lama's status as a reincarnation of Songtsen Gampo, Tibet's ancestral king.

Because of their portability and tendency to be worn on a daily basis, jewelry moves through a myriad of spaces, temples and kitchens alike. As Fabio Rambelli has noted, such objects of everyday use are neglected in Buddhist studies, for they are believed to represent "an inferior category of objects, essentially unrelated to philosophical speculations but pertain instead to popular mentalities often perceived as uninformed if not 'superstitious.'"¹ That said, as noted in the introduction, there was a moment (pre-Loos and Veblen), when objects of adornment were hailed as microcosmic models of the universe, and indeed such readings have also been operative within the Tibetan context.² However, an exploration of the cosmological significance of Tibetan jewelry would have necessitated moving the jewelry object off of the human body and into the ether. As Spyros Papapetros has noted:

How can a small artifact, such as a piece of jewelry or other form of adornment, which is celebrated as often as it is despised for its material brilliance, be redeemed by its capacity to act as a model of organization that is equally dazzling in its cosmological extensions?³

Papapetros's remarks bring attention to how the "despised" ornament has often been found powerful only in its functions as a metaphor or symbolic model. This cosmological significance is immaterial, disembodied, and far removed from the realm of the "decorative." In the preceding chapters, I've refused to "redeem" Tibetan jewelry in this way, instead insisting on their importance within the field of religious studies as objects worn on the body, enmeshed in the worldly affairs of battle, gender, and politics. Throughout this thesis, I have accounted for the

¹ Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality*, 5.

² For example, a number of Tibetan sources since the eleventh century have posited gau as a microcosmic model of the universe.

³ Gottfried Semper and Spyros Papapetros, "On the Formal Principles of Adornment and its Meaning as a Symbol in Art," *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57/58 (Spring/Autumn 2010): 299.

power of jewelry as it graces the moving body in real time, and the unique intimacy of this encounter. Taken together, I hope these chapters evidence the multivalency of the jewelry object and its place within the study of religion.

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