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COLLECTING TIBET: DREAM AND REALITIES

Emma Martin

Introduction

If I ask you to close your eyes and think of Tibet, what do you see? The Dalai Lama perhaps? Possibly snow-capped mountains decked with fluttering prayer flags, old men and women dressed in traditional costumes turning a prayer wheel - picture perfect as if commissioned for a feature in the National Geographic magazine - or maybe the Potala, the palace of the Dalai Lama, perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking Lhasa. Alternatively, if you associate Tibet with an idea, for example the practice of Buddhism, you might even think about the growing popularity of Mindfulness. All these images act as agents of Tibet in some way, but can you imagine a Tibet without some form of religious or spiritual marker? What does that look like?

Historically speaking, museums have found it difficult to think beyond religion, whether using artistic or ethnographic display methodologies, when representing Tibet (See Harris 2012, Clark 2016). This runs contrary to the lives of religious objects from other parts of the world now in European and North American museum displays, which, it is argued, have been asked to lead secular lives of varying kinds once they enter the museum (Paine 2013). This is certainly not the case for Tibet, which since the early twentieth century has consistently been presented to museum audiences with a religious context. This is, in large measure, due to the curatorial preference for the shrine; often devised as a series of stepped plinths filled with ritual objects and hung with meditation paintings called *thangka* (see Figure 1). [1]

The physical attributes of the shrine - a designated space for displaying sacred things - has given the museum the perfect apparatus to create a religious assemblage of objects, a sacred showstopper with a cultural context. The recreation of a Tibetan shrine in a museum has one purpose, to foreground the religious lives and duties of Tibetan objects. As Imogen Clark notes in her critique of the museum shrine, “These displays endeavour to contextualise objects by putting them back in their original environments” and, “encourage viewers to appreciate them from a more indigenous perspective” (Clark 2016: 2). [2] This is an approach that is also encouraged by Crispin Paine (2013). His research on religious objects in the secular spaces of the museum pushes the curator to think about their responsibilities to, and the challenges facing, religious objects in museums. He suggests, “first is to help visitors understand how the object

was understood in its religious context" and second, "to meet the demands of all those people who feel that the object is personally important to them" (Paine 2013, 11). But, what does this turn to religion mean for Tibetan objects that have not yet shown the secular side to their persona?

The preference for representing Tibet and its material culture through wholly religious narratives has increasingly been recognised as an ideological prison (Lopez Jr 1999). Museums in the UK rather than continuing to privilege the religious lives of objects in their care are instead mounting efforts to understand the latent historical, colonial and political context and 'the everyday' in Tibet collections through community engagement projects (see Crowley 2015) and archival research (see Harris 2012, Livne 2010, 2013 and Martin 2010, 2012). Mining the archives reveals that Tibetan objects displayed in religious contexts were not exclusively understood as religious things by their Tibetan Buddhist owners. Buddhist objects were simultaneously put to work as religious, political and diplomatic objects, or as sites of intellectual and artistic enquiry (see Martin 2015, forthcoming 2017). This type of work has resulted in alternate readings of Tibetan objects, which are now available via on-line interpretation and documentation, although admittedly these approaches have yet to materialise in physical display spaces.

While the primary concern of the 2016 Museum Ethnographers Group conference 'Faith and Community: Interpreting Beliefs in the Modern Museum' was framed by the intricacies and challenges of displaying and negotiating the sacred in museum spaces as laid out by Paine, in this paper I want to offer a counterpoint to these discussions. Using curatorial processes and particularly those associated with contemporary collecting I ask if curators of Tibetan objects can locate them in a less rigidly defined space. I also want to know if a move towards a secular approach can trouble the current stereotypes and enduring tropes that pervade western representations of Tibetanness; one that consistently envelops Tibetans in robes of religiosity and timelessness.

In order to do this I use National Museum Liverpool's (NML) current collecting programme, *Tibetan Realities: Life and Art in the 21st Century* as a case study. NML's Tibetan and Himalayan collection has been described as, "of unique importance" for its breadth and variety of objects. [3] They range from those owned by religious elites to everyday items used by nomadic communities and as such this collection provides a broad historical overview of Tibetan

culture and its complexities (many with precise provenance). Since 2008 I have added to the historical collection by acquiring a different kind of Tibet for the museum; one that highlights protest, globalization and invented traditions and one that is designed to ask questions of the significant historical collections held at NML. For this paper I focus on the curatorial choices I have made during the development of this collecting programme, but to put this into context I want to begin by picking out some representations of Tibet that are missing from current museum narratives.

Other Tibets

The privileging of the religious lives of Tibetan objects and the enduring success of the shrine has made it difficult to insert other Tibets into museum displays. Museum visitors are far less likely to encounter objects that represent nomadic and secular life in Tibet, for example, drinking beer (rather than tea), horse-racing and gaming, or meat-eating and weapons-based combat. The absence of such objects and their stories should not lead us to think that these narratives do not exist in museum collections. They do. If I take my own work on the historical Tibet collections at NML as an example there are significant numbers of material witnesses to the subjects listed above. Tibetans were drinking (large quantities!) from impressive *chang* (barley beer) jugs, they were gambling over the popular dice game *shö,* and they also carried impressive swords tucked into their sashes accompanied by chopstick and knife sets ready to cut into a succulent piece of boiled meat. Furthermore, they coveted saddles richly decorated with gilding and silk. These objects were important to Tibetans and Tibetan culture and their presence in Tibetan worlds meant they were also collected by colonial officers, missionaries and explorers who travelled in Tibetan areas.

Tibetan objects - like many objects categorized as ethnographic that arrived in Europe and North America museums as a result of colonial encounters - have entangled histories. As I have already mentioned, recent research has shown that Tibetan objects, religious in appearance and purpose, were in fact asked to do diplomatic work by their Tibetan Buddhist owners. For example, garments associated with Buddhist yogic practice known as *cham* were gifted to a British Officer as incitements to arms deals, while musical instruments played to announce the arrival of the Dalai Lama, were also gifted in the hope that the British would support Tibet's bid for independence. (Martin 2014, 519 and 327) When specific religious objects appear in colonial

archives as critical actors in international relations and diplomatic encounters, we must then question the appropriateness of privileging the religious use of those Tibetan objects in museum displays. Are we silencing political histories that could be just as important as religious ones to Tibetan groups living in exile, especially as factions of this community continue to press the case for Tibetan self-rule? We have to ask ourselves what we gain and what we lose when we place such an emphasis on religion.

Reading this paper you (and the museum visitor) might also be forgiven for thinking that Tibet is a thing of the past. Until I began NML's collecting programme in 2008, if I wanted to renew a Tibet-related display at NML I had to rely on historical objects largely collected in the early twentieth century, but which range in date from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. There were very few items that spoke of contemporary Tibet (see later discussion). Furthermore, relying on assemblages of Tibetan things from across time, space and differing political contexts to convey museum messages does, of course, flatten out the histories of Tibetan objects, situating Tibet in James Clifford's "ethnographic present" a mythical anthropological notion of time in which objects are described in museum labels using the present tense although the objects span several centuries and were collected in a multitude of contexts (Clifford 1988, 202). Clare Harris has used Clifford to think about the very particular dilemmas of displaying Tibet with an ahistorical framework. For her, both ethnographic and artistic methods of display confined Tibet to a "timeless" and, "nameless" space. "Tibet has been and continues to be imagined entirely in terms of great physical and temporal distance from the West, resulting in the denial of coevality and agency to those who live and create 'Tibet', that is, Tibetans" (Harris 1999: 17). More precisely, Tibet in the museum is not only still situated in a seemingly distant "ethnographic present", but Tibet distinctively inhabits a resolutely pre-1959 moment. [4] Despite museum collections, like NML's, holding objects once owned by Tibetan refugees who left Tibet for exile after 1959 (and who continue to do so) these histories and connections to issues of enforced mobility and dislocation have been smoothed out in favour of religion. [5]

These examples provide a brief, if incomplete, outline of the many conundrums and dilemmas that troubled me as I began to think about a new collecting programme focussing on the idea of Tibet. In the words of Nicholas Thomas, I planned to use this programme as a museological method (Thomas 2013), that is, using the curatorial process of collecting to create

new knowledge and new ways of working with the collection. As a result I began with a number of potential research questions, many of which are still to be answered. These are:

- How could I address issues of religious imprisonment, timelessness, and the lack of contemporary, and furthermore Tibetan, voices in the collection?
- Who, from the many competing and conflicting parties, should the museum collect with or from?
- What to collect in order to reflect the cultural and political changes Tibet has witnessed, processed and undergone over the past 50 years?
- Is it time to collect beyond the ethnographic?
- Finally, what objects reflect Western imaginings of Tibet and should I acquire examples for the museum's collection?

This questioning and the process of collecting objects that speak to the issues listed above have resulted in the collecting programme, *Tibetan Realities: Life and Art in the 21st Century*.

Tibetan Realities: Life and Art in the 21st Century

"My generation has grown up with Thanka [sic] painting, martial arts, Hollywood movies, Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, Rock n' Roll and McDonalds. We still don't know where the spiritual homeland is - New York, Beijing or Lhasa. We wear Jeans and T-shirts and when we drink a Budweiser it is only occasionally that we talk about "Buddhahood" - Gade. [6]

Gade (b.1971), a contemporary artist from Lhasa with a growing reputation in the international art world, expresses with clarity and humour the kinds of dilemmas that have accompanied me throughout this collecting programme. When Gade describes the ambiguities of being Tibetan in the twenty-first century, he pinpoints issues of globalization, cultural appropriation and to some extent dislocation or rootlessness: these ideas resonant with me. What it is to be Tibetan and what contemporary Tibet can be when seen from different vantage points are two important ongoing concerns for this collecting project. Through collecting I want to capture some of these challenging, and or conflicting, narratives that reflect the multiple realities of Tibet.

From the start I aimed to collect beyond the ethnographic. I did not want to tie the project to objects collected exclusively by ethnographic methods or which might easily fit into an ethnography collection. Instead I imagined room for contemporary art, commissioned pieces

from cultural institutions and touristic items bought from street hawkers in Tibetan cultural areas. This approach fitted into my idea of a blended collection, one that became coherent through the themes used rather than the type of objects privileged. While I wanted to collect beyond curatorial boundaries, the reasons for collecting were firmly rooted in the existing collections. Each acquisition had to speak to the historical objects, raising new questions or ways of knowing or seeing the collection. In order to see how this approach works I want to outline some of the themes I have used during the initial stages of the collecting programme.

Buddhism and Globalisation

Finding contemporary Tibetan voices is an important part of the project. I particularly wanted to include those from Tibet that had differing perspectives on what it means to be Tibetan from those in the Tibetan Diaspora. Harris has shown the tensions within the Tibetan Diaspora, when it comes to contemporary imaginings of Tibet (Harris 1999 and 2012). This is particularly apparent in cultural institutions with close ties to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA, previously the Tibetan Government-in-Exile) who continue to develop and promote a particular image of Tibetan art and culture, one which privileges preservation and a vision of Tibetan artistic purity. Contemporary artists and contemporary art have found it difficult to stake out a space for itself in this politically prescribed cultural environment. However, a group of artists outside of these confines working in Lhasa under the umbrella of the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild (several Diaspora artists also identify with this group) are building international reputations for their work. [7]

My interest in them comes from the ideas they collectively explore; what it means to be Tibetan in the twenty-first century, fractured personal identities, societal change, disruption and transformation, and of particular importance here, Tibetans as spiritual beings and the emergence of Buddhism as a global commodity. In 2009, with the support of The Art Fund, I purchased a capsule collection of twelve works, the first contemporary Tibetan art collection in a European public museum. The collection includes works from some of the grouping's most notable artists, including Gonkar Gyatso (b.1961), Tenzing Rigdol (b.1982), Dedron (b.1976), Kesang Lamdark (b.1963) and Nortse (b.1963). My selection criterion was simple enough; each piece must speak to an object in the historical collection. The works I acquired from Tsewang Tashi (b.1963) and

Gade are good examples of the kinds of conversations I wanted to instigate through the Tibetan Realities collecting programme.

Tsewang Tashi's work is particularly important for his portrayal of Tibetans: Tashi refuses to drape his subjects in the religious material markers of Tibetanness. Instead he produces close up, powerful portraits of Tibetans he sees on the streets of Lhasa, preferring to clothe them in tracksuits, jeans and trainers rather than monastic robes, prayer wheels or amulets. It is worth noting that Tashi's piece Untitled No. 6, chosen for Liverpool's capsule collection, was the only artwork to receive some resistance from the Art Fund committee, the reason being that it did not look Tibetan enough. This, I argued, was the point. Tashi's work is a counterbalance to the many colonial photographs in NML's collection that feature Tibetans as ethnographic types defined by their religiosity. Tibetans are found staring out of colonial images as pious (but unkempt) pilgrims, or weighed down by their religious regalia, often with *drilbu* (bell) and *dorje* (thunderbolt-shaped ritual object) in hand, seated behind low tables filled with ritual implements. These images epitomise the ways that colonial bodies chose to represent and consume Tibet in the early twentieth century. Yet Tashi's portraits turn the colonial gaze on its head and instead present strong, bold, hyper-realistic images of Tibetans stripped of every possible identifier of Tibetanness. He says, "I avoid seeking novelty in my works, because a lot of these things are imaginary or expectations by outsiders who are looking for 'Shangri-la' or 'Savage Culture. I am living in a real society and have feelings and thoughts as other people in the world. I want to speak as humankind in general." [8] By painting Tibetans as everyday people in a global city Tashi rejects western perceptions of the ethereal Tibetan.

Globalisation is also an on-going preoccupation for Gade. His painted works embody his internal discussions: he uses tradition techniques to produce mineral pigments and to prepare and stretch his canvases, but his contemporary versions of *thangka* replace the Buddha Shakyamuni with comic book heroes and corporate icons. His *thangka* series, The Diamond Series and The Buddha Series, which includes NML's Mickey Mouse (Figure 2), have become contemporary icons of his mixed-up vocabulary. By using Ronald MacDonald, the Incredible Hulk and Mickey Mouse, instead of Buddhist deities he comments on the changing nature of Buddhism, and its consumption in the West. He says that, "In most people's minds, Tibet is an ancient, mysterious and exotic place. The notion of 'Tibet' is a conundrum. When outsiders actually visit Tibet, especially Lhasa, they get culture shock when they see all the pop culture, fast food, rock music,

Coke and beer, brand name clothing, Hollywood movies, the nightlife scene, etc." [9] Gade challenges what it is to be Tibetan and what types of art Tibetans should create. He also challenges the perceptions of western tourists who come to Tibet expecting to experience a spiritual place of the past, not one in which its citizens mix up a series of global brands and icons in order to reconfigure a new set of identities for themselves.

Although I have highlighted just two artworks here, as a unit this contemporary art collection challenges what Tibetan visual and material culture looks like. It can be contemporary in its content and subject, it can be satirical and if a work features Buddhism, its inclusion does not automatically make it a Buddhist thing. These works also make it clear that Buddhist iconography - whether in its transformation or in its positioning within the narrative of the painting - can be highly political. The acquisition of this capsule collection presents a visual challenge to the accepted religious readings of Tibetan objects and as a result it offers a platform for exploring other hidden histories within the existing collection.

Tibetan Objects as Witness

A number of objects in NML's historical Tibet collection have never been displayed. Their invisibility is in large part due to their contentious history, or the contentious histories they record. Yet such objects and their presence in the archives can refute previously accepted truths and this is particularly so for Tibetan objects that came to British collections as a result of colonial interventions. Objects 'collected' during the 1904 Mission to Tibet - a trade negotiation mission that soon turned into a punitive expedition - contest the claims that British officers did not loot during the mission (Macdonald 1996: 26). NML's collection contains groups of objects - predominately religious in function and appearance - inscribed or labelled with details of their acquisition. This labelling gives several objects the opportunity to act as material witnesses to the fact they were taken from dead Tibetans lying on the battlefield or looted from monasteries destroyed by the British as they made their way to Lhasa (cf. Harris 2012, 278ns82).[10]

Objects such as the torso of this Buddhist figure (Figure 3), with its crushed head, missing fingers and absent jewels allows us to carry this idea further and to think about objects as victims of colonial violence and as survivors of the persecution of Buddhism in multiple imperial settings (tellingly this was also the narrative that the donor of the torso wanted to promote when donating it to Liverpool (now World) Museum in 1967). The archival notes for

this Buddhist figure, too disfigured to accurately identify, record that it was: "badly battered by Communist soldiers in 1919 when they took these places from the Kalmuks who, as you know, are Buddhists. The Buddhist temple was destroyed and the holy statues scattered on the floor" When Colonel Frederick Marshman 'Eric' Bailey (1882-1967) saw the figure in the home of its then owner, Count Alexei Bobrinskoy (1893-1971), he asked him to donate it to Liverpool Museum, as, "It is good proof of Communists' atrocities and persecution of all regions". [11] Colonial officers like Bailey (who had taken part in the Mission to Tibet), had complex reasons for wanting to use a disfigured statue taken from Kalmyk in the 1910s in order to illustrate issues of religious persecution for a museum audience in the late 1960s. In old age, he may have wanted to divert any potential attention from his own acts of colonial avarice in Tibet, but more likely he was hoping to sign-post museum visitors to the rapid changes that were taking place in Tibet in the 1960s following what China considered to be the 'peaceful liberation' of Tibet, but what Tibetans and their supporters understood as the invasion and occupation of their country. As with my own collecting practices Bailey realised that historic objects could speak to current issues.

Liverpool Museum was already receptive to the idea of introducing contemporary voices into the historic collections by the 1960s. Elaine Tankard (1901-1966), the Keeper of Antiquities was responsible for the Tibet collection during the 1950s and 1960s; a time of significant growth for the Tibet collection. She was well aware of contemporary Tibetan issues due to the networks of colonial officers and Tibet supporters she cultivated during her time in post. In 1964 she attended a Tibet Society event in London, where she bought several items from Tibetan refugees. They were selling their possessions in order to support themselves as they struggled to make a new home in a foreign country. She also - courageously I think - bought a small group of what I call witness paintings. These narrative paintings were produced by refugees on their arrival in India in 1961, possibly as a form of trauma therapy. This example (Figure 4), painted by Lobsang Choten shows The People's Liberation Army officers carrying out or ordering a number of atrocities, including the forced removal of sacred stupas (a monument which can contain Buddhist relics) models and statues in southern Tibet. Tankard collected these political and highly contentious narratives for the collection shortly before her retirement and she must have hoped they would speak of Tibet's current and complex state, but fifty years on these paintings are still to be exhibited at World Museum.

The many ways that Tibetan objects bear witness to acts of violence or political upheaval prompted me to collect items with similar intent. In 2008, at the time of the Beijing Summer Olympics I was living in Nepal as a Tibetan language student. Tibetans gathered outside the Chinese embassy on a daily basis to protest the games and to highlight China's human rights record. As a foreign student I was forbidden from attending or photographing protests by Tibetans, so instead I collected material markers of the protests for NML's collection. I visited the hawkers in the outskirts of Kathmandu who surrounded the Buddhist stupa at Boudha and purchased the 'Free Tibet' t-shirts and 'I Love Tibet' cotton bags that became the uniform of the protest movement during that summer. Following the practices of Tankard, who archived every piece of correspondence and provenance research, I documented the collecting process and tied the objects to the 2008 protests in Kathmandu. This ensures the objects retain their connection to acts of violence and protest, a narrative that does not sit comfortably with the dominant Buddhist imaginings of Tibet.

Un-Buddhist like behaviour has, unexpectedly, become something of a reoccurring theme throughout this programme. Collecting, coupled with archival research has led me to wonder if certain types of objects were not collected by colonial officials and therefore fail to find representation in museum collection because they sit outside of accepted understandings of Tibetan Buddhist material culture.

Collecting Un-Buddhist like Behaviour

What I thought was a simple and straightforward question led me to think about absences in the historical collection and why that might be. In 2011, in the Indian hill station of McLeod Ganj, the home of the fourteenth Dalai Lama and the CTA, I met with a Tibetan scholar. As an afterthought to our conversation I asked him what I should collect as a representation of Tibet in exile. Without a great deal of hesitation he replied that I should collect the material culture of *ache lhamo* or Tibetan Opera, as there was hardly anything in the museums of the West. This made a great deal of sense to me. *Ache lhamo* was historically performed in the round by a peripatetic troupe of male lay (i.e. non-monastic) players who sang, performed and used chant-fable. Each troupe was renowned for a particular repertoire of operas, all with a basis in Buddhist narratives, but interspersed with dance, political satire and lewd comedic sketches. In the 1960s, as Tibetans came into exile the operas were reconstructed from the memories of performers and

audiences. Today the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), funded by the CTA and based in the hills above McLeod Ganj, preserves *ache lhamo* as an exile approved marker of Tibetan culture. In short, TIPA performs Tibetanness for both the exile community and the many foreign tourists who visit the hill station. However, I was surprised by the comment that *ache lhamo* was not present in North American or European museum collections.

On my return to the UK, I searched for *ache lhamo* in British museums. Despite several British colonial officers photographing or writing about *ache lhamo* performances in their personal archives, the only remnants of *ache lhamo* I could find included a single headdress at Liverpool and four important nineteenth century examples in the British Museum acquired in 1894 and collected by Laurence Austine Waddell (1854-1938), although they are not identified as *ache lhamo* by the British Museum. [12] At the time I was also undertaking archival research for my doctoral thesis on a significant collector in Tibet and the Himalayas, (late Sir) Charles Alfred Bell (1870-1945). He wrote extended diary entries and took photographs of his encounters with *ache lhamo* during the *shöton* (yoghurt festival) in Lhasa in 1921 while leading a diplomatic mission to Tibet (these are now in the collections of NML, the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum). Surprisingly though, he did not collect the masks, costumes or props from any of the performances or from the Tibetan aristocrats he knew who had important collections of *ache lhamo* material, despite these same networks participating in and to a great extent guiding Bell in his collecting processes.

Earlier during the same diplomatic mission, Bell had been introduced to another significant performance-based piece of Tibetan culture - the Epic of King Gesar. Bell sat and listened to a performance by a well-regarded bard and that evening he recorded his thoughts on the epic in his diary: “No mention of Buddhism or Buddhist doctrines...It seems all to be about fighting and power” and he concludes, “it seems that the Saga was written at any rate before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet.” [13] Bell was perplexed by what he had heard and witnessed. The lack of Buddhist context confused him and it challenged to a certain extent what he thought he knew about Tibet. While many of the performances and events Bell witnessed featured in his published works this episode filled a very particular niche. In his publication, *Religion of Tibet* Bell used the Gesar recitation to explain something of *pre-Buddhist* life in Tibet (Bell 2000, 11-15). He could not find a way to present this tradition as one that lived alongside Buddhism and instead he moulded this episode to meet his own expectations of Tibet.

I want to suggest that *ache lhamo* also troubled Bell. The presence of un-Buddhist like behaviour, or the comfortable ease with which the secular and the sacred comes together in aspects of Tibetan culture, including *ache lhamo* and Gesar has meant that certain types of Tibetan things were avoided when it came to collecting Tibet during the colonial encounter. Tibet, its culture, society and governance was (and continues to be) understood by Europeans largely through Buddhism and many of the objects that were repeatedly collected and consequently donated to museums were visible tools of Buddhist practice. Things that were less clear cut could potentially destabilize this thesis and these types of complications to the Tibet narrative made such objects far less valuable as 'ethnographic specimens' or examples of Tibetan (Buddhist) art. [14]

Following this collection and archive-based research I instigated a commissioning programme with TIPA. This will result in a collection of costumes, masks and props for NML. The remit is to produce a set of objects that reflect the current performances and craft techniques used by the institute. This of all the strands is the most ethnographic in its method. I have spent time at TIPA recording the making processes (Figure 5) and I have also worked with Tibetan filmmakers to create a documentary and film archive of TIPA's 20th anniversary *shöton* in exile, which in 2015 brought together *ache lhamo* troupes from across South Asia to compete and perform.

This commission helps to answer several of my original research questions. It allows me to address issues of exile, the preservation (and control) of Tibetan culture, and it also gives me the opportunity to discuss the reasons why we have certain versions of a place's culture represented in museum collections. I began to ask further questions of Buddhism and its usefulness as a tool of authenticity as I wrestled with the question of what to do with objects that had no historical connection to Tibetan culture, but nevertheless had Buddhism applied to them for contemporary practices and commercial gains.

Invented Buddhist Traditions

Finally then, what does one do with an object not intentionally made for Tibetans to practice Buddhism with, that has no record of its existence before the 1970s in the historical or material archive, yet despite this has become synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism, Dharma practice and specifically meditation? [15] If one searches for images of Buddhist objects on the internet, it

does not take long before one comes across the Tibetan singing bowl (Figure 6). The singing bowl is sold as a tool that enhances the owner's ability to meditate and more recently it has been promoted as a tool that can increase the chances of mental and physical healing. They are bought from a multitude of on-line Dharma stores, in Europe and North America's World Art / Fair Trade shops, and from shops and roadside hawkers in South and East Asia where there are significant Tibetan populations. They are invariably authenticated as a historical object with a long tradition of use in Buddhist practice (these histories of use are consistently attributed to a Tibetan lama) and they are often pictured in religious settings together with other ritual implements, such as offering bowls, prayer beads, bells and *dorje*, and, cymbals. Today, the singing bowl is a very visible material marker of Tibetanness and the practice of Dharma.

Despite these claims, not all is what it seems. The Tibetan singing bowl is in fact a very modern and specifically western imagining of Tibet, what Eric Hobsbawm called an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawn 1983, 1). The singing bowl's history is largely, if not completely, fictitious and does not have the ancient origins that its sellers and users proclaim. The singing bowl is neither present in historical Tibetan texts that provide instruction on the use or appraisal of Tibetan ritual implements nor is there a single reference to it in the colonial era publications on Tibetan Buddhism that used Tibetan Buddhist objects as 'type specimens' in order to describe and identify the specific type of Buddhism practiced in Tibet (for example, Waddell 1895). Furthermore, having searched through endless colonial photographs and numerous museum collections I have yet to find a single example of a pre-1959 singing bowl in a museum collection.

Tibetans living in exile in Indian hill stations remember the arrival of this invented tradition in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Tibetan street hawkers, Nepali traders and hills people began to sell them to western and the occasional Indian tourist alongside prayer beads, Tibetan-style jewellery and meditational paintings or *thangka*. While the simplest type of bowls resemble the Buddha's begging bowl (see figure 6), giving it a strong visual connection to the past, the singing bowl was very likely conceived in Nepal or the Indian frontier town of Kalimpong for the burgeoning Hippy Trail tourist market. Today, the differing styles of bowl sold in McLeod Ganj are made in Delhi, Odisha and Rajasthan. Singing bowls sold in India have then never set foot in Tibet, are not made by Tibetans, and are not used by Tibetans in their ritual practice, although they are sold by Tibetans.[16] Despite this, singing bowls are as Hobsbawn

says, "responses to novel situations" (Hobsbawn 1983, 2). They are material evidence of the changing nature of Buddhist practice as it moved to the West, brought there by Tibetan lamas who came into exile following 1959. The arrival of Tibetan lamas in North America and Europe prompted, in part, the Hippy Trail and the arrival of backpackers in South Asia who searched for alternate experiences, world-views, and belief systems. Like other tourist groups they also required souvenirs they could take home. The singing bowl became both a way of maintaining contact with their experiences in the Himalayas and it represented their alternate views when displayed back at home. For Tibetans, the singing bowl signifies both a new source of income in exile and their on-going complicity in maintaining and supporting the image of Tibetans as spiritual beings. Singing bowls then have become markers of alternate western lifestyle choices that have synergies with Tibetan Buddhism and particularly meditational practice. Moreover, they also represent the types of negotiations and re-fashionings that Tibetans have undergone (and continue to undergo) after leaving Tibet.

The singing bowl is a modern fabrication, it has a falsified history and despite the claims of its sellers it has little cultural authenticity, but nevertheless I have acquired an example for NML's collection. I believe it has a great deal to say. The singing bowl has the potential to jolt visitors out of the 'ethnographic present' and to take Tibet beyond the "timeless" and "nameless" space it occupies. I plan to do this by placing the singing bowl (and Gade's *thangka*) on display in World Museum's Tibet shrine. Using Augmented Reality (AG) I aim to address issues relevant to the display of religious objects in museums and the privileging of religion when it comes to Tibet. As with the contemporary art acquisitions I want to highlight the discussion relating to Buddhism as a global commodity. I am also interested in how museum visitors respond to these interventions. Do they think they should be there? Or, are they surprised by an object's history or biography? I want to know if some objects are deemed to be more Tibetan than others. Should objects be experimented with by the curators who care for them?

Conclusion

Tibetan Realities: Life and Art in the 21st Century is a work in progress, but the programme at this stage shows that using the act of curation as a research method, that is, collecting to inform the research process or collecting in response to curatorial research, brings about new thematic ways of addressing existing collections. This project has the potential to release museum objects

previously understood as religious from their ideological prison as it brings historic objects into conversation with contemporary acquisitions, encouraging me to ask the same questions of both things. This has helped me to think about the repeated patterns of collecting practice and why certain types of Tibetan objects were over collected, whereas important forms of popular entertainment barely register in the museum archive.

I aim to continue producing a more textured view of Tibet and Tibetan objects for the museum, one that does not use religion to smooth out the frictions and ridges of a culture. Scholars including Lopez have commented on the pitfalls of seeing Tibet through a religious lens (1999). This myopic way of seeing blinkers those who are not Tibetan from seeing Tibet and Tibetans as contemporaneous entities, with long, complex, and often politicized histories. Today, Tibet does not exist on the political map, but this does not make Tibet a thing of the past. Instead Tibet exists in multiple locations, some real some imagined. Tibetans are not "timeless" or "nameless" and their conflicting and contested understandings of what Tibet is needs to be given space. In some small way I hope this programme at National Museums Liverpool does that.

[1] Paine notes that Newark Museum, New Jersey has used the shrine as a display mechanism since 1935 (2013, 40-42). Outside the museum, Tibetan Buddhist shrines were also constructed in colonial homes from the late nineteenth century onwards (see Harris 2012, and several presentations by this paper's author including, 'Meaningful Mantelpieces: Displaying Transculturality in the Domestic Spaces of colonial Calcutta and Gangtok' at *Colonial Objects Social Identity Seminar*, National Museum Denmark, 20-23 September 2016).

[2] There is a growing academic critique of the shrine and its use as the dominant museological device for displaying representations of Tibet. See, Imogen Clark, 'Monks, Mandalas and Magic: Materialising "Tibetanness" in the Museum', MA thesis, University of Oxford, 2011, and also Ariana Maki's presentation, 'Purity and Provenance: An analysis of the Exhibition the Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan' at *115th American Anthropological Association Conference*, 16-20 November 2016.

[3] NML's Tibet collection was described in this way by Professor Hans Roth (Bonn University), who during the 1980s surveyed and documented Tibet collections across Europe.

[4] 10 March 1959 is remembered by Tibetans as the day of uprising against China's People Liberation Army who arrived in Lhasa in 1951. This day also marks the date the fourteenth Dalai Lama left Lhasa for exile in India. He has never returned to Tibet.

[5] Collectors are also well aware of such issues. Clark notes that Alice S. Kandell's first purchase was from a Tibetan refugee. Kandell had conflicting feelings over whether or not to buy the amulet or *ga'u*. Nevertheless, she went ahead with the purchase, but the object's history was silenced in the production of her own shrine, which was donated as an assemblage to the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C in 2010 (Clark 2016, 20ns18).

[6] See Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild pages: https://www.asianart.com/gendun/artist/2.html (accessed 28 December 2016).

[7] Those artists living in Tibet also produce critiques of Chinese control and exploitation in Tibet. In simplified terms, one of the reasons Tibetan artists are able to produce this work in Tibet is due to the artwork's ability to project an image of modern and contemporary Tibet, something China is keen to promote.

[8] See PW Contemporary pages: https://www.asianart.com/pwcontemporary/gallery2/1.html (accessed 3 January 2017).

[9] See: http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/making.gods/information

[10] See for example, 54.85.55: http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/collections/ethnology/asia/tibet/item-438185.aspx (accessed 3 January 2017).

[11] Both quotes taken from the object history file for 1967.183.1 in National Museums Liverpool, Ethnology Department archives. Eric Bailey and his wife Irma Bailey (1896-1988) were important advocates for Liverpool's Tibet collection, donating and selling several hundred objects to the museum over a thirty year period. They also encouraged their families, friends, and associates to donate to the collection (see Martin 2010). Violence against the torso did not stop when it entered the museum. A note in the archive records that when the statue was accessioned in 1967 it was filled with 'sacred herbs', but the herbs must have been removed as they are no longer in the collection.

[12] I am keen to know of *ache lhamo* material in UK collections and I would be delighted to hear about examples I have missed.

[13] From unpublished private collection. Bell, Charles Alfred. (n.d). 'Second Book on Tibet Note Book II,' p.29.

[14] The lack of *ache lhamo* might also be understood as a result of class politics. British elites, like Bell, noted that *ache lhamo* was enjoyed and valued by all levels of society, with large numbers of working Tibetans attending the performances. In short this was not exclusively Buddhist nor was it high culture.

[15] Dharma is loosely translated as the teachings of the Buddha. Here I use the term Dharma to refer to the type of Buddhism practiced in western societies by lay people. Dharma centres tend to concentrate on meditation, retreats and the practice of Mindfulness in daily life.

[16] In McLeod Ganj, August 2016 I watched a TIPA-trained singer and musician (now resident in South Korea) 'perform' a singing bowl for a largely western, tourist audience. He told the audience that the song and associated ritual he was about to perform was traditionally offered to the Dalai Lama.

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