

RITUAL OFFERINGS CONNECTING HUMANS AND DEITIES

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Fig. 1 Vajradhara, torma butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2006; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung

TORMAS

Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China)
2006-2014

SUMMARY

Effigies known as *torma* and usually made of flour and butter—staples in the Himalayan diet—are used as enticing offerings to deities. *Tormas* can be empowered symbols of buddhas or receptacles of negative forces to be exorcized in rituals. Asian religions scholar Paul Kocot Nietupski examines how *torma* are used to facilitate interactions with both enlightened beings and demonic forces, and how they express local identity while building bonds between religious communities.

Tormas, as they are known in Tibetan (*bali* in Sanskrit), are ritual sculptures made of flour, butter, and decorative materials and are used in Tibetan, Indian, and other Asian religious traditions as conduits to a range of divinities.¹ The most common *tormas* are made of roasted barley flour and butter—two important staples of the Himalayan diet—and are intended as offerings of food to deities (fig. 2).² In addition, humans can participate in *torma* functions, for example in the *lu* ransom *torma* (*ludzong*), in ritualized medicine (*lutor*), projecting or “throwing” a prayer, a request, or a compelling command to a deity, and in return receiving a substantive response from the deity (figs. 3 and 4).³ *Tormas* are intended to be attractive art objects and appetizing foods for communities of divinities and of humans.⁴ They are also intended to be effective tools for use in a broad range of functions, including protection, Buddhist insight, tantric rituals, for good luck on auspicious holidays, and for community needs in general.⁵ *Torma* rituals vary, from long, detailed liturgies to brief recitations.



Fig. 2 Aniconic torma butter sculptures; Wenfengsi, Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China; photograph by Karl Debreczeny, 2009



Fig. 3 Pathgate Theatre, "Torma-making," *YouTube*, March 15, 2007, 4:26, https://youtube.com/watch?v=a_BC8e6xJlk



Fig. 4 AldaEaton, "Yeshe Dorjee- Tibetan butter sculpture," *YouTube*, August 26, 2014, 7:31, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=ghFIQJOaG5U>

PRACTICAL USES OF *TORMAS*

Torma offering rituals can be expressions of local identity and used to build bonds between religious communities. For instance, group belief in and worship of a bright blue *torma* of Vajradhara, a transcendent buddha and source of all elements of existence, can enhance regional community religious identity (fig. 1). Worship of Tibetan Buddhist iconic *tormas* of the famous eighteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist Gelukpa scholar, the Second Jamyang Zhepa (1728–1791), can enhance commitments to the regional political and religious institutions, in this case the Gelukpa Labrang Monastery and its branch communities. In this respect the ostensibly religious *tormas* serve social and political purposes.⁶ Further, as with other art objects, one can recognize the sources of distinctively sculpted *tormas* and works of prominent artists from different regions. For example, in Amdo, one can see the differences between artworks made by Labrang artists and by those from nearby Sengge Shong. This recognition likewise generates a sense of community definition.

TYPES OF TORMA

Tormas are often at the center of Tibetan Buddhist ritual practices and used to engage Buddhist and non-Buddhist deities, tantric protectors, bodhisattvas, and historically prominent scholars. Local Tibetan deities include, among others, *yul lha* (regional deities), *zhi dak* (local lords), *nyen* (local tutelary deities), *don* (local spirits), *gek* (demons), and *lu* (nagas, semidivine aquatic creatures). The deities often play specific roles in communities and homelands, and require specialized recognition and offerings, often communicated by *tormas* (sometimes of very large scale).

ICONIC TORMAS

There are accordingly many types of *tormas*, among them iconic *tormas* with a deity or historical figure carved, painted, or imagined.⁷ Iconic *tormas* often depict brightly colored Buddhist divinities or saints, and are used in a wide range of rituals. Works portraying Vajradhara (fig. 1) and the Second Jamyang Zhepa (fig. 5) are examples of iconic *tormas*.



Fig. 5 Second Jamyang Zhepa (1728–1791), *torma* butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2014; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung



Fig. 6 Avalokiteshvara, *torma* butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2014; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung

The iconic *torma* for Avalokiteshvara (fig. 6) and details of the ritual process for invoking him are described in text excerpts from the “One Hundred Tormas” (*Torma gya tsa*), a relatively long *torma* liturgy composed by the Fourth Panchen Lama Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662). This document contextualizes *tormas* with ancient Buddhist teachings on dependent origination and goes on to assert that the fundamental mode of being of all elements of existence is emptiness.⁸ It includes a statement of the Mahayana commitment to the speedy attainment of Buddhist enlightenment by all living beings. The text provides a description and liturgy of an “offering *torma*” to Avalokiteshvara, for visualization and recitation (excerpts paraphrased in English as follow):

This *torma* is offered to appease the leader of demons, to appease spirits that afflict children, and others, nonhumans and powerful beings visible and invisible. It is offered to protectors of the teachings and to those who generate unchanging love, especially to those who eliminate negative and generate positive circumstances, to the one thousand eight hundred classes of demons, the three hundred and sixty devils, the fifteen ghosts above, in between, and below, the demons and elementals. This offering *torma* will satisfy and counteract disease, epidemic, famine, frost and hail, drought, and will bring mental and physical benefit to all living beings who have been our parents.

This *torma* purifies all of the retributive causes of rebirth—killing, capturing, beating, stealing, robbing, and all that lead one to bondage. Eliminating causes of rebirth, one will quickly attain the best goal, enlightenment.⁹

ANICONIC TORMAS

Aniconic flour-and-butter *tormas* serve as receptacles and food for ephemeral deities invoked to receive and consume the *torma* offerings (figs. 7). The deities reciprocate by granting the wishes of the supplicants. In the image below (fig. 8), the topmost *torma* diagram is designated as white in color, on a white moon disk, both on a green vase, and both of these on a sun disk. The middle aniconic *torma* is a healing *torma* with a tantric song.¹⁰ The lower *torma* is a confessional instrument for beings in hell. The top is red in color and the base has four lotus petals.



Fig. 7 Aniconic flour and butter *tormas*, 2006; photograph by dharmaphotographs published under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license



Fig. 8 Jigme Lingpa (Tibetan, 1730–1798); Three Illustrations of Aniconic Tormas, from “Klong chen snying thig gi bla ma rig ’dzin ’dus pa’i gdang rol nyung ngu blo gsal mgul rgyan gtor ma’i dpe’u ris bcas dang pad gling gi dbyangs yig” [Chanting and musical notations for the performance of the bla ma rig ’dzin ’dus pa practice from the klon chen snying thig cycle of visions of ’jigs-med-gling-pa, with the illustrations of the gtor-ma cakes and chanting notations for the rituals]; late 18th century; image from Pema Kunkhyab, 1985, *Buddhist Digital Resource Center* (BDRC), <https://library.bdrclibrary.org/show/bdr:MW23624>.

Iconic and aniconic *tormas* serve a broad range of purposes. The bright blue transcendent Buddha Vajradhara (fig. 1) identifies the community’s visionary origins, the crowned and richly ornamented Shakyamuni Buddha asserts the historical Buddha’s pedigree (fig. 9),¹¹ the presence of the Palden Lhamo *torma* signals her protection of the Tibetan Buddhist Gelukpa order (fig. 10), Buddha Amitayus holds promise of longevity (fig. 11), and Manjushri cuts through ignorance (fig. 12). When the *tormas* are produced according to the standards for construction and invocation, with

correct appearance and implementation, they are believed to be effective, functional devices.



Fig. 9 Shakyamuni, *torma* butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2014; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung



Fig. 10 Palden Lhamo, *torma* butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2014; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung



Fig. 11 Amitayus, torma butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2014; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung



Fig. 12 Manjushri, torma butter sculpture; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); 2014; flour, butter, natural pigments; height of figure approx. 12 in. (30.5 cm); photograph by Sandar Aung

TORMA RITUALS

The *torgyak* (*gtor rgyag*) ritual is shown in a community procession following a *cham* dance at Labrang Monastery in Amdo (fig. 13). The image shows a vajra and stylized skull on top of the conical *zor* weapon. The leader carries an aniconic butter-flour *torma* in front. The dance and torma ritual are performed (figs. 14 and 15). The ritual is intended to absorb and eliminate the negative forces accumulated in the preceding months. After the dance the community proceeds to the outer wall of the monastery, and the event culminates in the burning of the *torma* and the *zor* weapon.



Fig. 13 *Torgyak*, a vajra and stylized skull on top of the conical *zor* weapon, aniconic butter-flour *torma* carried in front; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); procession after a cham dance; November 3, 2002; photograph by Paul Nietupski



Fig. 14 *Torgyak*, a vajra and stylized skull on top of the conical *zor* weapon, aniconic butter-flour *torma* carried in front; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet (Gansu Province, China); November 3, 2002; photograph by Paul Nietupski



Fig. 15 KD Memory Clips, "Vajrakilaya Reversal Ritual (Gutor Puja) at New York Palyul Guru Lhakhang 2021," *YouTube*, February 15, 2021, 11:31, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=LM-mbfSew6c>

Another ritual figure from a New Year festival in about 1932 at Labrang Monastery is a ludzong, the *lu ransom tormā* (fig. 16). This person and his costume express the function of a *torma* (*dzong*) and an effigy (*lu*), which absorbs all of the positive and negative influences on the monastery and community accumulated over the past year. The *torma* function is embodied here, and the figure is named as a *torma*. The figure circulates through the monastery and is eventually chased out, taking with him all of the year's negativity.

Ransom medical therapy (*lutor*) is another *torma* function (fig. 17). In Paro, Bhutan, the officiant uses herbs, wool, a live chicken, foods, a bell, and a drum to perform a *torma* ritual, invoking and compelling a malignant deity to leave a sick person, for instance a teenage boy with a respiratory disease.



Fig. 16 Marion G. Gribenow (American, 1899–1972); Ludzong, “*a lu ransom tormā*”; Labrang Monastery, Amdo region, eastern Tibet; ca. 1932; tinted glass lantern slide; height approx. 2 in. (5.1 cm); Gribenow Archive, Tibet House, New York



Fig. 17 Ritualized medicine (*lutor*); near Paro, Bhutan; 2014; herbs, wool, live chicken (foreground), foods, officiant with bell and drum; photograph by Paul Nietupski

Functions as a *torma*, with *lu*.

Contacts and communications between humans and deities are important parts of the Tibetan and Indian religious worldview. Tibetans and Indians share a world densely populated by deities of broad description, and the boundaries between human and deity are very porous. *Tormas* and ritual objects are vehicles for interaction between the two realms. In this vision humans and deities can interact with stylized *torma* gifts of foods often made of roasted barley flour and butter that compel deities to grant their wishes. *Torma* gifts can be iconic, with distinctive images of deities and humans who have places of prestige and power in the community legacy. *Tormas* can also be aniconic, exquisitely crafted with no anthropomorphic or divine shape of any kind. When accompanied by proper invocations, *torma* foods, and musical performances, deities are compelled to respond to human requests.

FOOTNOTES

¹ “The word *bali* occurs several times in the Rigveda and often later in the sense of tribute to a king or offering to a god The attitude of the Vedic Indian to his gods was at least as compatible with tribute as with voluntary gifts.” Monier Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit Dictionary*. Accessed May 25, 2021. <https://sanskritdictionary.com/?iencoding=iast&q=bali&lang=sans&action=Search>. For dyes and pigments used in *tormas*, see Jeff Watt, “Torma Offering Main Page,” *HAR: Himalayan Art Resources*, 2017, <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1062&page=1>.

² See Frances Garrett, “Shaping the Illness of Hunger: A Culinary Aesthetics of Food and Healing in Tibet,” *Asian Medicine* 6, no. 1 (2010): 33–54.

³ See Tibetan and Himalayan Library, ““gtor Ma” Entry at THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool,” Tibetan and Himalayan Library, 2019, <https://www.thlib.org/reference/dictionaries/tibetan-dictionary/translate.php>. The entry for “*gtor ma (torma)*” lists tantric ceremonies, protection of the Buddhist Dharma, daily *tormas*, occasional *tormas*, and types mentioned by Künkhyen Tenpey Nyima: shrine *torma (rten gtor)*, perpetual *torma (rtag gtor)*, *sadhana torma (sgrub gtor)*, offering *torma (mchod gtor)*, mending *torma (skang gtor)*, session *torma (thun gtor)*, daily *torma (rgyun gtor)*, captured *torma (gta’ gtor)*, and food *torma*.

⁴ Jeff Watt, “Torma Offering Main Page,” *HAR: Himalayan Art Resources*, 2017, <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1062&page=1>.

⁵ For medical applications, see Frances Garrett, “Shaping the Illness of Hunger: A Culinary Aesthetics of Food and Healing in Tibet,” *Asian Medicine* 6, no. 1 (2010): 33–54.

⁶ For a concise statement of community bonding mechanisms, see Scott S. Wiltermuth and Chip Heath, “Synchrony and Cooperation,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 1 (2009): 1–5.

⁷ Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, “Gtor ma brgya rtsa [One hundred tormas],” BUDA: Buddhist Digital Archives by Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) (Beijing), accessed January 12, 2022, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW3CN1676>; Claudia Butler, “Torma: The Tibetan Ritual Cake,” *Chö Yang (chos dbyangs): The Voice of Tibetan Religion and Culture* 7 (1996): 38–52.

⁸ On dependent origination, the document says, “Ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato hy avadat, teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇaḥ” [The great ascetic explained that all elements of existence are causally produced and causally destroyed]. Jayarava, “Ye Dharmā Hetuprabhavā—Causation,” Visible Mantra Press, trans 2009, <http://www.visiblemantra.org/dharma-hetuprabhava.html>.

⁹ Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, “Gtor ma brgya rtsa [One hundred tormas],” BUDA: Buddhist Digital Archives by Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) (Beijing), accessed January 12, 2022, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW3CN1676>, translation by Paul Nietupski.

¹⁰ The title of the song is “*rdo rje mthol glu skangs gtor.*”

¹¹ Rebecca L. Twist, “Images of the Crowned Buddha along the Silk Road: Iconography and Ideology,” *Humanities* 7, no. 4 (2018): 92, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040092>.

FURTHER READING

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