

## ZENPAR

TIBETAN WOODEN MOULDS FOR THE CREATION  
OF DOUGH FIGURES IN ESOTERIC RITUALS

JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA

Photographs of antique wooden boards by Duane Ramos

Inspired by the collection of Richard X. Zawitz



1 A selection of various kinds of *zenpar* from the collection of Richard X. Zawitz

### An introduction to the *zenpar* moulds of Tibet

Although much has been written on Tibetan art in recent years, there are still many aspects of this rich tradition hardly known to the outside world. One of the most intriguing areas of esoteric representation is the use of decorated wooden sticks in the preparation of symbols, idols and effigies. These tablets and baton-shaped pieces of wood are carved with a large variety of

deities, demons, sacred signs, ritual implements and sacrificial victims. The incised figures mimic the structures and beings of the universe, serving as a veritable roadmap of the Tibetan cosmos.

Decorated wooden sticks, carved with microcosmic structures, are called *zenpar* (Tibetan = *zan-par*). This Tibetan term literally means “barley cake mould”, which is named after the dough figures produced from them. By virtue of their connection to the expansive ritual tradition of Tibet, the

repertoire of engraved figures on *zenpar* is particularly diverse and intricate (1).

This study of *zenpar* is based on the collection of Richard X. Zawitz of San Francisco, California, an artist who has evinced a keen interest in Tibetan culture since the 1970s. He has amassed a collection of over 200 wooden boards. As a scholar working on Tibetan myths, rituals and history for many years, I present an enhanced perspective on *zenpar*, derived from my own research (see Bibliography for other studies).



## The allure of *zenpar*

At their best, *zenpar* have all the qualities of highly collectable items: they are attractive, ancient and rare. The large array of carved figures is seductive in form and laden with cultural and religious significance. Some *zenpar* are centuries old, having acquired warm, lustrous patinas and a softness reminiscent of delicate human skin.

*Zenpar* are unique in the realm of Tibetan art and woodwork (2, 3). There is no other medium in wood in which reverse image carving (intaglio) predominates. The tremendous skill involved in fashioning exceedingly fine details in reverse is no longer seen today. There are, of course, ornamented wooden doorframes in monasteries and palaces; wooden covers for scriptures adorned with deities, geometric and floral designs; and xylographs for Tibetan texts and printed amulets, but each of these genres exhibits carvings in relief.

*Zenpar* are reported to be made from birch, juniper, walnut and other hardwoods. Many are four-sided with quadrate and tabular shapes. Others are six-sided, eight-sided or with one flat face and a rounded back. Carved figures mark two or more sides of the board. Frequently, there is a carved loop or perforation at one end of a *zenpar* for stringing a cord or thong for handling and transport. *Zenpar* are customarily stored in leather cases or cloth sacks.

There is no mention of *zenpar* in the oldest Tibetan texts, thus the invention of these figured boards is probably attributable to the post-1000 AD era. The earliest *zenpar* are at least 500 or 600 years old, but some may be considerably older. They are difficult to date accurately though, because of the elementary iconography and the recycling of traditional aesthetic forms over centuries. Radiocarbon testing of these boards does not seem to have been carried out yet.

## The ritual philosophy and praxis of *zenpar*

Rather than painstakingly collecting precious gems and metals, livestock, wild animals, intricate tools and fancy gifts for rituals, Tibetans use barley cake figures, fashioned from *zenpar* carvings, as shorthand forms of the actual objects and beings. These dough facsimiles are employed just like real offerings and are believed to be just as effective when properly empowered. *Zenpar* therefore give ordinary Tibetans access to the full provision of ritual, economically and efficiently.

According to Tibetan religious tradition, maintaining a balance between humans, animals and the supernatural realm of deities and demons is essential if happiness and prosperity are to be guaranteed in the world. It is widely believed that should the concord between sentient beings be upset through unvirtuous behaviour, ignorance or environmental destruction, ritual measures may be needed in order to restore it.



2 Six *zenpar* in a fan-shaped array. This set of sticks has the full complement of figures (more than 250) needed for the practise of Tibetan rituals



3 Six-sided *zenpar*, carved with a wide selection of demons, animals, food offerings and sacred symbols (32.5 cm)

The Tibetan cosmos depicted in *zenpar* is designed for specific ritual purposes carried out by Tibetan monks and lay practitioners. *Zenpar* display carved representations of spirits, animals, humans, heavenly bodies, architecture and material objects of the ritualised universe. For the upkeep of individuals and communities, dough figures fashioned from the carvings are manipulated using sympathetic magic. The prime purpose of this regimen is to ward off illness and misfortune, and usher in well-being and good fortune. These twin goals are fundamental to Tibetan ritualism and the religious philosophy

behind it (4, 5).

*Zen* is made from a mixture of parched barley flour, water or milk and other ingredients (such as alcohol, butter, sugar, jaggery, medicinal substances and filings of precious metals). This mixture is kneaded into a ready-to-eat doughy substance. Bits of *zen* are sculpted into cones, spheres or strips and pressed into *zenpar* moulds. As *zenpar* often contain many different figures, officiants make impressions only of those needed for the ritual at hand. Once removed from the mould, the *zen* bears the same image, but in relief.





4 Monk using a *zenpar* to mould a barley dough figure of a demon implicated in illness. Photograph by John Vincent Bellezza



5 Dough figures of a man and woman made from a *zenpar* that will serve as substitutes for those afflicted by demons. In the foreground is a strip of barley dough (*zen*) impressed with auspicious symbols for use in the same ritual. Photograph by John Vincent Bellezza



6 *Zenpar* bearing intaglio images of the three bodhisattvas of enlightenment (from left to right: Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani), flanked by the founder of Tibet's most powerful Buddhist sect, Je Tsong Khapa (far right), and the Buddha of long life, Amitayus (far left). These high deities act as patrons of Buddhist rituals. This adroitly carved *zenpar* features a dharma wheel on one end and lotus petals on the other end, symbols of the doctrine and the inviolability of the doctrine (42 cm)

## A brief history of Tibetan ritualism

It was around 1000 years ago that the ritual traditions of Tibetans evolved into a form still practised today. These traditions belong to both the Buddhist and Bon religions. Although the origins of Buddhism go back to the Indian Subcontinent of the 6th century BC, it was only in the 7th century AD that this faith took hold in Tibet. A parallel religion, called Bon, attributes its origins to western lands of the remote past. According to the Buddhists and Bonpo, most elements of Tibetan ritualism are traceable to their founders, Sakyamuni Buddha and Tönpa Shenrab respectively. In historical fact, however, these apotheosised personalities had very little to do with how ritual traditions actually developed in Tibet (6).

Tibetan ritualism sprung up from the tantra of India, magical and transformative psychophysical practices incorporated into the mystic school of Buddhism, known as Vajrayana. Buddhist tantrics adapted to the alien Tibetan cultural and physical environment by drawing upon pre-existing ritual and mythic traditions, referred to as *bon*. Propagated for centuries by a priestly corps, *bon* constituted the bedrock of popular religious expression in Tibet (7).

In order to forge a Tibetan identity, Buddhists appropriated the basic principles of *bon* ritual traditions. Chief among them is that spirits influence the course of human

affairs and, in order to win their co-operation, they must be given gifts and placated. Furthermore, any such exchanges between humans and spirits must be tantamount to the outcome desired (8).

Tibetan Buddhists absorbed many of the basic sensibilities of the *bon* ritual tradition, wedding it to their own conceptions of tantric efficacy and human welfare. However, rather than merely utilitarian exchanges between the human and spirit worlds, Buddhism injected a powerful ethical dimension into Tibetan ritualism. This entailed the generation of compassion as the underlying motivation for all human endeavour. Moreover, the Buddhist pantheon was dominated by otherworldly gods, whose power was envisioned as being far beyond that of the autochthonous spirits of the sky, earth and underworld. Buddhists maintain that their transcendental gods oversee and regulate ritual activities, acting as the ultimate arbiters of success and good fortune (9).

By around 1000 AD, the assimilation of *bon* ritual traditions to the tantric Buddhism of India reached a mature stage. The Buddhists emerged as victors in this long and difficult process, and most practitioners and institutions associated with ancient Tibet religion were amalgamated to Buddhist religious and political structures by that time. Those affirming a Buddhist identity simply continued being Buddhists, as their kin are to this day. Religious practitioners, who refused to disassociate themselves wholly

from the narratives and customs of ancient *bon*, came to be known as Yungdrung or Swastika Bonpo. Buddhists and Bonpo share most religious traditions in common, and their doctrines continue to converge up to the present day. Both Buddhists and Bonpo also use *zenpar* to create a host of figures deployed in Tibetan ritual.

## The use of *zenpar* in Tibetan ritual

The ritual use of *zen* cakes can be traced to the first phase of literature in Tibet, composed in the language known as Old Tibetan. In this literature, *zen* constitutes offerings for both the living and the dead. *Zen* is also shaped into edible sculptures known as *torma* (*gtor-ma*), a stock object of offering in Tibetan ritual. *Zenpar* facsimiles are made to ornament and supplement *torma* (10).

While Old Tibetan texts are mute on the practice of human sacrifice, livestock was customarily slaughtered to appease demons and the use of animal parts was standard practice. In Old Tibetan ransom rituals, known as *liud* (*glud*), sheep and yaks were sacrificed, but this practice was largely halted with the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. Dough figures, cast from *zenpar*, have replaced the use of live animals.

In Buddhism and Bon, *zen* is also used to make effigies of patients for ransom rituals. These effigies reflect the main divisions of





7 Two figures of what might be deities in the rock art of western Tibet. Iron Age (700–100 BC) and Protohistoric period (100 BC–600 AD). The more recent figure on the left appears to have rays, feathers or horns on its head, an ancient precursor to cognate attributes of Buddhist and Bon deities and demons carved in *zenpar*. Photograph by John Vincent Bellezza



8 Board known as *shingri* (*shing-ris*) with diagonal pattern and male and female effigies carved in relief (20 cm). Used in ritual texts composed in the Old Tibetan language, the *shingri* is one of the indigenous prototypes of *zenpar*. This ritual object was retained in the Buddhist and Bon cults of protective deities. The specimen shown here predates the 15th century



9 Board with relief carvings of typical figures found on *zenpar*, probably western Tibet, 12th–14th century (35 cm). Top row includes benefactor elephants, bodhisattvas, flaming jewels, and protective deity with sword and shield. The bottom row features the Eight Auspicious Symbols with a ritual thunderbolt in the middle. This ritual object with figures reminiscent of *zenpar* carvings may predate the tradition of using dough moulds



10 Altar just before the start of a ritual called Gyashi in which *dud* demons are placated, bribed and sent off. Among the objects on the altar are *zenpar* figures, ritual cakes and an effigy (*ngarmi*) of a patient enrobed in bright yellow cloth. The thread-cross below the altar is used to persuade demons to remain with offerings as they are cast away, releasing human victims from their grasp. Photograph by John Vincent Bellezza

society in traditional Tibet: layman, lay woman, child, monk and lay religious practitioner. These and more elaborate effigies of patients, called *ngarmi* (*ngar-mi*), are given to demons in exchange for their human victims. There are also special dough sculptures of naked male and female demons called *lingka* (*ling-ka*), which are ritually banished or slaughtered during ritual performances (11–14).

*Zenpar* are employed in three major systems of Tibetan ritual: *dokpa* (*bzlog-pa*), *do* (*mdos*) and *löd*. The *löd* ritual of exchanging effigies for victims of demonic attacks can stand on its own, but is regularly incorporated into the other two categories of ritual tradition. There are many hundreds of Tibetan texts dedicated to these three ritual systems, some of which are still commonly exploited, while others have fallen out of favour with ritual practitioners.

In the *dokpa*, *do* and *löd* ritual systems,

likenesses of harm-causing spirits and their circle of animals and other subsidiary figures are moulded from *zenpar*. They are designed to attract analogous demons to the ritual venue and to act as vessels for their consciousness, so that they might be enticed, subjugated or even destroyed.

The *dokpa* is a large body of rituals practised by all sects of Buddhism and by the Bonpo. *Dokpa* literally means “returning harm to the sender”, and this is its central purpose. In *dokpa* rituals, *zenpar* figures, *torma* cakes, butter lamps and many other things are offered to the offending spirits to satisfy their hunger and other desires, with the express intention of freeing up human victims from inadvertently meeting the same end. In the *dokpa*, ritualists not only attempt to appease demons with gifts, they wield powerful tools with which to threaten them should they prove uncooperative. These include ritual daggers, choppers, hooks,



nooses, mallets, files, thunderbolts, missiles and slings. For the most recalcitrant demons, Tibetans resort to ritual slaughter (*bsad-pa*). However, the prospect of the harm wrought upon humans rebounding on demons is usually sufficient motivation for them to free their victims.

For most illnesses and problems precipitated by demons the *dokpa* ritual is thought effective. However, if relief is not forthcoming or it is determined that demonic provocations are of a more serious nature, a *do* ritual may be prescribed by monks. The core of the *do* is a model of the universe or community and ad hoc residence of the demons. This is a highly elaborate and colourful structure in which *torma* cakes, thread-crosses and *zenpar* figures play a crucial part. The idea behind the *do* is that mischief-making spirits will be lured into the palace edifice set up for them, liberating the patient from demonic possession.

There are many other types of Tibetan ritual measures in which *zenpar* are utilised as well. These include rites of expiation, propitiation of worldly spirits with incense, soul rescue, good fortune attraction and suppression of homicidal spirits.

### The demonology of *zenpar*

The demonology of Tibet is extremely extensive and convoluted, the product of both native and Indian traditions. Some common classes of demons are first mentioned in the archaic rituals and myths of Old Tibetan literature. With the coming of Buddhism, the demonology of Tibet became more elaborate, which is reflected in the myriad figures of *zenpar* (15–20).

Tibetan demonology is essentially different from that of the Semitic religions, where demons are seen exclusively as personifications of evil. In Tibet, they are closely bound to the forces of nature and the cosmos as well. Under the right conditions, demons and other elemental spirits are believed to act as human allies. Thus, technically speaking, most are semi-divine or semi-demonic in make-up, beings possessing ambivalent personalities, acting as both friend and foe. The dissonant personalities of Tibetan demons stem from pre-Buddhist conceptions of allegiance, utility and the personification of natural phenomena. Also, in Buddhism there is no notion of an absolute evil principle. Rather than enduring an eternal fate, it is the propensities of sentient beings that determine their personalities and circumstances over countless lifetimes.

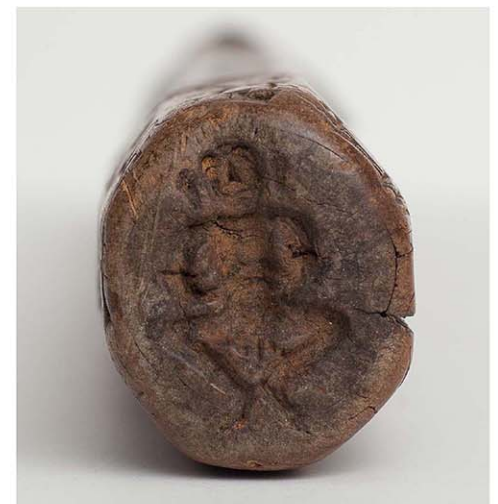
Although a number of major classes of spirits have pre-Buddhist origins, all have been brought into the tantric fold and reconfigured according to Buddhist doctrine. The most common grouping of elemental spirits contains eight orders known as Lhasrin Degye (Lha-srin sde-bryad). These and other spirits appear as solitary entities, brotherhoods and sisterhoods of varying number, and with entourages of subsidiary spirits and animals.



11 *Zenpar* with figures of monk (left), woman (centre) and man (right) to be used as substitutes for actual human victims (12 cm)



12 Figures of man and woman substitutes (left) and the quartet of demons known as Dudshi grasping a sword, flower, jewel and wheel (26 cm). Images of patients and demons are customarily depicted together on *zenpar*, revealing underlying ideas about the aetiology of disease and misfortune in Tibet



13 This *lingka* with bound limbs was carved on the end of a *zenpar* with an octagonal cross-section

14 *Lingka* (11 cm). The harm-absorbing scapegoat with crossed limbs emerging from such moulds is sometimes ritually stabbed with a dagger or hit with a miniature arrow





15 From left to right: woman, man and monk substitutes for the demons, dog and yak appeasement offerings for demons of the She Nying Duddok ritual. The four Dudshi demons on horseback are on the reverse side of the board (12.5 cm)



16 Man and woman substitutes and Dudshi demons of the She Nying Duddok and Gyashi rituals (24 cm)



17 Four sides of a *zenpar* (31 cm).  
Upper face: horse for offering, arrow, notched board, spear with flag, *mamo* demoness, *gyalpo*, *dud* and *tsen* demons, *lingka*.  
Upper middle face: ten of the twelve astrological animals (mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, bird).  
Lower middle face: remaining two astrological animals (dog, pig), five offering animals, birdman (*shang-shang*), bird.  
Lower face: animals including the horned eagle (fifth in line) of the sky, earth's surface and underworld in the retinues of various spirits





18 *Lingka*, *dud* and *gyalpo* demons, *lingka*, and *sabdak*, *tsen* and *shinje* demons (37 cm)



19 Infernal *shinje* spirits wielding notched boards and snares (29 cm). These boards, known as a *tramshing* (*khram-shing*), are traced to pre-Buddhist ritual practices and are probably one of the prototypes of *zenpar*. The *tramshing* is brandished by highly wrathful spirits



20 Snake, scorpion and frog of the underworld and the head of what appears to be a *damsri* fiend (26 cm)

### Tibetan astrology and other auspicious symbols in *zenpar*

In addition to the ubiquitous demons and effigies, *zenpar* bear intaglio images of the main components of the Tibetan astrological system. That is because Tibetan ritualists rely upon astrological calculations to determine the cause of an illness or demonic attack and the remedial measures required to neutralise it. Astrology is also harnessed to ascertain the time when a ritual will be most effective and the direction in which offerings should be given to noxious spirits.

Divination of ritual specifications notwithstanding, astrological calculations are applied to understand the kind of obstacles, misfortunes, accidents and spirit visitations a person will suffer in his or her lifetime. This intelligence is seen as essential in the ritual battle against illness and harmful spirits. By taking into account combinations of the twelve-year animal cycle, eight trigrams, nine magic numbers, eight planets and five or eight astrological elements, Tibetan astrologers determine adverse years and episodes in an individual's life. Representations

of these astrological parameters, such as those that grace *zenpar*, are believed to help pacify malefic influences associated with them.

Other common motifs in *zenpar* include the Eight Auspicious Symbols, the Seven Signs of Royal Dominion, Five Sense Offerings, and the Eight Auspicious Ingredients of Indian tradition, and the Nine Types of Armour and Weapons of the warrior spirits in the indigenous tradition (21–23).

### Conclusion

*Zenpar* exemplify the highly proficient craftsmanship and profound spiritual imagination of the Tibetan people. These figured boards offer us a vignette of an amazing traditional culture and way of life fast disappearing in the modern world.

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John Vincent Bellazza is a Senior Research Fellow at the Tibet Center, University of Virginia. In addition to numerous articles, his nine monographs include *The Dawn of Tibet* (2014), *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet* (2008) and *Calling Down the Gods* (2005). For more information about his research and exploration, see [www.tibetarchaeology.com](http://www.tibetarchaeology.com).





- 21 Upper face: animals that fly and walk in the circle of various elemental spirits.  
 Upper middle face: flaming jewels, dharma wheel and the Eight Auspicious Symbols (wheel, lotus, victory banner, conch, endless knot, vase, pair of golden fish and parasol).  
 Lower middle face: Dudshi demons, *gyalpo* demon, horse and elephant offerings, bestowing and tutelary deities.  
 Lower face: yak and dog appeasement offerings for the Dudshi, woman, man and monk substitutes, and the Dudshi (27 cm)



- 22 *Sabdak* demons of the nine magical numbers and the eight trigrams (34.5 cm)



- 23 Six and eight-petalled lotuses and other floral motifs for the Gyashi ritual (66 cm)