

Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, Charles Ramble, Christian Luczanits

Chapter 1: *Tsakali* Illuminated Cards: Physical Description, Function and Context

Abstract: In this chapter, the Zhangzhung Nyengyü *tsakali* set will be presented as a physical, written artefact based on a preliminary visual assessment, undertaken with the naked eye and simple tools that can easily be used in the reading room of any library. Basic catalogue and codicological information will be provided: size, form and condition; the type of language, script, illustrations and textual content; and initial macroscopic observations on materials and technological features, retrieved with a Dino-Lite digital microscope. The set will be described on a comparative basis and in the context of its social history and artistic and cultural affiliation.

1 *Tsakali* as heritage objects

There are two common translations for *tsakali* (Tib. *tsa ka li* or *tsakli*) in the existing literature: ‘miniature painting’¹ and ‘initiation card’. While the former stresses their miniature size, the latter emphasises the function of such miniature paintings that come in sets.

It is therefore questionable whether all paintings published under the term *tsakali* should be designated as such. For example, the earliest object likened to a *tsakali* is from Dunhuang (The British Library IOL Tib J 1364),² but it seems that this two-sided painting on a stick is a different type of ritual object. Equally, *tsakali* have to be distinguished from *sādhana* collections, such as the four volumes comprising 510 paintings preserved at the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich.³ Although similar to *tsakali* in format, these specific paintings are based on a print from Narthang and do not entail specific rituals.

The following account, then, largely focuses on the initiation cards that accompany ritual practice in both the Buddhist and Bon religions. *Tsakali* are associated with Tibetan culture, but are occasionally also affiliated with Naxi or other non-Buddhist religious systems.

1 Dagyal 1977, 41.

2 van Schaik 2016, 230; Doumy 2017 or Doumy 2023.

3 Willson and Brauen (eds) 2000.

Dan Martin notes on his blog that the word *tsa ka li* is found in certain Kanjur and Tanjur texts, and is a transcription of an Indic term that has never been identified.⁴ This statement somehow reflects how little has been written about the historical origins of this category of object. So far, they have mostly been considered in the context of exhibitions as representatives of much larger sets that are dispersed across many collections.

Though the historical origins of *tsakali* are not clear, their emergence parallels that of Tibetan scroll paintings (*thangkas*), with rare examples potentially predating 1200 CE, but the first large collections datable to the thirteenth century. The earliest datable published examples are traced to the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, but *tsakali* have become popular in Mongolia as well, where they continue to be produced.⁵ Further, it is notable that while earlier sets of initiation cards are largely figurative, later sets include a wide variety of imagery.

A group of early *tsakali*, painted in what is termed the eastern Indian painting style (*shar bris*), derive from a Taklung school context and can be dated between 1266 and 1297 on the basis of the dedication on their backs. The borderless cards are of two main types: red and black ink on a gold background, or red and gold on a red background. Sixty-six of them are included in a recent study on Taklung painting.⁶ It is clear from their content, mainly teacher portraits and deities, that these were part of much larger sets. For example, among the gold-background paintings are Rāhu and two constellations personified as goddesses, and among the red-background paintings are what were probably two distinct groups of twenty-one Tārās: one group of wrathful Tārās, all of which share the same iconography,⁷ and another group following the tradition of Sūryagupta, with a different iconography for each form.⁸ Furthermore, there is also some variation in size, which indicates that they were not meant to be kept in a stack. As Jane Casey points out, there is some indication that these cards were once consecration con-

4 Martin 2024.

5 As with *thangkas*, the market context from which many of the published examples derive favours earlier examples and the earliest possible dates. A more complete picture can be gained from the pages on initiation cards, Himalayan Art Resources, <<http://www.himalayanart.org/>> (accessed on 1 September 2024).

6 Casey 2023, 928–1040. The final three examples are painted in colour in at least two different styles, and thus do not belong to the two types referred to. Five of this group have been the subject of a study by Amy Heller (1997), with three of those in the Newark Museum collection (Reynolds 1999, 237–239).

7 Casey 2023; *Tsakali* 30–46.

8 Casey 2023; *Tsakali* 49–54. It is likely that, based on their number, the first group also represents the twenty-one Tārās. Casey (2023) does not attempt to identify the Sūryagupta forms individually.

tent, that is inserted into an image or stupa as part of its consecration.⁹ The same applies to a somewhat later set of paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum that was found within a 41.9 cm high gilt Buddha image.¹⁰ In this case, some of the paintings are larger than others, and it is unclear if any of them is inscribed on the back. Thus, initiation cards can be used as part of the consecration content of images or *chörten* (*mchod rten*), although we cannot be sure that they were originally made for this purpose.¹¹

For two early sets of *tsakali*, both described by Amy Heller, radiocarbon dates of the paper are available. Three paintings from the Roncoroni collection depicting female protective deities (*ma mo*) are painted on paper dated to between 1175 and 1250.¹² Likewise, the paper of another set, now at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art, has been carbon-dated between 1174 and 1293 CE.¹³ Stylistically, these Rubin Museum paintings are rather puzzling and indicate a more recent date.¹⁴

While the sets mentioned so far are fragmentary, a complete *tsakali* set is kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the accession nos 2000.282.1 to 2000.282.25.¹⁵ Attributed to the early fifteenth century, this set is dedicated to the deities of the Vajraguhya mandala. Fig. 1 shows the mandala deities with the cards in their relative positions to one another, as can be deduced from the respective colours of the figures. The two dark blue deities above are the primordial Buddhas Samantabhadra and Vajradhāra, while the six figures below are those that appear in the six realms of rebirth, each in the guise of their respective realms. As is commonly the case, the cards' different states of wear suggest that some were more exposed than others.

⁹ Casey 2023, 928–933.

¹⁰ Search for 'IM.121-1910' on <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/>> (accessed on 1 September 2024) for the Buddha image along with some of the paintings found inside it in the early twentieth century. Adding a letter of the alphabet immediately after '121' reveals further images of this set. The set on the Himalayan Art Resources site, <<https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=5492>> (accessed on 1 September 2024), is more comprehensive, but also incomplete.

¹¹ The repetition of the same subject multiple times may be an indicator of some of the illuminated cards' being used as consecration content.

¹² Heller 2010, 73–74. Obviously, the date range provided in the article is not the actual radiocarbon date, which comes with a percentage and a margin of error.

¹³ See Himalayan Art Resources, 'Initiation Cards: Nyingma Lineage Card Set', <<https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=120>> (accessed on 1 September 2024). Dates are provided for the individual paintings. Curiously, these somewhat larger paintings are painted on double sheets of paper that were glued together, as is most clearly visible on their versos.

¹⁴ This set compares to the one that is the focus of this book in the awkward way that beards of the figures are drawn (see Christian Luczanits's contribution).

¹⁵ Van Dyke and Campbell 2015; Behrendt 2015.



Fig. 1: *Tsakali* set with the deities of the Vajraguhya mandala; Tibet, early fifteenth century; opaque watercolour on paper; each painting $6\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$ in. (16×14.5 cm), New York, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 2000 (2000.282.1). Photo in the public domain; arrangement of deities proposed by Christian Luczanits.

As stated above, later collections tend to be more diverse. A good impression of this diversity is reflected in the Himalayan Art Resources site's collection of recent paintings on the subjects of the *Treasure of Precious Revealed Treasures* (*Rin chen gter mdzod*).¹⁶ A notable Mongolian *tsakali* collection is the c. three-hundred *tsakali* collected by Hans Leder in the area of Erdeni-zu Monastery, today held in European collections.¹⁷

These *tsakali* collections can be of any size, from a few cards to hundreds. Preserved sets often range from twenty-five to more than three-hundred. Today, only a careful consideration of their workmanship, material and size allows us to conclude whether cards of a present-day set were originally meant to be used together. Often the numbers indicate only how many of the cards were preserved, and this number may be accidental, especially if a particular set of *tsakali* was used by more than one person. The large number of these objects that have been preserved may indicate a high demand for such images and their common use in ritual and daily practice.

As the examples above already demonstrate, initiation cards are made with a wide range of materials and vary considerably with regard to artistic quality. Some show evidence of sophisticated workshop production and high-quality materials, while others are rather low in quality. The quality of a set is determined by who ordered the set and the artist or workshop that made it. The choice of materials was probably also dependent on what was available at any given time and place. Each set of *tsakali* could have been ordered for a specific person or ritual, but it could also have been produced for personal use by practitioners. The cards are ritualistic in nature, and not primarily intended to be decorative. Their function has absolute priority over aesthetic considerations. Nevertheless, some sets, such as the collection examined in this study, were carefully executed, and beautifully drawn and painted.

According to Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, a set of *tsakali* can be manufactured from any kind of paper or material that is not especially poisonous. In the case of a *tsakali*, a thangka or any other kind of image or print, a paper or cloth support is first prepared. This is then usually treated with a mixture of medicinal substances such as the 'six excellent ones' (*zangdruk* or *zangpodruk*, *bzang po drug*), immersed in water with a binding agent. The treatment may be understood as a purification, intended to avoid ritual pollution. For any kind of religious

¹⁶ See Himalayan Art Resources, 'Initiation Cards: Rinchen Terdzö Master List', <<https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1924>> (accessed on 1 September 2024). Each of the volume links leads to a set of *tsakali* relating to it.

¹⁷ Valente de Andrade 2007; Czaja 2013.

object (not only paintings), it is necessary to use the best-quality materials. However, it is often emphasised by Tibetan masters and practitioners that it is not always possible to fulfil this requirement. When high-quality materials cannot be obtained, any kind of paper or other material may be used.

The cards could be drawn or painted on either paper or canvas, or both as in the case of the *tsakali* preserved in the Drangsong collection.¹⁸ More recent cards may also be printed, since printing technology allowed for cheaper manufacturing; printed *tsakali* could be coloured in later if desired. Sometimes they might have been drawn ad hoc in a very simple way, as long as the practitioner was able to associate the image depicted with the practice required. When made of paper, the cards are usually composed of glued layers, in a similar way as Tibetan book leaves.

Typically, the recto side may bear a brief caption indicating the identity of the object or personality featured; the verso, which is not illuminated, will contain a stanza of praise to the subject. Either the recto or verso side, or sometimes both, will bear a number or letter, since the sequence of cards is an important feature of such collections. The depictions on the recto side of each card represent an object, a set of objects or, more commonly, a divine or human personality that is associated with the tradition in question. The great majority of such collections represent the historical figures constituting the spiritual lineage along which its teachings were transmitted, while the deities are those that the practitioner should invoke and visualise in the course of the ritual performance.

If we include miniature paintings, the themes chosen may include the entire Buddhist or Bon pantheon and ritual realm. A good illustration of this wide thematic scope is the Leder Collection, described by Olaf Czaja.¹⁹ It is difficult to differentiate them from painted scrolls (*thangkas*), with the size often being cited as the decisive factor.²⁰ In terms of materials, *thangkas* are usually made on textile with elaborated brocade or silk frames, while *tsakali* are usually much smaller in size and have a simple border framing the figures or symbols in the painting.

¹⁸ Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2023.

¹⁹ Czaja 2013.

²⁰ Several studies indicate a maximum of 20 cm in height.

2 *Tsakali* as ritual objects

Tsakali are employed in numerous ritual situations such as initiation ceremonies, empowerment rites, ritual mandalas or transmissions of teachings. The cards may substitute the ceremonial items they depict, help in visualisation, delimit sacred space or serve as aids to transfer the consciousness of the deceased during funeral rituals. They are used in initiation rituals to empower neophytes in the particular domain of religion they represent. As a tool for passing knowledge from master to student, any given set may well have been designed and produced specifically for a person at a particular level of spirituality. It is also possible that certain cards may have been produced later as the learning process continued.

Cards of the same set often reflect different states of preservation, and it is immediately possible to see which cards were used most often. Thus, if the owner of a particular set is known, we can discern which practice he was most often involved in. A *tsakali* set may provide a visual summary of a regular practice. We may ask how private these sets were: were they used by one master, were they inherited, and were they used by many students?

Many ritual performances entail the recitation of the names of the members of the lineage, and, during the performance, the officiating lama may hold up the images of each figure as the corresponding name is recited. Tibetan Bon and Buddhism are for the most part esoteric traditions, and disciples are not permitted to engage in a ritual or meditative practice, or even so much as to read the accompanying texts, without having first been initiated into the system. It is in the context of such initiation or ‘empowerment’ rituals that *tsakali* are most commonly used. At a certain point in the procedure, the master will touch the disciple’s head with the stack of *tsakali* to signify that he or she is now an authorised inheritor of the spiritual teachings they embody.

The great majority of such collections depict the historical figures constituting the spiritual lineage in which its teachings were transmitted, while the deities are those that the practitioner should invoke and visualise in the course of the ritual performance. Typically – as in the case of the collection considered here – the recto side may bear the polychrome image of a divinity, saint or sacred object, as well as the card index number, and, on the verso side, a passage of text of varying length quoting a scripture related to the corresponding image. The recto side may also bear a brief caption indicating the identity of the object or personality featured. From the text included on the *tsakali*, we can learn something about the identity of the figures painted on the recto side, but this does not tell us when, where or by whom the cards were produced.



Fig. 2: Recently made *tsakali* featuring minor protective divinities called the ‘four sentinels’ (*kha srung bzhi*) being used in a vampire-subjugation (*sri gnon*) ritual in Kagbeni, Nepal (2010).

According to Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, collections of *tsakali* are still widely used nowadays during initiations and other important ceremonies (see Fig. 2). He gives the following explanation of their use:

Both *tsakali* and *thangkas* have similar functions, but *tsakali* are used more when we do rituals, mostly initiations. So there are *tsakali* painted with the divinities, *tsakali* painted with lineage masters: individual lineage masters [depicted] one by one, [or] sometimes a group of lineage masters – it depends on how it is organised. As for their usage, [they are used] when we perform initiations. When we perform initiations or empowerment rites for a deity, there are different parts. Empowerment of the mandala uses such things as the vase, [while] empowerment of divinities uses the *tsakali* painted with the deities. Empowerment with the lineage masters [entails] showing each *tsakali*. Then there’s a prayer, a verse, and then normally practitioners have to imagine their particular lineage, whichever lineage is showing; and then, from his body speech, mind, crown, throat and heart, [there emanates] blue or white light (points at crown), red light (points at throat) or blue light (points at heart), representing all as the essence of the enlightened [ones], blessings, and the empowerment of the enlightened body, speech and mind of the particular master or divinity. So the lama who

gives the transmission also has to feel and imagine ... in a similar way, giving the blessings through this support of these *tsakali*, and the receivers have to imagine that. That is why we use *tsakali* as a support. The lama shows [the card], and then what is written on the back of the *tsakali* is basically some kind of phrase reflecting the certain enlightened qualities that master or divinity is endowed with. And then, the practitioner who receives the initiation, connecting and reflecting on these qualities, should try to fill the connection with certain notions and then receive blessings. That is what we have to do.²¹

3 The set of sixty-five *tsakali*: Physical description

The collection of illuminated cards that is the focus of this study contains sixty-five *tsakali* initiation cards belonging to the Dzogchen Zhangzhung Nyengyü system of the Bon religion. Each card is 9.4 cm in width by 20.2 cm in height. The cards were produced from one or sometimes more laminated sheets of paper of uniform size. In the latter case, one sheet was pasted to another by coating the page with an adhesive. A photograph of some of the items in the collection is shown in Fig. 3. According to numbers visible on the upper margins of the recto sides of the cards, there are two groups: Bundle 1, containing cards numbered from 0 to 57 (with nos 10 and 41 missing), and Bundle 2, containing eight cards designated by the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H. The whole set of *tsakali* is described in the appendix.



Fig. 3: Illuminated cards called *tsakali* belonging to the Zhangzhung Nyengyü belief system.

²¹ The interview with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche was conducted via Skype by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny and Charles Ramble on 16 July 2023.

4 The inscriptions on the *tsakali*

Unlike earlier forms of the religion, Tantric Buddhism is an esoteric tradition in which advanced meditation techniques may be practised effectively and safely only by those who have been initiated by a qualified master. This is a principle that it shares with Bon, and it applies not only to the practice of tantra, but also to the system that is considered to be the apex of all spiritual endeavour, the Great Perfection, Dzogchen (rDzogs chen). These empowerments are passed down through a lineage from master to disciple, either in person or through visions, and any spiritual tradition for which an unbroken line of transmission cannot be demonstrated is regarded as inauthentic or invalid. Certain metaphysical techniques are said to have been discontinued precisely because the relevant authority died before being able to transmit it to a successor. This is the case, for example, of the Tantric technique known as *phowa drongjuk* ('pho ba 'grong 'jug), the ability to project one's consciousness into another body, whether human or animal, and thenceforth to occupy it as if it were one's own. That lineage – or, at least, the Buddhist version of it, as the Bonpo strand is said to remain unbroken – is considered to have come to an end when the last adept, who had entered the body of a bird, was killed by a rival. Disciples who are initiated into a spiritual practice are therefore inheriting the powers not only of their master, but of *all* the previous masters in the transmission line, which often – as is the case of the tradition with which we are concerned here – begins in a superhuman realm.

As part of the initiation process, the disciple sits in front of the master, at a somewhat lower level, and is shown each of the cards in turn while the master reads out the inscription on the verso side. The inscriptions on the set of *tsakali* that are the subject of this book are written in headless, *ume* (*dbu med*) script, and range in length from seven to ten lines, most of them being eight or nine lines long.²² The pattern is the same in each case:

²² The appendix provides Romanised transliterations and translations of all the *tsakali*. The text contains numerous contracted forms (*bskungs yig*) that are presented first in a form approximating the contraction, then expanded in parentheses, with no emendations of heterodox orthography. The text has not been edited, and only in a few cases have improved readings been suggested (in brackets, preceded by the sign <) to clarify the meaning or to justify the translation. The numbering of the *tsakali* follows the sequence applied by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak. Each number is succeeded by the letter the *tsakali* bears on its recto side and the numerical equivalent of that letter immediately afterwards in parentheses. The fourth element is the caption under the figure on the recto side. Where the caption differs from the usual form of the name or contains extraneous material (in some captions the name is prefaced by *sras* or *de sras*, signifying '[spiritual] son

1. An opening exclamatory expression *e ma ho* – ‘how wonderful!’
2. Praise to the master represented on the recto, with a short statement of the significant quality or achievement attributed to him.
3. A sentence declaring that the master, who is like a spiritual essence, is bestowing an empowerment on the disciple, who is compared to an empty vessel waiting to be filled.
4. An aspiration that the disciple be empowered with the qualities or achievements of the master on the card being shown (no. 2 above).
5. A concluding threefold mantra: *A phad / ōṃ phad / hūṃ phad /*

Nos 1, 3 and 5 are unvarying, while nos 2 and 4 change according to the master in each case (see the card images in the appendix). The inscriptions on the cards that do not feature lineage masters are more varied, but all begin with the same exclamatory expression, and contain the aspiration that the disciple be empowered with the qualities represented by the image.

The cards are numbered according to two systems. At the top of the verso of each card is an Arabic numeral written in blue pen. These numbers were added by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, the senior teacher of the Bonpo community in exile, in 1986, when he first received the cards and was setting them in the proper order. The top of the recto side in each case bears a letter, following the convention used for identifying the volumes of multi-volume scriptural works. These letters were added by the painter, who would have written them at the same time as the captions for each figure, found directly under the image in the same red ink.

The first *tsakali* depicts a vase, *bumpa* (*bum pa*), which conventionally stands for a mandala, and hence the universe. Whether it bore a letter at the top is unknown due to damage – only the lower part has survived. In any event, the sequence of lineage holders begins with the second card, no. 1, which shows the Primordial Buddha. The first nine figures are all divine beings, and we would expect them to be marked from *ka* (the first letter of the Tibetan alphabet) to *ta* (the ninth letter). Although they have been numbered sequentially on the verso from 1 to 9, the sequence of letters on the recto actually runs as follows: *ka*, *kha*, *nga*, {*ca*}, *na*, *ca*, *pa*, *pha* and *ba*, corresponding to the numbers 1, 2, 4, {5}, 12, 5, 13, 14 and 15. The fourth and sixth *tsakali* both have the letter *ca*, but the double brackets around the first set (represented here by braces) suggest that it may belong to a different part of the collection; the letters of the fifth to ninth *tsakali* may perhaps be similarly explained.

[of the figure on the preceding card]’, or followed by *la*, ‘[transmitted] to’), the more usual form of the name is also given in parentheses.

The collection examined in this volume contains eight *tsakali* that (apart from the vase mentioned above) do not depict members of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü transmission. They have accordingly not been numbered on the verso by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, but they do have ordinal letters on the recto side. However, since some of these letters are shared by other *tsakali* in the collection, they are identified here by the (arbitrarily allocated) Roman letters A to H. The figures on these *tsakali* may be described briefly here.

{NGA} (4) The Cosmic Buddhas of the Five Families

Bottom: gSal ba rang byung, east, head of the Swastika Family
 Left: dGa' ba don grub, south, head of the Jewel Family
 Top: Bye brag dngos med, west, head of the Lotus Family
 Right: dGe lha gar phyug, north, head of the Wheel Family
 Centre: Kun snang khyab pa, centre, head of the Mind Family

The five *tsakali* B to F depict five of a group of divinities called the six subduing *shen* ('dul ba'i gshen drug). As mentioned in Chapter 2, each of these is responsible for the potential liberation of the beings inhabiting the six samsaric realms. During the phase of supplementary preliminary practice known as the 'inner distinction' (*nang gi ru shan*), disciples visualise themselves as each of these divinities in turn, with the aspiration to liberate the inhabitants of their respective realms. The *tsakali* contain certain anomalies. Conventionally, the Shen and their realms are the following:

Gods: Ye gshen gtsug phud
 Titans: lCe rgyal bar ti
 Humans: gSang ba 'dus pa
 Animals: Ti sangs rang zhi
 Hungry ghosts: Mu cho ldem drug
 Hell-beings: gSang ba ngang ring

Ye gshen gtsug phud is missing from the collection. In *tsakali* D (TA), gSang ba ngang ring, who should be responsible for hell-beings, has been allocated to the animal realm, while the usual master of the latter, Ti sang rang bzhin, has been put in charge of the hells. *Tsakali* B (NYA) depicts gSang ba 'dus pa, who is responsible for humans, but on the verso he is named as gSang ba ngang ring, which we assume to be a simple scribal error.

The last two *tsakali*, G ('I) and H ({ZA}), represent masters who do not appear to have any connection with the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, and have probably been included in this collection by accident. The verso of the former is blank, while the

text on the verso of the latter is written in a different hand from that of the scribe of all the other *tsakali*.

5 Paper

Within Bundle 1, when looking at the backlit paper of these *tsakali*, woven and laid papers could be identified. Card no. 23, depicting [De sras] gYung 'phan; card no. 25, depicting [De sras] dGe 'phan; and card no. D, depicting gSang ba ngang ring, were produced on a type of laid paper (Type 1). The remaining fifty-five (out of fifty-seven) cards are on a type of woven paper, however of two different qualities. Type 2a, a woven paper without any fibre bundles of 'cloudy' fibre distribution, was observed on *tsakali* nos 1–5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 34 and 56, and a slightly rougher Type 2b, a woven paper with many fibre bundles, was observed on *tsakali* nos 6, 8, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28–33, 35–40, 42–55, 57–58. In Bundle 2, one *tsakali* contained the laid paper of Type 1, three cards contained the woven paper without fibre bundles of Type 2a, and four cards contained the woven paper with many fibre bundles of Type 2b. A summary of the results is presented in the appendix at the end of the book.

