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# ASPECTS OF THE ORIGIN OF THE BUDDHIST TRADITION IN TIBET

BY

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It is a remarkable paradox that there is no word in Tibetan for “Buddhism”, in spite of the fact that the Tibetans—at least up to the Chinese occupation of their country in the 1950’s—have preserved a Buddhist culture which to all intents and purposes has remained uninfluenced by the European presence in Asia.

Tibetans do not think of themselves as “Buddhist”—they are either čhos-pa, “followers of čhos”, or bon-po, “followers of bon”. The čhos-pa, who are divided into a number of separate schools or traditions, of which the Gelugpa, the Kagyutpa, the Sakyapa and the Nyingmapa represent the major divisions<sup>1)</sup>, constitute the vast majority of the population. The bon-po were, at least in recent times, a relatively small minority. Exactly how small the minority was, we have no means of saying to-day<sup>2)</sup>. In all probability it was—particularly in Amdo, in Kham, and in the Himalayan regions—far from negligible. Even in Central Tibet, the very centre of Gelugpa orthodoxy, the bon-pos had monasteries with several hundred monks<sup>3)</sup>.

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1) For an up-to-date appraisal of these schools and their characteristic teachings, see G. Tucci *Die Religionen Tibets*, vol. 20 of *Die Religionen der Menschheit*, Stuttgart 1970, p. 47-58 and p. 62-127.

2) Information contained in European sources regarding the geographical distribution of the bon-pos in Tibet has been summarized by H. Hoffmann *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion*, Wiesbaden 1950, p. 236-243. Information obtained from bon-po refugees in India makes it clear that this summary, though the best that could be made at the time, by no means gives an adequate picture of the actual number of monasteries etc.

3) The most important were g-Yuñ-druñ-gliñ and sMan-ri, both in the province of gCañ. They are marked on the map on p. 283 of *A Cultural History of Tibet* by D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, London 1968. sMan-ri is described in my article “Remarques sur l’administration d’un monastère bonpo” to appear shortly in *Journal Asiatique*.

What, then, is the difference between a bon-po and a čhos-pa? And what are the relations of both to Indian religion, to Buddhism, to dharma? This is the problem towards the solution of which I hope to contribute in this article. The literary sources at our disposal are of two kinds:

1. Manuscripts, of religious as well as purely secular contents, written in an archaic form of Tibetan and discovered at the turn of the century in one of the chambers, walled up in or about 1035 A.D., in the cave temples at Tun-huang in North-west China.

2. Lamaist literature, philosophical as well as historical, composed by bon-pos as well as čhos-pas; that which has been preserved does not seem to have been written before c. 1000 A.D. although it clearly also includes traditions which are considerably older.

Taken as a whole, our sources represent a vast literature which has so far been only partially explored and utilized. Further, new texts are constantly being discovered among the Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. These refugees—and among them are many hundred adherents of bon—in themselves represent a rich field of research for those wishing to study Tibetan religion; but there is no time to be lost—traditional social and religious patterns are already rapidly disintegrating.

The following is based partly on a study of the relevant Tibetan texts, partly on conversation and study with bon-po monks, in particular the learned abbot, Sangye Tenzin Jongdong who since 1968 has been the abbot of the newly founded bon-po monastery in India.

Followers of čhos as well as of bon designate themselves—and each other—as nañ-pa, “insiders”, in contrast to all foreigners (Indians, Chinese, Europeans) who are phyi-pa, “outsiders”<sup>4</sup>). The occasional Christian or Muslim Tibetan is likewise phyi-pa. If there is a word in Tibetan for “Buddhist”, it is nañ-pa, which, as we have seen, also includes bon-pos<sup>5</sup>). Even the most cursory examining of bon-po literature makes it abundantly clear that it is a genuine Buddhist literature; bon-po monks, as anyone who has lived with them can attest, are Buddhist, and have the same patterns of faith, study, and monastic life as čhos-pa monks<sup>6</sup>). Adherents of čhos as well as of bon call the

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4) Presumably a Mongolian Buddhist is also reckoned as nañ-pa. Of other Buddhists, the Tibetans have had practically no knowledge.

5) That nañ-pa also includes bon-pos, is confirmed by R. B. Ekvall *Religious Observances in Tibet*, Chicago 1964, p. 23.

6) Those who have, like the present writer, been in close contact with bon-po

founder of their religion Sañs-rgyas, i.e. Buddha, and they strive—using identical means—to attain byañ-čhub, “Awakening” (sc. bodhi). An investigation of čhos and bon in the form they still exist as living traditions can only lead to the conclusion that both are “Buddhist”—or, since we are dealing with Tibetan culture, “lamaist” 7).

However, the problem is not so simple as these preliminary remarks may seem to indicate. If “Buddha” is understood as the historical figure Śākyamuni who lived in Northern India in the 5th century B.C., the bon-pos are not—neither in their own eyes nor in those of other Tibetans—“Buddhists”; or rather, the bon-pos are—but then only in their own eyes—the *only true* Buddhists. For who was Buddha? Buddha was known in the world as sTon-pa gŠen-rab, “The Teacher Shen-rab”, and his biography is to be found, as any bon-po knows, in the two volumes of “gZer-mig” 8). sTon-pa gŠen-rab lived in the country of sTag-gzig which is generally placed rather vaguely somewhere to the west or north-west of Tibet 9), and, according to the bon-po scholar Ņi-ma bstan-'jin (b. 1813), he was born (reckoning from 1961) 17.977 years ago 10). The same author places the birth of Sid-

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monks, can testify that these monks often combine remarkable learning with a genuinely Buddhist ethos. “Educated *bonpo* monks are brought up in the *dGe-lugs-pa* (“Yellow Hat”) Way, trained in conventional Buddhist philosophy and logic and receiving after examination and debate the academic degree of *dGe-bšes*”. (Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, London 1967, p. 2).

7) This fact has been strongly underlined by Dr. Snellgrove throughout the above-mentioned volume. My conclusions in this respect, although identical with Dr. Snellgrove's, have been reached independently of him.

8) The first seven of the eighteen chapters of “gZer-mig” have been published and translated by A. H. Francke in *Asia Major* 1924, 1926, 1927, 1930 and 1939. The contents of the whole book have been summarized by H. Hoffmann *The Religions of Tibet*, London 1961, p. 85-96.

9) It is not necessary to enter into a detailed discussion of the various “holy countries” of the bon-pos such as Žaň-žuň, 'Ol-mo luň-riň and sTag-gzig. In the fully elaborated tradition, as illustrated by two folding maps in *Tibetan Žang Žung Dictionary*, published by the Bonpo Foundation, Delhi 1965 (Lahore Press), three such “holy countries” are described; of these the two first would seem to be purely mythical, while the third is placed in Northern Tibet: 1) “The cave of Žaň-žuň (i.e. Inner Žaň-žuň, also called rTag-gzigs (or) 'Ol(-mo luň-riň))” 2) “Central Žaň-žuň”, to the south of which lies 3) “The Door of Žaň-žuň” (i.e. “Outer Žaň-žuň”).

10) See my article “A Chronological Table of the Bon-po: The *bstan rcis* of Ņi-ma bstan-'jin” in *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen), vol. 33. Ņi-ma bstan-'jin's work will be referred to hereafter as “bsTan-rcis” followed by the number of the relevant paragraph.

dhārtha Gautama in 960 B.C.—much too early, of course, but nevertheless within a reasonable historical perspective<sup>11</sup>). It is further stated that the doctrine of gṣen-rab will last for 12.023 years (again reckoning from 1961), while that of Śākyamuni will only last for 2159 years<sup>12</sup>).

The bon-pos consequently deny that Buddhism in their sense of the word reached Tibet from India. On the contrary, it was brought by gṣen-rab from sTag-gzig to the country of Žaṅ-žuṅ<sup>13</sup>). This country is generally placed in Northern or North-Western Tibet, and would seem to have included the area surrounding Mount Kailāsa<sup>14</sup>). From Žaṅ-žuṅ the Doctrine was brought to Tibet and the holy texts translated from the language of Žaṅ-žuṅ.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to deal with the question of the “language of Žaṅ-žuṅ”. It is well-known that the holy texts of the čos-pa have been translated from Sanscrit or Chinese and that they are prefaced by the title in the language in question transcribed in Tibetan characters. In the same way, the holy books of the bon-pos commence with a title which is generally stated to be “in the language of Žaṅ-žuṅ”. The authenticity of such language was formerly occasionally questioned<sup>15</sup>), and it has been suspected of being a pious fabrication intended to take the place of Sanscrit. The problem is further complicated by the fact that certain other “languages” have the same function: “The Heavenly Language of sTag-gzig”, “The Language of the Svastika-Gods”, etc. Further, one of the čos-pa schools, the Nying-mapa, has at least two “languages” of the same kind: the language “of U-rgyan”, and the language “of Bru-ša”. While there can be little doubt that these “languages” are, in fact, fabrications (this does not, of course, prevent them from forming coherent systems of syllabic symbols), it

11) bsTan-rcis 38. His nirvāna is placed in 880 B.C. It is worth noting that he is never referred to as “Buddha”, but as “Śākyamuni”.

12) Id. 230.

13) See Snellgrove *Nine Ways*, p. 14.

14) See Hoffmann “Zur Literatur der Bon-po”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft (ZDMG)* vol. 94, p. 169-188; id. *Quellen*, p. 212-213; R. A. Stein *La civilisation tibétaine*, Paris 1962, p. 16.

15) For instance by Hoffmann in “Zur Literatur der Bon-po”, where he does, however, not exclude the possibility of some texts being authentic translations. Stein, too, speaks of titles in the idiom “of Bru-ša” or Žaṅ-žuṅ” as “pious reconstructions” (*Civilisation*, p. 200). However, in the article “Žaṅ-žuṅ: the Holy Language of the Tibetan Bon-po” (*ZDMG* 1967, p. 376-381), Professor Hoffmann concludes, on the basis of the same material as Dr. Haarh, that we are dealing with an authentic language.

would seem that there can no longer be serious doubt that Buddhist texts have, in fact, existed in the language of Žaň-žuň. That Žaň-žuň actually existed as a non-Tibetan country at the time of the emergence of the Tibetan national dynasty (7th cent. A.D.), is an established fact—it is mentioned often enough in the historical texts discovered at Tun-huang<sup>16</sup>). A text, identified as a medical text, written in what apparently is the Žaň-žuň language, has even been found at Tun-huang<sup>17</sup>). However, we now possess a bilingual, Žaň-žuň/Tibetan text, “mJod-phug” (“Treasure-Cave”), with a commentary by *Dran-ṣa nam-mkha'*, a bon-po siddha (tantric adept) who lived in the 8th century<sup>18</sup>). We further possess a collection of quotations and shorter passages in the Žaň-žuň language<sup>19</sup>) which have been thoroughly analysed by Dr. Eric Haarh<sup>20</sup>). Dr. Haarh concludes that the language of Žaň-žuň “belongs to the West Tibetan languages, most probably among the complex Pronominalized dialects of the Western group, following the terminology of the Linguistic Survey of India”<sup>21</sup>). In other words, it is related to a number of languages spoken to-day in the Western Himalayas, and Dr. Haarh has established identity between the numerals as well as many syntactic particles in these languages and the language of Žaň-žuň. During a short visit to Himachal Pradesh in 1970 I was able to collect further material from a speaker of Kanauri, one of the languages in question, and one is undeniably surprised when one hears Žaň-žuň words used as the most natural thing in the world. Of the numerous examples I collected, I shall only give one: “god” is in Žaň-žuň *sad*<sup>22</sup>)—and in Kanauri *sät*!

16) See Bacot, Thomas and Toussaint “Documents de Touen-Houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet”, *Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque d'études*, 51, Paris 1940-46, passim.

17) F. W. Thomas “Žaň-žuň Language”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1933, p. 405-410. Edited in *Asia Major*, vol. 13, 1967, p. 211-217.

18) *mDzod phug: Basic Verses and Commentary* by *Dran ṣa nam mkha'*, published by Tenzin Namdak, Delhi 1966.

19) In the *Zang žung Tibetan Dictionary*, see n. 9.

20) “The Zhang-zhung Language. A Grammar and Dictionary of the Unexplored Language of the Tibetan Bonpos”, *Acta Jutlandica* XL: 1, Aarhus 1968. See also *The Yar-lui Dynasty*, Copenhagen 1969, p. 445 n. 38.

21) “The Zhang-zhung Language” p. 26.

22) Id. p. 42. We also find the word in the name of a bon-po siddha, the existence of whom we have no reason to doubt, namely Sad-ne-ga'u. (See my *Bon-po Studies: The Akhrid-System of Meditation*, Oslo 1969 and New Delhi 1971, index).

However, we must continue. Our bon-po sources claim that the doctrine of the Buddha (gŠen-rab) was firmly established in Tibet when čhos appeared; and the undeniable fact that čhos gradually supplanted bon is stated to be the result of curses uttered in former times by certain demons. Ņi-ma bstan-'jin gives the following account:

“In the Earth-Ox Year (749 A.D.), the perverse prayer of a demon (being the ultimate cause), and he who acted like a monk but retained the Five Poisons (Ignorance, Lust, Hate etc.—Šāntarakṣita is referred to) providing the immediate cause of the (appearing of the) pernicious Buddhist (i.e. čhos-pa) monks, a demon having entered the heart of the king and the merit of the realm of Tibet being low, the time came when the sun of the Doctrine was made to set”<sup>23)</sup>.

It is indeed startling to see the appearance of čhos described as a catastrophe by an author who is in every other respect profoundly Buddhist!

The matter is further complicated by the fact that the Tun-Huang texts as well as later literary sources are unanimous in stating that both before and after the establishment of the national dynasty (7th century) there existed a class of priests called bon-pos. Judging from the Tun-Huang texts, there would not seem to be anything Buddhist about these priests; one of their main functions seems to have been to perform the burial of and to carry out the cult connected with the dead kings<sup>24)</sup>. We know that Buddhism, called čhos, was protected by the royal house and was established only after a bitter political struggle with the indigenous priests, including a class of priests called bon-pos, supported by powerful aristocratic families<sup>25)</sup>. As a result of this struggle, the royal dynasty was brought to an end, and the country was plunged into a state of chaos which lasted until the emergence around 1000 A.D. of a politically powerful čhos-pa hierarchy connected with large monastic centres. As I have shown elsewhere<sup>26)</sup>, it is during this period that we find the formation of an organised tradition whose followers call themselves bon-po, but who are manifestly Buddhist. Like certain čhos-pa traditions, e.g. the Kagyutpa, it was not monastic at the outset, but

23) bsTan-rcis, 55.

24) See e.g. M. Lalou “Rituel Bon-po des Funérailles Royales”, *Journal Asiatique*, vol. CCXL/3, 1952, p. 339-362. See also Haahr *The Yar-lun Dynasty*, passim.

25) This struggle has been described by Hoffmann *Religions of Tibet*, p. 66-83.

26) *Bonpo Studies*, part I.

rapidly became so <sup>27</sup>). This tradition continued without interruption up to the Tibetan bon-pos of to-day.

It has often been supposed that the lamaist bon-pos of to-day represent a profound assimilation of Buddhist i.e. čhos-pa, traditions, and that their origins are to be found with the pre-Buddhist bon-po priests. According to this theory, the bon-po priests, being unable to compete with the intellectually more sophisticated Buddhist monks, plagiarized Buddhist texts and copied Buddhist rituals as best they could. This point of view has been adopted by Professor Hoffmann in *The Religions of Tibet* (London 1961):

“The Bon religion, which was originally the national Tibetan version of North and Central Asian Shamanism and Animism, developed in Western Tibet, and particularly in Zhang-zhung; certainly under the influence of Buddhism and probably also under the influence of Persian and Manichæan teachings, into a syncretist system with a developed doctrine and a sacred literature” (p. 84).

And further:

“Lamaist authors never cease to insist that... Bon priests took Buddhist texts, merely making minor alterations in the names of persons and places, sometimes even turning the religious teachings in them into their own... Our own observations... suggest that there is some justification of the Buddhist charges of plagiarism” (p. 108).

Speaking of the revival of Buddhism in Central Tibet after the collapse of the national dynasty, Professor Hoffmann states that

“a development began which brought the Bon religion closer and closer to Lamaism. The original religious fund from Zhang-zhung was now supplemented by a growing stream of newly borrowed teachings so that gradually the Bon priests were in a position to offer their followers all that Buddhism could” (p. 97).

If we accept Professor Hoffmann's interpretation of bon, we can divide its development into three stages:

1. a primitive animist-shamanist popular religion;

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<sup>27</sup>) sMan-ri was founded in 1405 (bsTan-rcis 129); the temple (Snellgrove translates “Academy”, *Nine Ways*, p. 4 n. 4) (gcug-lag-khañ) of Dar-Idiñ gser-sgo was founded in 1173 (bsTan-rcis 103). The monasteries of kLu-brag and bSam-gliñ were founded in the 13th century (Snellgrove, loc. cit.), while the monastery of g-Yas-ru dBen-sa-kha was founded by Bru-čhen rGyal-ba g-yuñ-druñ in 1072 (bsTan-rcis 83).

2. a gradual assimilation to Buddhism and incorporation of Gnostic-Buddhist syncreticism from *Žaṅ-žuṅ*;
3. complete assimilation to Buddhism after the collapse of the dynasty, resulting in the modern bon-po tradition.

This interpretation is, in fact, derived from chapter 8 of the “Crystal Mirror of Doctrinal Systems”<sup>28</sup>), a rather polemical Gelugpa, hence *čhos-pa*, text written by the abbot Thu-kvan bLo-bzaṅ čhos-kyi ṅi-ma (1737-1802). This author, who gives a brief and interesting, but in many respects quite misleading presentation of bon-po doctrines with which it is not likely that he was truly familiar, divides the development of bon into what amounts to precisely the three above-mentioned stages, namely “original bon”, “erring bon”, and “transformed bon”<sup>29</sup>).

Professor Hoffmann claims that after their assimilation of Buddhism,

“the later Bon-po led an isolated existence apart from the main stream of spiritual development as as discarded heretical sect, as a provincial tendency in religious belief whose main tendency was and still is a purely negative one, namely anti-Buddhism” (p. 74).

And he continues:

“But all this developed in an atmosphere of hostility to Buddhism. Just as the mediaeval Satanist desecrated the Host, so the Bon-po turn their sacred objects not in a dextral but in a sinister fashion... The Bon religion had become ossified as a heresy, and its essence lay largely in contradiction and negation” (p. 98).

Whatever the historical origins of bon may be, Professor Hoffmann’s description of bon as a living tradition, and in particular his comparison of bon, which claims to be the pure and original doctrine of the Buddha, with “the mediaeval Satanist” whose essence indeed lay “in contradiction and negation”, is as misleading as it could possibly be. However, his description has been accepted and even quoted by other scholars, e.g. R. Ekvall who speaks of “wilful distortion of perversion of Buddhist ritual”, “circumambulation in the same perversely contradictory manner”, “deep antagonism which finds expression in reversal and contradiction”, etc.<sup>30</sup>).

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28) Grub-mtha’ šel-gyi me-loṅ of which *Quellen zur Geschichte* contains the translation (p. 328-338) and text (p. 415-419) of chapter 8.

29) *’Jol-bon* (wrongly for *rdol-bon*), *’khyar-bon*, *bsgyur-bon*.

30) Ekvall, *Religious Observances*, p. 22-23.

The bon-po attitude is, in fact, the very opposite of that evoked by Hoffmann and Ekvall. This can be stated not only on the basis of prolonged personal contact with bon-pos, both monks and laymen, but also on the basis of bon-po texts of all kinds, texts which, it is only fair to add, were not available when Hoffmann wrote his study of Bon. It is, of course, true that these texts contain much material that is not Buddhist; the same, however, is equally true of čhos-pa texts. What does strike one on encountering bon-po monks is not their familiarity with pre-Buddhist ideas and practices—if this is what one seeks, one will indeed be disappointed—but an exceptional willingness to learn and study teachings of other traditions, to which they usually feel superior, though not hostile.

As Professor Snellgrove aptly remarks <sup>31)</sup>:

“Western scholars of Tibetan well know how difficult it is to persuade an indigenous Tibetan scholar to take any interest in forms of Tibetan literature that lie outside his particular school. Normally a *dGe-lugs-pa* (“Yellow Hat”) scholar would be ashamed at the idea of reading a work of any other Tibetan Buddhist order, let alone a *bonpo* work. Yet educated *bonpo* monks clearly have no such inhibitions. They will learn wherever they can, and given time they will absorb and readapt what they have learned”.

While it is true that bon-po monasteries have occasionally been burnt and followers of bon persecuted <sup>32)</sup>, the same is true of other traditions as well, the best-known example being the *Ĵo-nañ-pas* whose monasteries were all forcibly closed down in the 17th century by the 5th Dalai Lama <sup>33)</sup>. On the other hand, relations have by no means always been hostile between bon-pos and čhos-pas. The ties between bon-pos and Nyingmapas have been particularly close; as I have shown elsewhere, several historical figures play an important part in both sects <sup>34)</sup>. This is not surprising in view of the great doctrinal similarities of the two schools. Further facts pointing to a striking lack of hostility between čhos and bon can be mentioned. A highly interesting encyclopaedic work of the 15th century, recently published in India, the “*bšad-mjod*

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31) *Nine Ways*, p. 13.

32) Hoffmann *The Religions of Tibet*, p. 99-100; *Quellen*, p. 242.

33) Hoffmann *The Religions of Tibet*, p. 140.

34) *Bonpo Studies*, Introduction.

yid-bžin nor-bu” by Don-dam smra-ba’i seŋge, exhibits a remarkably dispassionate approach to bon as well as čhos. Gene Smith states:

“The author of the *Bšad mdzod* represents an interesting eclectic tradition of Buddhism and Bon. Both are treated impartially, almost as two aspects of an identical religion”<sup>35</sup>).

The same attitude, perhaps even more explicitly stated, is manifest in a short text in my possession written by the bon-po monk lDoñ-bcun bZod-pa rgyal-mchan (b. 1866), who treats bon and čhos on a strictly, even pedantically, equal footing, constantly stressing the need for bon-pos “to delight in bon” and čhos-pas “to delight in čhos”<sup>36</sup>).

A closer investigation of the etymology of the word “bon” will be useful at this stage. Recent research<sup>37</sup>) indicates that we are dealing with two homonyms “bon” meaning a) “invoker” or “to invoke”, related to ’bod-pa “to invoke, to invite”, and b) “seed”, related to sa-bon “seed”, ’bo-ba “pour out”, Lepcha bon-na “drip”. *Bon* is further glossed by the Žaň-žui term *gyer* which means “chant” and is used in the sense of “chant”, not only in bon-po, but even in čhos-pa texts<sup>38</sup>). A bon-po, then, is, according to etymology a) an „invoker (of the gods)”, hence “one who chants”. Etymology b) is perhaps to be related to the variant form Bon, found in Tun-huang manuscripts<sup>39</sup>), of the more usual Bod, “Tibet”; thus bon may also be taken to mean “the autochthonous Tibetan religion” and as such contrasted to čhos which was imported from India and China.

Consequently, a bon-po in pre-Buddhist times may be regarded as an

35) Introduction, p. 10 of *A 15th Century Tibetan Compendium of Knowledge, the Bšad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu* by Don-dam-smra-ba’i-seŋge. Edited by Lokesh Candra with an introduction by E. Gene Smith, *Satapiṭaka Series* vol. 78, New Delhi 1969.

36) MS copy belonging to Sans-rgyas bstan-’jin l’jōn-lđoñ of “Drañ-sroñ bZod-pa rgyal-mchan gyi luñ-yig”. His date of birth is given in bsTan-rcis 209.

37) W. Simon “A Note on Tibetan Bon”, *Asia Major* vol. 5, 1956 p. 5-8; G. Uray “The Old Tibetan Verb Bon”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 17, 1964 p. 324-334; Snellgrove *Nine Ways*, p. 1 n. 1, p. 20 n. 2.

38) For *gyer*, see Haarh “The Zhang-zhung Language” p. 30. For the use of *gyer* in the sense of “chant” see e.g. *bšad-mjod* (f. n. 35), p. 456: lus-kyi sgo-nas sgom pa yin/ñag-gi sgo-nas gyer-ba yin/yid-kyi sgo-nas bsam-pa yin/.

39) See M. Lalou “Tibetain Ancien BOD/BON”, *Journal Asiatique* 1953, p. 275-276. That “Bon” is an authentic variant of Bod is confirmed by the Chinese rendering of “Tibet”, viz. Fan (<\*<sub>c</sub>b<sup>o</sup>i<sup>w</sup>en). See B. Karlgren *Analytical Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese*, Paris 1923, p. 22.

“invoker”, a particular type of priest among several others. The Tun-Huang texts mention different kinds of bon-pos: bon-pos of gods, of humans, of horses, of magic, of heaven, of the created world, of the paternal clan, of burials etc.—presumably these terms designate various specialists. Other classifications employ names of different clans: Se-bon, rMa-bon etc., or countries: rGya-bon, lDam-bon etc. 40).

Other priests, too, are mentioned, particularly the various classes of *gšen*. This word has been translated by Professor Hoffmann as “shaman” 41), which is, to say the least, misleading; the pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet may perhaps have contained elements which can be called “shamanist”, but if we take this religion as a whole, “shamanist” will be seen to be a much too narrow characterization. Snellgrove’s translation “sacrificer” 42) is much more to the point, as the specific function of the *gšen*-priests seems to have been to perform sacrifices. The *gšen*-priests, too, are classified in various ways.

Bon-priests, then, are part of the religious scene in Tibet before the official introduction of Buddhism in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. Not all bon-pos, however, were native Tibetans. On the contrary, our *čhos-pa* sources inform us that bon-pos were invited to Tibet from neighbouring countries. Thus “The Report of the King”, a text of the 14th century, (which purports to contain re-discovered texts, *gter-ma*, hidden in the 9th century), states that at the death of King Gri-gum bcan-po, the first king to leave his body on earth (his predecessors had ascended bodily to heaven by means of a rope), no-one in Tibet knew how to perform the burial, and bon-pos from Ta-zig and 'A-ža were invited to perform the proper rituals 43).

Ta-zig indicates, rather vaguely, Iran; 'A-ža generally indicates Turco-Mongolian tribes of the Kokonor-region. However, as regards 'A-ža, it is possible that the author of “The Report of the King” has preserved a tradition which is at fault; for a whole series of other sources all manifestly place the country of origin of the foreign bon-pos to the West and North-west of Tibet. dPa'-bo gCug-lag 'phreñ-ba, an historian of the 16th century, states that a “heretic” (*mu-steg-pa*) from

40) Stein, op. cit., p. 195.

41) “Gšen, Eine Lexicographisch-religionswissenschaftliche Untersuchung”, *ZDMG* 1944, p. 340 ff.; *Quellen*, p. 207.

42) Snellgrove and Richardson *A Cultural History*, p. 52.

43) Hoffmann *Quellen*, p. 246 and 346; Haahr *The Yar-luñi Dynasty* p. 100.

the land of Gurṇavatra on the border between India and sTag-gzig was invited:

“At that time, from the country called Gurnavatra on the border between India and sTag-gzig, came a heretic, a bon-po by name of 'A-ža. He flew in the sky and uttered prophecies. On wood he skinned the hide; on stone he ripped open the quartered parts. With meat and wine he performed offerings to the demons incessantly” 44).

Another chronicle, written by the 5th Dalai Lama in the 17th century, states that in order to perform the burial of Gri-gum bcad-po, gšen-priests were invited from Žaň-žuň and Bru-ša 45). Žaň-žuň is, as we know, placed to the west of Tibet; so is Bru-ša, which is identified with the present district of Gilgit.

A third chronicle, the “Crystal Mirror of Doctrinal Systems” of Čhos-kyi ňi-ma, asserts that at the same occasion bon-pos were invited from Kashmir (Kha-čhe), Gilgit (Bru-ša) and Žaň-žuň 46).

In other words, there is a high degree of consensus in čhos-pa texts that bon came to Tibet from the Indo-Iranian frontier districts. It is perhaps worth noting that dPa'-bo glug-lag 'phreň-ba describes the bon-po from Gurṇavatra as a mu-steg-pa; this word is used in Tibetan to designate the hinduists, the heretics par excellence. His description of the bon-po, moreover, immediately suggests a tantric adept of the “left-handed” (vāmācāra) type or Śaiva yogin of the aghori-type. Čhos-kyi ňi-ma supports our impression in stating that the bon-doctrines introduced in Tibet by the bon-pos from Kashmir etc. are said to contain Śivaist doctrines 47) and that the third and final stage in the development of bon was introduced when “a paṇḍita (i.e. an Indian) dressed in a blue robe hid heretical texts 48) as a “treasure” and thereafter himself found them and mixed them with bon” 49).

It is, of course, possible that the strictly orthodox Čhos-kyi ňi-ma has only wanted to discredit contemporary bon-pos by alleging that their teaching contained doctrines fabricated by a Śivaist. However, it is equally possible that he has preserved an ancient tradition which contains a core of historical fact. Kashmir was a flourishing centre of

44) Haarh, p. 101-102.

45) Hoffmann *Quellen*, p. 316 and 409; Haarh, p. 101.

46) Hoffmann *Quellen*, p. 330 and 416; Haarh, p. 113.

47) Hoffmann *Quellen*, p. 331 and 416 (mu-stegs dbaň-phyug pa'i grub-mtha').

48) čhos-log.

49) Hoffmann *Quellen*, p. 331 and 416.

Śivaism as well as of Buddhist tantrism, and tantrists, both in India <sup>50</sup>) and Tibet, have traditionally been clothed in blue.

However, the problem is further complicated by the presence of two other traditions, both preceding čhos (in the sense of “Buddhism”) in Tibet, namely *sgruñ*, “stories” and *lde’u*, “riddles” <sup>51</sup>.)

According to the “Report of the King”, the reign of the first Tibetan king was characterized by “sacred conventions” (*lha-yi čhos-lugs*) <sup>52</sup>), *sgruñ* and *lde’u*. It was only several generations later that the first bon-pos were invited to Tibet; they enjoyed royal patronage and were presumably regarded as part of “sacred conventions”, for in other texts we find the triad bon, *sgruñ* and *lde’u* <sup>53</sup>). *dPa-bo gCug-lag* explains that *sgruñ* included tales like that of “Ro-lañs gser-sgrub”, presumably a version of the Indian *Vetālapañcaviṃśatikā* and was “an omen of the appearance of Sūtras”, while *lde’u*, “riddles”, presumably a system of making predictions <sup>54</sup>), was “an omen of the appearance of *Abhidarmapiṭaka*” <sup>55</sup>).

To sum up, our čhos-pa sources indicate that while bon-pos were invited to Tibet from neighbouring countries to the west and northwest, i.e. from areas which were tantric and śivaist centres, there already existed an indigenous priesthood in Tibet, a section of which was likewise styled bon-pos, at least by the later tradition <sup>56</sup>). Čhos-pa authors have not distinguished these two categories; by calling both “bon-pos”, the contemporary lamaist bon-pos who made such arrogant claims for their *sTon-pa gŠen-rab* were made to appear as exponents of a thoroughly heretical doctrine.

However, the picture will not be complete before a thorough study is made of the bon-pos’ own texts. This has yet to be undertaken, but

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50) Stein *Civilisation*, p. 199.

51) See n. 43.

52) For the translation “sacred conventions”, see Snellgrove and Richardson *Cultural History*, p. 59. For the meaning of čhos in this connection, see Haarh, p. 447 n. 6: “Čhos is an integral idea of the Tibetan royalty, being the religious law entrusted to the sacerdotal class . . . Čhos signifies the Universal Order . . . both in nature . . . and in society . . . guaranteed by the presence of the Tibetan king”.

53) Haarh, p. 88 and 107 (quoting *dPa-bo gCug-lag* and the Chronicle of the 5th Dalai Lama).

54) Tucci *Die Religionen Tibets*, p. 264.

55) Haarh, p. 103-4.

56) E.g. Čhos-kyi ñi-ma, see Hoffmann *Quellen*, p. 329-330 and p. 416; Haarh p. 102.

at least some progress has been made. First of all, we must realize that bon-po does not, in these texts, normally mean “invoker”, but “follower of bon”, i.e. “a follower of the doctrine of sTon-pa gŠen-rab”, with the undertone of “a follower of the true religion of Tibet, i.e. the religion which was established before the coming of čhos”. sTon-pa gŠen-rab is, of course, not an historical person. He is what Snellgrove calls “a religious hero”<sup>57)</sup> and his biography as found in “gZer-mig” consists of elements copied partly from the “religious epic” of Padmasambhava, partly from conventional biographies of Śākyamuni.

However, certain main points in the “epic” of sTon-pa gŠen-rab no doubt correspond to historical realities. In chapter 12 we see sTon-pa gŠen-rab as Buddha and ruler of sTag-gzig. Khyab-pa lag-riñ (“Khyab-pa Long-Hands”), the bon-po version of Māra<sup>58)</sup>, sends his followers who steal the seven horses of gŠen-rab. He decides to hide the horses in Tibet. gŠen-rab follows in hot pursuit, “not (as he explains) in order to get the horses only, but because the time has come to spread the doctrine in Žaň-žuň and Tibet”<sup>59)</sup>. In both countries he communicates part of his doctrine to local bon-pos. Note that bon-pos are supposed to exist in Žaň-žuň and Tibet *before* the coming of gŠen-rab. However, it is only after the death of gŠen-rab that the doctrine is propagated by his disciples in various countries, e.g. China, India, Tibet and Žaň-žuň. This is described in chapter 17. Bon-po and čhos-pa texts accordingly agree in stating that an organised doctrine bearing the name of “bon” was brought to Tibet from an area situated rather vaguely in the West.

According to chapter 1 of a hitherto unpublished but highly interesting text, the “Great Exposition of the Created World”, of which the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) possesses a copy<sup>60)</sup>—a text which was “discovered” as a “treasure” by Khod-spo bLo-gros thog-

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57) *Nine Ways*, p. 15 n. 1: “The story of “the religious hero” *gSen-rab* is in effect another great Tibetan epic, comparable in importance with the great epic of Gesar, which thanks to the intensive studies of R. A. Stein, is now far better known. Yet *gSen-rab's* legend is supported by a whole complex system of religious practices, altogether an extraordinary phenomenon”.

58) The epithet “Long-Hands” suggests some connection with the Iranian demon Būšyānštā who is characterized precisely by his long arms—in *Mihr Yašt* 97 he is called dar<sup>a</sup>γō<sup>7</sup>. gav.

59) See Snellgrove *Nine Ways*, p. 14-15.

60) Srid-pa rgyud kyi kha-byañ čhen-mo, Bibl. Nat. ms. tib. n. 493. See R. A. Stein “Recherches sur l’Épopée et le Barde au Tibet”, *Bibliothèque de l’Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises*, vol. XIII, Paris 1959 p. 31.

med, in all probability in 1301<sup>61</sup>), i.e. at about the same time as the composition of *gZer-mig—bon* declined after the initial propagation while *čhos* prospered. This was due to the curse of a certain demon, *Lha-sbyin nag-po*<sup>62</sup>). Accordingly, the *gšen gSañ-ba 'dus-pa* (*Guhya-samāja*) transforms himself into “the son of a god” and in the land of humans, in India, he subdues the demon and assumes the name of *Śākyamuni*. As *Śākyamuni* he proclaims The Holy Doctrine (*dam-pa'i čhos*)<sup>63</sup>). This is a good example of the syncretist approach of many *bon-po* texts: *čhos* is first stated to have spread due to a demonic curse; thereafter a divine being, called a *gšen*, incarnates himself as *Śākyāmuni* and founds the “holy *čhos*”. It is unclear whether we are dealing with two separate forms of “*čhos*” or whether the apparent confusion is due to the juxtaposition of two traditions. Elsewhere<sup>64</sup>) the text states that in order to prevent the doctrine of *gšen-rab* from declining, *bon*, *čhos* and *sman* (“the art of medicine”) were all propagated.

All this indicates that there is no real opposition between *bon* and *čhos* on the doctrinal plane. An investigation of the various personages who are said to have brought *bon* from *Žaň-žuň* to Tibet confirms this. We find a number of them described in a very important text, the “Oral Tradition of *Žaň-žuň*”<sup>65</sup>). Many of them are well-known from other texts, and a fair number of them, no doubt, correspond to historical figures. In any case, some of them are well known in at least one *čhos-pa* tradition, the *Nyingmapa*<sup>66</sup>).

One episode from the “Oral Tradition of *Žaň-žuň*” must suffice by way of illustration. It is taken from the biography of *Gyer-spun*s *sNan-bžer lod-po* who was a contemporary of *Khri-sroñ lde-bcan*; in other words, he lived in the 8th century A.D. As I cannot hope to improve upon it, I reproduce the translation of Dr. Snellgrove<sup>67</sup>).

“As for the place to which he was attached all his life, it was the region

61) *bsTan-rcis* 117.

62) Cf. *bsTan-rcis* 55, quoted above (see n. 23).

63) *Fol.* 15b et seq.

64) *Fol.* 14a.

65) *Žaň-žuň sñan-rgyud*, published as vol. 73 in the *Śatapiṭaka Series*, New Delhi 1968.

66) See my *Bonpo Studies*.

67) *Cultural History*, p. 103-104. For the date of *sNan-bžer lod-po*, see op cit., p. 101.

an island in the middle of the lake. At the end of every repast *Gyer-spungs* placed a small bowlful of moistened meal aside. Then the ice of the lake was in an unsafe condition, and so with each little bowlful of moistened meal, the master and his disciple made some broth which they drank. The sediment of each lot of broth, he poured on the rock which served as his pillow, but still the ice was unsafe. So they scraped off the sediment of the broth and put it in water and drank it. Thus three years passed. Then the servant thought: "The two of us, master and pupil, will die some time whenever it may be. How if I just fall off a cliff and turn myself into a corpse?" So he said to his master: "Worthy *Gyer-spungs*, there is a fresh human corpse". "Have you come upon one?" his master asked. "Yes", the servant replied. "Well, go round the island, and see what there is". So he went and returned with the news: "There is the corpse of a wild ass". "As we are of undefiled stock, we may not eat it", his master said. A few days later he went round the island again, and reported that there was the corpse of a woman with a bad goitre. "We are not allowed to eat carrion", his master said. "Put our things together". What is *Gyer-spungs* doing now, the servant thought, there will be no way of leaving tomorrow, and he was frightened. *Gyer-spungs* said: "Hold on to me and close your eyes". They travelled a long way, and then he thought "I have left the cooking tripod behind", so he opened his eyes and looked back. A woman wearing jewelry was coming along, winding up a length of white cloth. Then he looked forwards, and there was a woman in front just like the other one, and she was spreading out a length of white cloth, on which the two of them, master and pupil, were advancing. But as soon as he looked, they pulled away the cloth and disappeared, and just as they would have reached the water's edge, they fell into the water. Then a number of laymen from those northern plains gathered around them, and the master said to them: "I am *Gyer-spungs*". But his flesh was withered and his hair had grown long, so they did not recognize him and said: "*Gyer-spungs* died many years ago. You are not he". Then he told them the whole story and they believed in him. First they gave him lye, then the milk of a white goat and of a white 'bri (female of the yak), and after that they gave them all the food they wanted, and so restored them to normal bodily strength".

As Dr. Snellgrove remarks, the willingness of the disciple to sacrifice himself for his guru and the implication of cannibalism belong to the Indian tantric tradition. So do the women dressed in jewelry—they are *ḍākinīs*, attendant goddesses of meditating yogins, who play an important part in the Nyingmapa tradition as well. In other words, we are dealing with tantric adepts of the siddha-type, very similar to figures like Padmasambhava<sup>68</sup>). The teaching of these bon-po siddhas

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68) The "Great Exposition of the Created World" juxtaposes (fol. 27a) "sToñ-rgyuñ mthu-čhen of bon" and "Pad-ma 'byuñ-gnas (i.e. Padmasambhava) of čhos". A modern painting in my possession of sToñ-rgyuñ mthu-čhen shows a naked ascetic of the siddha type.

is called the “Great Perfection” (rjogs-pa čhen-po, rjogs-čhen), and we find a detailed exposition of it in the “Oral Tradition of Žaň-žuň”. We know that the teachings of the “Great Perfection” were transmitted as part of an established tradition in Central Tibet (gCañ) around 1000 A.D. 69). A fully established tradition requires some time to mature; in other words, we are led back precisely to the bon-po siddhas, some said to be Tibetan, others said to be natives of Žaň-žuň, who lived in the 8th century A.D., and whose teachings are copiously quoted in the “Great Perfection” text called “The Fifteen Chapters of the Supreme Doctrine” (A-khrid thun-mchams bčo-lña) of which I have translated a number of chapters in *Bonpo Studies*. This text which was written by Bru-čhen rGyal-ba gyuň-druň (1242-1290) 70), is a systematisation of the teachings of siddhas like Dran-pa nam-kha’ 71) and Li-šu stag-riň 72), bon-po siddhas of the 8th century; their teachings, as quoted in this text, are as Buddhist as any contemporary čhos-pa teachings. Further, the texts which “The Fifteen Chapters of the Supreme Doctrine” quotes, are not fictitious texts invented for the occasion, but are on the contrary in several cases texts of which we now actually possess copies.

What, then, is to be made of all this? We do not as yet have the results of a systematic study of the origins of the bon-po siddhas and their relations to the indigenous priests, likewise called bon-pos, at our disposal. However, I believe the following point of view is the one which best seems to fit the facts as we know them at present. Both bon-po and čhos-pa sources suggest that Buddhist siddhas, i.e. tantric adepts, and possibly also Śivaist yogins, established themselves in what is now Western Tibet, but which formerly—up to the 7th-8th centuries—was an independent non-Tibetan kingdom called Žaň-žuň. This happened prior to—or at least independently of—the official introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the form of čhos. Siddhas from Žaň-žuň thereupon established themselves in Tibet where they, as all sources

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69) See my *Bonpo Studies*, passim.

70) bsTan-rcis 108, 116.

71) Dran-pa nam-mkha’ is mentioned as a disciple of Padmasambhava in rGyal-po’ibka’i than-yig, chpt. 10, fol. 30a, 5 et seq., translated by Hoffmann in *The Religions of Tibet*, p. 61.

72) sŇa-čhen Li-šu stag-riň seems to be an important figure in the history of the bon-pos. According to bsTan-rcis 30 he was born 1691 B.C., i.e. he comes in the same class of siddhas as Dran-pa nam-mkha’, Che-bdaň rig-’jin, and Padma

agree in stating, became violently opposed to those Buddhist groups who enjoyed the particular favour of the royal house and who designated their doctrine as čhos. For reasons which at present are not quite clear, the tantric siddhas from Žaň-žuň and their Tibetan followers identified themselves with the indigenous priesthood, a section of which were called bon-pos, “invokers”. What, however, is not always sufficiently realized, is that during the following centuries čhos-pas as well as bon-po siddhas assimilated all they could of indigenous Tibetan religious beliefs, and that the ancient lha-čhos, “sacred conventions”, disappeared altogether as an independent institution. Part of the literature which was created during the 8th and the following centuries by bon-po siddhas may—particularly, perhaps, as regards treatises on logic, vinaya and prajñāpāramitā—be copied from that of the čhos-pas; but “by far the greater part would seem to have been absorbed through learning and then retold, and this is not just plagiarism”<sup>73</sup>). In any case, bon-po literature—although it does, like that of the čhos-pa, contain much pre-Buddhist material—was developed by siddhas and later by monks who, however much they may have been opposed to čhos, were, in fact Buddhist; by the later tradition, čhos-pa as well as bon-po, they have, however, been identified with those indigenous, non-Buddhist priests who were likewise called bon-po. These non-Buddhist, indigenous bon-pos, may, of course, have participated in the literary output of čhos-pas as well as of bon-po siddhas. On the other hand, the resistance which the indigenous priesthood, supported by powerful aristocratic families, put up against čhos, and the persecution which this priesthood subsequently suffered, has by later lamaist bon-po tradition been taken to refer to the bon-po siddhas from Žaň-žuň. The picture is, in whichever way one chooses to regard it, extraordinarily complicated. It is, however, obvious that if it can be established that

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mthoň-grol, for whom similar dates of birth are given, but who all seem to have been active around the 8th century A.D. bs Tan-rcis 48: “In the Earth-Monkey Year Lord sŇa-čhen Li-šu went to Tibet from rTags-gzigs, i.e. the Inner Žaň-žuň, by means of his skill in magic, bringing 10 000 Bon texts (552 B.C.)”. bsTan-rcis 54: “In the Earth-ox Year... a demon having entered the heart of the king... the sun of the Doctrine was made to set... having hid the Five Secret Treasures and the 1700 subsidiary Treasures... Li-šu... went to the Heavenly Sphere (749 A.D.)”.

73) Snellgrove *Nine Ways*, p. 12.

there existed a Buddhist siddha tradition in West Tibet independently of the official introduction of Buddhism in Central Tibet under the patronage of the Tibetan kings in the 7th century, it will be necessary to reconsider many aspects of the early religious and cultural history of Tibet, and a new chapter can perhaps be written in the history of religious contacts between India and its neighbouring countries.