

Bon-The Primitive Religion of Tibet

Prof. Anukul Chandra Banerjee,
Gangtok.

Tibet, the "Land of Snows" is marked off by encircling great sky-scraping snowy mountains and the rugged rocky ranges, always covered with snow, high and perilous. Such natural geographical conditions help her people to develop their religious ideas and practices in a peculiar way. The variety of landscape had its influence further on the Tibetan mind and produced a faith, furious and mysterious, peculiar to Shamanistic cult.

The Tibetan historical sources provide us with materials which prove the existence of another religion, known as Bon, a kind of Shamanism, prior to the advent of Buddhism. The meaning of the word 'Bon' still remains unknown. This is also corroborated by Waddell.¹ In dictionaries is not found the meaning of the word Bon, simply a vague account of this religion is given.

In his 'A Tibetan-English Dictionary'² S. C. Das writes that "Bon is the ancient religion of Tibet which was fetishism, demon-worship and propitiation by means of incantation. The word Chos which ordinarily means religion is used as antithesis to Bon. Bon signifies the kind of Shamanism which was followed by Tibetans before the introduction of Buddhism and in certain parts still extant". Jaschke³ holds the view that Bon is the name of the early religion of Tibet, concerning which but very imperfect accounts are existing; so much is certain that sorcery was the principle feature of it.

1. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. XXXII, 333.

2. P. 879.

3. A Tibetan-English Dictionary-P, 372.

When Buddhism became the religion of State, the former was considered heretical and condemnable and Lha-cos and bon-cos, or shorter cos and bon, were placed in opposition, as with us Christianity and Paganism ; at the present time, both of them seem to exist peacefully side by side, and the primitive religion has not only numerous adherents and convents in C (Central Tibet) ; but manifold traces of it may be found still in the creed of the Tibetan of today". H Hoffmann¹ writes that "origin of the word 'Bon' to describe it lost in the past, and it is not readily definable, but in all probability once referred to the conjuring of the gods by magic formulas".

Rockhill observes² that "Mr. Brain Hodgson connects it with the primitive Turanian superstitions and the doctrines of Caivism 'but' he adds, in the Himalayas even the Bon-po priests themselves can tell nothing of the origin of their belief". He³ further observes that "the word Bon-po is unquestionably derived from Punnya, one of the name of the Swastikas or worshippers of the mystic cross swastic, which in Tibetan is called "gyungdrung".

It would not be irrelevant to point out in this context that the word 'Bon' signifying seed, usually found in the scriptures with the word 'Sa' (ground) shows some affinity with the word vija, the Sanskrit word frequently employed in the Indian Tanticism in a symbolic sense of the cult.

Bon, the earliest religion of Tibet, was, according to early writings, founded by Gshen-rab or "Gshen-rab mi-bo or Gshan-rab, the man".⁴ Opinions differ as to the time, place and life of Gshen. Some followers of Bon-religion (Bon-pos) maintain that he appeared some 1055 years before Buddha, while others claim that he was a contemporary of Buddha.

1. The Religions of Tibet, P-14.

2. The Life of Buddha, P-206.

3. Ibid, P-206.

4 According to Hoffmann (The Religions of Tibet, P-85)-the word Gshen-rab itself is not really a name at all, but a descriptive appellation meaning the most excellent of the Shamans (Gshen Priest) something of which, the Bon-pos always remain aware.

There are also some others who hold that he was an incarnation of Buddha. Contrary to this is the claim that he was an incarnation of ardent Buddhist teacher who subsequently opposed Buddhism.¹ According to some non-Bon-po Tibetan historians² Gshen-rab was most probably a contemporary of King Pute-Kong- yal, son of King Gri-Gun-tsen-po of Tibet, while others³ maintain that he appeared at the time of the sixth successor (6th king of the lineage) of King Nyakhri-tsen-po and was known as king Khri-lde-tsen-po. But it should be noted here that the name of the 6th king was Dag-khri-tsen-po (or Shril-khri-tsen-po) and not Khri-lde-tsen-po as mentioned above.

The followers of the Bon religion (Bon-pos) agree that Gshen-rab was born in Ol-mo-lung-ring valley of Zhang-Zhung country. Zhang-Zhung is identified with Guge, one of the three districts of Nga-ri province of Tibet. It lies on the other side of the Indo-Tibetan border. Some Buddhist Tibetan historians,⁴ however, maintain that Gshen-rab was born in Central Tibet at a place called Am-shod-on-it still lacks identification.

Gshen-rab who was born as the son of king Thod-kar and queen Yo-chhi-rgyal-zhed of Guge was married to Hos-za rgyal-med. He had sons and daughters. He could control the spirits under his power and exhibit miracles. He had the fore-knowledge and also could prophesy. He preached in his own way the rituals of the gods which subsequently became the Bon of Gshen-rab.

From the gZer-myig⁵ (Kpey memory) we learn that the sons became the disciples of the father Gshen-rab and helped much in propagating the teachings. In their early youth the sons who were very learned and wise used to hold discussions with their father on simple matters, such as the mystic-etymological interpretation of

-
1. Tibet : A Political History by Tsepon W. D. Shakapa, P 13.
 2. Blo-bzang rgya-mtsho (1617-1682), Sod-nam-gya-tshan (1270-1312), Dph-bo-gtsug-lag-preng-ba (1503-1565).
 3. Thos-kvan-chhos-kyinima chhos-kyi-dorje, (1680-1736), Gig-tongc-npo.
 4. Thos-kvan-chhos-kyi-nima (Chhos-kyi-Dorje) (1680-1736) and Jig-ten-gam-po (1143-1217).
 5. Chapter, VIII.

names, a pastime very popular in Tibet. In this case the names are those of Gshen-rab, of his parents, of his palace, and so on. And from there the discussions proceed over the five moral poisons and various questions of Bon cosmology to the metaphysical heights of the doctrine of Shun-yata or Voidness.¹

There are many sects among the followers of Bon (Bon-pos) in Tibet. Of them two are mostly well-known—the Bon-chhal-nag the (Black Bon), the original Bon and the Bon-chhal-kar with Bon-terma (White Bon and treasured Bon), the transformed Bon.

According to some non-Bon-po historians² when Gshen-rab was only twelve years old, he was taken away by the demon and was with them for long twelve years. But when he came back he could tell the whereabouts of the spirits as also which kinds of offerings would be beneficial to the people. He pointed out to the people the way of performing such rituals which gradually developed into a ritualistic system, and people respected him as a great teacher. It is to be seen that rituals were chiefly concerned with the way of making offerings to the worldly gods (mostly local spirits), taming the evil spirits, subduing the enemies (by black magics, etc), curing illness, predicting and displaying minor miracles and the like. They did not refer to any kind of philosophy or religion. Such was the actual state of Bon of Gshen-rab, which is commonly known as Bon-Chal-nag (black Bon).

The Bon-pos (adherents of Bon) assert that Bon was first started by Gshen-rab himself when he visited Tibet, but preached there only a part of Bon-chhal-nag (black Bon). Later on, his followers preached extensively and translated from Zhang and Tazig into Tibetan. According to Hoffmann,³ the two language names (Zhang and Tazig) are really one and the same. He further observes that 'the Zhang-

1. The Religions of Tibet, Hoffmann, P-89.

2. Thos-kyan-chhos-kyi-nima (Chhos-kyi-Dorje) (1680-1736), Jig-ten-gon-po (1143-1217).

3. The Religions of Tibet, P. 109.

Zhung tongue is obviously intended to serve the Bon religion as Sanskrit serves Buddhism and the supplementary Zhang-Zhung title is intended both to increase the authority of the texts and to vouch for its authenticity.'

With the gradual spread of Buddhism in Tibet the Bon-pos (adherents of Bon) lost their popularity and influence among the people. They were further persecuted. In order to make Bon a strong and meaningful doctrine, they transformed many Buddhist texts as Bonism for the benefit of the future Bon disciples. They also produced a number of works. They deal mainly with meditational practices, rituals, theology and philosophy. They are but 'wholesale plagiarism of Buddhist Canonical works' and that is why they fail to give us the true nature of Bon religion.

King Khri-srong-lde-btsen (755-797 A D.) is regarded by the Tibetans as an incarnation of Manjusri even today. He received a strong religious impulse for Buddhism from his mother, the Chinese princess, who was a devout Buddhist. His rule made the zenith of Tibetan power and the affirmation of Buddhism as the Chief religion of the State. But he found the existence of Bon being still a creed in Tibet.

There were thus many followers of Bon with their sorcery, exorcism, enchantment and devil-dancing. He had even Bon officials. He wanted Buddhism strike deep roots in Tibetan soil and flourished as an indigenous mode of religion and philosophical thoughts. So he attempted to overthrow Bonism and ruthlessly persecuted the Bon-pos (adherents of Bon). But his attempt did not meet with desired success.

He then issued a proclamation, enjoining all the followers of Bon in Tibet to give up their faith and adopt Buddhism, His minister Rgyal-bai-byang-chub further requested Rin-chen-mchog, the great Bon teacher to embrace Buddhism. But he stubbornly refused to yield to his request. At this the king became highly enraged and punished the teacher for his obduracy.

This, of course, created deep resentment and the consequence had been that Rin-chen-mchog became a more professed enemy of Buddhism further. Along with his followers and other Bonpos he composed many Buddhist texts secretly on the pattern of Buddhism and Hinduism with but few elements of original Bon so that Bon teachers would be in a position to offer their followers all that Buddhism could. And these writings he passed as genuine Bon scriptures.

It may be recalled here that the Nying-ma-pa, signifying the old ones, was then the original sect of Buddhism established by Padma-sambhava in Tibet. It proved more attractive to the people but was actually opposed by the followers of Bon. People suspected the genuineness of the books as Bon scriptures.

They believed that these works levelled up as authentic Bon scriptures were but plagiarism from Buddhist works. They were, therefore, the transformed texts of Buddhism. The Bon scriptures were rather the texts of the 'Earlier translated Buddhism' of the Nying-ma-pa sect whose teachings were then prevalent. This created deep resentment among the believers in Buddhism.

The king, the royal protector of Buddhism, having been apprised of it, felt that the prestige of Buddhism would suffer a setback there, wanted to suppress the Bon religion. He further issued an order to punish too severely the Bon teachers because of their conversion of the sublime teachings of Buddhism into the Bon scriptures.

Thus ensued an open conflict with the Bon-pos for the first time in the Tibetan history, during his reign. The Bonpos did not yield. They offered active resistance.

Many of the Bon-pos were killed as also a few Bon teachers were beheaded. Such severe measures notwithstanding, the transformation of the works continued secretly by the remaining Bon teachers. But through the terror or severe punishment, they con-

cealed the scriptures, i.e., the transformed texts in the caves of the various places. They are thus known as the Bon-gter-ma ('The Hidden Treasures of the Bon-pos').

These texts, of course, include the well-known Prajnaparamitas, rDzogs-pa chen-po (Mahasandhi) and the like, and there are many texts which have no difference excepting technical terms and pattern—this is the "Bon-chal-kar" (or Bon-kar-White Bon), the transformed Bon.¹

It is to be seen how the king suppressed the Bon religion and persecuted the non-believers in Buddhism. He is highly glorified by the Tibetan historians for its unique success in the making of Buddhism the State religion by suppression of the Bon religion. The Rgy l-rabs-bon-gyi-hbyung-gnas, a Bon chronicle, gives us an account of the downfall of the Bon religion under king Khri-srong-lde-btsen.²

It would not be irrelevant to point out in this context that opinion differs among the Tibetologists like Tucci Snellgrove, Hoffmann and others about the relation between the Nying-ma-pa and Bon of Gshen-rab. Some hold that there are many aspects of the Nying-ma-pa doctrine which, it seems, might have come from Bon or the Bon influenced the Nying-ma-pa doctrine.

We do not like to enter into a polemic here. But it may, however, be said that it was Nying-ma-pa sect which opposed the Bon and defeated the Bon teachers in the debate and the king thereafter launched his offensive against the followers of Bon. King Khri-srong-lde-btsen is rightly looked upon as the great royal patron of Buddhism.

Indeed, it was through his sincere efforts that Buddhism came to occupy the prominent position it did in Tibet, because of his ruth-

1. J. A. S. B. 1881. P. 19.

2. A. H. Francke, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Ptii, 80n.

less suppression of the Bon-pos, the strong adversaries of Buddhism. He was thus an avowed enemy of Bon and did his utmost to uproot it. His overthrow of Bon was not, however, fully effective, for some of the Bon teachers advocated Bonism surreptitiously.

Thus the prohibition of Bon and expulsion of the adherents of Bon by the king could not deter the zeal of the Bon teachers to carry on the work of transformation and adaptation of Bon texts. This, however, went on secretly. It would be pertinent to point out in this connection what Tucci writes, "the Bon-po priestly class could not set back while its prerogatives and prestige were being curtailed, and they were soon joined as allies on the pretext of defending the old traditions, by those aristocrats who resented the power of the king and of the noble families supporting him. Their resistance smouldered for a long time before it exploded little more than half a century after Thrisong detsen's edict which proclaimed Buddhism the State religion".¹

Buddhism fell on evil days with the king Glang-dar-ma's accession to the throne. "His reign was marked by his undoing of everything his predecessors had done. He and his ministers did their best to destroy Buddhism and the customs of Tibet". He was described as "Devil in his role of 'Julion the Apostate' of Buddhism". Buddhism thus lost the royal patronage. Its followers were ruthlessly persecuted and furthermore the king wanted to have the old religion (Bon) revived. This gave an opportunity to the Bon teachers to enrich their religious scriptures further.

From the Chhos-kyi-rdo-rjes—grub-mthah-shel-gyi-melong,² we learn the subsequent overthrow of Buddhism, a man named Gahedrgur-klu-dgah of Tsang-pya who converted many Buddhist texts as Bon at Dar-yul-dro-lag, a place of Bon pilgrimage. He transformed the words (technical terms) as also the materials differently from

1. Tibet : The Land of Snow, G-Tucci, 29.

2. A rough and abridged translation of the Chpt. IX, see also J. A. S. B., 1881, p. 199 ff.

many Buddhist texts. Even the names of several most widely known Buddhist works were changed. For instances, the detailed (or long) Prajnaparamita (Yum-chhen) came to be known as Kham-chhen, the Nyi-shu-nga-pa in 25 chapters as Kham-chhung, the Gtan-lad-bad-pa as Bon-mdo, the five classes of Mantras (gZungs-sde-lnga-Panca-dharani) as Klu-hbum-dkar-na-khra-gsun. These writings he hid in the rocks of the Mtsho-linga-hdren-chhung. Afterwards the texts which had been hidden were discovered as if they were chance discoveries.

Similar conversion of texts was subsequently made by Bon-zhig of Khyung-po and others. The Bon of these transformed ones—earlier, middle and latter—are called 'Chhla-dkar' (white water) and 'Bon of effect'. In these texts, there are topics on impermanence of all things (anityata), deed (karma), (consequence phala), love (maitri), compassion (karuna), thought of enlightenment (bodhicitta) and six perfections (paramitas). Also there are peculiar substitutes for the five paths (ways of emancipation), ten stages (dasabhumis), the three divine bodies (trikaya), Tantric measures, initiation and meditation; vows, consecration, burnt offering (home), offering diagrams (mandalas), rites for the dead, arhat, bodhisattva, sunyata, Tathagata Buddha, Vairacana, Sariputra, Maudgalyayana, etc. Many kinds are to be found therein—some resembling Buddhism and others not.

From the above it is apparent, 'that the Bon "scriptures" as actually available, are nothing but plagiarisms of Buddhist works'. The Bon-pos borrowed too freely from the vast stores of the Buddhist works. They created their own scriptures by mere imitations of Buddhist writings, like the Buddhist they codified their secret works in two collections - the Kanjur and the Tanjur. The former contains the authoritative utterances of Gshen-rab, while the latter deals with the explanatory and expository works. The Kanjur comprised hundred and forty volumes and the Tanjur hundred and sixty as against hundred and six or hundred and eight and two hundred and twenty-five volumes of the Buddhists.¹

1. Roerich-Traits inermost Asia, New Haven, 1931 P, 357.

The Bon-pos founded a number of monasteries in the Buddhist fashion for the residence of the monks "who lived according to rules of an order along the lines of the Buddhist Order, and went in for philosophy, mysticism and new fashioned magic, religious festivals and the carrying around the sacred objects in procession".¹ The Bon-pos used the holy objects in the opposite direction, instead of clockwise direction, as in Buddhism. Their Swastika, the mystic cross called in Tibetan Gyung-drung 'and did not turn dextrously as that of Lamaism do, but symmetrically, to left instead of right'. They used to chant the famous formula, 'Om Matri Muye Sale du' in place of the sacred Avalokitesvara formula of the Lamas 'Om Mani Padme hum'. Rockhill writes² that "the Buddhist influence is so manifest in it (Bon) that is impossible to consider it as giving us very correct ideas of what this religion was before it came to contact with Buddhism."

The Bon-po religion has repeatedly been said to be the same as that of the Tao-sse and it is remarkable that these two religions have drawn so largely from Buddhist ideas that they have nearly identified themselves with it. "The Bon-pos had no literature of their own. They took over the Buddhist excerpts and symbols on a vast scale, thereby creating a literature and an iconography very similar to those of the Buddhists as to be almost indistinguishable to casual observers."

In the G-Zer-myig is given a broad survey of the world of gods, i.e., the pantheon of the Bon-pos. The pantheon of the Bon-pos has been very much enlarged like that of Lamaism. Hoffmann writes³ that "...in addition to the pantheon of the later Bon religion created primarily in Zhang-zhung under Western Asiatic and Buddhist influence, the old, so to speak anonymous gods of the animist, shamanist era have remained alive in the minds of the common people. The highest principle of this religion and at the same time the transcendental Urguru from which all enlightened understanding comes, and

-
1. The Religions of Tibet, PP. 97, 98.
 2. The Life of Buddha, P. 206.
 3. The Religions of Tibet, P. 101.

which in type is similar to the 'Adibuddha of many of the Vajrayana system is called Kun-tu-bzang-po, in Sanskrit Samantabhadra, in other words, it bears the same name as the Adibuddha of Padmaism, to which, of course, the syncretic Bon religion bears a close resemblance. Philosophically considered, this Samantabhadra represents the ultimate absolute, the Dharmakaya, called here the Bon substance (Bon-sku) a concept which despite many positive characteristics (conscious bliss) seems to be largely the same as the Mahayana 'Voidness'."

In the Bon pantheon Bon-sku-kun-tu-bzang-po is the supreme deity and Bon-skyong (Dharmapala), a guardian deity, a nine headed enormity,¹ as his sister Srid-pai's rgyal-mo who has three eyes and six arms is taken to be Sri devi (Tara) of Lamaism. There are numerous dreadful gods with human or animal heads. There are further other gods with heads of various animals, such as, pigs, horses, bulls and tigers. Those apart, there is a special group of gods dwelling on the tops of the sacred mountain Kailāsa.²

It is interesting to note in this connection that in the Bon-pantheon, goddesses take precedence over the gods and the female priests are regarded superior to the male priests in this religion.³ Lastly, the Bon-pos have monasteries of their own in which there are many images of gods, saints and demons like those of Lamaism, but with different names thereof.

Sacrifices of animals and even human beings and such other practices were openly indulged in and they formed an important part in the religious observances of the Bon.⁴ A fair idea about the original character of the Bon-po rituals can be had from the ancient manuscripts (9th or 10th cent. A. D.) where the Tibetan rites are described.⁵ "The officers are assembled once every year for the lesser

1. S C. Das, J.B.T.S., I, iii, appendix I, 1881, P. 197.

2. Hoffmann, The Religions of Tibet, P 104

3. J. B. T. S. I, iii, appendix I, and Journal of the Asiatic Society, 1881, 197n.

4. Cf. J. A. S. B. 1881, 198n.

5. R. A. Stein, Tibetan Civilization, P. 25.

oath of fealty. They sacrifice sheep, dogs, and monkeys, first breaking their legs and then killing them, afterwards exposing their intestines and cutting them into pieces. The sorcerers having been summoned, they call on the gods of heaven and earth, of the mountains and rivers, of the sun, moon, stars, and planets, saying : "should your hearts become changed, and your thoughts disloyal, the gods will see clearly and make you like these sheep and dogs." Every three years there is a grand ceremony during which all are assembled in the middle of the night on a raised altar, on which are spread savoury meat. The victims sacrificed as men, horses, oxen and asses, and prayers are offered in this form : "Do you all with one heart and united strength cherish our native country. The gods of heaven, and the spirit of the earth will both know your thoughts and if you break this oath they will cause your bodies to be cut into pieces like unto these victims."¹

As already observed, the offering up of the animal sacrifices was the most important feature of the old Bon religion. When Buddhism became the state religion the Bon-pos were prohibited to indulge further in such practices. But this form of sacrifice could not be entirely eradicated because of the deep conviction of the people. Substitutes for living animals were sacrificed instead representations of yaks and sheep, and wooden curving of deer heads.

We have further from the gZer-myig ² 'the description of a human sacrifice for the recovery of a sick prince. It writes : 'the soothsayer seized the man by the feet whilst the Bon-po took his hands. The black Han-dha then cut open the life orifice and tore out the heart. The two, the soothsayer and the Bon-po, then scattered out the blood and flesh of the victim to the four corners of the heaven'. It should be mentioned that with the light of Indian civilization introduced by Buddhism the adherents of Bon were obliged to give up their human and animal sacrifices, and instead use little statue made

1. The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1880, P. 441.

2. Hoffmann, The Religions of Tibet, P. 22, c/ Albert Tafel, Meine Tibetreise, Vol. II, PP. 153, 198, Notes-2, 232, 236.

of dough containing barley-flower butter and water. "Bonpos were now prohibited making human and other bloody sacrifice as was their wont; and hence is said to have arisen the practice of offering images of men and animals made of dough." Its mythology is exceedingly complicated. It enumerates an endless number of spirits or divinities, all hostile to man and it is necessary to propitiate them by continual sacrifices. Even down to the present day some Bon practices still exist in parts of Eastern and South-Eastern Tibet; the most populous part of the country. Dr. Hoffmann¹ writes 'that followers of Bon religion are still using the blood of cocks to conjure peace'.

According to Chos-kyi-ni-ma, a famous Tibetan scholar, there are three stages in the history of Bon religion. The first stage, i. e. the earliest stage is known as the Hdsol-Bon (wild-Bon). It started from the time of Gnah-khri-btsan-po, the first of the early legendary kings of Tibet of the Bon period, and continued upto the reign of king Khri-sde-btsan-po. From Bu-ston² we also learn "the worship called Mdol-bon was spread" upto the time of Khri-sde-btsan-po. The second stage called the Hkhyar-bon (corrupt bon) began in the reign of king Dri-gum-btsan-po and extended upto the time of the introduction of Buddhism under the king Srong-btsan-gam-po who is regarded as the first king in whose reign Buddhism first succeeded in penetrating into Tibet. The third stage the final stage named Bsgyur-bon (a reformed bon) covered the period from the reign of king Srong-btsan-gam-po down to Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419AD) who "reorganised Atisha's reformed sect and altered its title to the Virtuous Order", or Gelug-pa. This sect soon eclipsed all the others; and in five generations it obtained the preist-kingship of Tibetan, which it still retains to this day."³

Further, "from the view point of modern Tibet, no one can be more important in its history than Tsong-kha-pa." Lastly, it will be

1. The Religions of Tibet, P. 22.

2. A History of Buddhism in India and Tibet, translated by Ober Miller Vol. II, P. 182.

3. Weddel, Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism, P. 38.

worth mentioning here that 'with the foundation of the reformed Yellow Church by Tsong-kha-pa in the fifteenth century, and its gradual development into the dominating spiritual and secular power in Tibet, the Bon-po found themselves increasingly restricted in their movement, and finally exposed to violent persecution.'¹

A study of the earlier stages of Bon religion Hkhyer Bon and Hdsol-Bon is indeed interesting as it helps us to understand the struggle between the new-coming Buddhism and Bon. But the original character of Bon cult cannot be obtained even from the second stage (Hkhyer Bon—corrupt Bon) which seems to have made ample use of the Saiva and the Sakta doctrines. The introduction of such peculiar form was necessitated with the death of the first king of Tibet.

'The Tibetan Bon-pos² were not sufficiently acquainted with the appropriate rites and therefore, had to bring in three Bon priests from the West, from Kashmir, Gilgit and Guge, one of them was possessed of the necessary knowledge. This man carried out an operation known as the 'Taming of the Dead' apparently with a magic knife. The rites in question are probably connected with the idea of preventing the dead from returning and harming the living i. e., they are obviously related to similar ceremonies such as can be met with amongst most primitive people.'

It is thus apparent that such rites were previously quite unknown in the Bon religion. They owed their origin to those Bon priests brought for the purpose, 'this stage of the Bon religion, called 'erroneous bon' were mixed up with the Saiva doctrine of the Tirthika.'³ These rites have since been used.

The Bon-pos, however, subsequently codified all the principal rites. They laid down '360 ways of death,' '4 ways of preparing graves and '81 ways of taming evils'. Unfortunately, only the names

1. Hoffman, *The Religions of Tibet*, P. 99.

2. *Ibid*, P. 23.

3. J. A. S. B., 1881, P. 198.

of these texts have come down to us¹ . Like the second stage of the Bon [Hkhyer Bon—corrupt Bon] the third and the final stage of Bon [Bsgyur Bon-reformed Bon] also does not help us much in forming correct ideas about the original nature of Bon i. e., its first stage Hdsol Bon [wild Bon].

Thus we know very little about the original nature of the Bon religion because of dearth of positive evidence. Our knowledge of its actual nature is rather vague and fragmentary. Hoffmann² writes : “What the original Bon religion was like before it came into contact with Buddhism, but this is made difficult by the great dearth of authentic documentary evidence. In fact, actual documents from those early days are unknown, and they can hardly have existed in any case, because it was not until the first half of the seventh century that, under Buddhist influence, Tibet received a written language and a literature.” “The Buddhist influence”, observe Rockhill, “is so manifest in it [Bon] that it is impossible to consider it as giving us very correct ideas of what this religion was before it came in contact with Buddhism”³ Furthermore, F. A. Stein⁴ says : “The history and characteristics of this religion [Bon] are still subject to considerable uncertainty at least as far as the early period is concerned.”

Let us now turn to the theory of Bon. There are many sections [sects] of Bon, such as southern, northern and central. We propose to give here in broad outline, the views advocated by the Bon Dbus-gter [“centre-treasured one”] which is the most widely spread sects. According to it there are four Yanas of “Bon of characteristic cause”, four Yanas of “Bon of effect”, “the Tantrayana”, and one Yana of “summit and supreme”.⁵

THE FOUR YANAS OF (CHARECTERISTIC CAUSE) :—

i] The Yana of god and man. According to it the followers of this Yana cannot realise the theories of the other Yanas. They have but

-
1. J. A. S. B., Vol. 50, 1881, Pt I, P. 204.
 2. The Religions of Tibet. P. 15.
 3. The Life of Buddha, P. 206.
 4. Tibetan Civilization, P. 229.
 5. Yanas carry here the essence of theory.

attachment to the eight Bōns.¹ They keep the precepts of taking refuge perfectly as also observe the virtuous Bōn practices. Further, they depend on others for understanding the profound doctrines. According to this Yana fundamental teachings can be comprehended only with the aid of the preceptors. None can himself realise its truth. Proper guidance of the preceptor is absolutely necessary in this regard. It may compare favourably with the Buddhist conception of Sravakayana "which is meant for common monks aspiring for Arhata".

ii) The Yana of self realised Gshen. It has two aspects :—

- a) The Sravakayana - according to which external materials are true [real] and
- b) The Pratyekabuddhayana - according to which external materials are not true [real].

The principal views of the former are the wisdom of realisation of non-atman of person [Nirpudgalaman] and the rejection of the defilement of misery [Kleavntsi] and ten demeritorious actions [dasaakusalapatha], while those of the latter realisation of non-atman of person [nirpudgalatman] and the emptiness of both grasper and to be grasped [subject and object] as also observing virtuous vows of body, speech and mind. This Yana agrees fairly with the Buddhist Sravakayanas and Pratyekabuddhayanas. We have already seen the Sravakayana in Buddhism is meant for ordinary monks longing for arhatship. But the Pratyekabuddhayana is meant only for those monks who like rhinoceros live a lonely life in the forest and obtain enlightenment without the assistance of a teacher.

iii) The third Yana known as the Yana of "Compassionate mind" or 'Sems-tsam' [Yogacarin] has two aspects :—

- a) Those who accept the organs of the senses pure or true.
- b) Those who accept the organs of the senses as illusory.

1. They are the eight worldly doctrines or principles viz :—

1) Gain (labha), 2) Loss (alabha) 3) name (yasa) 4) bad name (ayasa) 5) Scandal (ninda) 6) praise (prasamsa) 7) happiness (sukha) 8) misery (duhkha).

It compares favourably with the Buddhist conception of Yogacara which "denies the existence of the phenomena, but yet, in a certain sense, recognises an existence containing thought and consciousness".

iv) The fourth Yana known as the Yana of Swastikasattvayana¹ or Madhyamika. It has two aspects :—

- a) Svatantrika Madhyamika and
- b) Prasangika Madhyamika corresponding to those of the Buddhist Madhyamika system.

THE FOUR YENAS OF EFFECT :—

- i) The Yana of premeaval Gshen, pure action [Kriyayoga]. It compares to the Buddhist Kriyatantra which deals with the constructions of the temples, buildings and images of gods, etc.
- ii) The Yana of fulfilled fore-knowledge [Carya-yana]. It fairly answers to the Buddhist Caryatantra which advocates the practical cult. The aforesaid two Yanas are called the "Outer Tantra".
- iii) The Yana of perfect development [Visualisation] or "primeaval Gshen". It agrees fairly with the Buddhist Yogatantra dealing with the practical Yoga.
- iv) The Yana of great meaningful and fully perfected or the "Great primeaval Gshen". It corresponds to the Buddhist Anuttarayogatantra dealing with higher mysticism.²

The final one [the ninth Yana] is called the Summit and Supreme Yana, the Dzogs-pa-chen-po [Mahasampanna]. It corresponds to the Dzogs-pa-chen-po of the Tibetan Nying-ma-pa sect of Buddhism.³

The last three Yanas [seventh, eighth and ninth] are called the three "Inner Tantras".

-
- 1. It stands for Bodhisattva.
 - 2. C/o Winternitz, A history of Indian Literature, Vol. II, P. 389.
 - 3. The dzogs-chen at least in shape is similar to the Nying-ma-pa, Dzogs-Pachen the ninth and highest doctrine. It is that is why some maintains the Nying-ma-pa has been influenced by Bon because of Dzogs-chen and the like.

It is thus evident that all the Bon doctrines were fully designed after the model of Buddhism. It is interesting to note here that some Tibetan scholars maintain that the nine stages of the theory of Bon are embedded in the Buddhist three Yanas viz., Sravakayana, the second [Yana of self-realisation of Gshen-rab] is Pratyekabuddhayana, the first Yana [the Yana of gods and man] is Sravakayana, and the remaining Yanas [3-9] are Mahayana.¹

In fine, from the sense of the Tibetan word, it may be said that Bon was originally an aspect of Tantra cult. It was amalgamated into the Buddhist esoteric faith later on. Several other reformed Tibetan sects were further brought forth thereon.

Lastly, it may be observed that "the development of Buddhism in Tibet, however, can be fitfully traced, mostly through the story of its conflict with Bon till its reform and final establishment by Atisha in 11th century."²

Further, "Bon may have, done," writes R. A. Stein,³ more than has hitherto been supposed towards preparing the ground for the adoption of Buddhism, by asimilating Indo-Iranian elements before Lamaism did so."

1. For details vide the Bon section of the book "History and Religious History" of Reader No. 9 compiled by the the Text book committee, Dharamsala, P. 976.

2. Sukumar Dutt, Buddhism in East Asia, P. 203.

3. Tibetan Civilization, P. 236.