

**PER KVAERNE**  
(Oslo)

## **Bon and Chos – the Other Story**

### **Abstract**

The standard Buddhist version of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet under the patronage of the Tibetan kings in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD is not based on contemporary sources, but is a pious reconstruction made some three to four hundred years after the event.

The concern of this paper is not with historical reality in a strictly factual sense, but rather with competing representations or constructions of history. Although the established Buddhist version of Tibetan history has long dominated the Tibetan as well as the international scene, it is not the only version. The ‘autochthonous’ Bon religion has its own historical perspective, which in many respects differs radically from that of the Buddhists. I shall argue that although the Bon version is no older than the dominant Buddhist one, it is an independent and coherent construction of early Tibetan history. The paper draws heavily on what may be the earliest historical text of the Bon religion, the *Grags pa gling grags* (late twelfth century AD?), of which an edition, translation and study is under preparation.

The standard Buddhist version of the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet under the patronage of the Tibetan kings in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD is not based on contemporary sources, but is a pious reconstruction made some three to four hundred years after the event. Although the *sBa bzched* may contain material going back to the time of Khri-srong lDe-btsan, modern scholarship tends to place the edition presently available in a later period, perhaps the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and in any case it is only in that century that a number of historical texts can be confidently dated.<sup>1</sup> By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the story of

---

<sup>1</sup> On the *sBa bzched* (also known as the *dBa' bzched*), see Pa sang Wang du and Hildegard Diemberger, *dBa' bzched. The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of the Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet*, With a Preface by

the pious Buddhist wives of king Srong-btsan sGam-po, the founding of the monastery of bSam-yas, the activities of the Indian siddha Padmasambhava, and the debate between the partisans of the Indian and Chinese versions of Mayahayana Buddhism, which all took place during the reign of king Khri-srong lDe-btsan, together with the account of the murder of the allegedly anti-Buddhist king Glang-dar-ma and the subsequent break-up of the Tibetan empire, had become standard elements in the perception of the majority of Tibetans of their own history.<sup>2</sup>

Although historians today find little to support the traditional Tibetan claim that king Srong-btsan sGam-po was a devout Buddhist, it is generally believed that he as well as subsequent kings were sympathetic to Buddhism, albeit for hard-headed political reasons. In this paper, however, my concern is not with historical reality in a strictly factual sense of the word, but rather with competing representations or constructions of history. Although the established Buddhist version of Tibetan history has long dominated the Tibetan as well as the international scene, it is not the only version. As one would expect, the Bon religion has its own historical perspective, which in many respects differs radically from that of the Buddhists. I shall argue that although the Bon version, in the form that has come down to us, is no older than the dominant Buddhist perspective, it does represent an independent tradition of historical representation.

Starting with the work of David Snellgrove forty years ago, there is a small but growing body of academic work relating to the teachings and doctrines of Bon.<sup>3</sup> The historical writings of Bon, however, have received much less attention. The only substantial work that comes to mind is Samten Karmay's translation of a part of Shar-rdza's *Legs bshad mdzod*.<sup>4</sup> This is a fairly recent work, composed in the early part of the last century, but it does quote extensively from older sources, and it is one of these sources that I want to discuss now. I am referring to a text that for the sake of simplicity I shall refer to as the *Grags pa gling grag*. I must hasten to add that I cannot, at the moment, give a convincing explanation of this title, so that somewhat vexing question has to be put aside. It does, however, seem that this is the oldest available

---

Per K. Sørensen, *Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens* Nr. 37, Vienna (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften 2000), especially pp. ix ff.

<sup>2</sup> On Glang Dar-ma, see Samten Karmay, "King Lang Darma and his Rule", pp. 57–67 in: Alex McKay (ed.), *Tibet and her Neighbours. A History*, London (Hansjörg Mayer), 2003, especially the conclusion on pp. 64–65: "[...] there is a strong suggestion that the king himself personally remained Buddhist and during his reign Buddhism certainly continued to flourish. The early sources give no suggestion that he persecuted Buddhist monks, but as he was against the involvement of Buddhist clergy in politics it is likely that he was not in favour of maintaining the special privileges of the Buddhist monastic establishments as had been the case especially during the reign of King Ralpachen".

<sup>3</sup> The seminal work in this respect is D.L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon. Excerpts from gZi-brjid edited and translated by...*, London Oriental Series vol. 18, London (Oxford University Press), 1967. For an overview of Western scholarship regarding Bon, see Per Kvernø, "The study of Bon in the West: Past, present, and future", pp. 7–20 in: Samten G. Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano (eds.), *New Horizons in Bon Studies*, Bon Studies 2, Senri Ethnological Reports 15, Osaka (National Museum of Ethnology), 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Samten G. Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, edited and translated by..., London Oriental Series vol. 26, London (Oxford University Press), 1972.

historical text in the Bon religion. Anne-Marie Blondeau has devoted an article to an intensive study of the date of this text, and has concluded that its genesis seems to be intimately linked with the rMa family, and that it may date from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> or the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

I would like first of all to mention the various manuscript sources. For a long time, the only manuscript of this text available in the West was curiously enough preserved in the Oslo University Library. This is a recent manuscript, copied in the year 1919 for the British Political Officer in Sikkim, Major William Lachlan Campbell, who is expressly mentioned in the colophon. It was, incidentally, Major Campbell who provided the American theosophist Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz with a copy of Karma Gling-pa's *Bar do thos grol* text which Kazi Dawa Samdup translated and Evans-Wentz published under the title *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1928. To return to the *Grags pa gling grag* manuscript, it soon became clear to me that the copyist had made all sorts of mistakes, probably because he did not have the slightest idea of the actual subject matter. It was therefore a great step forward when a second manuscript was brought from Tibet to the Bon monastery in India. This manuscript is by all appearances quite old, and carefully written; unfortunately it is badly torn in places, and the first few pages are missing. The text has also been published in Lhasa in 1998 in volume 72 of the Lhasa Bon Tenjur edition.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I also have a xerox copy of a manuscript belonging to a private individual, possibly in the Nagchu region; this text is important because it contains lengthy passages which are not found in the other three, and probably represents a link to later Bon historical texts such as the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Srid pa rgyud kyi kha byang chen mo*. In other words, there is now a fairly good manuscript basis for working on this text.

Turning to the contents of this text, it must be pointed out that it contains much more than a history of Bon in Tibet. It provides an overview of the geography of the world; it has a detailed description of the holy mountain of Gangs Ti-se and the lake Ma-pang; and it enumerates the successive periods in the history of the world and the corresponding Awakened Beings. It also contains an elaborate version of the birth and descent from heaven of the first Tibetan king gNya'-khri bTsan-po. All this is of great interest, but here I shall concentrate on certain sections of the text that deal specifically with the relationship between Buddhism and Bon.

Adopting the perspective of Bon, I shall speak not of "Buddhism and Bon", but of "Chos and Bon". The reason is, obviously, that "Buddhism" means literally "the doctrine of the Awakened One". Logically, therefore, "Buddhism" can apply equally well to Bon. As already stated, I am concerned with representations of history, not history as such, and hence I adopt the terminology of the text itself. I am of course aware that in the Bon

---

<sup>5</sup> Anne-Marie Blondeau, "Identification de la tradition appelée Bsgrags-pa bon-lugs", pp. 37–54 in: T. Skorupski (ed.), *Indo-Tibetan Studies: Papers in Honour and Appreciation of Professor David L. Snellgrove's Contribution to Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Tring (The Institute of Buddhist Studies), 1990.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Henk Blezer, Leiden, for sending me a xerox copy of this edition of the text.

religion, this religion is referred to as g.Yung-drung-bon, “Eternal Bon” or “Immutable Bon”; but again, to simplify matters, I shall just refer to it as “Bon”.

There are three episodes in the narrative of the text that will be presented here. The first explains how Chos was established in India in spite of the attempt made by a demon to pervert it; it follows that in the Bon view, Chos, if taught and practised correctly, is a true and valid doctrine, but as we shall see, its adherents have falsely appropriated the texts and teachings of Bon, passing them off as their own. Secondly, I shall briefly touch on an episode that relates how the Tibetans, who were adherents of Bon, sent an army to India to rescue the followers of Chos when the latter were oppressed by ‘heretics’ (*mu stegs pa*), presumably Hindus. Finally, I shall present the rather involved account of how king Khri-srong lDe-btsan’s interest in Chos, or rather, the ‘false’ Chos practised and taught by Padmasambhava, ultimately led to the banishment of the Bonpo priests from Tibet.

The first episode explains how Shâkyamuni was born as one of the four emanated ‘wisdom sons’ of sTon-pa gShen-rab (*gTsug-lag srid-pa’i bu-bzhi*). The text first enumerates a divine genealogy starting with the god Sangs-po ’Bum-khri, whose youngest grandson, Srid-bu Log-pa-can enters into an incestuous relationship with his sister, Srid-lcam Byu-re-ma. Thereafter, “in a land of India called Varanasi”, their offspring was born in a cave; the son’s name was Mun-pa Zer-lan Nag-po. This demon had a poisonous sack with no opening; yet from inside it, four demons appeared, the last being Nga-med Chos-po. The latter dresses as a tantric yogin, “taking in his hand a vajra with a broken point, and a bell with a broken point, wearing a human skin”, and, claiming to practise Chos, attracts human beings whom he devours. Throwing their skin and bones into a pit, he says that their bodies have vanished as they have attained Enlightenment. In order to put an end to this, gShen-rab goes to the heaven of the Thirty-three Gods and commands the divine youth, Dam-pa Tog-dkar-po, to go to the land of humans and subdue the demon:

“O noble, divine youth! I shall give you a secret, special command.  
In the land of humans is a demon called Nga-med chos-po.  
By day he stays on the mountains and causes disturbance,  
by night he stays in the valleys and moves about stealthily.  
Sometimes, saying that it is the practice of Chos,  
he devours humans, saying he is an Awakened One!  
You shall subdue the demon by being skilful in means.”

The divine youth is then born as Shâkyamuni, the son of Shuddhodana; he puts on the yellow robe of a monk, and approaches the demon, stating that he wishes to become his disciple. The demon replies that by placing magic nectar on his tongue he will reach Enlightenment in three and a half days, and his body will disappear. The ‘nectar’, however, is poison, but it has no effect, and when the demon tries to cut him to pieces with his razor-sharp sword, the divine prince remains unharmed. The demon then assumes a fierce form and swallows Shâkyamuni, but the latter “transforms himself into a great, fierce

deity with indestructible limbs and adamantine nails with sun and moon as eyes, with a great *garuda* as head-ornament and the head of a horse emerging from the head-crest. The bowels of the demon were greatly disturbed, the veins and limbs greatly distended, his brain was split into four parts. The cry of the *garuda*, “*Lhang lhang!*” and of the horse, “*Tsher tsher!*” resounded. “

The demon was thoroughly terrified, and when Shâkyamuni shows the citizens of the town the pit filled with “clanking bones and heaps of flesh, bodily ornaments and clothes”, they are filled with faith, and the demon eventually becomes a lay disciple and is given the name Thar-pa Zhon-nu. Later, when Shâkyamuni passed beyond suffering, the name of Eternal Bon was changed to Holy (*dam pa*) Chos, and the texts of Bon were transformed into Chos.<sup>7</sup>

The second episode begins exactly as before, with the divine genealogy ending with the incestuous couple; but after having brought forth the poisonous bag containing the four demons, they engender two off-spring: “an evil-looking brother and sister, whose names according to Chos were Marali and Matali.” These two in turn copulated, and a son was born whose name was mNga'-med Sems-la-bstan. In the land of India, from the time of king Shuddhodana (i.e. the father of Shâkyamuni), the doctrine of Enlightenment had flourished (this can refer equally to the true Chos as well as to Eternal Bon). The “heretics” (*mu stegs pa*), on the other hand, had produced no less than 360 false doctrines. Since there was no “royal law” in India at that time, in other words, no one to enforce the true doctrine, each and every heretic could preach his doctrine as he pleased. At that time, “the evil-looking man”, mNga'-med Sems-la-bstan, created many doctrines (*chos mang po*) by mixing the Chos of the “insiders” (i.e. the true Chos of Shâkyamuni) with the evil spells (*ngan sngags*) of the “heretics”. This created great strife in India, each party insisting, “I am right, you are not”, and competing with each other in magic and philosophy. The upholder of Chos, Dharmarâja, and the heretic La-ba Nag-po (Krshnakambalin)<sup>8</sup> fought: the heretic hurled a great disc, breaking the neck and killing the upholder of Chos. The adherents of Chos being almost destroyed, they conferred together and said: “Since this heretic cannot be destroyed by philosophical debate or by military might, we must ask the king of Tibet for help”, and so they called on Tibet to send an army. Riding the steed Mu-khen Khong-ma, soaring like a bird, the commander of the Tibetan army, Wa sKyes-bzang sTag-s nang came “with wonderful banners flying”. Although the chief priest (*bon po*) of India, Lha-bdag sNgags-gro invoked the “enemy-gods” (*dgra lha*) and subdued the “enemy-demons” (*dgra srin*), the heretics were vanquished and the enemies of Chos in India were overcome. The text adds, perhaps not without complacency: “That the “insiders” in the end were happy and fortunate was due to the favour of the priests (*bon gshen*) and the assistance of the army of Tibet”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed this episode in “Sâkyamuni in the Bon Religion”, pp. 33–40 in: *Temenos*, vol. 25 (1989).

<sup>8</sup> Kambalin usually designates a Jain monk.

<sup>9</sup> This passage is translated p. 102 in “Bön Rescues Dharma”, pp. 99–102 in: Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (ed.), *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, Princeton, N.J., 1997.

We now pass to the final, but also the most complex, of the episodes, viz., the one involving king Khri-srong lDe-btsan and the founding of the monastery of bSam-yas. Here we are within a historical period, although one must always remind oneself that the whole epic account of Padmasambhava's coming to Tibet dates from a much later period, and may, as Anne-Marie Blondeau has shown, to some extent be a Buddhist adaptation of parts of the Bon text *mDo gZer mig*.<sup>10</sup> However, leaving questions of *textgeschichte* aside, we again turn to the *Grags pa gling brag* itself. The narrative at this point starts in an ominous way with the leader of the Bon priests, Khod-spungs Dran-pa Nam-mkha', having a dream of

“...someone who said he was a supernatural emanation,  
practising Chos in the land of India:  
his hair was cut short, his finger-nails pared,  
wearing saffron robes, similar to the colour of a duck,  
explaining, “This is the Holy Chos” –  
such a one, similar to a demon (*mi ma yin*),  
riding on a horse and a mule,  
with neither drum (*rnga*) or flat-bell (*gshang*),  
holding a brass vajra in his hand,  
clasping a golden dagger (*phur bu*) to his side,  
with a rosary of finger-joints,  
a monk (*ban dhe*) with a skull as his cup,  
pouring ritual substances in the form of human blood and horse blood  
into a bowl –  
such a one I dreamt destroyed the dominion of Bon”.

The text laconically adds that, “after a few years, Padmasambhava came to Tibet, just as Dran-pa had dreamt”. The king supports the newcomer and wishes to practise his teachings; however, he is warned by his minister Ma-zhang Khrom-pa-skyes, a staunch follower of Bon, that,

“If the bird adopts the manner of the fish, it will drown and die;  
if the fish adopts the manner of the bird, it will thirst and die;  
if the yak from gTing-gong in the north is banished to Tsha-ba-rong in  
the south, its heart pines;  
if the ass from the three lands of Mon in the south is taken to gTing-rong  
in the north, its brain will freeze, and it dies”.

<sup>10</sup> Anne-Marie Blondeau, “Le Lha-dre bka'-than”, pp. 29–126 in: Ariane Macdonald (ed.), *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, Paris 1971.

With these examples he warns the King that the Indian monk will not hesitate in polluting the hearth, the king's '*gur lha* will be offended, "and the realm of Tibet will be ruined."

In his reply, the king reveals the real motive for his interest in Chos, saying,

"The king of India is said to have attained a thousand years because he practised this doctrine. I likewise require it in order to prolong my life", adding confidently that, "Even if I die, I do not require the funeral rites (*bsdur*) of Bon, for it is said that by uttering a single prayer one is reborn as a god, so now I shall practise Chos". Saying this, he would not listen.

The king now appoints ministers who support Chos to be in charge of military campaigns against Tibet's neighbours: Ta-zig, Khrom Ge-sar, and China, but after initial success, the whole realm, as the texts says, is reduced to "complete disorder". The king has second thoughts, and Chos is proscribed and spies appointed to make sure that no one practices it. Padmasambhava returns to India, "unable", as the texts says, "to put up with the insults of the ordinary people of Tibet". Now the fortunes of war turn, the Tibetans are victorious, and the neighbouring countries are brought under their sway. The king rejoices, and the Bon priests are given privileges and titles.

In spite of this, the king once again invites Padmasambhava from India, who, together with other monks, "spoke ingratiating and slanderous word":

"Your Majesty! The Bonpos will seize Your Lordship's dominion by wily means.

The priests wear wide-sleeved garments of white silk,  
cloaks of the fur of white lynx and white wolf,  
turbans made from the skin of the white lion;  
they have vessels of gold and silver, scepters of crystal.  
Although they have not seized the royal position  
during Your Lordship's own life-time,  
they will do so in your son's life-time.

Therefore you should get rid of them now,  
build temples to the deities of Chos,  
and not listen to the speech of the Bonpos and ministers".

Using an apt image, the text resignedly comments that, "His Majesty's ears were finer than silk and the monks lips sharper than chisels; so when the two came into contact, the king imposed a tax on his subjects and built twelve temples designated to Chos".

Being once more convinced by the Indian monks, king Khri-srong lDe-btsan now builds the temple of bSam-yas. Numerous monks and nuns gather there, but the texts contemptuously describes them as "male and female beggars, blind men and women, widows and widowers, men and women without off-spring, lepers and polluted people – all entered the temple and were taught the precepts of Chos". This list provides, if



nothing else, an interesting indication of the values and ideas of purity of the older, pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet, although it is worth noting that according to the Buddhist *vinaya*, people who are blind or who are lepers cannot be ordained.

The king decides that the question of whether Bon or Chos should have religious supremacy is to be decided by means of a contest in magic skill. The passage is too long to discuss in detail here. Suffice it to give just one instance of the kind of test imposed by the king: Both sides are obliged by the king to kill by means of magic a representative of the other side, and then bring that same person back to life again. While Padmasambhava is not even able to make his opponent fall asleep, the Bonpos not only cause a representative of Chos, a monk called Shakya Gra-ba, to die, but are also successful in resurrecting him. When he returns to life, he gives an interesting account of his *post mortem* experiences, very different from the kind of experiences described in the later *bar do thos grol* literature. When the king asked, “Shakya gra-ba, what happened to you?” he replies: “Having been carried away by a black man on a black horse, I arrived at the top of a pass which he said was called gShen-la Yor-mo. There a white man on a white horse appeared in front of me, and said he was a god of the Bonpos; he said to me, “You are still a little early”, so I returned, and now I feel as if I have awakened from sleep”.

There also follows a heated exchange of accusations between the two parties. The essence of the mutual recriminations are, from the side of Bon, that their opponents are greedy, incestuous, and addicted to all sorts of unclean and polluting substances and practices. In fact, we see essentially the same traits as those characterizing the demon vanquished by Shâkyamuni. The adherents of Chos are particularly derided for having no effective funerary rites. The Chos monks counterattack by criticizing the same funerary rites, accusing the Bon priests of, “wanting the man who is not ill to be ill, the man who is ill, to die; for the man who is dead you perform funeral rites [...]. Having no teaching to offer, you simply utter cries of *bsvo!*”

The king continues his impure ritual practices, instructed by Padmasambhava; accordingly the gods of Tibet are offended, and this time disease and plague break out all over Tibet, and the king, too, falls ill. “Then His Majesty told the Bonpos to make offerings to the *lha* and the *klu*, to make offerings to the *’gur lha*. As a result, his illness was cured and the plague was stopped”.

Finally, the king, unable to decide which religion to prefer, nevertheless opts for Chos, and the Bonpos are given the choice of conversion, exile, or being sentenced to death. Most of them choose exile, hiding the texts of Bon in various places so that they may be rediscovered in the future, but the foremost among them, Khod-spungs Dran-pa Nam-mkha’, becomes a monk according to Chos, although he defiantly ordains himself, pointing out that the Enlightened Ones in former world-ages were not ordained by “the yellow-clad followers of Chos”. The real motive which he gives for ordaining himself, however, is interesting; it has nothing to do with the truth or otherwise of Chos, but he states that only by obeying the king will “the inhabitants and the realm of Tibet be happy, its dominion and power be great”. He rounds off his speech with a long prophecy



that the royal line will be cut off and society and morals collapse as a result of the new doctrine from India.

The *Grags pa gling brag* is an exceptionally important testimony to a hitherto little-known, but coherent and well-established alternative construction of early Tibetan history. Obviously there is a great need in Tibetan studies for in-depth studies of textual as well as archaeological sources in order to establish, to the extent possible, the actual historical facts. However, this approach may be brought to an impasse by various limitations, and the alternative – or rather, complementary – approach to history, viz., the study of the construction of history, in other words, of ideology, may in the end be equally significant.