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The Myth of Bon Cosmogony

Abstract

The myth of Bon cosmogony is often narrated in various religious texts and thus these versions are not necessarily similar. In this paper I would like to present the myth based on the *Srid-pa'i mdzod-phug*. The myth of Bon cosmogony does not only concern the description of the nature of the universe, but at the same time it also explains the evolution of sentient beings. I would like to point out the main concepts of Bon cosmogony, such as elements, existence and sky and how they are related to each other and to Tibetan and Zhang-Zhung beliefs in general.

Introduction

The myth of Bon cosmogony is often narrated in various religious texts and thus these versions are not necessarily similar. For instance in this paper I would like to present the myth based on the *Srid-pa'i mdzod-phug*. The myth of Bon cosmogony does not only concern the description of the nature of the universe, but at the same time it also explains the evolution of sentient beings. A description of the evolution of the universe and of sentient beings is frequently found in various ritual texts as well as in a number of Bonpo Tantra and Dzogchen texts. Especially in the ancient practice of a ritual called *smrang*, the narration of the origin, which is the second vehicle of the *sNang-gshen* Bon teaching (which has four divisions) in the text which is called *Srid-pa rgyud 'byung cho rabs-kyi smrang*, states emphatically that the counting of the ancestral lineage is used for the purpose of understanding the evolution of existence. Moreover, there are many Bonpo religious historical texts titled *Srid-pa rgyud*; more significantly many Bonpo religious texts of *gTo* ritual introduce the ritual together with the myth of the origin of the universe and sentient beings in the beginning connoting the great efficient communication between

humans and non-humans by quoting the ancient account as a witness. All these examples allow us to say for sure that the myth of Bon cosmogony is an important part of the early Bonpo's beliefs. Many Bonpo texts suggest that in these beliefs the study of Bon cosmogony is not to question the origin of the universe, and that it also describes the origin of the primordial mind. There are also many examples that explain the connection of the outer universe with the inner sentient beings in many ways. I will present some of these examples under the section of "Primordial void".

The elements, the existence and the non-existence

The term '*byung-ba*' means 'element', *Srid-pa* means 'existence' and *bsKal-pa* 'non-existence'. The series of these three units explain the element as a cause of the existence, existence itself and the destruction of the existence. The sequence of these three components is as follows:

The existence existed before the non-existence came into being.
 The element existed before the existence came into being.
 Before the formation of elements,
 there was no cause of existence which could form the existence.
 Before the formation of existence,
 the non-existence could not cause destruction.
 If the universe and sentient beings were not destructed by non-existence,
 then the elements and existence would get mixed up.
 That leads to the fact that there was no heaven and no hell.
 There was no virtue and no sin.
 There was no formation, situation, destruction and no voidness (which remains as chaos).

Therefore, from time to time the formation and destruction of the universe is necessary. It is said that in the past many cosmic evolutions and destructions took place. The cosmic origin, as we have seen in the Bonpo texts, is attributed to the first cosmic divine figure, the ancestor of existence, *Khri rgyal khugs-pa*. It is said that during the span of each existence a triad of deities *lha-gshen* and *srid-pa* always come into existence in order to lead sentient beings. During the era of the present existence, the triad of the deities *lha-gshen-srid gsum* are: *Lha*: *gShen-lha 'od-dkar*, *gShen*: teacher *gShen-rab* and *Srid-pa*: *Sangs-po 'bum-khri*.

Primordial void

The space or primordial void plays an important role in the Bon cosmogony. In many Bonpo texts the primordial void is called *ci-yang med-pa* 'the state of nothingness', and

ye-med stong-pa, ‘the primordial state of nothingness and void’. According to the *mDzod-phug*, (before the universe and its beings came into being) there was the primordial void called *Nam-mkha’ stong-ldan phyod-sum*, its meaning being not fully understandable, but this term also contains the notion of ‘sky / space’ and ‘voidness’. If we compare with the Zhang-zhung language, the primordial void must be identified as *mu-rgyung* which means ‘cause of sky / space’, the primordial sky which appeared before the five elements came into existence. There is no doubt, that *mu-rgyung* is an old term and is used in the various categories of Bonpo *Sutra*, *Tantra* and *rDzogs-chen* texts. However, not all sources agree about the definition of the term. According to the earliest source *Ka-ba gling-dgu* the “*mu-rgyung*” is to be understood as the cause of all primordial existence or of the pure emptiness of mind.

According to the *rDzogs-chen* and *mDzod-phug* system the primordial sky *mu-rgyung* is described as the foundation of the universe and all sentient beings. The detailed account of how the primordial sky formed the foundation of all beings and the universe would be examined according to the following two texts.

The *sGron-ma drug-gi dgongs-’grel* says that “the evolution of the external world from the mind took place by the union of space, light and primordial mind”. This quotation describes the manner in which the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) emerged one after another. The manner in which living beings evolved from the mind in the form of a synthesis is called *rtsal* and resulted from the union of space, light and primordial mind.

The *mDzod sgra-’grel* says that the foremost causes of the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, space) have resulted from space, as well. It further says about the foundation of the treasure of the phenomenal existence that there are two: 1. the external foundations – earth, water, fire and air, and 2. the internal foundations – flesh, blood, heat, and breath. Space and mind are said to be openers of the external and internal elements. The text describes in more detail the space-consciousness, which means the consciousness that is interdependent on the spaciousness of space. We may see that quotations from both sources describe space as the basis of both the physical world and living beings.

Space is not only identified as the origin of the universe and the beings, but it also remains within the space and finally disappears in the space. The cycles of the universe and of sentient beings are explained in parallels. For instance there are four cycles of the universe beginning with the creation, existence, destruction and remaining in the void. Likewise there are four cycles of sentient beings beginning with birth, old age, sickness and death.

Formation of the universe

Formation of the universe is caused by the love and compassion of enlightened beings, and by the power of virtuous and non virtuous individual deeds and the miraculous power of Khri-rgyal khugs-pa, the ancestor of existence. In the phenomenon of the

formation of the universe, hatred and misery appeared before the compassionate and benevolent mind. Therefore Khri-rgyal khugs-pa, let himself grow strong wish against the demon Med-'bum nag-po whose evil intention was to create a world full of misery. In this primordial void there already existed *Nam-mkha' stong-ldan phyod-sum*, the five fermentations of elements. The five causes of the elements were gathered in the body of the father Khri-rgyal khugs-pa who was believed to be the creator of the universe and its beings. Here the inherent existence of the fermentation of the five elements to the *Nam-mkha' stong-ldan phyod-sum*, and gathering the causes of the five elements in the body of Khri-rgyal khugs-pa made both space and creator seem to be more potential to cause the emergence of the elements. Then father Khri-rgyal khugs-pa created the universe out of his mouth vapour. First he blew *ha* from his mouth. Out of his mouth vapour emanated as a wheel of light, from above moving downwards and built up the elements. First it produced a wind called *tshan-ting* whose function is to hold and not let go, a wind called *nan-ting* whose function is to lift and not let fall, and a warm cloud curtain and a warm flag. After forming the air, the air violently turned the wheel of light and changed heat into fire. Out of the coldness of wind and heat of fire, water was formed. From water dust sprang up and was churned by wind to form the earth. The earth is said to be the foundation for generating the four continents, the universal mountain, forests, mountains and rocks, etc.

Cosmic eggs

The first cosmic egg¹ mentioned in the Bonpo text must be *'byung-ba'i sgo nga* which emerged out of the essence of the five causal elements as a "light egg" (with four faces and eight corners, the size of a seven-year-old female yak) and as a "dark egg" (with three corners, the size of a three-year-old bull lying down).

Khri-rgyal khugs-pa is usually seen as the creator of the universe, but his role is rather an indirect involvement in the creation than directly creating the beings.

He appeared to be the ancestor of the universe. He broke the light egg with his light wheel. From the broken egg light went to the sky and the scattered gods *thor-gsas* came out, the rays of the egg went into the earth and the so-called arrow gods *mDa'-gsas* came out. From the essence of the egg Srid-pa sangs-po 'bum-khri, the emanation of Khri-rgyal khugs-pa came out. Sangs-po 'bum-khri is often called the father of the universe. It was he, who had positive attitude to existence.

The chief spirit of non-existence is called bsKal-pa med-'bum nag-po. He broke the dark egg and the light of the egg went upwards and darkness, obfuscation and obscuration came out. The rays of the egg went downwards and madness, obfuscation, and obscuration came out. Out of the essence of the egg appeared a black man of light.

¹ About cosmic eggs see also Claudia Seele, *Traditionen kosmogonischer Mythen in den Urzeitlegenden der Bönpos*. Bonn 1995 (M.A. thesis).

bsKal-pa med-'bum nag-po gave him the name Mun-pa zer-ldan nag-po. He liked non-existence and voidness, ending and destruction and did not engage himself in creation and existence.

Father Sangs-po and mother Chu-lcam laid together, though not touching their foreheads, as well as not making their noses wet, and as a result the animals and birds were born. Then during a subsequent copulation, the couple touched their foreheads and wetted their noses. From this union eighteen brothers and sisters were born, nine primordial males and primordial females. Various human races and generations then descended from each of these eighteen ancestors.

There were also *rin-chen sgo-nga*, precious material eggs, namely: 1. shell egg, 2. golden egg, 3. a type of an agate egg, 4. stone egg, 5. egg of mixed precious materials, 6. crystal egg, 7. turquoise egg, 8. iron egg, 9. copper egg. Twenty-seven protectors of the Bonpo *Spyi-spungs* teaching, twenty-seven *dbal-mo*: nine *gZe-ma*, nine *Gyad-mo* and nine *Byin-te* are said to have also been born from them. When those twenty-seven protectors were born out of the cosmic eggs, the eggs of *gZe-ma* and *Gyad-mo* broke open with an extremely loud sound while the eggs of *Byin te* did not.

Father Sangs po and Mother Chu-lcam – parents of sentient beings

According to the Bonpo cosmogony father Sangs-po 'bum-khri's name in Zhang-zhung language is either Tshangs-rgyung or Sangs-rgyung. He is named so because it was he who created the universe from his initiative action and who also entered into union with mother Chu-lcam rgyal-mo to produce all the beings of the earliest time from the realm of non-existence into existence. He had a positive attitude towards the existence of beings who engage in the virtuous activities and he arranged their existence. The miraculous birth of Chu-lcam rgyal-mo from the blue light egg is described as follows: Out of the depths of the five causal elements emerged a drop and the rain, out of the drop and the rain emerged the external ocean. The aspiration of father Sangs-po and the power of human actions combined formed a consort of Sang-po named Chu-lcags rgyal-mo in the ocean. This is the way she emerged: First the ocean was moved by the wind and formed bubbles as big as a tent. Out of the bubbles came a blue light egg. The egg broke by itself and there appeared a blue turquoise female with blue hair tied in seven plaits down to her armpits. At the time of the emergence of males and females in the universe, Chu-lcags rgyal-mo is described to be the earliest female being. The name Sangs-po 'bum-khri is often prefaced with 'father of existence', (*Srid-pa'i yab*) just as Chu-lcags rgyal-mo is also called 'mother of existence' (*Srid-pa'i yum*). The father Sang-po 'bum-khri named his consort Chu-lcags rgyal-mo, 'Queen of the Metal Water', Chab-shang 'phrul-mo 'the Miraculous Lady of *chab-shang*', bZang-za ring-btsun 'the Auspicious Lady, the Noble One Having a Long Life' *Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo*, 'the Queen of Existence, Sa-trig er-ti 'the Mother of Enlightened Beings of the Past, Present and Future'.

Importance of elements, sky and existence

As we have seen, four main features played an important role in the myth of the Bon cosmogony: the space, the elements, the existence, and the non-existence. And we have seen that the non-existence had always a bad connotation in the Bon cosmogony and therefore was always represented in the form of evil and destructive beings.

From the remaining three the most important are the elements, as they were the origin of the universe and the first cosmic eggs were formed from them.

There exist five heroic syllables *dpa'-bo 'bru lnga* depicting these five elements, and from them the alphabet of Zhang-zhung / Tibetan (40 letters) are said to have been developed.

The oldest classification of the Bon teachings is called *sGo-bzhi mdzod-lnga*. Each of these teachings is also said to have been entrusted to the five elements of Bon whose titles are associated with the five elements. There are also four elements called *gShen* said to be formed from the elements.

The elements themselves divided into the light essences of the five elements, the pure essences of the five elements, and the impure essences of the five elements, altogether fifteen. 1. The light essences of the five elements are: sound as the essence of wind, sun as the essence of fire, moon as the essence of water, stars as essences of the earth, and light as the essence of the sky. 2. The pure essences of the five elements are said to be the main cause and the aspiration of Khri-rgyal khug-pa and bsKal-pa med-'bum nag-po is said to be the secondary cause to generate the gods of the five elements. The five elements' goddesses hold the emptiness of breath, heat, blood, flesh and mind and do not release them. This action closes the five doors of demigods, humans, hungry ghosts, animals, and hellish beings and the five emptinesses appear. The impure essences of the five elements are: iron as the essence of wind, copper as the essence of fire, salt as the essence of water, gold as the essence of earth, turquoise as the essence of the sky.

Among the five elements sky appears to be the most important element in Bon religion. The Tibetan term *nam-mkha'* is very ambiguous, and in some contexts it can be understood as 'space' whereas in others it can be 'sky'. Therefore I defined three divisions of the sky in my Zhang-zhung dictionary²: 1. A state related to the sky god. 2. Primordial state which appears at the beginning of the five elements. 3. Blue sky which is the source of rain, thunders and hailstorms. The importance of sky in Bon beliefs is indisputable among all Tibetan historians, and even the Buddhist historians often named Bonpos as 'sky lovers'.

The term *Srid-pa* is associated with the earliest male and female *Srid-pa yab-yum*, the king and queen of existence *Srid-pa'i rgyal-po* and *Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo*, as well as with

² Dagkar Namgyal Nyima, *Zhang zhung – Tibetan – English Contextual Dictionary*, Bonn, 2003, pp. 31–33.

the four heavens of Bon; the two of them are called *srid-pa ye-sangs* and *srid-pa gung-sangs*. The teaching of the Bon's fourth vehicle is called the *srid-gshen*. There is also an odd practice *Srid-pa hos* which originated from Bon, though today it is mainly practiced by the Buddhists. In Bonpo sources this practice seems to have a connection to the ritual of 'growth of wealth'. But Tibetan Buddhism used a thangka painting depicting several figures while performing the ritual. The figures include a square grid of the numbers one to nine called *sme-ba dgu*, and the eight trigrams of the I-ching called *spar-kha brgyad*, both of which are used in Tibetan astrology. This painting is carried in front of the processions of travelling lamas, and is used in marriage and funeral ceremonies.

As a remarkable note on *srid-pa* one should mention a prominent practice of bestowing the title of *Srid-pa* to the Zhang-zhung kings. This fact is attested by the Dunhuang documents as well as by the Bonpo sources. According to both sources, the ancient Zhang-zhung king's name was associated with the Zhang-zhung term *lig* which denotes the Tibetan *Srid-pa* 'existence'. The term *srid-pa* is used in the Zhang-zhung king's name *zhang-zhung srid-pa'i rgyal-po* 'king of the universe'. The Zhang-zhung king's name associated with the Zhang-zhung term *lig* has certainly a connection with the Bonpo belief in *srid-pa*, and the use of this term seems to be rather old and convincing, since it was never bestowed on the Tibetan kings.

Through the study of Bon cosmogony, it becomes obvious that the significance of sky, the elements, and the existence can be found in the Bon cosmogony texts, as well as in many other Bonpo works. The importance of them may be seen as a common belief shared by many religions. However, the way in which 'the elements', 'the existence' and 'sky' are understood in the Bon religion remains unique and perhaps derived from the Bon cosmogony.

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