

The naming of Tibetan religion:

Bon and *Chos* in the Tibetan imperial period

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Introduction

For some time now there has been disagreement about what we should call the religious practices that existed in Tibet alongside Buddhism during the Tibetan imperial period – the seventh to mid-ninth centuries. Within the Bon tradition we find various periodizations, the best known of which is the three historical stages of ‘old Bon’ (*bon rnying*), ‘eternal Bon’ (*g.yung drung bon*) and ‘new Bon’ (*gsar bon*). In the Buddhist polemical works, the earliest stage of Bon is *brdol bon*, which we can gloss as ‘indigenous Bon’, and this is followed by ‘deviant Bon’ (*’khyar bon*) and then translated Bon (*bsgyur bon*) (cf. Martin 2001: 41–2 and Bjerken 2004). The definitions of each stage, and the time-periods assigned to them differ, but what the Buddhist and Bon classifications have in common is an assumption that a tradition known as Bon existed from the earliest times.

Both sets of classifications date from the eleventh century or later, and both are called into doubt by earlier documentary evidence. This evidence is found among the manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave, dating from the ninth to tenth centuries. Rolf Stein, reviewing several Dunhuang manuscripts that use the term *bon*, concluded that “le mot *bon* seul semble désigner un rite. Il ne s’agit pas du Bon comme principe de philosophie ou comme nom de la doctrine postérieure [the word *bon* seems to designate a ritual. It is not a philosophical principle nor the name of the later doctrine]” (Stein 1988: 52).¹ This view was subsequently challenged by Samten Karmay, who wrote:

My view is that a number of Dunhuang MSS ... attest to the existence of a widespread belief designated as Bon in the royal period and that this is

¹ For the context in Arthur McKeown’s English translation, see Stein (2010: 269). The translation here is mine.

different from the ‘organized Bon’ by which we mean what the Buddhists call *bsgyur bon* and the later Bonpo call *g.yung drung bon*. (Karmay 1998 [1983]: 168)²

Karmay drew upon one manuscript in particular to argue the point that the term *bon* referred to “the existence of a widespread belief.” This is Pelliot tibétain 972, a kind of introduction to Buddhism for Tibetans, which contains a line criticizing “the belief in heretical *bon*” (*mu stegs bon la yid ches ste//* Pelliot tibétain 972, 2v.3). However, this statement still begs the question of what is signified by *bon*. In fact, the manuscript itself provides a clue in the following lines, which refer to the divination practice known as *mo bon* (*mo bon dag la srid ma ltos//* Pelliot tibétain 972, 2v.4).³ This was pointed out by Henk Blezer in a sustained critique of the argument that some kind of ‘organized Bon’ is to be discerned behind the term *bon* in the Dunhuang manuscripts:

Karmay quite rightly notes that the term *bon* occasionally (but only very rarely) is also used for something of ‘religious’, probably mainly ritual, content and cites several Dunhuang-period passages in support. On close examination, however, these occurrences do not really affect the above analysis. Sparse references to *bon* ‘religious’ (ritual) content also invariably appear to refer to the specific content of ritual performance of Bon specialists and they do not imply the more abstract notion of some kind of self-conscious, organized, popular or elite Bon religion. (Blezer 2008: 428)

² This statement occurs in an addendum which does not appear in the original (1983) article. John Vincent Bellezza expresses the same view; he argues that the archaic materials consider “the concept of *bon* as the entire spectrum of rituals and the philosophical and symbolical systems that lie behind them” (Bellezza 2008: 498). However, he does not offer specific citations in support of this view.

³ Karmay read this as a reference to a female *bon* priest: *bon mo*. However, *mo bon* is well attested elsewhere in the manuscripts as a reference to a *mo* divination ritual. Moreover, this interpretation is supported by another manuscript, IOL Tib J 360/10, which contains the same verse; here the line is: *mo bon ltas la srid ma btos*. The presence of *ltas* where the other text has *dag* makes it even more clear that the context here is divination. Neither Karmay nor Blezer noticed that both texts seem to be drawing on an apocryphal Chinese sūtra, the *Bayang jing* 八陽經 which was translated into Tibetan several times and is found in the Dunhuang manuscripts in several recensions. One recension of the *Bayang jing*, which Stein describes as being in the ‘Chinese vocabulary’, uses the term *bon po* (Pelliot tibétain 748) as well as *mo bon* (Pelliot tibétain 2206); see Stein 2010: 31–35. Here the terms are translations from the Chinese, with *bon po* used for *xieshi* 邪師 ‘heretical teacher’ or ‘sorcerer’.

Thus it seems that these arguments over the significance of *bon* in the Dunhuang manuscripts return us again and again to Stein's definition: a kind of ritual. There is a growing consensus among contemporary scholars that there was no organized (or even disorganized) religion going by the name of *bon* in the Tibetan imperial period.⁴ Yet we should not be lead into thinking that we have only two alternatives: either to accept the there was a religion before and during the Tibetan imperial period that went by the name of *bon*, or to reject the whole concept of a pre-Buddhist religion. Where could we go from here?

The problem is in large part linguistic. And it is about historical specificity, about how words were being used at a particular time. So we need a close attention to linguistic context, whether looking at a Buddhist text written in Tibet, a translation, or a text from a non-Buddhist source. We also need to choose documentary sources to which we can assign as narrow a range of dates as possible. In this paper I hope to offer the opportunity to move this debate forward by presenting some new sources, and showing how they may help us towards new insights. In particular, I want to point to (a) the existence of *bon po* and other non-Buddhist ritualists at the local level during the imperial period, and (b) the agency of the early Tibetan Buddhists in conceptualizing the manifold Tibetan rituals and myths as a unified whole, elucidating and perhaps creating the very idea of a non-Buddhist Tibetan religion.

'The Little Religion': Buddhist presentations of an 'other'

Our main literary sources on non-Buddhist ritual traditions are, as previously mentioned, from the Dunhuang caves. The antiquity of these sources has recently been challenged by a number scholars.⁵ The Dunhuang cave was closed at the beginning of

⁴ The problem of naming also applies to the anthropological study of non-Buddhist religious practice in Tibet. This is what Rolf Stein referred to as "the nameless religion." More recently, Charles Ramble has used the term *pagan* in his work, and justified it as follows:

'Pre-Buddhist' and 'non-Buddhist' are inadequate for a number of reasons: the first not least because it begs important questions about the relative antiquity of the two traditions in the region, while the second fails to distinguish other forms of 'non-Buddhism'—such as Hinduism—that exist in Mustang. 'Popular,' another handy evasion, is perhaps even more misleading because of its implication that the cults of place-gods lie within the sphere of public activity, whereas they are in fact quite specialised fields. Whatever its shortcomings, 'pagan' at least expresses the essentially local character of these cults (the Latin *pagus* could be very acceptably rendered by the Tibetan word *yul*), and also suggests an ethos that is at odds with the tenets of high religion, whether Buddhism or Bon (Ramble 1998: 124).

⁵ See for example Walter (2009: xxi–xxvii). For documents proven to post-date the Tibetan empire, see Uray (1981) and Takeuchi (2004). For manuscripts relevant to the present enquiry, see Blezer (2008: 423–4) and Dotson (2008: 56).

the eleventh century, and a position of scepticism would suggest that we do not expect any of the texts to date from any earlier than this. That did not stop an earlier generation of scholars from taking certain texts as representative of religion during the era of Srong brtsan sgam po, that is, as far back as the early seventh century.⁶ Fortunately, we are now better placed to use palaeography and codicology to date manuscripts. This, along with linguistic assessment of whether language is archaic (though still open to the objection of feigned archaism) offer the prospect of a more confident dating of the manuscript sources.⁷

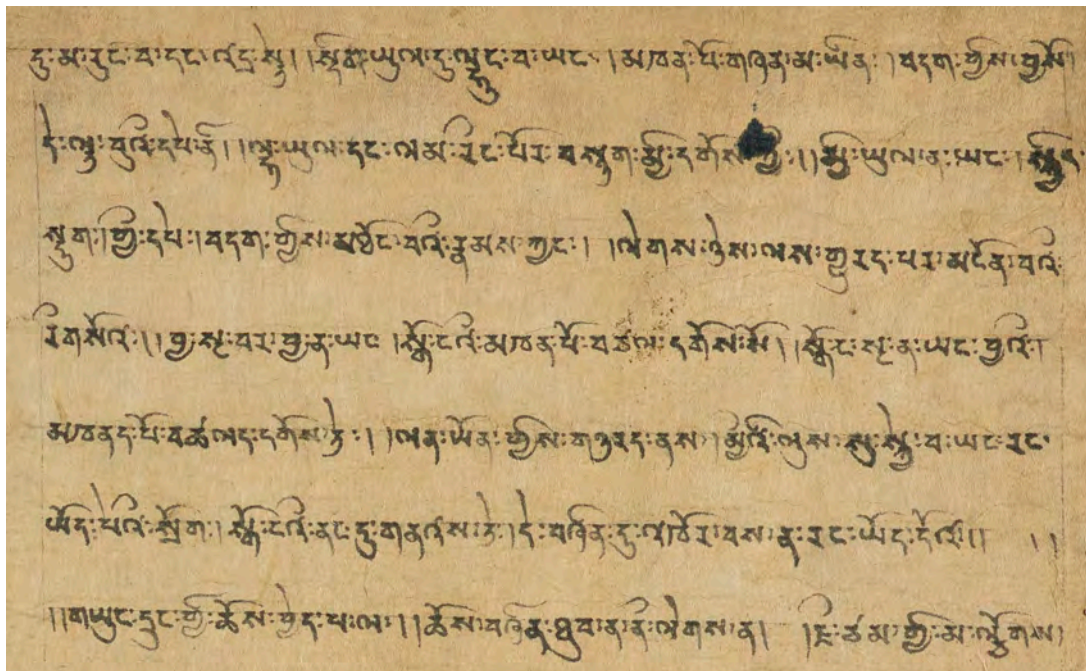


Figure 1 IOL Tib J 1746

Given these doubts, in this section and the next I will present sources that can be dated to the imperial period with reasonable certainty. We begin with a scroll, IOL Tib J 1746 (Figure 1), which I believe to date from the imperial period on the grounds of codicology, palaeography and linguistic analysis:⁸

⁶ Most notably, Ariane Macdonald (1971), who was extensively criticised by Stein for holding this position (Stein 1985).

⁷ See van Schaik (2013).

⁸ I would like to thank Kazushi Iwao for first bringing this manuscript to my notice.

(i) Codicology: the manuscript is a scroll in the same format as the scrolls used to copy the *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra* in the middle of the ninth century, by the order of the emperor Khri lde gtsug brtsan (r. 815–841). Also, unlike Tibetan scrolls from the post-imperial Dunhuang, the format of the scroll is horizontal, with two columns of text written on each scroll panel. The dimensions of each panel are 28 cm by 41.5 cm, and each panel has been marked with margins and guidelines. In all of these codicological features, the scroll matches the most common format for copying the *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra* carried out at toward the end of the reign of Khri lde gtsug brtsan. It is likely that the use of left-over paper for other purposes occurred soon after this time, that is, after 841. Thus an estimate for the copying of the text would be at some point in the 840s.

(ii) Palaeography: the writing style of IOL Tib J 1746 is actually more archaic than most copies of the *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra*. It falls within what I have called the ‘square style’, which is found in the *Old Tibetan Annals*, as well as in certain Buddhist texts, like a copy of the *Samdhinirmocana sūtra* brought to Dunhuang from Central Tibet (IOL Tib J 194).⁹ Regular features of the square style seen in this manuscript include the short descenders and *shad*, the four-side *ba* and head of *ga* (in other styles these are triangular). The scribe has also used the double *tsheg* in preference to the single, and sometimes uses a mid-line *tsheg* after *nga* (where it is placed inside the space of the letter itself). The presence of the square style is an indicator that the manuscript was written in the imperial period.¹⁰

(iii) Linguistic analysis: The text contains frequent occurrences of the archaic *da drag* and *'a brten*. These alone might be conscious archaicisms, but the text also has many linguistic features that suggest that it predates any standardization of Buddhist translation practices (see Scherrer-Schaub 2002). For example, throughout the text, the word ‘Buddha’ is not translated, but transliterated as *'b'u dha*. We also see the pre-reform use of *g.yung drung*, and the presence of some terms which are simply not seen in later dictionaries, like *lan yon*.

IOL Tib J 1746 is essentially a treatise on the advantages of Buddhism over Tibetan beliefs and rituals. It is written in the first person, giving the impression of a sermon delivered by a missionary to a dubious audience, trying to reach out with an informal style and examples drawn from everyday life. The following passage is representative of this approach:

⁹ Evidence of the Central Tibetan provenance of IOL Tib J 194 is that the paper is composed of Daphne fibres, which are not found in manuscripts produced in Dunhuang; see Helman-Ważny & van Schaik (2013).

¹⁰ See van Schaik (2013).

lha yul dang lam rīng por bsnyag myi dgos kyI// myi yul na yang/ skyid sdug/ gyI dpe/ bdag gyis mthong ba'I rnams kyang// legs nyes las gyurd par mngon ba'I rigso'// bya snga bar bya na yang/ sgo nga'I mkhan po btsal dgos so// sgo nga snga na yang bya'I mkhand po btshald dgos te// (IOL Tib J 1746, 1b.2-5)

It is not necessary to pursue the long route to the land of the gods. Even in the land of men I have seen many examples of happiness and suffering and it is clear that this comes from good and bad behaviour. If you want to know what came before the bird, you need to find an expert on eggs. And if you want to know what came before the egg, you need to find an expert in that!

Despite this conversational style, the text is quite scathing when it comes to discussion of non-Buddhist religious ritual and belief:

chos chu ngu la chags nas/ nI// lha dang gnam la bskurd// rung ba gchig tsham byung na nI/ legs pa'I chos kyang myi dgos par skad/ zero<d> <te>// bde skyid pa'I/ lam ni/ sgo pye ba bzhin 'dug ste'/ tshor ba ni thard/ ma tsho zhīng myi nyand pa nI/ nad pa sman 'thung du ma rung ba dang 'dra ste// sdig yul du lhung ba yang/ mkhan po gzhan ma yin/ bdag gyis byaso/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 1a.14-1b.1)

Those who are attached to the little religion propitiate the deities and the sky, and if even a single good thing occurs, they say that they don't need the excellent religion. The path of joy is like opening a door – one feels liberated. [The little religion] offers no sustenance and is useless. It is like being ill and drinking medicine that has no benefit: you will fall into the land of suffering. There is no other expert – you have to do it yourself.

Here we have a characterization of the non-Buddhist religion from the Buddhist point of view – propitiation (*bskurd*) of the gods and the sky. The important role of the sky in early Tibetan mythology is well attested; like *lha*, the term *gnam* appears in the

Dunhuang manuscripts containing non-Buddhist narratives, such as ‘the age of decline’.¹¹ And the supplication of deities, often via sacrificial rituals, appears in a number of characterizations of the pre-Buddhist religion.

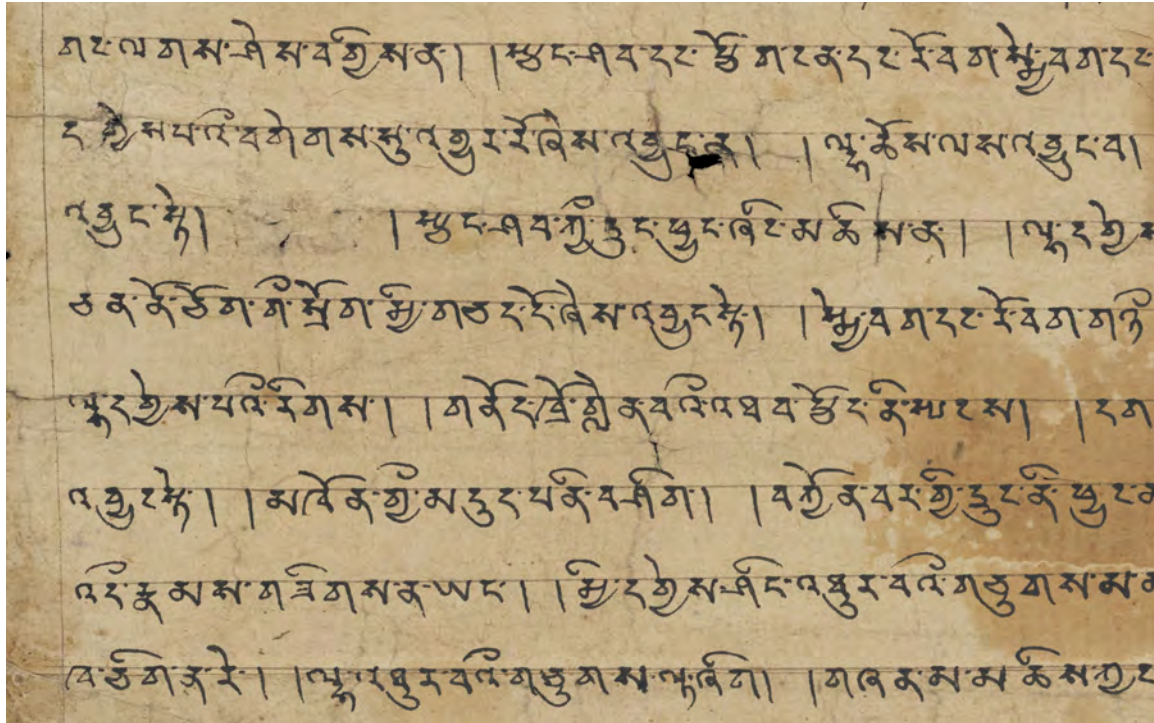


Figure 2 IOL Tib J 990

It is worth briefly comparing this characterization of Tibetan beliefs with another previously unstudied treatise (unfortunately fragmentary) on non-Buddhist practices, IOL Tib J 990 (Figure 2). This text addresses the concerns of Tibetans who are anxious about avoiding the displeasure (*myi dgyes*) of the deities. This text contains a great deal of archaic vocabulary, and is difficult to translate. Essentially, it presents a softer approach than that of IOL Tib J 1746, not criticizing the non-Buddhist religion directly, but merely suggesting that the ethical precepts of *lha chos*, the “divine religion” (i.e. Buddhism) are the best way to avoid the deities’ displeasure. Such references to Buddhism as *lha chos* blur the linguistic distinction between the old and new religions:

¹¹ See IOL Tib J 734 and 735, and the edition and translation in Thomas 1957. In the commentary on the ritual text *Rgyud gsum pa* in IOL Tib J 711, it is said of the deity Eldest Son of the Moon (*zla ba'i bu chen po*), that the monks called him Devaputra (*lha'i bu*), while the bonpos called him Sky-deity (*gnam lha*). The text itself may well be from the tenth century. See IOL Tib J 711, f.4a and the discussion of this in Stein (2010: 35).

lha chos is a good Buddhist term, but it also has associations with Tibetan ritual terminology like *lha bon* (see the sources discussed in the next section).

Reference to Buddhism as *lha chos* is also consistent in the popular *Sayings of the Wise Monk* (*'Phrul gyi byig shu*), found in several versions among the Dunhuang manuscripts. Matthew Kapstein mentions this as one of a group of early texts providing “evidence of the production of an indigenous Tibetan didactic literature whose primary aim is the propagation of the doctrines of rebirth and moral causation” (Kapstein 2000: 44). IOL Tib J 990 criticizes Tibetan rituals (like animal sacrifice), but preserves and to some extent appeals to Tibetan beliefs (like the importance of pleasing the deities). An objection put into the mouth of a non-Buddhist Tibetan explains the basic characteristics of Tibetan ritual, as the invocation (*brjod*) and supplication (*gsol*) of deities through sacrifice:

kha cig na re// lha 'thur ba'I gcugs lha zhig// gzhan ma mchis kyang lha
brjed [read: brjod] pa la tha dad de// sangs rgyas ni ska ma chos su gsol//
bdag cag gi sgo lha dang// yul lha ni srog chags kyis gsol te// brjod pa'i cho
ga myi 'thun bas// myi dgyes shing 'thur bar 'gyur ro zhes mchi ba dag kyang
mchis grang ste// (IOL Tib J 990, ll.11–13)

Some say: “When the deity is disturbed, even if there are other [methods], the invocation of the deity is the best. The Buddhists pray to *ska ma* religion. With our gate deities and local deities, we pray by [killing] living creatures. Because of the conflict between these rituals of invocation, there will be unhappiness and disturbance.”¹²

As an alternative to such rituals, IOL Tib J 1746 promotes the figure of the Buddha as a figure of compassion who treats everyone equally. It also emphasises the message of personal responsibility for one’s own fate that is entailed by the Buddhist understanding of *karma* as the effects of one’s own actions:

¹² The ‘gate deities’ (*sgo lha*) feature in the contemporary rituals of the people of Mustang, as recorded by Charles Ramble (2008: 207).

'b'u dha mnga' che la thug rje che zhing/ snyoms par mdzad de// gnyisu ma mchis par gchig du dgongs na// legs byed pa <lta>/ lha yul du sus drangs// nyes/ byed pas skyid pa'I sar/ myi tard par/ sus bgags te/ na rag du lung zhes byas na// skyid sdug/ gag bdam ba'I dbang bdag la yod pas rung// legs pa'I chos rang yod pa/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 2b.1-4)

The mighty Buddha is vastly compassionate and treats everyone equally. Thinking of them as one, without making distinctions, he acts for their welfare. This is excellent. Whoever tries to be conducted to the land of the gods by committing sins will not be liberated to the place of joy. You may say 'anyone who stops doing this will fall into hell', but I have the power to choose between joy and suffering, because I have the excellent religion.

Here the preacher contrasts the audience's fear of the consequences of stopping their ritual propitiation of the deities with his own Buddhist confidence in the karmic efficacy of his own actions. The description of the Tibetan audience's beliefs in a 'land of the gods' (*lha yul*) on the one hand and a hell (*na rag*) or 'land of suffering' (*sdig yul*) on the other are seen in other early sources.¹³ The attempt to replace the traditional Tibetan world-view with one of individual responsibility by emphasising the workings of karma is found in many other Tibetan Buddhist tracts from this early period; indeed, Matthew Kapstein has argued for central role of the ideas of karma and rebirth in the conversion of the Tibetans to Buddhism.¹⁴ The frequent references in IOL Tib J 1746 to those who do not heed the Buddha's message suggest that it comes from a time when Buddhism was still far from established. The author complains that, "even if they hear the scriptures with their ears, they are not able to retain them and study them" (*yi ge las rnar thos kyang / brnags shing nyand du ma btub pa/* IOL Tib J 1746, 2b.7). This is also expressed in a metaphor:

¹³ See the discussion in Stein (2010: 58-59). These two terms for heaven and hell are found in the various versions of the *Sayings of the Wise Monk* (the most complete versions are in Pelliot tibétain 126 and 992/2), which seems to be an early Buddhist missionizing text similar in intent to IOL Tib J 1746.

¹⁴ See the early chapters of Kapstein (2000), especially pp.42-6.

dper na [ny]I [ma] shar na pa'I '[od] kyis / gar gyang snang zhing khebs ste/ /
[k]un kyi mthong na' / / mus long gIs ma mthong gzhong kung / khas pub
pa'I 'og du myi snang ba dang 'dra' ste/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 1a.9–11)

For example, when the sun rises, everything is illuminated and covered, and it is seen by all. Yet the blind do not see it, and concealed valleys are not illuminated.

Though this striking text has many interesting features, the one I want to focus on here is that non-Buddhist beliefs and practices are discussed without the use of the word *bon*.¹⁵ In particular, IOL Tib J 1746 is one of very few early sources that makes explicit reference to Tibetan non-Buddhist practices *in general* (rather than specific ritual techniques); these are consistently discussed as a form of *chos*: either as ‘the bad religion’ (*chos ngan pa*) or ‘the little religion’ (*chos chu ngu*). Buddhism, on the other hand, is the Buddha’s religion, or *buddhadharma* (*chos 'b'u dha*), the good religion (*chos bzang po / chos legs pa*), the correct religion (*chos yang thag pa*) or the great religion (*chos chen po*). Particularly striking is the term *g.yung drung gyi chos*. The term *g.yung drung* was used extensively in early Buddhist translations, but was later generally replaced by *yang dag pa*, eventually falling out of use in most Buddhist contexts, and conversely becoming especially significant in the post-tenth century Bonpo religion. The use of *g.yung drung gyi chos* to refer to Buddhism in IOL Tib J 1746 shows that it was still considered an entirely appropriate epithet for Buddhism itself.

References to the ‘little religion’ might remind us of anthropological distinctions between the great tradition and little traditions. But the way the Buddhist author of IOL Tib J 1746 uses the terms is entirely to elevate the great and belittle the little. He writes:

cher ni chos dang 'b'u dha yI yon// chung ngu ni bdag nyId/ kyis log pa la ma
bltas pa'I yon te/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 2b.5–6)

¹⁵ Note that the text also lacks reference to *bon po* or *gshen*; instead we have *mkhan po*. Stein (2010: 21) has shown that in Buddhist translations, *mkhan po* (or the expressly pejorative *log pa'i mkhan po* and *yon po'i mkhan po*) can serve the same role as *bon po*.

‘Greatness’ is the qualities of the Buddha and [his] religion. ‘Littleness’ is the quality of my not having recognized my errors.

There are scriptural precedents for this: though the term *chos chung ngu* is far from common, it appears in a number of sutras, including the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. And in the *Ratnakūta sūtra* there is the line, “those who reside in houses possess the little religion; those who go forth possess the great religion” (*khyim na gnas pa ni chos chung ngu dang ldan pa'o// rab tu byung ba ni chos chen po dang ldan pa'o // 'Phags pa khyim bdag drag shul can gyis zhus pa zhes Derge, Dkon brtsegs, D63, f.272a*) Behind all of this is, of course, the Sanskrit word *dharma*. The word is notoriously polyvalent; in the context in which we find the word in IOL Tib J 1746 and its scriptural sources, the following extract from the definition of *dharma* in Monier-William’s dictionary is relevant: “usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty.” I think ‘customary observance’ and ‘prescribed conduct’ in particular are helpful definitions for our reading of IOL Tib J 1746. We should also consider the more specific religious definitions that Monier-Williams gives: ‘virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good works’. Some of these signifiers also seem to be present in IOL Tib J 1746, especially when the author refers to Buddhism as merely *chos* without qualification.

Thus I disagree with Michael Walter's assessment that *chos* and *bon* had essentially the same meaning – a ritual method – in the imperial period.¹⁶ IOL Tib J 1746 shows that *chos* was used to refer to a general agglomeration of behaviours and beliefs, much as *dharma* can be used this way in Buddhist scriptures, and in later Tibetan literature. The ‘little religion’ or ‘bad religion’ is contrasted with ‘the great religion’, the ‘good religion’, ‘the Buddha's religion’. There is an equivalence implicit in the use of the same word, *chos*, for both. The two are equal and opposite. This tells us that the writer of IOL Tib J 1746 considered that the Buddha's *chos* had a competitor, not in the form of

¹⁶ Walter attempts to separate *chos* from its association with *dharma* by citing the appearance of the term *chos tshul* in the *Skye shi 'khor lo* (Pelliot tibétain 220 *et al.*) as an example of *chos* being “an apparently non-Buddhist term in a non-Buddhist environment” (Walter 2009: 73, note 84). Here I think Walter should have remembered better his own insistence that none of our surviving literary texts predate Buddhism, and that Tibetan literacy co-evolved with Buddhism. The *Skye shi 'khor lo* is a Buddhist text, if an unusual one, and the term *chos tshul* (Skt. *dharmanaya / dharmanetri*) is common in Buddhist scriptures. Walter gives no other examples to show that *chos* should be understood outside of the meanings of *dharma*. However, his position on *chos* later leads him to assert that “it is as if *chos* were the term from one language for the ritually correct way to do something, and *bon* the same from another” (Walter 2009: 192). There seems to be a misconception behind this statement, that if *chos* is used to refer to something other than Buddhism, some pre-Buddhist use must be behind this. Of course, *chos* (like *dharma*) can refer to many things other than Buddhism.

specific disparate rituals, but as another form of *chos*. Thus for this writer, who was probably situated in the Tibetan imperial period, there was some kind of organized religion in competition with Buddhism, and if that is too strong, at least a conglomeration of beliefs and practices that posed a threat to Buddhism.

The uses of *chos* in IOL Tib J 1746 also sheds some light on the well-known edict ascribed to Khri srong lde brtsan. Consider the following passage:

de nas dge ba'i bshes gnyen gyis bstangs te chos kyang gsan/ yi ge yang sphyan
sngar brims nas/ sangs rgyas kyi chos dpel zhing mdzad par bsgrims so// de
na bod kyi chos rnying pa ma lags la/ sku lha gsol ba dang cho ga myi mthun
pas/ kun kyang ma legs su dogs te/ la la ni sku la dmar yang dogs/ la la ni
chab srid god gyis kyang dogs/ la la ni mi nad phyugs nad byung gis kyang
dogs/ la la ni mu ge langs babs kyi kyang dogs so// (Coblin 1990: 167, l. 110b)

Then in the company of a teacher of virtue I listened to the religion (*chos*) and the texts were brought before my eyes. Then I attended to¹⁷ the practice and propagation of the religion of the Buddha (*sangs rgyas kyi chos*). In it, there was nothing of the old religion of Tibet (*bod kyi chos rnying pa*).¹⁸ The invocation of the deities (*sku lha*) and the rituals were not in harmony with it. Therefore they were all designated improper. Some were designated as demeaning¹⁹ the imperial presence. Some were designated as damaging the state. Some were designated as causing diseases in humans and cattle. Some were designated as bringing on famines.²⁰

¹⁷ Here I read the text's *sgroms* as *sgoms*; Coblin (1990:175) suggests *sgrims*, 'to concentrate one's energies upon.'

¹⁸ Here I follow the two text exemplars that have *lags na* rather than *legs pa* (the latter is favoured by Coblin).

¹⁹ Here I follow Walter's translation, amending *dmar* to *dman*.

²⁰ My translation here differs in some respects from previous ones. That of Kapstein (2000: 53) seems to be mistaken in interpreting the list of negative qualities as being suspicions cast upon Buddhism by the anti-Buddhist faction in Tibet. Richardson's (1998: 93) translation is better, and Michael Walter's (1991: 72 note 84) better still. However, I take issue with Walter's translation in this line: "At this point, excepting the old Tibetan *chos*, all [other] rituals at all, because they were rituals not in accord with the *sku lha gsol ba*, were considered to be not good." The insertion of "[other]" here turns the meaning of this line around, so that "the old religion of Tibet" is excepted from the emperor's criticism, rather than being the object of criticism. I think this is a mistake. On the other hand, it is acceptable to translate *sku lha gsol ba dang cho ga myi mthun pa* as "the rituals were not in accord with the supplication of the *sku lha*." This choice of translation supports Walter's readings of the terms *sku bla / lha* as "human beings representing powerful spiritual beings" who played a crucial role in the imperium (Walter 1991: 104). However, my reading is based on the dyadic nature of the rhetoric of the edict (which is similar to IOL Tib J 1746), which sets the

The main thing I want to draw attention to in this passage is the complementarity of “the Buddha’s religion” on the one hand, and “the old religion of Tibet” on the other. This dyad of two forms of *chos*, equal and opposite, matches what we see in IOL Tib J 1746. In the edict, both kinds of *chos* refer to comparable entities, which we can translate as ‘religion’ (which I do here, without asserting that this is the best translation) or as ‘customary observance or prescribed conduct’. I do not think that Michael Walter’s assessment, based on this same passage, that *chos* refers to “a sort of ritual procedure” is good enough. I also disagree with Michael Walter’s argument that *bon* does not appear in these edicts because it essentially meant the same as *chos* and the two terms could be substituted for each other, as names for a ritual method (Walter 2009: 192, 211 note 43). Contrary to such a view, the passage cited above makes it clear that “the old religion of Tibet” comprises a number of individual ritual procedures (*cho ga*). Thus *chos* in the edict is an umbrella term that indicates a *complex of practices*.

Surely the emperor, and the author of IOL Tib J 1746, would call the whole complex of non-Buddhist beliefs and practices *bon* if that is what they were generally known as. But they do not. So from these sources it seems that in the imperial period *bon* was not the name for Tibetan non-Buddhist religion in general. Given the strong association of *bon* with funerary rituals right through the tenth century, I suspect that the non-appearance of the term here has more to do with the fact that Khri srong lde brtsan was not engaging in a specific criticism of non-Buddhist funerary rituals.

Would it be correct then, to suggest that *chos* was the name of the old religion of Tibet, before the Buddhists appropriated it to translate Sanskrit *dharma*? I suspect not. The question of the name of Tibet’s ‘ancient religion’ was treated to a long discussion by Ariane Macdonald, in which she settled on the term *gtsug lag* (or just *gtsug* alone) (Macdonald 1971). This was convincingly disputed by Rolf Stein, whose analysis of many sources not used by Macdonald led him to reject the idea that *gtsug* was the name

“old religion” against the “Buddha’s religion” (much of the text being an explanation of the latter). Others have suggested that this rhetoric had a political element, and was in part directed against those members of the aristocracy who were opposed to the ascension of Khri srong lde brtsan and were associated with the anti-Buddhist movements of the earlier eighth century. Of course, in other imperial pillar edicts, like the Samye pillar, the *lha* are invoked (*gso*) as witnesses; but the critique in the edict we are looking at here is directed against the elevation of the invocation of the deities to a position superior to Buddhism – the same elevation that the author of IOL Tib J 1746 protests against. In any case, the main point I want to make here is that *chos*, as the name of the old religion, does not refer to specific rituals, but a *complex* of many kinds of ritual practice (*cho ga*) and by association, beliefs in their efficacy.

for the ancient religion (Stein 1985: 96 and the English translation in Stein 2010: 136). Stein also criticized Erik Haarh's suggestion that *chos* could fill this role. Haarh had written that "chos is an integral idea of the Tibetan royalty, being the religious law entrusted to the sacerdotal class" (Haarh 1969: 447 note 6). Yet the few sources in which *chos* appears outside of a Buddhist context — often in the form *chos (lugs) bzang (po)* — do not justify reading it in this way.²¹

On the other hand, in the sources reviewed above, where *chos* is clearly being used to refer to a complex of ritual practice and belief, there is a clear link to the cluster of meanings around the Sanskrit *dharma* already cited from Monier-Williams: "usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty." It might well be better, as Stein suggested, to put aside the quest for the name of the pre-Buddhist religion. Let us consider the following scenario instead:- The various ritual practices and associated beliefs that existed in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism were not conceptualized as a unit and referred to by a single term at the time. It was only when the Buddhists began to propagate their religion in Tibet, and compose polemics against competing practices and beliefs that it became possible to conceive of them as a whole and lump them together under a single name. That name, *chos*, originated in the Tibetan cultural milieu but by the time the Buddhists were using it in this way it was strongly associated with the meanings of the Sanskrit term *dharma*. I am not suggesting that Buddhist polemics like IOL Tib J 1746 provide a fair, or even very accurate, representation of the non-Buddhist beliefs and practices that existed during the imperial period. But, like the edict of Khri srong lde brtsan, they are examples of the way early Tibetan Buddhists created a non-Buddhist 'other' in their polemical literature, and an example of the fact that the word chosen to conceptualize these beliefs and practices as an entity was not *bon*, but *chos*.

²¹ In these non-Buddhist documents, the term *chos (lugs) bzang (po)* appears to have more to do with good governance than with the rituals of priests (not that these can be firmly separated). See for example the Lhasa Treaty Pillar (East face, l.20; see Richardson 1985: 110–111), and the tomb inscription of Khri lde srong brtsan (l.2; see Richardson 1985: 86–87); and among the Dunhuang manuscripts, see for example the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll.354, 358, 366, 451), and one of the narratives of "the age of decline" (IOL Tib J 735, ll.7, 20). Many translations of these early documents have resorted to the phrase 'good religion' when translating *chos (lugs) bzang (po)*, but is problematic. Brandon Dotson's choice of the term 'custom' seems a better policy (Dotson 2007: 5–6, citing Stein 1985). Of course, that fact that at some point the Tibet word *chos* was chosen to translate Sanskrit *dharma* does suggest that some conceptual resemblance was perceived between the two words; however, we should assess these apparently pre-Buddhist usages of *chos* on their own terms.

Ritual ephemera: imperial-period Bonpos and other ritualists

By contrast with the term *chos*, references to *bon* in the Dunhuang manuscripts, in accounts both sympathetic and critical, can always be linked to the practice of specific rituals, and *bon po* to the officiants of these rituals. So, though there is no historical justification for using the word *bon* to refer to the complex of non-Buddhist ritual practices and beliefs before and during the Tibetan imperial period, I certainly do not want to imply that we should not be using the term *bon* at all when talking about this period. As mentioned above, some scholars have argued for a thoroughly sceptical approach to the manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave – the source of most of our earliest material containing the term *bon*. This would make even those references to *bon* and *bon po* in ritual narratives like the funerary text Pelliot tibétain 1042 open to being seen as productions of the tenth century and no earlier.²²

With that in mind, I will leave the Dunhuang manuscripts to one side, and examine here a few wooden documents found by Aurel Stein in the Lop Nor desert.²³ Unlike the Dunhuang cave documents, we can be quite confident that these are products of the Tibetan imperium, as the military fort where they were found, now known as Miran, was lost by the Tibetans in the collapse of the Tibetan empire.²⁴ The documents date from the Tibetan occupation of Miran (mid-8th to mid-9th century). Thus they are more firmly dateable than any of the Dunhuang manuscripts that employ the term *bon* (even IOL Tib J 1746). Although some woodslips were transliterated and roughly translated by F.W. Thomas some sixty years ago, their relevance to non-Buddhist religious practice in imperial-period Tibet has not yet been fully investigated.²⁵

²² In addition, a new collection of sources for non-Buddhist ritual practices and narratives, the manuscripts from the Dga' thang stūpa, seem to date from the tenth century at the earliest (see Pa tshab 2007, Karmay 2009 and J.V. Bellezza 2010).

²³ See Stein (1921) for an account of the discovery of the Tibetan woodslips.

²⁴ The exact date of the fall of Miran is not known. Beckwith states that this place remained in Tibetan hands into the 850s, but then “passed out of the historian’s ken” (1985: 172). From the point of view of language and paleography, the woodslips studied here belong among the military documents that form the bulk of the collection, and this may be said to form part of the culture of imperial Tibet, even if their exact *terminus ad quem* is not known. On the general features and contents of the Tibetan woodslips, see Takeuchi (2004). Of course, these documents are from one particular corner of the empire; nevertheless, while they clearly represent local ritual events, correspondances with manuscripts from not only Dunhuang but Dga' thang in Central Tibet suggests that they belong to a wider realm of ritual practice.

²⁵ Thomas (1951) contains transliterations and translations of secular manuscripts from Dunhuang, Miran and Mazar Tagh. The ritual documents are treated in Chapter 6, ‘Government and Social Conditions’.

These documents also help us with another problem with the Dunhuang cave manuscripts which talk about *bon* – which is that they are liturgical (or perhaps we might say literary) affairs. As Brandon Dotson has written, regarding Pelliot tibétain 1285 and its description of *bon* and *gshen* as ritualists:

At the same time, this is a picture gleaned from liturgical descriptions of *bon* and *gshen*, and does not describe relationships obtaining between actual *bon* and *gshen* in a given place. It is rather an exemplar for members of the tradition to follow. (Dotson 2008: 56)

Dotson goes on to note that none of the Dunhuang ritual narratives contain any local information, such as who the officiants of the rituals were, or whether a local deity was the object of the ritual. By contrast, the woodslips are valuable sources because they are ephemeral documents of a local ritual events. They offer us a chance to see the uses of the term *bon* and *gshen* in operation, ‘on the ground’. The ritual events recorded in the woodslips include funerals, supplication of deities, divination and ransoming rituals. Only the records funerals and deity supplications mention *bon* or *gshen*, and it is not clear whether their absence from the records of divination is significant or not.²⁶

Five woodslips were identified by Thomas as records of funeral rituals (nos. 82–87, cf. Thomas 1951: 389–391). They all share vocabulary, and seem to record the same type of ritual; there is certainly some overlap here with the funeral ritual narratives in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Thomas's translations are not very satisfactory, and it is perhaps for this reason that their importance for the study of early Tibetan ritual has not been recognised. In the woodslips, we find references to the guidance of the “mental principle” (here a very provisional translation of *thugs*) of the deceased to the correct level (*gral*), which we also see in the ritual narratives Pelliot tibétain 1068 and 1134. This seems to be the main purpose of the rituals recorded in these woodslips (see Figure 3).

²⁶ Thomas (1951: 399–401) identified five woodslips as records of divination rituals. The modern pressmarks of these woodslips are: IOL Tib N 744 (M.i.xv.0016), IOL Tib N 137 (M.I.iii.7), IOL Tib N 255 (M.I.iv.79), IOL Tib N 189 (M.I.iv.35), IOL Tib N 161 (M.I.iv.3). Some of these refer to the same types of supernatural beings we have already seen: *yul sman*, *rtse sman* and *g.yang*. However, no ritual officiants, *bon po* or otherwise, are mentioned. Thomas suggested that the references to *sogs pa* at the beginning of two slips indicated a ritual of scapulimancy. Given the similar phrasing of the other slips, and the mention of sheep in one, it seems likely that they all refer to a similar kind of ritual. None mention *mo*, the dice divination that we see in the Dunhuang manuscripts like S.155 and Pelliot tibétain 1047 (both of which use the term *bon* as well).

The main element of the ritual practice seems to be a libation offering; the woodslips specify a precise number of spoonfuls (*yams*) of a sacred beverage (*skyems*) to be offered. This ceremony is referred to in passing in other manuscripts as the ‘beverage offering’ (*skyems gsol*), and a reference in the *Old Tibetan Annals* suggests that some form of the ritual dates back to the seventh century.²⁷ Funerary rituals involving libation were practised in Inner Asia and China from at least the second millennium BC; for example, oracle bones and grave goods from the Shang and early Zhou period indicate the practice of libation in sacrificial, especially funerary, rituals.²⁸

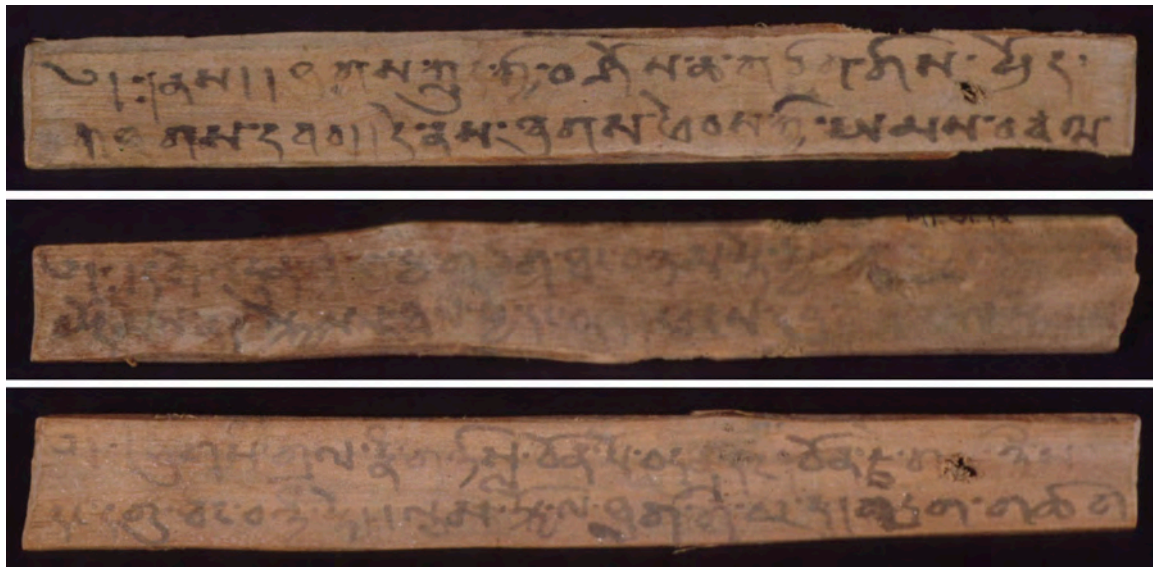


Figure 3 Three of Aurel Stein’s woodslips from the Lop Nor desert

The woodslips also repeatedly mention that the ritual space is delineated with wooden poles (*lcam skyo*), a feature also seen in Pelliot tibétain 1042.²⁹ The most interesting of the woodslip records of funeral ritual records, for our purposes, is the

²⁷ See for example Pelliot tibétain 1047. In the *Old Tibetan Annals*, the drink offering (*skyems gsold*) is made by an official in the year 682/3 (see Dotson 2009: 94). From a later period (probably the tenth century), one of the manuscripts from the Dga’ thang stūpa is a ritual narrative for the ritual of drinking beer known as the “golden libation” (*gser skyems*); see Bellezza (2010: 45–6). The *gser skyems* continues to the present day as a Buddhist ritual for propitiating protector deities.

²⁸ On Shang and Zhou ritual vessels for libation, see for example Linduff (1977) and Thote (2009). The archaeological record shows that libation was practised in ancient Siberian rituals (see Jacobson 1993), and from a later period we also have of libation in funerals practised by Mongol and Khitan aristocracies (many examples are cited in Baldick 2000). Thus funerary libation could be considered a part of what Christopher Beckwith has termed the *Central Eurasian Culture Complex* (see Beckwith 2009). However, since funerary libation was also part of the ritual system of ancient Greece and ancient India, we may have to settle for noting its ubiquity.

²⁹ See Pelliot tibétain 1042, l.113. My interpretation of the difficult term *lcam skyo* as ‘wooden poles’ is provisional. F.W. Thomas (1951: 389–390) translated the term as referring to a wife in mourning, but this does not seem right.

one detailing the involvement of *bon po* and *bon rje* in the ritual: IOL Tib N 330. This records the guidance of the mental principle of the deceased to “the second level” (*thugs gral rnam gnyis*).³⁰ In this particular ritual performance, the ritual space contained several officiants: seven *bon po* and two *bon rje* (the latter, perhaps, being the senior officiants of the ritual).³¹ The same kind of ritual is represented in another woodslip; here the officiants of the ritual, who are referred to simply as “master and servant” (*dpon g.yog*) are said to have guided the mental principle of the deceased into the ritual space.³²

A similar ritual was recorded in IOL Tib N 279, which has twenty-one Buddhist monks (*dge 'dun*) involved in the ritual.³³ This suggests that monks could participate in the same kind of funeral rituals associated with *bon po* and *sku gshen*. Such a possibility is supported by the ritual described in Pelliot tibétain 239, the ‘substitution’ (*bsngo ba*) in which Buddhist elements replaced traditional non-Buddhists elements of the ritual.³⁴ It is difficult to say whether in the particular ritual recorded on IOL Tib N 279 the monks were involved in the role held by the *bon po* and *bon rje* or were attending a ritual for a deceased member of their *sangha*. Either scenario would be intriguing.

Another ritual record, IOL Tib N 268 mentions the use of an effigy, the *glud* or *klud*.³⁵ The document seems to be incomplete, and we are missing the names of the officiants, but since the ransom object represents the mental principle (*thugs*) and the same term, *thugs klud*, appears in Pelliot tibétain 1042 as part of funerary procedure, it is likely that this is also a record of a funeral.³⁶ The many similarities between all of these brief records of funeral rituals and the long narrative of a royal funeral in Pelliot tibétain

³⁰ The term *thugs gral* also appears in IOL Tib J 562, which is discussed below.

³¹ IOL Tib N 330 (M.I.vii.55): \$:/[th]ugs gral rnaM gnyis la bon po bdun dang/ bon rje gnyis dang dgu thang bnyam ste// lcam skyo la thug gi bar du/ gdug gchig la myi chig kyang drug thul gyi rab las skyogs yams bcu bchu stsald pa'i sdom/ skyems thul gsum// (Thomas 1951: 390).

³² IOL Tib N 283: \$:/dro chos phan chad/ btol gyi myi 'dus gyi lcam skyo la thugs pa tshun chad chus pa dpon g.yog gis 'dren pa'i// (see Thomas 1953: 389–90).

³³ IOL Tib N 279 (M.I.vi.12): \$:/dge 'dun nyi shu rtsa gcig thang bnyam ste myi gchig ... bsdoms nad skyems thul phye dang bzhi/ phangs dbu [thus] la skyems ... cad zhal ta pa stong rims myi shu rtsa bzhi// thang bnyam ste/ myi cig kyang dru[-] yams bcu bcu gsol ba/ bsdoms na/ <thu> sky[e]ms phral brgya (see also Thomas 1951: 391).

³⁴ This text was analysed by Rolf Stein (1970). See also Imaeda 1981 and Ishikawa 2012. The same text is also found in the fragmentary manuscript IOL Tib J 504 and 562. Note that in these manuscripts the term *bon* only appears once, in the phrase *bon yas 'dod smrang*.

³⁵ IOL Tib N 268 (M.I.vi.2.a): \$:/nas// thugs klud kyi bshos cha gcig gis srod <g> thugs dbab// de nas thugs phebs kyi yams btsal te/ gdugs tshod nar ma dang/ nas/ stsang nan yams gsum gs[o]/nyam pag yams gchig btsugs nas/ gor bu yal sar drangs te g.yal spyi nas// do ma'i cho smos te 'jol (see also Thomas 1951: 392.)

³⁶ Dotson (2008: 63) discusses these funerary and ransoming rituals as “complementary technologies,” with reference to Pelliot tibétain 1042. A detailed narrative account incorporating the ransom ritual appears in IOL Tib J 734.

1042 helps us to situate these wooden documents within a ritual tradition exemplified by that narrative.³⁷

The presence of many of the terms found in these wooden documents also indicates that Pelliot tibétain 1042 contains imperial-period material. Michael Walter has argued that this manuscript should be assigned to the post-imperial period, but since he did not make the linguistic or orthographic reasons for this assertion explicit, the argument remains to be settled. The wooden documents from Miran certainly demonstrate that Pelliot tibétain 1042 is closely related to the actual practice of funerary rituals during the imperial period. This seems a more satisfactory view of the matter than Walter's conclusion that Pelliot tibétain 1042 is simply a "unique and highly unusual text."³⁸ When we place Pelliot tibétain 1042 in dialogue with the wooden ritual ephemera from the deserts west of Dunhuang, it seems plausible that the narrative of the royal funeral rituals found in the former served as the mythical background for the individual ritual events represented by the latter. Given the evidence we have seen of a thriving ritual funerary tradition existing in the first half of the ninth century, Pelliot tibétain 1042 should be regarded as relevant to actual ritual practice.

* * *

Let us now look briefly at the ritual ephemera relating to the supplication of deities. As we saw in the previous section, Buddhist authors of the imperial period who criticized non-Buddhist practices paid special attention to the ritual propitiation of deities, and the belief that this would have positive effects, either in this life or the next. Three of the woodslips are records of just such rituals. Two of these, unlike any other wooden documents, are four-sided sticks, with one end sharpened to a point (Figure 4). Each of the four sides has been written upon, in a continuous text which runs across the four sides of the stick.

³⁷ Pelliot tibétain 1042 is associated with Pelliot tibétain 1039 and 1040. In Pelliot tibétain 1042 we have multiple references to *bon po* performing these rituals (and only one to *bon per se*).

³⁸ Walter (2010: 193); the general discussion of Pelliot tibétain 1042 is on pp.192–195. Elsewhere (p.296), Walter is content to state that Pelliot tibétain 1042 "is not Imperial-period." See also Henk Blezer's (2008: 432) more cautious assertion that Pelliot tibétain 1042 has a "relatively unique character" (which it shares with Pelliot tibétain 239 as well as IOL Tib J 504 and 562).



Figure 4 IOL Tib N 255

One of these sticks (IOL Tib N 255) records a ritual directed towards local deities designated *yul lha yul bdag*, a construction that also appears in Pelliot tibétain 1042. The ritual is also addressed to the spirits known as *sman*. The ritual officiants include the *zhal ta pa* and *sku gshen*, as well as a *lha bon po* – the *lha* prefix presumably indicating a specific role in propitiating deities.³⁹ The term *lha bon* (lacking the *-po* nominalizer) also appears in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll.185–6) and a number of times in IOL Tib J 735 (a narrative of ‘the age of decline’), where it is one among several types of *bon* (see l.228) – making it clear that *lha* is a qualifier here, signifying a special type of *bon* or *bon po*. It seems that the role of *bon po* was specifically associated with funerary rites (suggesting that this was its origin), with the officiants of other forms of ritual were specified with adjectives like *lha*.⁴⁰

³⁹ IOL Tib N 255 (M.I.iv.121): \$//yul lha yul bdag dang/ sman gsol ba'i zhal ta pa/ sku gshen las myi[ng] b[sgrom] pa/ gy-d [-] zhal ta pa/ gsas chung lha bon po/ blo co [com] [rno]/ -m pos sug zungs/ la tong sprul sug gzungs/ (see also Thomas 1951: 395.)

⁴⁰ In the canonical translation the *Saṅghāṭa-sūtra*, we find the term *lha bon po* used to translate the Buddhist Sanskrit term *devapālaka*. Like most sūtras in the Tibetan canon, the translation dates to the latter half of the eighth century, although it was subsequently revised. In the sūtra, the *devapālaka* is a kind of priest who performs human and animal sacrifices to evoke the favour of a god; in sūtra's story, the *devapālaka* does this service for parents who want to save the life of their child (who dies despite the ritual being carried out). There is certainly some linguistic correspondence between *lha bon po* and *devapālaka*. Perhaps the Tibetan translators also saw an analogy between the

Another important revelation from IOL Tib N 255 is that the *lha bon po* and *sku gshen* worked together in certain rituals. This agrees with Brandon Dotson's reading of the ritual narrative text in IOL Tib J 1285, which had previously been read as evidence for rivalry between *bon po* and *gshen* (Dotson 2008). It is not clear from this ritual stick whether the *lha bon po* and *sku gshen* had different functions within the ritual. But we do have two more records of deity supplications, one in which there is a *lha bon po* but not *sku gshen* (IOL Tib N 210) and other in which there is a *sku gshen* but not *lha bon po*.

IOL Tib N 210 is another four-sided stick recording a ritual for a *rtse bla*, *rtse sman* and *g.yang*. The ritual officiants are a *lha bon po* and *zhal ta pa*. Though the text is difficult to decipher, it looks like we also have the personal names of the two people performing these roles.⁴¹ In the third document of a deity supplication ritual we have a clearer record of the personal names, as well as the roles, of the officiants. This is IOL Tib N 873, which is a rectangular slip, rather than a pointed stick.⁴² The ritual is directed towards a *yul lha yul bdag* and a *sman*. Two different roles are mentioned: one *zhal ta pa* and one *sku gshen*. Following this we have the term *dpon yog* (i.e. *dpon g.yog*), 'master and servant', suggesting a superior and inferior rank.⁴³ The two names, scribbled less carefully on the back of the slip, are a Blon Man gzigs and a Blon Mdo bzang. The fact that both people are identified with the official rank of *blon* suggests that the roles of *zhal ta pa* and *sku gshen* (and by extension, *bon po*) need not have been vocational, but rather roles that could be adopted when appropriate in order to carry out specific rituals.⁴⁴

activities of the sūtra's *devapālaka* and the *lha bon po* of Tibet. This use of *lha bon po* to translate *devapālaka* in the *Saṅghāta-sūtra* was mentioned in passing by Bailey (1966: 520). The discovery of the sūtra among the Gilgit finds confirms the existence of a Sanskrit version around the time of the sūtra's translation into Tibetan. And at the other end of the chronological spectrum, it is worth noting that *lha bon* is still used to refer to ritual specialists in the Himalayan areas at the fringes of the Tibetan cultural area. See for example Ramble (2009: 198).

⁴¹ IOL Tib N 210 (M.I.iv.60): \$//rtse bla [rtse] sman dang g.yang gsol ba'i zhal ta pa dpon g.yog tu bskos pa/ gyab stag rta[n] zhal ta pa/ ya sto[ng] [r]an lha bon po/ my[i] mth[o]ng mngon pa/ gsas la brtsan [phar] ['dzu']// my[e]s kong phyag tshang dro brtsan sug zungs/ rtse bla rtse sman dang dang g.yang gu dang sna tsho[gs] ... (see also Thomas 1951: 394.)

⁴² IOL Tib N 873 (M.I.xxvii.15): \$:/yul lha yul bdag dang sman gsol ba'i zhal ta pa/ dang sku gshen dpon yog/ /:/blon/ man gzigs blon mdo bzang (see also Thomas 1951: 395.)

⁴³ The term *zhal ta pa* appears frequently (along with *sku gshen*) in Pelliot tibétain 1042, where Lalou translates this as 'les chambellans'. F.W. Thomas translates it as 'administrant'. It seems to refer to a junior participant in the ritual.

⁴⁴ Another possibility is that the two figures on the woodslip are the patrons of the ritual, rather than the officiants. In any case, both seem to have been active in the region, as we see the same names in other manuscripts from Miran and Mazar Tagh. A seal with the same name, and the emblem of a horse and rider, is A Blon Mdo bzang is named in Or.15000/228, a letter from Mazar Tagh, with faint seal. A Blon mang gzigs is mentioned Or.8212/1900, a fragment from Mazar Tagh; Or.15000/426, a contract, with four round seals, from Miran; and Or.15000/467, an official record from Miran in which he is one of the convokers of a conference in the Turkic regions (Dru gu yul).

To sum up, these wooden documents give us the best proof we could hope for that *bon po*, *sku gshen*, *zhal ta pa* and other related terms were ritual roles taken on by real people involved in funerary rites, local deity supplication, and ransom rituals in the Tibetan imperial period. The ritual ephemera from Miran serve as a valuable complement to the ritual narratives and liturgies in the Dunhuang manuscripts. These are local rituals directed towards local concerns like funerals and local deities like the *yul lha*. They are not directed towards the *btsan po*, the protection of the empire, or any other central concern. As ephemera of specific local ritual events, the woodslips support Dotson's view that "local rituals, such as ransom rites, preceded and informed their elaboration on a larger scale" (Dotson 2008: 65).⁴⁵ Along with Dotson, I do not think we need not argue about whether the local rituals or the narratives came first. These ritual ephemera complement the centralizing ritual narratives. We can see that accounts of royal funerals like Pelliot tibétain 1042, and narratives of healing and ransom rituals like Pelliot tibétain 1285 could have developed out of local ritual practices, and subsequently have provided a ritual narrative and mythological context for these local rituals.

If we see the relationship between the local ritual events and the ritual narratives in this way, we do not need to identify descriptions of non-Buddhist ritual practices in Tibet with an 'imperial' or 'royal' religion, as some influential previous studies have done.⁴⁶ While rituals surely had their place in the Tibetan court, it seems better to view Tibetan non-Buddhist ritual practices *in general* as existing across the Tibetan cultural area, not as expressions of a central state religion, but as local rituals linked by oral traditions. It might be useful to consider the ritual narratives that have survived in the Dunhuang cave (and the Dga' thang stūpa) in the light of Lori Honko's definition of 'tradition':

To me *tradition* primarily refers to materials only, to an unsystematic array of cultural elements that have been made available to particular social group in different times and contexts. Tradition would thus look like a store, only some parts of which are in use at any given time ... Tradition, in other words,

⁴⁵ On the same page, Dotson accepts that it is also possible to view the local traditions as derivative of the imperial tradition, but prefers to see this as secondary. He prefers to see the imperial religion as 'local religion plus' – 'where regional and local ritual traditions and territorial cults are expanded and adapted for imperial use, and only then filter back down to a local level'.

⁴⁶ The most influential efforts in this regard are probably Haahr (1969) and Macdonald (1971). I am here agreeing again with Brandon Dotson who says that this tendency 'must be resisted' (Dotson 2008: 67).

would denote the cultural potential or resource, not the actual culture of the group. (Honko 1996: 19)

In Honko's terminology, *tradition* refers to the materials available (narrative accounts, ritual techniques, and so on), whereas *culture* signifies an ordering of the mass of traditional material into an integrated and functional whole, a system. In this sense, when we study the early Tibetan ritual materials, we are clearly dealing with a tradition. At the same time, we are struggling to understand the cultures (plural) that made use of these traditional materials. Thus I would suggest we should not look for an essence behind the term *bon* (or other terms from the pre-Buddhist religion), but rather for family resemblances within the material that is available to us. In this way we are free to talk about a 'tradition', 'culture', or even 'religion' without suggesting something possessing a centre (such as at the imperial court) or an essence (such as specific ritual narratives).

'The Bonpos of Tibet': Buddhist critiques of funerary rituals

The prevalence of the funeral rituals practised in the Tibetan imperial period is reflected in the number of Buddhist critiques of them found among the Dunhuang manuscripts. The most extensive of these is Pelliot tibétain 239. The author of this text displays an in-depth knowledge of the terminology and mechanics of Tibetan funerary rituals, and suggests how they may be turned into acceptable Buddhist rituals through the substitution of certain parts of the ritual with Buddhist elements. However, the text does not mention the *bon po* or *sku gshen* which we saw in the wooden documents from Miran.⁴⁷ I will briefly introduce here two more Buddhist critiques, which have not previously been discussed, and which do target the *bon po* specifically, thus offering us further insight into the uses of the terms *bon* and *bon po*. Unfortunately, these manuscripts are not so clearly dateable as those discussed above, so we cannot necessarily read them as evidence for the situation during the Tibetan imperial period.

⁴⁷ The text is on the recto only, the verso containing the *Lha yul du lam bstan pa*. See Stein 1970, Imaeda 1981, Chu 1989 and Ishikara 2012. We find only one use of the term *bon* in Pelliot tibétain 239, which is *bon yas* at r.7, l.5.

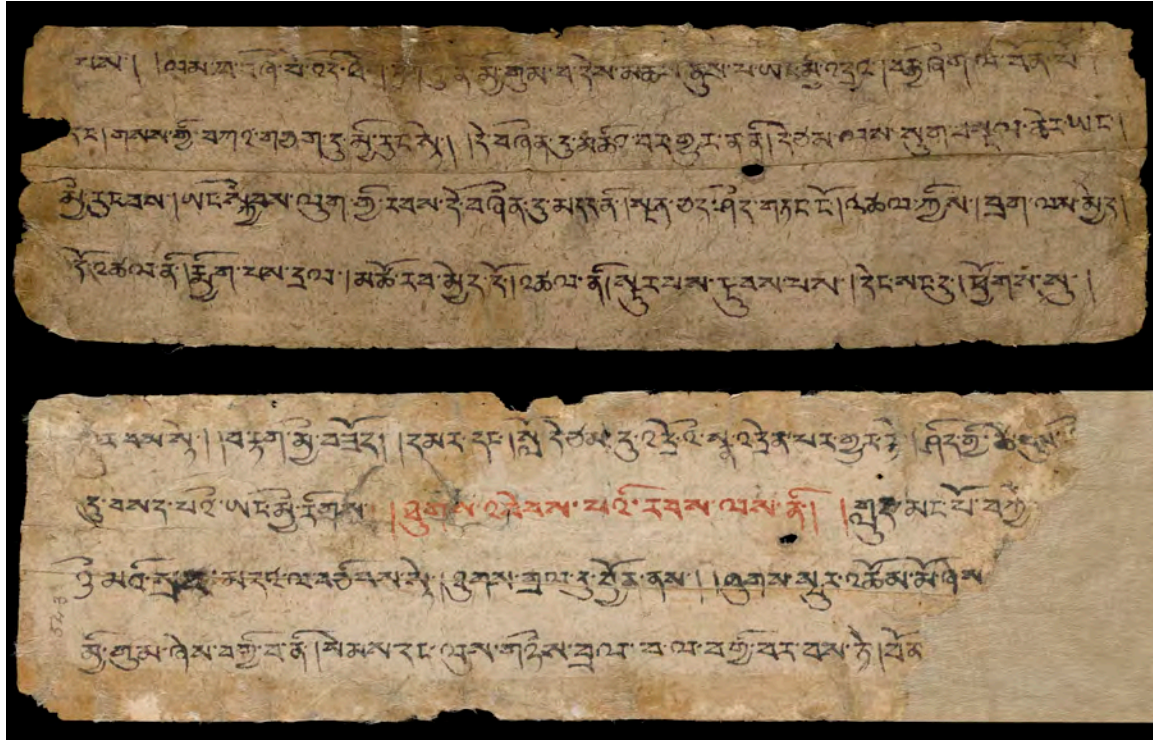


Figure 5 IOL Tib J 489 and 562

The first critique is in fact two manuscripts which were previously thought to be unconnected, IOL Tib J 489 and 562 (Figure 5). Placing them together, it is clear that they are two panels of a single original concertina manuscript.⁴⁸ The text on one side is a Buddhist prayer, and on the other we have a description and criticism of funerary rituals. One line is written in red, which appears to be the common practice of rubricating the name of a cited text, suggesting that what follows is a citation, or a paraphrase, of a non-Buddhist ritual text. The name of the text or tradition cited is *thugs bebs pa'i rabs*, that is, the ritual for the descent of the mental principle of the deceased. Other references in the text suggest that we are dealing with the ritual of guiding the mental principle towards the ideal “level” (*gral*) that we saw in the wooden ritual records from Miran. This manuscript also provides us with confirmation of the presence within such rituals of the sheep as a spirit guide (*skyibs lugs*), and the use of ransom effigies (*glud*). Most importantly, we have a reference to the presence of the *bon*

⁴⁸ Both manuscripts were catalogued in Dalton and van Schaik (2006); however, we did not recognise that they were from the same original manuscript at that time. The discoloration of IOL Tib J 489, and the conservation of the more damaged IOL Tib J 562 somewhat disguise this relation. Furthermore, because of the way they have been catalogued, it is the verso of the former that matches the recto of the latter. The fact that they are from the same manuscript is evidence in their dimensions, in the presence of a string hole right of centre in both, and in the similarity of handwriting and the text’s *mise en page*.

po as officiant. The similarities between this text and the terminology of the wooden ritual documents from Miran suggests that the author was dealing with the living tradition represented by those rituals.⁴⁹

The second of these fragmentary critiques offers an even more revealing use of the terms *bon* and *bon po*. This fragment, which has the number Or.8210/S.12243, is sewn onto another piece of paper, which contains an incomplete Buddhist *sādhana* (Figure 6). Both pieces of paper are heavily worn, and the one containing the funerary critique has darkened with use, so much so that parts can only be read with the help of infrared photography. Such heavy use, and the fact that the manuscript as we have it has been repurposed, suggests that it dates from some time before the Dunhuang cave was closed at the beginning of the eleventh century. The writing style of this fragment, which is closest to the official cursive found in the imperial period documents, suggests a ninth-century date, though this cannot be confirmed.

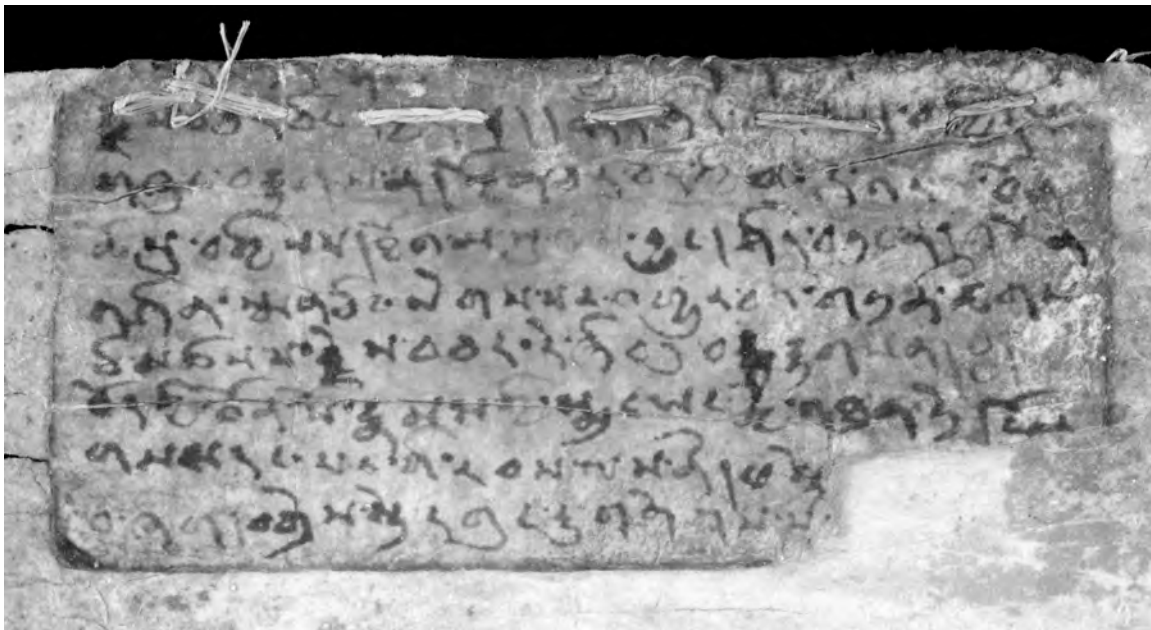


Figure 6 Or.8210/S.12243

⁴⁹ IOL Tib J 489 verso: ... pas// lam kha bzhi po 'di thog [t]ag tu ni myi gum ba des mchis nus pa yang myi 'dra/ brgya zhiḡ la bon po/ dang/ gsas gyi bka' gcag du myI rung ste// de bzhIn du mchi' bar gyur na ni/ de tsam las sdug bsngal cher yang/ myI rung bas/ yang skyibs lug gyi rabs de bzhIn du mdad ni/ sngan cad shId gtang ngo/ 'tshal kyis/ brag lam myed/ do 'tshal ni/ rmig pas dral/ mtsho rab myed do/ 'tshal ni/ sdur pas rngubs pas/ deng sang du/ phyogs su IOL Tib J 562 recto: [-]r bam ste// brtag myI bzod// dmar dang/ slo de tsam du 'dre'i sna 'dren par gyur ste/ shid gyi tshe dus shi[d] [...] du bsad pa'i yang myI rigs// thugs 'bebs pa'i rabs las ni// glud mang po bkye [...] nyl ma'i srang mda' la bcibs ste/ thugs gral du byon nas// thugs spur tshom mo zhes [...] myi gum zhes bgyi ba no/ sems dang lus gnyis bral ba la bgyi bar bas te/ bon [...]

The fragment begins with a jargon-heavy description of the treatment of a corpse in the funerary tradition. This is clearly a process of embalming, although the details are not clear. One reading would be this: the corpse is eviscerated (*rjes bcad*) and drained of blood (*dpyad*); then after some lapse of time, the corpse is entombed after being anointed with materia medica (*sman*) and beautified (*legs par 'gyur*). This description seems somewhat similar to the treatment of the corpse in royal rituals as told in Pelliot tibétain 1042 and the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.

In any case, what is striking here is the statement: “In the past, Tibetan interment was practised according to the *bon* religion” (*sngon cad bod kyi mdad 'do la bon chosu bgyis pa/ Or.8210/S.12243*). Here we see again that word *chos*, used so freely in the missionary text in IOL Tib J 1746, but now married to the word *bon*. What are we to make of this? As we have seen, the ritual texts themselves do not seem to use the word *bon* to refer to a tradition that includes and extends beyond the rituals they themselves present. Yet here, in S.12243, *bon* seems to have that extended significance, as a term covering funerary rituals in general. In placing *bon* in apposition to *chos* in this way, the author of this text suggests that *bon* is a form of *chos*. And as we saw above, for Buddhist writer, *chos* carries the meanings of *dharma*, as in a system of behaviour, observance, something believed to be right and good; perhaps, a religion.⁵⁰

After giving a précis of the Tibetan funerary tradition, the author of the fragment states: “if one examines the justifications for this [practice] ... even the ritual narratives of the *bon po* of Tibet are not in agreement” (*de nyid bcu ba brtags na:/ bod kyi bon po rnams kyi smrang yang myl 'thun te/ Or.8210/S.12243*). On the face of it, this appears to be a criticism of the multifarious nature of the ritual narratives (*smrang*) that supported Tibet's non-Buddhist rituals. Judging from the few of these narratives that have survived in the Dunhuang cave and the Dga' thang stūpa, these narratives are not meant to support and agree with each other. They address specific rituals and seem to derive from a folkloric context without any overarching, organizing metanarrative. The Buddhist author is applying an expectation of coherence – of the desirability of a metanarrative – that we do not see in the ritual texts themselves.

And why does the author specify the *bon po* (plural) of Tibet? What other *bon po* could there be? In fact, coming from a Buddhist author, the statement is perhaps not so unlikely. Translators of Chinese apocryphal sutras, working in the late eighth and early ninth century, used *bon po* to translate general Chinese terms for heretical teachers

⁵⁰ In contemporary Bhutan, non-Buddhist rituals are referred to by the same words, *bon chos* (personal communication, Karma Phuntsho).

such as *xieshi* 邪師.⁵¹ Among the Dunhuang manuscripts there is a Tibeto-Chinese phrasebook (Or.8210/S.1000 and S.2736) which glosses *bon po* with *shi kong* (*shigong* 師公), ‘sorcerer’ (cf. Thomas & Giles 1948). These translation choices vastly extended the range of the term *bon po* to cover all non-Buddhist priests in settings outside of Tibet itself. In the context of such a generalized significance, the phrase “*bon po* of Tibet” becomes meaningful. This generalized use of *bon po* suggests the same trend that we see in the fragmentary polemic in S.12243, in which the *bon po* has become the exemplar of the non-Buddhist ritualist. This then sets the scene for the later appropriation of the term by the emergent Bonpo tradition from the eleventh century onwards.

Conclusion

During the rise of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century, Buddhists composed critiques of non-Buddhist rituals and beliefs which, perhaps for the first time, identified these beliefs as a unified whole, a way of thought and action, an alternative form of *dharma* (*chos*). General Buddhist critiques like IOL Tib J 1746 identify certain key features of this non-Buddhist *chos* – a belief in the agency of spiritual beings, and the need for certain kinds of ritual practice to ensure that they are kept happy. Another genre of Buddhist polemic targeted funerary rituals in particular. Among these polemics we find detailed descriptions of these rituals, which are said to include the practice of libation, the use of effigies, and the guidance of the mental aspect of the deceased. This genre of polemic targeted the figure of the *bon po* in particular as the exemplar of the non-Buddhist ritualist.

Previously neglected sources for the actual practice of non-Buddhist rituals in imperial Tibet, the wooden slips from the Tibetan military settlement at Miran, show that during this period the *bon po* was one among several types of ritualist specializing in funerals and the invocation of deities for various purposes. Other ritual roles included the *lha bon po*, the *sku gshen* and the *zhal ta pa*. The records of actual funerary rituals in these documents show many of the same practices that are described in the

⁵¹ These sources were discussed by Rolf Stein (1983), who discussed the use of *bon po* in the *Bayang jing* 八陽經, as mentioned earlier. Recently, Jacob Dalton has recently mentioned the Buddhist use of *bon* in texts like the *Bayang jing* 八陽經 as “a blanket pejorative to refer to non-Buddhist medicine men, exorcists, and prognosticators of all sorts” (2011: 58).

Buddhist polemics, and there is also considerable overlap with the ritual narratives found in the Dunhuang and Dga' thang manuscripts.

I would suggest that the general impression we gain from bringing these sources together is that the early Buddhist discussions of non-Buddhist rituals have a totalizing approach, in contrast to the ritual records themselves, and the variety of ritual narratives that stand beside them. The ritual records are *distributed* in that they represent specific local ritual events. The ritual narratives are *diverse* in that they represent a variety of traditions without an over-arching interpretative scheme. It is Buddhism, an imported metanarrative, that brings together this variety of Tibetan rituals and beliefs as an entity that can be identified, named and discussed.

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