SHENRAB’S ANCESTORS AND FAMILY MEMBERS:
WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Kalsang Norbu Gurung

Introduction

This paper is a part of my doctoral dissertation in which I study the life account of the founder of Bon, Shenrab Miwo (Gshen rab mi bo), which was written by Bonpos in the beginning of the last millennium. In the process of writing the life account of Shenrab Miwo in the Mdo ’dus,1 the Bonpos have incorporated a number of stories from various Tibetan sources. In order to make these stories complete, they have also adopted many personal names in the stories, which I will discuss in this paper.

There are an abundance of names in the Mdo ’dus. Many of these belong to members of Shenrab Miwo’s family, including his ancestors. The author(s) seems to have considered these family names to be of equal importance as the other material contained in the Mdo ’dus. One might wonder where the author(s) got these names from. I will try to answer this question by tracing the possible origins of these names. I have elsewhere discussed some of Shenrab Miwo’s family members, including his wives and children.2 Here I will discuss the name of Shenrab’s father, the name of his mother and her family background, Shenrab’s ancestors, and his brothers.

Father Rgyal bon thod dkar, Bon po of Men & Gods

According to the Mdo ’dus, Shenrab’s father, named Rgyal bon thod dkar, was the son of Dmu King Lan kyis thems pa skas and Queen Ngang ’brang ma.3 His mother, the queen, was a daughter of A lde khyab pa of the Phya family. This indicates that Shenrab was a grandson of Dmu and Phya, which are recognized as two important clans in old Tibetan historical sources.4 In the very brief account in

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1 The Mdo ’dus is a shorter and older account compared to the other accounts: the Gzer mig, a mid-length account and the Gzi brjid, a long account. For the dating of the Mdo ’dus, See Gurung 2011 (chapter ii) and Gurung (forthcoming).
2 Gurung 2011, chapter v.
3 On the other hand, the ’Dul ba gling grags and Rtsa rgyud ngyi sgren record the name of Rgyal bon thod dkar’s mother as Lha za ’phrul mo. Shar rzza (1985: 16) gives us yet another similar name, Nga’ng grags ma, who was the lady (consort) of Srid rje ’brang dkar, an ancestral member of Dmu lineage, and was also called lha za, “a divine princess.”
4 See Mkhas pa lde’u 1987: 233. A dialogue between the ruler of Dmu and an envoy of Phya (alternatively phya) is also described in Pelliot tibétain 126 (lines
the Mdo 'dus, we see Shenrab’s parents and grandparents being identified by several names. These names also include those of Shenrab’s maternal grandparents, although their family name is not recorded.

In order to trace the possible sources of Shenrab’s father’s name, I shall first look closely at the structure of his name. His name is written in at least five different ways in the Mdo 'dus, including some that are probably modified from mi (human) to myes (grandfather). The names are:

1. Mi bon lha bon rgyal bon thod thod dkar⁶ and its shorter version Rgyal bon thod dkar’ are the most well known names among the Bonpos. To translate them literally, mi bon means “human bon,” lha bon “divine bon,” rgyal bon “royal bon,” and thod dkar means “[wearing a] white turban.”
2. Mi bon lha bon rgyal po thod dkar and its shorter version Rgyal po thod dkar,⁸ in which rgyal bon is replaced with rgyal po (king).
3. Myes bon lha bon rgya bon thod dkar,⁹ in which mi bon is replaced with myes bon (grandfather bon) and rgyal bon is replaced with rgya bon (Chinese bonpo).¹⁰
4. Me (or mes) bon lha bon rgyal bon thod dkar.¹¹ There is an alternative spelling of me bon (literally “fire bon”) with mes bon or myes bon in the name. The word mes is the alternative spelling of myes.

The word rgya refers to China. I have argued for this translation in Gurung (2009: 258). See Stein 2003: 600 for a different opinion. The word rgyal means king as in rgyal po above.

104-68, see Imaeda 2007: 22-24). In this text, a man from the Phywa is asking a man from the Dmu to rule the land of the black-headed men, which latter generally refers to Tibetans (for a detailed discussion, see Karmay 1998: 178-180, note 31). This Dmu and Phyga family relationship is also maintained in the Mdo 'dus.

5 Mdo 'dus: 55.
6 Ibid.: 41 and Mdo ‘dus Lhagyal: 18a and 24a for this name.
7 Mdo ‘dus: 52, 55, 59, 105, 119, 191 and 203 and Mdo ‘dus Lhagyal: 22b, 24b, 26a, 46a, 52a, 84a and 89b.
8 Mdo ‘dus Karmay: 26b, 28a and 29b for the short name.
9 Ibid.: 21a.
10 The word rgya refers to China. I have argued for this translation in Gurung (2009: 258). See Stein 2003: 600 for a different opinion. The word rgyal means king as in rgyal po above.
11 Mdo ‘dus: 55.
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breviated form of bon po (cf. mi’i bon po, lha’i bon po, rgyal po’i bon po and rgya’i bon po).

All the above names are only present in the Mdo ’dus. There is a slightly different name, Mi bon lha bon yo bon rgyal bon thod dkar, recorded in the Gzer mig. Here, an extra word yo bon is added, the meaning of which is not clear to me, unless it is derived from ye bon (primordial bon) or from yog bon, which is a name that appears among the thirty-three bonpos. As I will argue later, yo bon corresponds with yo phyi, a part of the name of Shenrab’s mother. Shenrab’s father’s name is one example of a name that seems to have been derived in different ways from old Tibetan sources.

References to mi bon lha bon rgyal bon

Among the old Tibetan sources, I will first look at some Tibetan documents preserved in Dunhuang caves. Those documents were only accessible until the early 11th century due to the closure of the caves either in 1002 AD or in 1035 AD. The documents became available again after their discovery in the beginning of the twentieth century. I assume that some fragments of these texts, or oral traditions that correspond to the documents preserved in Dunhuang, were probably available elsewhere and Bonpos may have had access to them. To the best of my knowledge, such hypothetical fragments and traditions are no longer in circulation today, apart from what has been preserved in Dunhuang sources and what may be reflected in some of our Shenrab narratives. Based on this assumption, I shall try to determine how the name of Shenrab’s father relates to the names found in the Dunhuang documents.

As stated above, the first part of the name of Shenrab’s father is Mi bon lha bon rgyal bon, which is recorded in Pelliot tibétain 1134 as follows.

[119] bu ni lha’i bu tsha ni srin gyi tsha’/ myi bon/ lha’i bon/ rgya bon
brim tang gis/ rgyal tag brgyad [120] / ni / gnam las / bre19[/] se [mo]
gru bzhi ni / sa la / bchas [/…]

The son is the son of a god and the nephew/grandson is the nephew/grandson of a demon, [he who is] the human bon, the

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13 Gzer mig: 15.
14 For the list of the thirty-three bonpos, see Gurung 2011: appendix 2.
15 Rong 2000: 274.
16 Stein 2003: 591.
17 Imaeda 2007: 149.
18 There may be a different interpretation of the word bre, but here I translate it in the sense of bre ba which means “to connect,” “to display” or “to weave,” as defined in Zhang (1996: 1906-1907, see gnam la ’ja’ tshon bre ba) and in Bon ritual texts.
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divine bon and the rgya bon called brim tang connects the eight rgyal cords19 in the sky and constructed the se[mo] gnu bzhi (four-sided tomb) on the earth.20

As shown in the above passage, there is a long phrase myi bon lha’i bon rgya bon brim tang. This phrase appears to be either a description of a person called brim tang (the last part of the phrase), or a description of three different people—judging from the punctuation marks separating the phrases into three parts in the original document. In the latter reading, one would take myi bon, lha’i bon and rgya bon brim tang separately. Alternatively, this phrase can also be read as a description of two persons (myi bon lha’i bon and rgya bon brim tang), as we find in the late 13th-century Tibetan history, Rgya bod kyi chos ’byung rgyas pa written by Mkhas pa lde’u, which I will discuss later.

It is well known that myi is an alternative spelling for mi, and thus myi bon becomes an alternative spelling for mi bon.21 Similarly, as I have shown in the list of the father’s names above, rgya bon seems to be an alternative spelling of rgyal bon in the Mdo ’dus, although the literal meanings of rgya bon and rgyal bon in present-day use are different. The Bonpos probably considered rgya and rgyal to be interchangeable.22 However, the rgya bon brim tang that appeared in Pelliot tibétain 1134 has become rgyal/rgya bon thod dkar in the account of Shenrab. I will discuss thod dkar in the next section.

Table: A Speculative Example of Name Transformation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pelliot tibétain 1134</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
<th>Mdo ’dus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rgya bon brim tang</td>
<td>rgya &lt;alternative&gt; rgyal brim tang &gt;replaced by&gt; thod dkar</td>
<td>rgyal bon thod dkar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19 In this context, I prefer to translate rgyal t(h)ag as “a protection cord belonging to rgyal spirit,” as rgyal is, alternatively, one of the eight classes of gods and demons (Tib. lha srin sde brgyad) who is assigned to remove obstacles to the funerary ritual activities.

20 Cf. also Stein 2003: 601-602, for se[mo] gnu bzhi and rgyal t(h)ag.

21 Cf. myi bo for mi bo, myi rje for mi rje in Pelliot tibétain 16 [25v3] (see Imaeda 2007: 7) and myi rabs for mi rabs in Pelliot tibétain 1047 [8] (see Imaeda 2007: 51).

22 There are other examples like, rgya rong and rgyal rong (a region in Sichuan province in China) and rgya mkhar and rgyal mkhar (a mythical palace in Bon texts), which are interchangeable too. Most of these interchangeable words are the result of how these words are pronounced by the people of eastern Tibet.
The rendering of names in the Mdo 'dus from old Tibetan documents can also be seen in some other names. Within the list of thirty-three bonpos, there are three names listed as phya bon thod dkar, rgyal bon bong (bon) po and sman bon 'bring dangs.24 If these names are compared with the names found in the above passage in Pelliot tibétain 1134, the similarity is evident. Here we can see that one name is spread over three names: thod dkar in the first name, rgyal bon in the second name, and 'bring dangs (cf. brim tang) in the third name. This proves that either several names were compiled to form one name or that an existing name was modified to form another.

Another reference to the name of Shenrab’s father is given in the late 13th-century Tibetan history Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa written by Mkhas pa lde'u. Although this source is dated almost two hundred years later than the Mdo 'dus, some information recorded in Mkhas pa lde'u’s chos 'byung could still depend on an older tradition. Furthermore, this Tibetan history was apparently composed on the basis of an older source, although the author(s) does not specify any details. In fact, the names recorded in this text are comparable to the names given in Pelliot tibétain 1134. I shall first quote the passage from the history by Mkhas pa lde'u25 and then compare it to Pelliot tibétain 1134:

‘bring mo dre btsun rmu mo dang mi bon lha bon dang rgya ‘brong tan chen po bshos pa’i sras ‘chi med gshen gyi rmu rgyal tsha dang/ ce’u gshen gyi phyag (phya) dkar tsha gnyis so.

The middle daughter, Dre btsun dmu mo, consort ed with Mi bon lha bon and Rgya ‘brong tan chen po. From [each] union, they had two sons. The first is a grandson of Dmu King, ‘Chi med gshen, and the second is a grandson of White Phya called Ce’u gshen.

This passage has been translated by Karmay as, “Mi bon lha bon unites with the second daughter Dre bsun dmu mo. From this union two brothers Mtshe mi gshen gyi dmu rgyal tsha and Gco’u gshen gyi phyag mkhar were born.”26 In his translation, Karmay omits the name Rgya ‘brong tan chen po. In reference to the first son ‘Chi med gshen gyi rmu rgyal tsha, he also reads mtshe mi instead of ‘chi med. Karmay seems to have used the version of the history by Mkhas pa lde’u published in 1987 in Lhasa, volume three of the series Gangs can rig mdzod, which I have also checked. However, for an unknown reason, he has read the passage differently from the original passage in Tibetan.

According to this Mkhas pa lde’u’s chos ‘byung, Dre bsun dmu mo had two husbands: Mi bon lha bon and Rgya ‘brong tan chen

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24 Mdo 'dus: 53.
po. From these unions, she also bore two sons: a grandson of the Dmu King and a grandson of White Phya. The two names of the husbands suggest a significant relationship between this source and Pelliot tibétain 1134, although Pelliot tibétain 1134 gives Myi bon lha bon and Rgya bon brim tang as two names of the same person, while Mkhhas pa lde’u lists them as the names of two separate persons. If we look carefully at the names (Rgya bon brim tang in Pelliot tibétain 1134 and Rgya ‘brong tam chen po in the history by Mkhhas pa lde’u), we can find a link between their sources. Given that one of these sources is dated before the Mdo ‘dus and the other after it, we may conjecture that the two later accounts derive from a source similar to the passage in Pelliot tibétain 1134. Mkhhas pa lde’u could have written the Rgya bod kyi chos ‘byung rgyas pa on the basis of the same source. In other words, the anonymous source first related in Pelliot tibétain 1134 and later recorded in the Rgya bod kyi chos ‘byung rgyas pa could have influenced later Bonpo authors’ understanding of Shenrab’s father’s name.

Regarding the descriptive name of the first son, ‘Chi med gshen gyi rmu rgyal tsha, there seems to be a conflation, as ‘chi med corresponds with ‘Chi med gtsug phud (the name used for Shenrab before his descent, according to the Mdo ‘dus), and gshen with Gshen rab mi bo (i.e. Shenrab Miwo). As indicated in the last part of the name, the person is said to have been a grandson of the Dmu King (Tib. dmu rgyal tsha). The only person whom this description could be referring to is Shenrab, because he is not only described as a grandson of the Dmu King and a son of Rgyal bon thod dkar, but he is also connected to the name ‘Chi med gshen (‘Chi med gtsug phud plus Gshen rab mi bo).

Now we can further speculate as to why it was Rgyal bon thod dkar who was portrayed as Shenrab’s father. I shall refer here to the above passage from the 13th-century Tibetan history by Mkhhas pa lde’u, regarding the relation between the first son ‘Chi med gshen, and the first husband of Dre btsun dmu mo, Mi bon lha bon. Bonpo authors might have interpreted the first husband Mi bon lha bon as Mi bon lha bon rgyal bon thod dkar. The first son, or grandson of the Dmu King, ‘chi med gshen might have been interpreted as Shenrab Miwo. The name ‘Chi med gshen could be read as combination of Shenrab’s name in his previous life, ‘Chi med gtsug phud, with gshen from Shenrab Miwo. Therefore, it is clear that this sort of information may have driven the author(s) of the Mdo ‘dus to assert that Rgyal bon thod dkar was the father, Shenrab Miwo the son, and that their family descended from the Dmu clan.
References to thod dkar

There are two different references to thod dkar found in the Dunhuang documents. The first is pho gshen thod dkar found in Pelliot tibétain 1285⁷ and IOL TIB J 734.⁸ It refers to male ritual priests wearing white turbans. There was a group of a hundred such priests who were invited from the White Pure Mountain (Tib. dags ri dkar po) to cure someone’s illness. This reference always appears before a reference to “female priests” (Tib. mo gshen), who were also invited from the Black Shadowy Mountain (Tib. sribs ri nag mo) to cure illness.⁹ We can see from this reference that thod dkar is an epithet for a group of male ritual priests (Tib. pho gshen) who were probably wearing white turbans (Tib. la thod). The second reference to thod dkar is recorded in Pelliot tibétain 1286 and Pelliot tibétain 1290. The reference is to the name of a person identified as the king of Rtsang (nowadays spelled as Gtsang) province. What is evident from these two references is that thod dkar is also a name of an historical figure. Therefore, it is very likely that these references could have influenced not only the name of Shenrab’s father, but also his designation as a king, and even the clothing he is described as wearing.

I should also like to mention an interesting reference to thod dkar found in the list of twelve lords, spirits and masters given in the Srid pa spyi mdos. According to this text, twelve lords, spirits and

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⁹ Cf. also Blezer 2008: 430-431 and Dotson 2008: 48-49 for a discussion on this reference.

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⁹ Pelliot tibétain 1290/line r4: myang ro’i phyDr khar na rje rtsang rje’i thod kar/, line v5: myang ro’i phyDr khar na rje rtsang rje’i thod kar/ See Imaeda 2007: 249-250.

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⁹ See also Smith 2001: 219. Here the name Rtsang rje thod dkar rje is listed among the four lords of the Stong tribe, the fourth original Tibetan tribe.

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⁹ Bonpos claim that this text was discovered in 1067 AD by Gnyan ston shes rab seng ge. According to Shar rdza (1985), he was a shepherd called Gnyan ston shes rab rdo rje, but the people called him Gnyan ‘theng re ngan (Tib. ‘theng, “lame”) because of his lame leg (cf. Karmay 1972: 153 and Blondeau 2000: 249). Karmay (1998: 346) has translated part of this text into English. In the colophon to the Srid pa spyi mdos, this text is attributed to Sangs po khrin khod. Nam mkha’i nor bu (1996: 581) considered this text to be an old Bon source and he identified the author as Ra sangs khri na khod, who is said to have lived in the 8th century AD. According to Karmay (1972: 12), Ra sangs khri na khod was born into the Khyung po clan as one of the two sons of Gyer chen zla med (8th century AD?, cf. Karmay 1977: 51 for this date). The name Ra sangs rje from Khyung po is also recorded in Pelliot tibétain 1286, line 7: zhang zhung dar pa’i rje bo lig snya shur / blos po khyung po ra sangs rje dang (see Imaeda 2007: 197) and
masters were invited for a ritual offering at the mdos altar. The first of these twelve and perhaps their leader, Gshen rab myi bo, was asked to pacify some demonic forces, including Māra Khyab pa, who often interfered in Shenrab’s practices. The remaining nine lords and spirits (see table below) were offered whatever food and drink they desired, so that they would not cause any harm to other beings. The final two of the twelve are described as divine masters (Tib. dbon/dpon gsas). Although not specified clearly, their task seems to have been to mediate between the spirits and the humans. Elsewhere in the same text, the author briefly writes that there were three hundred and sixty thod dkar in total, “srid ni thod dkar srid/ sum rgya drug cu srid.” This suggests that thod dkar, according to the Srid pa spyi mdos, is also the name of group of divine masters, which corresponds to some extent with the description in Pelliot tibétain 1285 and IOL TIB J 734. Apart from the name thod dkar, parts of a few other names like, rmu rje and btsan rje can also be found in the list of Shenrab’s ancestors. This will be discussed later in this essay.

Table: The Twelve Lords and Spirits Listed in the Srid pa spyi mdos (3b-4b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Their description</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Gshen rab myi bo</td>
<td>A god of gshen (cf. gshen lha or lha gshen)</td>
<td>at the border of god and human world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Dgung rgyal ma</td>
<td>Queen of the sky</td>
<td>at the upper of the three spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Rmu rje</td>
<td>King of rmu (alt. dmu)</td>
<td>at the middle of the three spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Gu lang</td>
<td>Cf. Maheśvara? Tib. gu lang dbang phyug</td>
<td>at the lower of the three spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Btsan rje</td>
<td>Lord of btsan spirit</td>
<td>on the other side of the space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pelliot tibétain 1290 (line r4): blon po khyung po ra saangs rje [...] (line v5) zhang zhung dar ma’i rje bo lag snyan skur // blon po khyung po ra saangs rje / (see Imaeda 2007: 249). The two names: Saangs po khrin khod and Ra saangs khrin na khod are very similar, although it is not certain that these two names belong to the same person. Particularly, the latter part of the names Khrin khod and Khrin na khod are very close. However, what can be justified here is that the narrative content of the text seems to have been derived from a source from a period contemporaneous to the Dunhuang documents.

This altar may be similar to the altar built in the Mkha’ klong gsang mdos ritual (see Blondeau 2000: 279, for an illustration of the altar).


Srid pa spyi mdos: 3b.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>This rje</td>
<td>Lord of goblin (Tib. this rang / the'u rang) in between the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Ma mo</td>
<td>Female demonic spirit on this side of the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Dogs (dong) bdag</td>
<td>Lord of hole (nāga spirit?) at the upper hole at the rainbow and the cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Gnyan rje</td>
<td>Lord of gnyan at the middle hole at mountains and rocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Klu rje</td>
<td>Lord of nāga at the lower hole in water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Thod dkar</td>
<td>At the palace called Snang srid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Wer ma</td>
<td>lis rgyad kyi zer ma³⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A passage from the *Khyung 'bum gong ma* (a text found amongst the manuscripts collected from Gansu)³⁸ sheds light on the question of why the phrase *rgyal bon thod dkar* is attached to the phrase *lha bon* (divine bon). This work informs us of a person by the name of *Lha bon thod gar*, a part of the name of Shenrab’s father. According to the text, Dung myi lha gar invited Lha bon thod gar to defeat his enemy, a demon named Lan pa skyin reng, Dung myi lha gar is described as a primordial god and is also called *lha chen* (great god). Since all of the relevant events take place in a heavenly land called Lha yul gung thang,³⁹ Lha bon thod gar must also be identified as a divine figure. That is probably the reason why the name *Rgyal bon thod dkar* was also attached to *lha bon* (divine bon) to construe the name of Shenrab’s father, Mi bon lha bon rgyal bon thod dkar.

**Shenrab’s Mother Rgyal bzhad ma, Mother of Men and Gods**

Like the long name of his father, Shenrab’s mother also has a very long name, Mi phyi lha phyi yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma. She is popularly known amongst the Bonpos by the shorter version of her

³⁷ The passage in the *Srid pa sgyp ni mdos* (4b) reads: *lis rgyad kyi zer ma ma* spyin ['dren ni su 'dren na] spyin ['dren ni wer ma 'dren]. From the context, *lis rgyad kyi zer ma* seems to be a name of place, but I am not clear about its location or meaning.

³⁸ No information is available so far regarding the date of this source. I am grateful to Ngawang Gyatso for sharing this rare manuscript with me.

³⁹ This toponym, Lha yul gung thang, is found in Pelliot tibétain 1060 [3] (see Imaeda 2007: 83) and IOL TIB J 731[r44] (see Imaeda 2007: 264).
name, Yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma. According to the Mdo ’dus,\(^{40}\) Shenrab’s mother’s maiden name was Gsal ba’i ‘od ldan mo. When she married Rgyal bon thod dkar, she was initiated with the longer name. In regard to the construction of this long name, the author(s) of the Mdo ’dus used the same model as he used for the name of the father. Just as the word bon is repeated three times in the father’s name, the term phyi is repeated three times in the mother’s name. Also, the first two names of Shenrab’s father, mi bon and lha bon, are repeated here with the suffix phyi, becoming mi phyi and lha phyi. These are followed by yo phyi (cf. yo bon) and rgyal bzhad ma. As mentioned above, in the Gzer mig, the name yo bon is added to Shenrab’s father’s name, which here corresponds with yo phyi. However, it is not entirely certain which one of the two, yo phyi or yo bon, influenced the other. Rgyal also appears in her name (cf. rgyal bzhad instead of rgyal phyi), which probably corresponds to rgyal bon in the father’s name. However, modifying rgyal bon into rgyal phyi (following the same system of replacement) apparently was not possible; perhaps the latter phrase does not carry any relevant meaning in this context.

The old Tibetan word phyi as it appears in Shenrab’s mother’s name is to be interpreted as an abbreviation of phyi mo, which in this context means “grandmother.”\(^{41}\) It can be said that she was honoured as the grandmother of all human beings, as is clear from her descriptive name. From the long name of Shenrab’s mother, she was known as mi phyi (grandmother of men), lha phyi (grandmother of gods), and yo phyi (everyone’s grandmother) who is called rgyal bzhad ma (a blooming queen-cum-mother).

In the Mdo ’dus, there are several variants of Shenrab’s mother’s name, although they are all clearly referring to the same woman. I shall list them here, including those variants that are probably only the result of scribal errors:

1. _Mi phyi lha phyi yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma_\(^{42}\) and its shorter version _mi phyi lha phyi’i rgyal bzhad ma_\(^{43}\) are the name used most often by the Bonpos.
2. _Mi phye lha phye yo phye rgyal gzhan ma._\(^{44}\) The word phyi is replaced with phye, and bzhad with gzhan, probably scribal errors.

\(^{40}\) Mdo ’dus, p. 55.
\(^{41}\) See Pelliot tibétain 1071[r332], zhang lon ‘di rnam s kyl myes pho dang / pha dang phyi mo dang ma’ dang… (see Imaeda 2007: 106) “these Zhang lon’s grandfather, father, grandmother, mother and…” The word zhang lon in this text seems to be a title of a high ranking position, but its real meaning is unclear to me. Almost an identical passage is also found in Pelliot tibétain 1072[078] (see Imaeda 2007: 115).
\(^{43}\) Mdo ’dus: 41.
\(^{44}\) Mdo ’dus Karmay: 28r.
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3. **Mi phyi lha phyi yo phyi rgyal bzhad,** Mi phyi lha’i yo phyi rgyal bzhad, and mi phyi yo phyi rgyal bzhed. The main difference here is that ma is omitted, probably to achieve the required amount of syllables for this verse. In the third name, phyi is replaced by phye, which again looks like a scribal error.

4. **Yo phyi/phye rgyal bzhad yum.** In this name, ma is replaced with yum, “mother.”

**The Family Background of Yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma**

According to the *Mdo ’dus*, Yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma, alias Gsal ba’i ’od ldan mo, was a daughter of King Sa la and Queen ’Gir ti ma. This tells us that she was born into a royal family. Elsewhere in the *Mdo ’dus*, it is suggested that the mother of Shenrab must be from royal descent (Tib. rgyal rigs). However, the author of the *Gzer mig* disagrees with the account in the *Mdo ’dus* and supplies us with the information that King Sa la was born into a lower class, in Tibetan dmangs rigs, which is equivalent to Sanskrit śūdra, the “commoner” or “servant” class in the Indian caste system. It is also suggested that it was Yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma’s engagement to Rgyal bon thod dkar that entitled her family to become members of the royal family.

Apart from the brief account mentioned above, the author(s) of the *Mdo ’dus* does not provide further details on the family background of Shenrab’s mother. I shall summarize the account recorded in the *Gzer mig*, which also demonstrates how Bonpos later elaborated the story of Shenrab’s mother.

Even after the whole world had been searched, it was very difficult to find a suitable bride for the Prince Rgyal bon thod dkar, the *Gzer mig* reports. When the Prince reached the age of thirteen, a father and a son came to visit him and introduced themselves as coming from the city Lang ling near the lake Mu le stong ldan had, and being from a dmangs rigs (Skt. śūdra) family. The purpose of their visit was for the father to offer his beautiful daughter to the Prince. When the Prince saw that they were physically handicapped (the father was blind in his right eye and the son had a lame left leg)

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45 *Mdo ’dus* Lhagyal: 84r.
46 *Mdo ’dus*: 191.
47 *Mdo ’dus* Karmay: 84v.
49 The name Sa la occurs four times in the *Mdo ’dus* (55, 59, 113 and 208), three of which refer to the King who was the father of Yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma and one of which refers to a Brahmin.
50 *Mdo ’dus*: 52.
51 *Gzer mig*: 15-25.
52 A similar name is mentioned in Shar rdza 1985. It is a crystal lake (Tib. shel mtsho) called Mu le had, located in Spu rangs (cf. Vitali 1996 for Spu rangs). According to Karmay (1972: 124), three hunters, including Mar pa ’phen bzang, found some Bonpo treasures nearby this lake.
and belonged to the *dmangs rigs*, he replied with embarrassment. He said, “It is impossible that you could have a beautiful daughter, who would be appropriate to be my wife, therefore do not spread this news. If you have a beautiful daughter, then bring her secretly to the lake Mu le stong Idan had, when I go there to take a bath.”

Because Prince Rgyal bon thod dkar was embarrassed by this meeting, he lied to those who asked him about it, though he reported the news truthfully to his father. His father responded positively and declared that it is not impossible for the visitor’s daughter to be beautiful, for the man and his sons’ disfigurements might be the result of either the downfall of a celestial being, or the liberation of someone from the suffering of Hell. Furthermore, this might be either an indication of the downfall of a king to become an ordinary person, or the uplifting of an ordinary member of a lower class to rule the country as a king. The physical disabilities of the father and son are not bad omens, he continued, because blindness of the right eye is an indication of blocking the door to the lower realms and a lame left leg is an indication of benefitting sentient beings. The Prince was convinced his father’s reply and prepared to meet the daughter of the *dmangs rigs* family.

When the mother of the *dmangs rigs* family heard of the Prince’s response, she became sad and cried. When the father decided to send his daughter to marry a man from the same class, she begged her father not to send her away, at least not until the full moon of the next month. The daughter told her father that she wished to go to see the prince. The parents agreed to her appeal that she may go to see the prince.

During the prince’s bathing event, the Prince was looking at the centre of the city full of astonishment. Seeing the Prince’s amazement, the Brahmin Gsal khyab ‘od ldan asked, “You do not seem to appreciate the amusing performances of the gods, nāgas and humans; but you seem to be entertained by something else in the city centre. What is the amusement that you see there?” The Prince replied, “There is a beautiful girl on the top of the white palace in the centre of the city of Lang ling. Is she the daughter of a nāga, who has come in the form of a human, or a sky-goddess, who has come in the form of a nāga, or a human? I am amazed by this, therefore I am smiling.”

The Brahmin saw the girl and went to gather information about her family background. He asked the girl, but she left without reply. Then he made enquiries among the local people who told him about her family. The Brahmin reported this to the Prince, who sent him again to enquire further. The lame son received the Brahmin. When the Brahmin found the girl exceptionally beautiful, he also became excited. He suggested to the parents that they offer their daughter to the prince. Although the father and son disagreed, the girl proposed a condition. The girl sent message that if the prince wished to be with her from his heart, he should offer a royal position to her
parents. The Brahmin conveyed the girl’s proposal to the prince. The latter accepted the proposal and decided to appoint the girl’s parents to royal positions. The Brahmin gathered the people of the city of Lang ling and announced the enthronement of the girl’s parents. The father Sa la was enthroned as a king, the mother Čir ti ma as a queen and the brother Gsal khyab as a prince. After the marriage, the daughter Gsal ba’i ‘od Idan mo was named Mi phyi lha phyi yo phyi rgyal bzhad ma.

In this long story from the Gzer mig, there are at least two points to consider. The family of dmangs rigs (Skt. śūdra), in which Shenrab’s mother was born, and the activities of the Brahmin, which are also reported in the Rgya cher rol pa, the Tibetan translation of the Lalitavistara.

The dmangs rigs (Skt. varṇa) or the caste system is rooted in Indian culture and does not apply to Tibet, although the system is mentioned in numerous early Tibetan translations of Indian Buddhist texts. These early Tibetan texts probably influenced the understanding of the social order among Bonpos. However, the author(s) of the Mdo ’dus describes the origin of the four castes differently from how we know it from Indian texts and Tibetan translations. In the following passage from the Mdo ’dus, the four castes are said to have originated from the four elements: earth, water, fire and wind.

The nāgas were miraculously born from the four elements: earth, water, fire and wind. The royal caste born from the earth, the merchant caste from water, the Brahmin caste from fire, and the commoner from wind.53

Although this passage describes the four castes of nāga spirits, the variation indicates a different understanding of the four-caste system in Tibet. We may understand that this interpretation of the four castes also applies to the human realm, although the author(s) of the Mdo ’dus does not explicitly mention these four together anywhere in the text. The author(s) does however mention all four of the castes: royal caste (Tib. rgyal rigs), merchant caste (Tib. rje’i rigs), Brahmin caste (Tib. bram ze’i rigs) and commoner caste (Tib. rmang rigs gdol ba) on various other occasions and there they do apply to the human realm.54

The four-caste system has been elaborated further in later Bonpo works, and there it is more closely connected to humans. As examples, I will present two relevant passages from the Gzer mig and the Mdzod sgra ‘grel. The four castes are even organized in hierarchical order in accordance with their distinct natures. The Gzer mig describes that there are four human castes. People belonging to royal

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53 Mdo ’dus: 13, ‘byung bar smon lam btab pa las/ sa chu me rlung ‘byung bzhi las/ klu rnaams rdzu ‘phrul las la skyes/ sa la rgyal rig/ chu las rje’u rigs ‘byung/ me las bram ze rlung las rmang rigs ‘byung/ de tshe rigs bzhi klu chen brgyad/

54 Mdo ’dus: 40, 47-48 and 207.
caste (Tib. rgyal rigs, Skt. kṣatriya) are the greatest, those belonging to merchant caste (Tib. rje’i rigs, Skt. vaisya) are the purest, those belonging to Brahmin caste (Tib. bram ze’i rigs, Skt. brāhmaṇa) are the noblest, and those belonging to commoner caste (Tib. rmangs rigs, Skt. śūdra) are the lowest.55

A very similar interpretation is given in the early twelfth-century Bon cosmological text, Mdzod sgra’grel.56 According to this text, the greatest are those who belong to the royal group. The noblest are those who belong to the merchant group, the purest are those who belong to the Brahmin group and the lowest are those who belong to the commoner group. However, in contrast to the categorization of castes in the Gzer mig, the status of the merchant caste and the Brahmin caste are switched in this Bon cosmological text. This suggests that there was no standard categorization of the four caste systems among the Bonpos. Since the system of the four castes is foreign to Tibetan culture, its categorization depends largely on how an author understands the four castes, or how he remembers the interpretation of the four-caste system, as it appears in relevant texts.

Shenrab’s Ancestors of the Dmu Family

As discussed in the first section above, only two male ancestors are recorded in the list of Shenrab’s paternal lineage that appears in the Mdo ’dus. The first one is Shenrab’s grandfather, the king of Dmu named Lan kyis thems pa skas, and the second is his father, Rgyal bon thod dkar. Let me paraphrase here the relevant passage. There was a king of Dmu, named Lam gyi thems pa skas, in the Bar po so bryad palace, in the land of ‘Ol mo gling in Jambudvīpa. He consoled with the Phya Princess Ngang ’brang ma, a grand-daughter of Ma btsun ’phrul mo. Their son was Rgyal bon thod dkar, who married Rgyal bzhad ma with whom he had nine sons and one daughter. The youngest of them was Shenrab, who became the ruler of the kingdom.57

In later Bon sources, the paternal lineage list of Shenrab’s ancestors was further extended to include three or more names and their female partners. The inclusion of these names demonstrates the way in which the life account of Shenrab continued to develop. I shall discuss that expansion providing examples from two earlier Bon sources (’Dul ba gling grags and Lla ba khyung chen) and from a

55 Gzer mig: 14.
56 Mdzod sgra’grel: 28. This text is said to have been discovered by Gyer mi nyi ‘od and Sma ston srid ‘dzin in 1108 AD.
57 Mdo ’dus: 41–42 and 55.
twentieth-century Bon history by Shar rdza.\textsuperscript{59} The 'Dul ba gling grags has three extra names in the list of Shenrab’s ancestors:\textsuperscript{59}

From the heart of Gshen lha [‘od dkar], a brown-reddish light arose and landed on the peak of the brown Dmu mountain. That [light] transformed into a human, who possessed a white light. He was called Dmu phyug skyir mzhon. His union with Lha za ganggs grags\textsuperscript{59} bore a son named Dmu btsan bzher gyi rgyal po. [The latter] consorted with a Phya lady called Rgyal mo and they had a son named Dmu btsan rgyal po. [The latter] and [his wife] Rim nam rgyal mo son was Dmu King Lan gyi them skas. The latter consorted with Lha za ‘phrul mo and their son was Dmu King Thod dkar [the father of Shenrab Miwo].

As we will see in the following quotation, four names are added in the second source, \textit{Lta ba khyung chen}, which is datable to approximately the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{61}

There was a king called Dmu phyug skye rab, who was a direct descendant of the nine ‘then.\textsuperscript{62} In this lineage, the king who had the power to liberate [his people] was the Dmu King Lam pa phyag dkar. The king who was enthroned in the place of [Lam pa phyag dkar] was the Dmu King Btsan pa gyer chen. His successor was the King Thog rje btsan pa, and the latter’s successor was Dmu King Lan gyi them skas. He [Dmu King Lan gyi them skas] was succeeded by Rgyal bon thod dkar, the one who supported all existence.

As seen in the two passages above, it is generally agreed that all the figures are kings and are descendants of the Dmu family. However, the lists are not consistent in the 'Dul ba gling grags and \textit{Lta ba khyung chen}. For instance, the second and the third names recorded in the 'Dul ba gling grags are not given in the \textit{Lta ba khyung chen}. Instead, the second and third names are different and a fourth name is also added in the \textit{Lta ba khyung chen}. This inconsistency between the two texts is probably due to different sources.

\textsuperscript{58}Shar rdza 1985.
\textsuperscript{59}‘Dul ba gling grags: 118–19. Another early Bon text \textit{Rtsa rgyud nying sgron} (79-80) also follows the ‘Dul ba gling grags list: dmu phyug skyer zhen, dmu btsan bzher gyis rgyal po, dmu btsan rgyal ba, dmu rgyal lan gyi them skas, rgyal po thod dkar, ston pa gshen rab.
\textsuperscript{60}This can be compared to Lha za gung drug, one of the six wives of Shenrab Miwo in the \textit{Mdo ’das}. Another comparable name Lha mo gang grags appears in the Bon cosmogonical text, the \textit{Mdzod phug}.
\textsuperscript{61}Lta ba khyung chen: 4-6. According to the colophon, a person with the family name rma discovered the text \textit{Lia ba khyung chen} in Sham po cave. He is identified as rma Shes rab blo ldan in a small note, but I assume that rma in the colophon refers to rma Shes rab seng ge (b. 12th-century), because many other Bon texts were discovered by him in the same cave.
\textsuperscript{62}The nine ‘then spirits are said to be descendants of a god.
Nevertheless, these early sources have influenced later Bonpo authors’ presentations of the names of Shenrab’s ancestors. This is evident from the early twentieth-century Bon history by Shar rdza. Shar rdza’s history has received great deal of attention in Western academia as it has been translated into English by Karmay (1972). Shar rdza combined the two lists above and then extended it to create a well-known list of Shenrab’s ancestors. As can be seen in the table below, Shar rdza gives eight names, including the father Rgyal bon thod dkar, and thus pushes the family lineage of Shenrab Miwo about eight generations back. Nam mkha’i nor bu seems to consider this to be an authentic list of the Dmu kings, though he pushes the list of Shenrab’s ancestors even further back, to thirteen generations.

Table: Ancestors of the Dmu Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dmu btsan bzher gyi rgyal po</td>
<td>Dmu King Btsan pa gyer chen</td>
<td>Dmu King Btsan pa gyer chen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Dmu btsan rgyal po</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>King Thog rje btsan pa</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dmu King Lam gyi thems pa skas</td>
<td>Dmu King Lan gyi them skas</td>
<td>Dmu King Lan gyi them skas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi bon lha bon Rgyal bon thod dkar</td>
<td>Dmu King Thökar</td>
<td>Rgyal bon thod dkar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenrab Miwo</td>
<td>[Shenrab Miwo]</td>
<td>[Shenrab Miwo]</td>
<td>Shenrab Miwo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**63** Nam mkha’i nor bu 1996: 48-49. 
Nine Brothers or Nine Ways

In chapter twelve of the *Mdo 'dus*, Shenrab is described as the only son of Rgyal bon thod dkar, but chapter six of the *Mdo 'dus* informs us that King Rgyal bon thod dkar and Queen Rgyal bzhad ma had nine sons and one daughter. This is to say that there were nine brothers and one sister in Shenrab’s family. The three elder brothers were named Phya gshen, Snang gshen and Srid gshen, who became teachers of three heavenly realms (Tib. *lha gnas gsum*). The three middle brothers, ’Phrul gshen, Mi/Ye gshen and Gtsug gshen, went to tame the *g.yen* spirits of the three spheres: *yar g.yen* (the spirits in the sky), *bar g.yen* (the spirits in the intermediate sphere) and *sa g.yen* (the spirits on the earth). They became the masters of the *g.yen* spirits. The younger three brothers are Grub gshen, Grol gshen and Gshen rab (Shenrab). These three stayed to assist their mother Rgyal bzhad ma. The sister, Ngang ring ma, was married to Phya An tse lan med, who gave birth to a son named Yid kyi khye’u chung. The youngest of the nine brothers, Shenrab, became the ruler of the kingdom, married six wives, and had ten children.

This description of the nine brothers is nowhere to be found in the other accounts of Shenrab Miwo. What can be the possible origin of this description? In chapter seventeen of the *Mdo ’dus*, there is a list of the Nine Ways of Bon or the nine methods for teaching the doctrines of Bon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Nine ways (Mdo ’dus, ch. xvii)</th>
<th>The Nine brothers (Mdo ’dus, ch. vi)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Phya gshen</td>
<td>Phya gshen (B1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Snang gshen</td>
<td>Snang gshen (B2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ’Phrul gshen</td>
<td>’Phrul gshen (B4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Srid gshen</td>
<td>Srid gshen (B3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Dge snyen</td>
<td>? Gtsug gshen (B6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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64 *Mdo 'dus*: 105, *rgyal bon thod dkar bu cig gshen rab 'di*
65 I have not been able to identify these three heavenly realms.
66 See the thirty-three *Bonpos* listed in Gurung 2011 (appendix 2), who were also responsible for subduing the spirits of these three spheres.
67 For the nine ways of Bon, see Snellgrove 1967: 9-11.
Among the names of the nine brothers listed in the table, five names (B1–B5) exactly match five of the nine Bon doctrinal teachings. Three names (B6–B8) are also related to four of the Nine Ways (5–7 and 9), but only from their contexts. The remaining name, Gshen rab (B9), does not match any of the Nine Ways, but since he is identified as Shenrab Miwo, he is, after all, the one who taught the Nine Ways. I would therefore argue that most of the names of the eight brothers of Shenrab Miwo as listed in the Mdo ’dus are derived from the doctrinal system of the Nine Ways of Bon. It is still a mystery why such an interpretation was made, given that it does not add any credibility to the life account of Shenrab. In fact, it contradicts the assertion in chapter twelve of the Mdo ’dus that Shenrab was an only son. However, considering the highly composite nature of this text, we probably should not expect consistency.

In regard to how the names of the nine brothers were constructed, a few other factors are also worth discussing. There are two names listed among the thirty-three bonpos in the Mdo ’dus that are relevant here: srin(srid) bon and phya bon. According to Pelliot tibétain 1285, the term phya is used to describe a ritual (text) to be recited (Tib. mo btab phya klang), so the priest who performs that ritual is known as phya bon. This document also informs us that there are two kinds of ritual priests: bon and gshen. Since both the terms bon and gshen designate a ritual priest, the names phya bon and srid bon could

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68 Cf. gtsug phud thob pa’i gshen, the gshen who has removed his crown and renounced worldly life, thus becoming an ascetic monk. This name also corresponds to gtsug gshen of Gtsug gshen rgyal ba, otherwise known as Yid kyi khye’u chung.

69 The Tibetan terms grub and grol have the connotations of “practicing” and “liberating,” which belong to Tantric practices, while sgrol (lam) may also refer to the Rdzogs chen path, the ninth of the Nine Ways.

70 Mdo ’dus: 53–54.

71 The phya ritual is generally performed to avert misfortune and to ensure a long life. See A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo terms (Nagano [et al.] 2008: 152).

72 Dotson 2008: 43–44.
have been reinterpreted as *phya gshen* and *srid gshen* in the list of Shenrab’s brothers in the *Mdo ’dus*.

Table: Some Other Examples of *bon* and *gshen* designations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bon</th>
<th>Gshen</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Phrul bon</td>
<td>'Phrul gshen</td>
<td>Stein: 1972, 230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lha bon</td>
<td>Lha gshen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye bon</td>
<td>Ye gshen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dur bon</td>
<td>Dur gshen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ol bon</td>
<td>'Ol gshen</td>
<td>PT 1285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

As discussed above, the way that the names of Shenrab’s parents, ancestors, and other family members are presented in the *Mdo ’dus* can demonstrably be traced back to earlier sources. As for the name of Shenrab’s father, we find two separate names in the Dunhuang documents: *Mi bon*/*lha’i bon*/*rgya bon* *brim tang* and *Thod dkar*. It is evident that the first two names, *mi bon* and *lha’i bon*, are kept unaltered, as in the original. A part of the third name, *rgya bon* was modified and put together with *thod dkar*, a name found in old Tibetan documents. The intermingling of the names derived from old Tibetan sources is further evidenced by other names found in the *Mdo ’dus* and in the late thirteenth-century Tibetan historical text called *Rgya bod kyi chos ’byung rgyas pa*. The relationship between *Mi bon lha bon* and *’Chi med gshen*, as father and son, is also recorded in this history. Since *’Chi med gshen* is none other than Shenrab, later Bonpo authors may have remembered him as the son of *Mi bon lha bon* Rgyal bon thod dkar, and therefore as a grandson of a *Dmu* king.

After the father’s name was settled, a similar model was applied to construe the name of Shenrab’s mother. In parallel to the word formations with *bon* in Shenrab’s father’s named (*mi bon*, *lha bon*, and so on), Shenrab’s mother’s name features word formations with *phyi*.

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73 *Mdo ’dus*: 54.
(mi phyi, lha phyi), where the bon in Shenrab’s father’s name are replaced by phyi in his mother’s name.

As I have shown above, only two of Shenrab’s ancestors were listed in the Mdo ’dus, but this list was extended in later sources. By the time of Shar rdza’s twentieth-century Bon history, this list had increased up to four times in length. It was extended even further by Nam mkha’i nor bu, who added several other names.

Finally, confusion between the names of the Bon doctrinal teachings and the personal names of Shenrab’s brothers that appear in the Mdo ’dus raises questions about the construction of this extended group of nine brothers.

Based on this evidence, I conclude that the names found in the Mdo ’dus have several origins. These names help us to construe the hagiography of Shenrab, but they also serve to connect the Mdo ’dus to other available historical sources. The author(s) seems to have had recourse to many old sources and/or oral traditions when including these names. Although the names that are recorded in the Mdo ’dus are comparable to the names that appear in documents preserved in Dunhuang, they do not necessarily derive from those specific texts. This would in fact be very unlikely, because there is a gap between the date of sealing of the cave in the early eleventh century and the emergence of the Mdo ’dus in the late eleventh century (approximately). But I think that it is safe to conclude that older Tibetan documents or oral traditions, closely corresponding to what has been preserved in Dunhuang, were in fact available to Bonpo authors and also influenced later works, including the Mdo ’dus and the later thirteenth-century Tibetan history by Mkhas pa lde’u.

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