

Compte-rendu de: Per Kværne and Dan Martin, *Drenpa's Proclamation: The Rise and Decline of the Bön Religion in Tibet* (in collaboration with Joanna Bialek and Charles Ramble), Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2023 [Vajra Academic, Vol. III]. ISBN: 978-9937-733-30-4 (xiv, 656 pp.).

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84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

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The book under review presents the first complete translation into English (or, for that matter, into any other European language) of the *bsGrags pa gling grags* (henceforth *GLG*). The *GLG* is a Tibetan historiographical work of the Bon tradition, which is attributed to the 8th-century figure Dran pa Nam mkha' and which has been dated by modern scholars to the late 12th century. We are especially fortunate in that this translation has been carried out by two of the foremost scholars in the field of Tibetan Studies in general and of the study of Tibetan historiography and of the Bon tradition in particular. In preparing this translation, Per Kværne and Dan Martin have worked with five manuscripts (discussed on pp. 68–73, with sample pages reproduced on p. 336).

The English translation, which represents the core of the work, is preceded by a substantial introduction by Per Kværne and succeeded by a diplomatic edition of what the translators consider to be the oldest manuscript version of the text (= A, the Dolanji manuscript). The latter is reproduced in Wylie transliteration, and the variant readings found in the other manuscript sources are noted in smaller font on the right-hand side of the page beside the line they refer to, so that the reader can easily discern the various readings that confronted the translators of the text (the conventions used are all described on pp. 81–83). The volume is supplemented by an appendix reproducing passages from the *GLG* that are shared by various other sources, as well as an extremely useful glossary prepared by Joanna Bialek of the special terms found in the *GLG*. An exhaustive bibliography and an index further enhance the usefulness of this book.

In the introduction Per Kværne discusses four contexts for the usage of the term *Bon* as signifying (1) a cluster of more or less unified non-Buddhist religious practices existing on the Tibetan plateau during the imperial period (7th–9th centuries); (2) local beliefs and practices during the 10th and 11th centuries, some of which having had antecedents in the imperial period; (3) post-11th century traditions, which by the 12th century had crystalized under the epithet 'Eternal

Bon' (g.*Yung drung Bon*) in a complex process of interaction with and mutual borrowing from Buddhism, whereby elements from (1) and (2) were also incorporated into this religious system; and (4) a range of practices still current on the margins of the Himalayan plateau, which are sometimes locally referred to as *Bon* and which partially represent the continuation and adaptation of (2), bearing apparently little influence from the institutionalized religion of Eternal Bon (3).¹ The *GLG* belongs to the third of the above contexts. While it is placed in the mouth of the 8th-century Bon priest and cultural hero, Dran pa Nam mkha', and while there may indeed be links to material from the imperial period, the *GLG* must basically be approached as a late 12th-century reconstruction and retelling of events having taken place several centuries earlier.

As well as providing a detailed overview of the contents and structure of the text, the introduction further deals with the doctrinal background of the Great Completeness (*rDzogs chen*) that informs the *GLG*, the text's peculiar eschatology, which combines the Buddhist doctrine of karma with recollections of the non-Buddhist religion of the imperial period, the role of the priests during the imperial period in ritually securing the king's power, and the wider social world described in the text and the relationships that connected humans, gods, demons, and priests. Here Kværne makes useful references to ethnographical fieldwork carried out by Charles Ramble, Toni Huber, Daniel Berounský, etc., on (non-Buddhist) Tibetan rituals still practised in Tibetan areas and on the fringes of the Himalayan plateau—referred to as category (4) above—implying a possible sense of continuity with the reminiscences of imperial period rituals found in the *GLG*. Such references also enrich the invaluable discussions of technical terms and rituals found in the footnotes that accompany the translation.

Even though the later tradition considers the *GLG* to be a treasure (*gter ma*), i.e. a text concealed during difficult times for the benefit of future generations, the *GLG* does not style itself along such lines (p. 11). It presents itself as a large commentary on a set of root verses found at the beginning of the text. These root verses, however, have been identified by Dan Martin as belonging to an entirely different text that is also attributed to Dran pa Nam mkha', the *rNam 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig*, itself part of the *Gal mdo*, a slightly earlier work that uses reasoning to establish the *rDzogs chen* view (p. 63, pp. 66f). Likewise, the Zhang zhung title appended to the *GLG* does not match the Tibetan one and also belongs to the *rNam 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig* (pp. 80f). The *GLG* thus belongs to a wider group of texts attributed to Dran pa Nam

¹ The classification slightly modifies and fine-tunes that formerly proposed in Per Kværne, 'The Study of Bon in the West: Past, Present, and Future', in Samten G. Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano (eds.), *New Horizons in Bon Studies: Bon Studies 2*, Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000, pp. 7–20, esp. p. 17.

mkha', which emerged within the rMa clan in the 12th and 13th centuries (pp. 67f).

Interestingly, the Bon tradition asserts the existence of two (and occasionally even three) personages known as Dran pa Nam mkha', and they are sometimes conflated: an earlier one at the time of Mu khri btsan po, the son of the first Tibetan king, gNya' khri btsan po, and the 8th-century contemporary of Padmasambhava, who is the protagonist and mouthpiece of the *GLG*. This doubling of a (semi-)historical figure (= the 8th-century Dran pa Nam mkha') and his projection into the distant past is typical of Bon historiography and exemplifies a process whereby historical events and personages are mythologized to create the seemingly infinite timeframe of Eternal Bon.² A further instance of this can be seen regarding the persecution of the Bon religion: the historical vicissitudes met by the Bon tradition during the reign of Khri srong lde btsan are likewise doubled and projected into the distant past, during the reign of Gri gum btsan po, placing the historical events in a grand mythological scheme of repeated waves of rise and decline.

The core of the *GLG*'s narrative centres on how Khri srong lde btsan (742–ca. 800) came to favour Buddhism over Eternal Bon and on the unfortunate consequences of this misguided choice. This core narrative is framed by a wider mythological structure depicting the spatio-temporal unfolding of the known world, the arising of enlightened beings, and the succession of the Tibetan kings. The *GLG* presents us with an alternative historiographical tradition, one in which the figures responsible for Tibet's conversion to Buddhism—Khri srong lde btsan, Sāntarakṣita, and Padmasambhava—far from being the heroes, are the villains of the plot (frequently referred to as the “three beggars,” *sprang po gsum*), with Dran pa Nam mkha' and his entourage of Bon priests and priestesses (on the latter in particular, see pp. 41f, pp. 261–263) being those who strive to uphold the happiness of the Tibetan people in spite of the king's foolhardy infatuation with Buddhism.

The *GLG* itself presents its narrative in terms of four main topics, which discuss the cosmology of 'Dzam bu gling (the known world of the 'Rose Apple'—or, as duly noted by the translators, perhaps more accurately 'Black Plum' Continent), the succession of the enlightened ones, who are 1,002 in number, the rise and decline of the kings and priests, and the rise and decline of Eternal Bon, whereby it should be noted that the fourth topic is subsumed under the third one, so it does not appear as a separate chapter in the body of the work. Fortunately, this rather loose outline has been filled in by the translators of the text,

² On this and related processes, see Henk Blezer, 'The Bon of Bon: Forever Old', in Henk Blezer (ed.), *Emerging Bon: The Formation of Bon Traditions in Tibet at the Turn of the First Millennium AD*, Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2011, pp.207–245, esp. pp. 214–218.

who have supplied 109 subheadings that help the reader to navigate their way through the text while keeping sight of the narrative's structure. These headings also greatly facilitate the task of switching between the English translation and the diplomatic edition of the Tibetan text. One might only regret that this structure is not reproduced in the book's table of contents.

The main part of the second chapter, on the succession of the enlightened ones, is devoted to gShen rab Mi bo che, the principal Buddha and fountainhead of the Bon tradition, and his activities for the welfare of beings (pp. 130–133). While all the countries surrounding Tibet are taught the Bon doctrine (pp. 137–143), which is portrayed as the eternally valid religion upholding the cosmic order, certain demonic beings begin to cause obstacles. In particular, by using truncated ritual instruments, they propagate false Chos instead of Bon. gShen rab Mi bo che transforms into numerous emanations in order to subdue the demon Nga med Chos po and understands that success depends on the youth Dam pa Tog dkar. The latter is a divine emanation not born from a womb, and he is commanded by gShen rab to counteract the demon's nefarious designs, which include devouring his disciples and throwing their remains in a pit, all the while claiming that they have reached the state of transcendence without a remainder of the aggregates (*phung po lhag med*, pp. 148f).

This is where the episode concerning Śākyamuni's appearance in India comes in, the latter being portrayed as an emanation of gShen rab Mi bo che (p. 144, p. 133, p. 152). Śākyamuni is depicted as a tantric yogin who pretends to follow the demon Nga med Chos po in order to outwit and conquer him. The demon initiates Śākyamuni by placing an inebriating beverage on his tongue. While pretending to be intoxicated, Śākyamuni remains in contemplation and withstands the demon's attacks. When the demon swallows him, Śākyamuni assumes a fierce, gigantic form, distending the demon's body from within. The demon finally agrees to convert and offers up his life force. This is when the Bon scriptures are transformed³ into Buddhism (Chos), an episode intended to demonstrate how Buddhism owes its very existence to Bon, of which it is but a particular adaptation and (no doubt rather pale) reflection. The *GLG* presents Bon and Buddhism as two communities that practise the same doctrine, so that when one seems to disappear, the other seems to rise, both ultimately serving the same purpose (pp. 157f).

The third chapter, on the rise and decline of the kings and priests, continues with gShen rab Mi bo che's propagation of Bon in Tibet itself, a propagation which according to the text predates the country's

³ The Tibetan verb *bsgyur* (p. 386, the perfective of *sgyur ba*) can refer both to 'translating' and 'transforming'.

kings. The first king of the Yarlung dynasty, Nya khri btsan po, is depicted as a crystal man emerging from a crystal scorpion; his three brothers likewise emerge from a golden frog, a turquoise fish, and a conch-white tadpole, respectively (pp. 170–172). His son Mu khri btsan po, like Nya khri btsan po, descends to the world of men from the sky by means of the *dmu* cord. During Mu khri btsan po's reign, troubles begin to arise due to the king's egotism, but they are successfully averted. The king hides a group of profound scriptures, which are subsequently transmitted outside the human realm for three generations.

It is during the second half of the reign of Gri gum btsan po that problems begin in earnest. His birth is therefore accompanied by a number of unfavourable omens. Despite the magical skills of the priests in working for the welfare of the country and its people (pp. 194–199), some of the king's evil ministers slander the Bon religion, claiming that the priests' power threatens to overshadow that of the king. As a result, Gri gum btsan po instigates the first persecution of Bon, although the tradition continues to be practised in dBus (p. 211) and although the priests are able to hide their texts as treasures (pp. 204–206) in anticipation of the destruction that will follow. At the age of thirty-six, Gri gum is killed in battle by one Lo ngam, who is one of his subjects. After his death, his son sPu lde gung rgyal reinstates the Bon tradition (pp. 216f).

At the time of king Lha tho tho ri, an Indian teacher travels to Tibet, bringing with him a golden *caitya* or miniature *stūpa*; according to one of the manuscripts, three items (for their identification, see p. 221, n. 698) are blown by the wind on to the roof of the palace. This event is accompanied by the somewhat ominous statement: "What is called Chos has indeed appeared." An interesting divergence from Buddhist histories is the fact that in the *GLG* Thon mi Sambhoṭa is made into a minister not of Srong btsan sgam po but of the latter's father, gNam ri blon btsan. Buddhist texts begin to come to Tibet, although gNam ri blon btsan's interest in the Indian religion displeases the gods, and those practising Buddhism are quickly subdued. During the latter part of Srong btsan sgam po's reign, the king is influenced by his Nepalese wife to favour Buddhism.

It is only during the reign of Khri srong lde btsan, however, that the Bon religion is eventually eclipsed by Buddhism, and the success of the latter is attributed in the *GLG* to the perverted aspirations of the "three beggars." A further contributing cause is the fact that India and China, jealous of Tibet's greatness, conspire to introduce Buddhism to Tibet to weaken the country (pp. 238f). These factors cause perverted Chos to arrive in India and to mingle with the genuine variety (= that taught by Śākyamuni), resulting in different factions. The Indian followers of genuine Chos are almost vanquished by the heretics and call on the Tibetan king for assistance (pp. 240f), in an interesting reversal

of the usual relationship of intellectual superiority in which India is generally placed in Buddhist histories of Tibet. A further point to note is the ambiguity of the term 'Chos' itself as it is used in the *GLG*'s narrative: it can refer both to perverted doctrines and to those that while genuine are but a pale imitation of the perfection of Bon and into which Bon transforms itself when all other options have been exhausted. The term 'holy Chos' (*dam pa'i chos*; Skt. *saddharma*) is thus often used in an ironic sense in the *GLG* (e.g. p. 254).

Given this state of affairs, it will come as no surprise that Dran pa Nam mkha' has a bad dream presaging the arrival of Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita (p. 250) and that the king's adoption of Buddhism is compared to various calamitous and unnatural situations, such as fish adopting the ways of birds and birds adopting the ways of fish (p. 252). The disorder that ensues results in the defeat of the Tibetan army. Buddhism is thus sent back to India, along with its chief representatives, Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava, and happiness, military success, and prosperity return to Tibet, where the Bon priests are once again conferred their titles and privileges.

Nonetheless, as might be expected, this happy state of affairs does not last, and before long Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita return to Tibet to build monasteries and temples, including bSam yas, and advise the king to get rid of the Bon priests. The king decides that the representatives of Buddhism and Bon must engage in a contest of magic and debate, the outcome of which will determine which religion the king will adopt. Padmasambhava turns out to be less powerful than the Bon priests in the magical contests, and during the debate Dran pa Nam mkha' explains that the Buddhists fixate on virtues to the detriment of the rDzogs chen view, and that despite their obsession with non-conceptuality, they lack an adequate account of origin (*dpe dang lo rgyus*, "examples and stories") as well as proper funerary rites (pp. 274f, p. 278). This point is taken up later on in the *GLG*, where the Bon funerary rites, which provide both temporary enjoyment and the ultimate happiness of realization, are favourably contrasted with the Buddhist ones, which due to their exclusive focus on the emptiness of the *dharmadhātu* leave hungry those who fail to realize it (pp. 289f). The text continues with a critique levelled against the transgressive substances used in tantric rites and the associated necromantic practices (pp. 281f).

Despite the Bon priests' success in both magic and debate, the king increasingly turns towards Buddhism during the latter part of his reign, although his subjects continue to prefer the Bon tradition. Even the king favours the funerary rites of Bon, yet the protagonists of Buddhism slander Bon, claiming that the king's power is being usurped by the priests. gNubs Nam mkha'i snying po and Cog ro klu'i rgyal mtshan, well-known translators of Indian Buddhist texts, are here

credited with transforming Bon texts into Buddhist ones (pp. 291–293). Here again, this narrative serves to establish the anteriority and superiority of the Bon tradition and to explain that despite its outward decline in the face of Buddhism, Bon continues to irrigate Buddhism in the manner of an underground current, even while mostly unbeknownst to the Buddhists themselves. The rise and success of Buddhism thus becomes a mere epiphenomenon in the grand drama of the unfolding of Eternal Bon. While it is acknowledged that the followers of Buddhism desire enlightenment, they are portrayed as taking sides, such as ‘self’ and ‘other’, even though on a fundamental level Bon and Buddhism are both considered to be the display of reality-as-such (*bon nyid*, p. 297).

Dran pa Nam mkha’ self-ordains as a monk, and his self-ordination illustrates at once his skilful means in assuming whatever outward form will best ensure the survival of the Bon tradition given the new Buddhist context and a refusal on his part to submit to the authority of the Buddhist monks (since normally ordination would be bestowed by a preceptor). The sacred shrines and doctrines of Bon are transformed into Buddhist ones, and this process of doctrinal adaptation is said to include the transformation of the class of the “Mental Teachings” (*sems phyogs*) into rDzogs chen (p. 301). It is at Dran pa Nam mkha’s instigation that Khri srong lde btsan issues the order to hide the Bon texts as treasure, and interestingly Padmasambhava (who in the *GLG* is made out to have visited Tibet three times rather than twice, p. 304, p. 320) is here portrayed as hiding not only Buddhist treasure texts but also Bon scriptures.

Having been expelled from the country, the Bon priests curse the king and monks (pp. 304–307). Bon having become yellow (i.e. having taken on the external trappings of Buddhism), they pray that both Bon and the “yellow religion” (i.e. Buddhism) may spread, and that Bon may eventually come back from the borderlands. On the advice of the priestess gCo bza’ Bon mo, the king reinvites the priests one last time, and once again the kingdom briefly prospers. The priests visit bSam yas monastery, yet they are unimpressed and do not prostrate themselves before the temple.

Although by this point the king has come to the conclusion that both religions are beneficial and would like both Buddhism and Bon to peacefully coexist side-by-side (“let each have their treasures,” p. 315), gNubs Nam mkha’i snying po requests that the Bon priests be expelled once more, and thus they return to their former exile, while Vairocana and rTsang Legs grub pursue the work of transforming Bon rituals into Buddhist ones, changing the rank and the names of the deities (p. 320).

Dran pa Nam mkha’ makes a final speech in which he explains that he was forced to become a monk because of the difficulties befalling

the Bon religion and that he bears no ill will towards the perpetrators of these misfortunes. He expounds on his realization of ultimate reality and predicts numerous calamities that will occur in the wake of the suppression of Bon, notably the disintegration of royal rule. Among the ominous signs following the king's adoption of Buddhism, he mentions a general sense of disorder, the fact that rulers will be overthrown by their subjects, that monks will break their vows, and that tantric adepts (*sngags pa*) will engage in village rituals, as well as foreign invasions (pp. 325f)—all of which can be seen as recollections of the time of fragmentation (*sil bu'i dus*) that followed the collapse of the Tibetan Empire. Dran pa Nam mkha' finally promises that he will send forth an emanation in the distant future, and that he will not pass into woe-transcendence (*mya ngan mi mda'*) but will instead wonder the world blessing those with merit and secretly observing their meditative experience (p. 334).

The translators have succeeded in producing a flowing yet precise English rendition of the *GLG* in spite of the highly complex nature of the text, and it can be said without exaggeration that this book is a true model of erudition. Hence, there is very little that could be criticized. There is a mistaken cross-reference for *klu* (p. 31, n. 84: "see n. 85" needs to be corrected to "see n. 172"). The choice of the word 'trance' to translate *bsam gtan* is somewhat unfortunate,⁴ and one might have liked to see two distinct words to translate *ye shes* and *shes rab*, both being rendered here as 'wisdom' (p. 114: "eyes of Wisdom"—here with a capital—for *ye shes spyan*; p. 262: "gods of wisdom" for *ye shes lha rnams*; p. 116: "Lamp of Wisdom" for *shes rab sgron me*; p. 333: "great wisdom" for *shes rab che*). The translation "little focus on objectives" (p. 334) for *bza' stad chung* (var. *gza' gtad chung*) could potentially mislead readers into thinking that this is a negative attribute, when actually it is positive, being an expression of the realization of rDzogs chen, although the accompanying footnote does help to clarify this. Typographically, there are two places in the diplomatic edition where the font of the subheading (or of words thereof) is smaller than it should be (p. 380, p. 477).

But these are trifling matters in light of the immense value of this work, which represents a major contribution to the study of Tibetan historiography and to our understanding of the historical and mythological narratives that have shaped the identity of the Bon tradition.



⁴ On the difficulties in using the word 'trance' for the parallel Pāli term *jhāna*, cf. Lance S. Cousins, 'Buddhist *Jhāna*: Its Nature and Attainment according to the Pali Sources', in *Religion*, vol. 3:2, Autumn 1973, pp. 115–131, esp. pp. 125–127, where the author notes that 'trance' would only be applicable if used in a strictly medical sense.