

Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity: Bon Priests and Ritual Practitioners in the Himalayas

Geoffrey Samuel

Introduction

The Bon religion of Tibet and its followers, the Bon po, first became known to Western scholars through the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. In Buddhist historical writings, Bon is presented as the religion of Tibet in pre-Buddhist times, and specifically as the religion supported by the anti-Buddhist party at the Tibetan imperial court from the seventh to ninth centuries. As this suggests, Bon is portrayed by these texts in negative terms, as a rival religious tradition opposed to the civilising mission of Buddhism in Tibet.

That mission was not seen by Tibetan Buddhists as a merely human enterprise, but as an undertaking that was throughout guided and promoted by the Buddhist deities themselves, above all by the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara (Tibetan: *Spyan ras gzigs*). Avalokiteśvara is held to have taken rebirth numerous times in the course of Tibetan history, most notably as the successive Dalai Lamas, in order to bring it about. A critical Tibetan term here is *'dul ba*, which has a range of meanings including taming, disciplining, and bringing under cultivation. It is among other things the Tibetan term used to translate Vinaya, the Buddhist disciplinary code. I have written elsewhere of the opposition between tame and wild, between disciplined and uncontrolled, in Tibetan societies, and the place of the Buddhist lamas as those whose function is to undertake the taming (Samuel 1993a: 217-222).

Part of this Buddhist mission of taming Tibet was the conversion of the local gods and spirits of Tibet into protectors of the Buddhist dharma, which was carried out, in Buddhist legend, by the great Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava, usually known in Tibetan as Guru Padma 'byung gnas, the 'Lotus-Born Guru,' or Guru Rin po che, the 'Precious Guru'. Padmasambhava is closely linked to Avalokiteśvara, and became a major ritual figure in his own right within Tibetan Buddhism, especially among the Rnying ma pa, the 'Old Order' of Tibetan Buddhism which claims to go back to the

teachings of Padmasambhava during his visit to Tibet. Padmasambhava was summoned or invited to Tibet by the then Tibetan emperor, Khri srong lde'u btsan, because the deities of Tibet opposed the building of the first Tibetan monastery at bSam yas in Central Tibet. 'What the king's men built by daylight, the spirits destroyed and levelled each night. Thus, the construction could not progress.' (Nyang Ral 1993: 58). As Padmasambhava travelled from his meditation-cave in Nepal through Tibet to Bsam yas, he subjugated the local deities through his Tantric power and forced them to take oaths of obedience to the Dharma (cf. Blondeau 1971; Samuel 1993a: 168-70). This is a critical and central episode for the entire conceptual structure of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, since the ability of later generations to control the deities through Tantric Buddhist ritual and so to secure the prosperity and wellbeing of the Tibetan people is premised on this initial submission of the deities to Padmasambhava.

The Tantric Buddhist deities and their earthly representatives were thus engaged in a process of taming, ordering, and bringing under cultivation of the wild territory of Tibet and its various human and non-human inhabitants. This process was never fully achieved, even before the Chinese takeover overturned much of what had been accomplished over many centuries. Tibetan Buddhist lamas today may still see themselves in some sense as engaged in this ongoing work, which has indeed been extended to the many other parts of the world in which lamas now live and teach.

The resistance of the deities to Buddhist control is linked thematically to the resistance of the pro-Bon party at court during the reigns of the final two Tibetan emperors. The first of these emperors, in the semi-historical accounts of later Tibetan historians, was pro-Buddhist, but the second, Glang dar ma, is described as supporting Bon and persecuting the Buddhists. He was eventually killed by a Buddhist monk, an event that precipitated the end of the united Tibetan empire.

So much for Bon in the Tibetan Buddhist historical accounts. Buddhist religious texts are not much more informative, since Tibetan Buddhist religious authors are generally not much concerned even with other Buddhist traditions within Tibet, except for polemical purposes. One exception was in fact translated into English in the early 20th century. This is the description of Bon teachings by the great late 18th-century Tibetan scholar Thu'u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma in his great comparative survey, the *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long*. However, it had little if any impact on Western understandings of Bon (cf. Samuel 1993b). The one significant Western translation of a Bon po text before the 1960s, Francke's version of the *Gzer myig*, a hagiography of the central figure of the

Bon religion, *Ston pa Gshen rab*, also seems to have made little impression (Francke 1924-49).

Tibetan Buddhists themselves, whether lamas, monks, or laity, frequently retain strong prejudice against Bon po even in modern times (see e.g. Namkhai Norbu 1981: 22, which notes the irrationality of such prejudice). The Bon po were seen as the untamed, as practitioners of sorcery and evil magic, as a kind of negative reversal of Buddhism's civilizing mission, and Buddhists were brought up to distrust and fear them. Bon po were also often accused of practising animal sacrifice, which has long been a particularly significant issue for Tibetan Buddhists (cf. Samuel 2005: 192-214), although in point of fact it would appear that contemporary Bon po are no more likely to sacrifice animals than contemporary Tibetan Buddhists. The issue of animal sacrifice however has led to a distinction from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective between so-called 'black Bon' (*bon nag*), which includes such practices, and 'white Bon' (*bon dkar*) which is said to have rejected them under Buddhist reform.

The Bon po themselves, although occasionally mentioned in the travel literature, seem never to have been asked what they thought about their own religion. The major Bon po areas of Tibet were some way from the standard itineraries of European travellers, which focussed on the trade route from India to Shigatse, Gyantse and Lhasa. On the rare occasions when Bon po monasteries were encountered, they seem to have been viewed almost entirely through Buddhist stereotypes, as in the account given by the German Buddhist Anagarika Govinda of a visit to a Bon po monastery in his autobiographical memoir, *Way of the White Clouds* (Govinda 1974).¹ By the mid-20th century, Bon had become a kind of area of free fantasy for scholars writing about Tibetan religion. Virtually nothing was known about Bon except for a bundle of negative stereotypes, so scholars felt free to project almost anything on to it: Bon was animistic, shamanistic (not a positive term in those days), and generally a repository for all the elements of Tibetan religion which did not appear to derive from the somewhat idealised pictures of Indian Buddhism prevailing at that time.

Studies of the Bon religion of Tibet underwent a dramatic change in the 1960s and 1970s, when the voices of the Bon po themselves began to be taken seriously. The writings of David Snellgrove (e.g. 1961, 1967), Per Kvaerne (e.g. 1974) and Samten Karmay (e.g. 1972, 1975) opened up to us a very different Bon, a religious tradition which was comparable to, and indeed in many ways very similar to, Tibetan Buddhism,

¹ This was the monastery of Guru Gyam near Mount Kailash; Govinda visited the area in September 1948 (Kvaerne 1998: 81-83).

with its own monasteries, lamas and texts, its own sense of its history and lineage, and its own project of taming and civilizing the Tibetan people. 'White Bon,' 'Black Bon,' animal sacrifices, sorcery and shamanistic rituals were nowhere to be seen, though certainly, as with Tibetan Buddhism, itself there were plenty of rituals with this-worldly and pragmatic purposes.

A younger generation of Bon scholars, Western and Tibetan, has extended this picture, and through their work we have begun to appreciate the complex processes through which this scholarly Bon po religious tradition, which I shall call G.yung drung Bon here for convenience, since that is one of the tradition's principal names for itself, came into being and differentiated itself from the early Rnying ma pa tradition during the 10th and 11th centuries. All this has been a valuable and indeed fundamental contribution towards the contemporary understanding of Tibetan religion, and an essential move away from earlier pictures of Bon as some kind of primitive pre-Buddhist cult. Instead today we have Bon recognised as a parallel tradition to Buddhism. That recognition was dramatically symbolised by the 14th Dalai Lama's public participation in Bon po ceremonies wearing Bon po robes, in effect accepting that Bon was a valid Tibetan tradition of spiritual cultivation in its own right.

These are undoubtedly positive developments. There is no doubt that the present view of Bon is a great advance, both in scholarly and in human terms, on the stereotypes prevailing before the work of Karmay, Snellgrove and Kvaerne. However, the picture is not quite that simple, since it is becoming clear from contemporary ethnographic accounts that this view of Bon as a Tibetan religious tradition parallel to and closely allied to Buddhism is not the only kind of Bon still practised in Tibetan cultural regions.

More specifically, there remains a range of local, village-based religious practices among contemporary culturally Tibetan populations which are referred to as Bon but which have no obvious connection with the sophisticated scholarly tradition of G.yung drung Bon lamas, monks and lay practitioners. At the same time, these kinds of Bon recall some of the older stereotypes of Bon practice, of black and white Bon, of ongoing rivalries between Buddhism and Bon, and the like. These kinds of village Bon practice have received little systematic scholarly attention, but a variety of studies in the Himalayan borderlands, ranging from Central Nepal through Sikkim to Bhutan, and on into Arunachal Pradesh and Southern Kham, have described practices that have at any rate a clear family resemblance to each other. This leaves us with a number of questions, which provoked the present paper: What are these practices, and do they

belong together in some sense? Why are they called Bon, and what relationship if any do they have to the sophisticated scholarly tradition of G.yung drung Bon? What kind of historical sense might we make of this situation?

I should add that I do not assume that the fact that two or more things are called Bon necessarily means that there is a close historical or other connection between them. There may be, but equally the label Bon may have become attached to several quite different things. To begin with, it is useful to look more closely at some of the studies to which I have referred.

The (Lha) Bon Complex: Village Bon in the Tibetan Borderlands

The Nepalese studies were written by a number of well-known Western anthropologists of Tibet and Nepal from the early 1990s onwards, including Hildegard Diemberger working with the Khumbo in Eastern Tibet and Charles Ramble in the Kali Gandaki Valley. It is worth looking at these studies also in relation to work on the Tamang people in various locations in Nepal by David Holmberg, Brigitte Steinmann, and others. Anna Balikci's work on Sikkim, originally written as a PhD at SOAS, like these studies forms part of a long-standing Western research tradition in the Himalayas.

I will also consider a number of recent Bhutanese studies. The Bhutanese research is less well known and has been written by a group of native Bhutanese scholars, several of whom had studied anthropology outside Bhutan. It includes a number of papers given at IATS and other international conferences, as well as a small book published by the Centre for Bhutan Studies in 2004, called *Wayo, Wayo - Voices from the Past*. This book contains seven studies by native Bhutanese scholars of village festivals, all of them involving priests or ritual officiants referred to as *bon*, or practices described by the participants as Bon practices (cf. Choden 2004, Dorji 2004, etc).

Khumbo

We can start with the term *lha bon* –locally pronounced *lhaven* – first I think introduced to Western scholarship in a 1992 paper by Hildegard Diemberger, referring to the community of Khumbo in Eastern Nepal (Diemberger 1992). Khumbo is, in Diemberger's

words, “the self-designation of an originally rather heterogeneous people made up of different clans who came [. . .] from Tibet at different times and from various directions. Nowadays, they are farmers and animal keepers inhabiting the steep slopes of the Arun Valley and the high pastures at the foot of Mount Makalu in Nepal” (1993: 90). So this is a fairly remote Tibetan population in an area that, we learn, still had little centralised control, at any rate at the time Hildegard first got to know them in the 1980s:

There has never been any structure of institutionalized central power: the exercise of informal power is based on the concept of uphang [dbu-phang] [. . .] which may be glossed as ‘prestige’. Uphang and wangthang [Dbang-thang] (literally, ‘power’), ideally bestowed by clan and mountain deities, define the status of the ‘great people’ (Mi che che [Mi che che]) who determine internal politics. These are mainly religious specialists: the Buddhist lama [Bla-ma], the lhaven [lha-bon] whose religion is centred upon the local clan and mountain deities and the lhakama [lha-bka’-ma], the female oracle [. . .]. Yet there is no social stratification: social hierarchy is quite flexible and ‘great people’ are also peasants like everybody else. (1993: 90).

So the *lha-bon* here is a priest of the local clan and mountain deities, and, as we will see, he has a cooperative relationship with the lama. The Khumbo strike me as very much the kind of Tibetan population that would fit well into the “Zomia” model advanced by James Scott in his *The Art of Not Being Governed* (cf. Samuel 2010). They are people who are living in an area with little centralised power, and who in fact may well have settled in this area in order to escape the ravages of political power elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural region. I do not want to make too much of Scott’s specific model here, but I think that the relatively remote location of this population is worth noting, since it is also characteristic of most of the other examples.

The *lhaven*’s role is based on his knowledge of the invocations to the spirits and deities of the local environment. These invocations name more than a hundred local spirits in relation to various places in the Khumbo territory, so that the *lhaven*’s invocation “draws an idealised map of the entire region of settlement” (Diemberger 2002: 108 – my translation). On Khumbo altars, the lama’s tormas, which derive from the Rnying ma byang gter tradition, are on the right hand side; the *lhaven*’s tormas, representing local clan and mountain deities, are on the left (2002: 110-111). So here we

have complementarity and cooperation between the *lha bon* and lama, who in fact are using the left and right sides of the same altar.

Te

Moving on from the Khumbo, I consider another community in Nepal, that described in Charles Ramble's recent ethnography *The Navel of the Demoness* (Ramble 2008). Ramble's book is a detailed ethnography of Te, one of a group of five villages in southern Mustang who speak a distinctive Tibeto-Burman language known as Seke. One would, I suppose, describe these villages as culturally Tibetan in a generic sense – the villagers are mostly also fluent in the local Tibetan dialect. Many features of local society are characteristic of other Tibetan communities, particularly those in relatively peripheral regions such as this. While the people of Te appear to do their best to keep external political authority at arms' length, they live in a single densely-populated settlement, which has quite a complex internal political organisation, and in this respect contrast with the Khumbo.

The people of Te have hereditary Buddhist lamas of the Rnying ma tradition² and they also have a special hereditary priest known as the *lhawen* (again spelled *lha bon*). The people of Te are unusual, though by no means unique, among Tibetan communities in Nepal in that they still carry out animal sacrifices to the local deities or *yul lha*. These involve the sacrifice of a total of six animals per year, five goats and a sheep, on the occasion of two calendrical festivals. The Te *lhawen's* role is linked to these animal sacrifices, and it is fairly basic – he recites a brief invocation before the animals are sacrificed by his two assistants, who are two of a variety of village officials selected from different village households on an annual basis.³ So *bon* here again basically appears to mean someone who invokes and makes offerings to the local deities.

In other villages in the region, similar priests are known by other names, including *aya* and *drom* (cf. e.g. Ramble 2007), but in the present context I am concerned with the use of the term *lha bon* for priests of this kind. I also note in passing that while there are spirit-mediums in the area, in other words people who are possessed by local deities and through whom those deities speak, and Te has had one of these in the

² There used to be a Sa skya monastic presence, but it has more or less disappeared.

³ They are “the youngest of the four constables and the youngest member of the *yupa*, the assembly of estates” (Ramble 2008: 198-9). On *lha bon* see also Ramble (1998).

recent past, these spirit-mediums, as among the Khumbo, are quite distinct from the *lhawen* and are not referred to by the same term.

The question of the relationship between Buddhism and the cult of the mountain gods is a major topic of Ramble's work. He argues that the real focus of Te's religious life is neither Buddhism nor the cult of the local deities, but what he calls the civic religion of the village –in the sense of Robert Bellah's well-known article, 'Civil Religion in America' (Bellah 1967). Much village ritual is quite explicitly about the political organisation of the village. Both the Buddhist elements and the cult of the local deities have essentially been incorporated into this 'civic religion' as ways of achieving the collective desires of the villagers for the preservation and continuity of the community.

Te is a somewhat unusual village in its very strong focus on village political life, and its separateness from the surrounding communities – In the past, Te was almost completely endogamous. The question remains of how far we might choose to regard Te as an anomaly, and how far as an alternative prism through which to look at Tibetan village society more generally, particularly in these relatively peripheral areas where historically there was little centralised political authority, and villagers ran their own affairs most of the time. At any rate, Te represents a situation where the community is apparently keeping the institutions of Tibetan Buddhism somewhat at arm's length.

The cult of local deities of various kinds is or was of course standard throughout most cultural Tibetan Buddhist communities, if carried out with considerable local variation. Generally speaking lay people make regular smoke offerings (*bsangs mchod*) of juniper, other scented woods and 'pure' substances, to these deities, both at home on behalf of the household, and collectively on behalf of the community. Local deities also receive offerings in Buddhist ritual. In the Buddhist ritual context, as mentioned earlier, these deities are thought of as having been subdued and tamed by Guru Rinpoche in ancient times, so that they are obliged to respond to the demands made of them by present-day lamas and Buddhist ritual practitioners. One significant feature of the Te situation though, which again will recur in some of our other accounts, is that the local deities are regarded as being 'wild'. In an explicit reference to the conversion myth I mentioned earlier, the people of Te claim that their local deities were never effectively tamed by Guru Rinpoche (Ramble 2008: 190).

Tamang

Another group of studies from Nepal is worth mentioning in this connection. These are on the Tamang, an ethnonym that covers a somewhat varied population of mid-highlands peoples, all speaking a language closely related to Tibetan and with many Tibetan cultural features (Macdonald 1989). The Tamang have ritual specialists called Bombo – in other words *Bon po* – whom David Holmberg and other specialists on Tamang society describe as shamans, and who heal illness through visionary journeys in which they seek to discover the spirits who are causing the illness and recover the lost spirit-substance, shadow-soul or life-essence of the sick person.⁴ The Tamang also have lamas, and, according to Holmberg, in the older material there is a kind of ritualised conflict between *bombo* and *lama*, with a number of variants of a myth told by both *bombo* and *lama* of rivalry between the two, ending in an agreement that the *bombo* will look after the living, and the *lama* will take care of the funerary rites. This is a story known in Tibetan literature through its appearance in relation to Milarepa's contest with a *Bon po* practitioner.⁵

However what is worth noting is that there is a third significant class of ritual specialists in Tamang communities, the *lambu* – a term which can plausibly related, again, to *lha bon*.⁶ The *lambu* is a sacrificial priest and is responsible for offerings to the deities. Unlike the *bombo*, whose visionary journeys have an exploratory nature, the *lambu*, like the Khumbo and Te *lha-bon*, has a fixed repertoire of chants referring to the various local deities (Holmberg 1984, 1989).

Lamas and sacrificers [*lambu*] can in fact replace each other for many rituals and, for the purposes of this brief article, we can understand them in opposition to shamans or bombos who practice from what appears – through the vantage of the rituals of lama and *lambu* – a deconstructive shift. (Holmberg 2006: 90)

⁴ The term for this life-essence is *bla*, obviously cognate to Tibetan *bla*, which also refers to a life-essence that can be lost and recovered (Samuel 1993a: 186-7, 263-4), though the historical relationship between the two concepts is unclear.

⁵ In the Tibetan version, as in the Tamang Buddhist version, the Buddhist figure naturally comes out on top, but the Tamang *bombo* account has the *bombo* as the winner.

⁶ Rajendra Thokar uses the spelling *lhabon* in his article (2008: 398).

The Tamang again figure themselves as ‘on the wild side’ in relation to Tibetan Buddhism - the Tamang goddess was never bound by Buddhist lamas (Holmberg 2006: 98), and the rituals of the Tamang lamas seem pretty rough and ready by comparison with their Tibetan equivalents.

Sikkim

The Sikkimese material is fairly similar to what we have already seen for Khumbo and Te. The Sikkimese population is a mixture of Lepchas, Tibetans, and recent Nepalese immigrants, but Tingchim, the village north of Gangtok where Anna Balikci undertook her research, is a Tibetan village. It is some way from the nearest substantial monastery, and Balikci notes that although “villagers considered themselves Buddhists, there were no lamas in Tingchim until 1910 and people were dependent on shamans and other ritual specialists” (Balikci 2002: 18). More specifically, there were male and female shamans, there was a specialist in Tantric ritual, the *nagshong*, and there was a specialist known as the *bönben bongthing*⁷ who performed the offering rituals for the supernatural beings of the locality.⁸ To quote Balikci further,

Tingchim villagers collectively refer to the ritual knowledge of the *pawo*, *nejum*, *nagshong* and *bönben bongthing* as *bön* (*bon*), or more precisely as *lhabön* (*lha bon*) if it is concerned with the protective *pholha molha*, and as *drebön* (*'dre bon*) if it is concerned with honouring or appeasing the ambivalent local supernatural beings. What they call *bön* has probably little relation with the Bön religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet and certainly no relation with the tradition of the modern Tibetan Bonpo monasteries. (Balikci 2002: 19)

Elsewhere she notes that *bön* in Tingchim “refers to specific oral ritual texts that are chanted and considered to be the core of the *bön* specialists’ ritual knowledge” (2002: 338). Balikci gives some details of two principal texts, both of which were centred around narrations of a figure called Yum Machen Düsum Sangye (‘Great Mother, Buddha of the Three Times’), who is represented as a daughter of Gshen rab, the

⁷ *Bönben* (*bon ban*) means “Bonpo monk (*bandhe*)”. *Bongthing* is a term for similar practitioners among the Tibetan’s Lepcha neighbours.

⁸ The shamans were more concerned with the village ancestral deities, the *pholha molha*.

founder of Bon in the Tibetan G.yung drung tradition (2002: 279, 289-90, 338). As Mother, Yum Machen Düsum Sangye forms a couple with the Father, Guru Rinpoche (in other words Padmasambhava; 2002: 346).

As we can see, there are some rather complex transformations going on here in relation to the official textual narratives of both Tibetan Buddhism and G.yung drung Bon. I would suggest that rather than seeing the village mythology as a reduced and confused derivative of some earlier textual narrative, we might see the folk and textual accounts as parallel, and probably as both going back in some form for many centuries.⁹

It is also worth noting that while there is a shamanic component to *bön* in some of the Nepalese and Sikkimese material, the key role, the one most specifically labelled as *bönben*, *lhaven*, *lambu* etc, is not about possession, but about the making of invocations and offerings to local gods. These invocations and the ritual procedures that go with them, including the offering of *torma*, the sacrificial offering-cakes of butter and barley-flour widely used also in the ritual of the lamas, are the key ritual knowledge for these specialists.

Bhutan

The material from Bhutan, if less detailed, is similar, and quite extensive. The *Wayo*, *Wayo* collection, published in 2004 by the Centre for Bhutan studies, consists of seven papers, all by Bhutanese scholars, and all mentioning local practices and/or ritual specialists termed *bon* or *bonpo* which fit into the same general frame as those discussed already.¹⁰ Thus the opening chapter, by Tashi Choeden, describes a village festival (Ha) performed annually in the village of Gurtshom, on the Kuri Chu river, and other nearby villages ‘in order to propitiate local gods and deities’ (Choden 2004). This is regarded by local villagers as a *bon kar* or ‘white *bön*’ practice – the black/white opposition refers to the previously-discussed idea of *bön* having been reformed and cleaned up under Buddhist influence: Choeden says that black *bön* would involve ‘activities such as black magic sorceries and animal sacrifices’ (2004: fn, p.1), much in agreement with the standard line retailed by early Western studies of Tibetan religion. The last *bon* ritual

⁹ Compare McKim Marriott’s well-known article on relations between village and literary versions of Hindu ritual and mythology (Marriott 1955). While one might be wary of speaking of ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ Traditions in the Tibetan context, a mutual relationship between vernacular/oral and monastic/literary versions seems as evident here as in the Indian material.

¹⁰ Several of these scholars, and other Bhutanese scholars, have written elsewhere on related material, somewhat extending the picture, e.g. Pelgyen 2002; Pelgen 2002, 2007; Penjore 2009; T. Dorji 2002.

specialist however died some forty years ago, and the practice is now led by *gomchen* or lay Buddhist practitioners. It involves the offering of *torma* to local deities.

The following chapter, by Lham Dorji, describes a group of village rituals known as *roop* and performed in the middle Kheng region of Bhutan. “The rituals involve *kartshog* or white offerings consisting of feast, libation and fumigation offerings to local protecting deities, gods and goddesses of seed and legendary founders of Bon” (L. Dorji 2004: 24). This is again regarded as a ‘white *bon*’ practice. The village Bon po makes offerings to the founder of Bon (Toenpa Shenrab) and the goddess Amai Gung Lhai Gyalmo, and to the god and goddesses of seeds (Sonmo Apa Gojayla and Sonmo Ama Deleg Dolma). All of these rituals have a strong element of fertility and prosperity, and in the Bhutanese versions often include explicitly sexual imagery, verses, and games. The role of Bon po is not hereditary and anyone who knows the invocations can perform the role. There is a strong emphasis on the need for communal harmony during the festival, and the Bon po has responsibility for ensuring this, and can fine villagers who squabble or fight.

The third paper, by Dorji Penjore, gives a generally similar account of a village festival in the outer Kheng region that involves the worship of another Bon deity, Bon lha O de Gongjan (Penjore 2004). The name of this deity is similar to that of ‘O lde gung rgyal, an important deity who figures in the origin myths of the Tibetan emperors, though Penjore is unsure as to whether there is a relationship. Again we have a black bon/white bon contrast; the village festival is regarded as white bon, the absence of animal sacrifices being a key marker, and again there is a non-hereditary village practitioner called the Bon po, but with little evident relationship to the G.yung drung monastic Bon of Tibet. Phuntsho Rapten’s account of a Lower Kheng village offering is similar (Rapten 2004). In this case, as in the Sikkimese example, we have a village shaman participating along with the Bon po, along with a ritual clown, the Gadpupa, reminiscent of the Atsara who play such a significant role in the Bhutanese Buddhist ritual dance tradition (cf. Pommaret 2006). The three remaining papers offer further variations on similar themes (Galay 2004; Kinga 2004; Pelgen 2004).

There is a lot of detailed material in the *Wayo, Wayo* collection, including a number of ritual invocations used in the festivals, and one could say more about these, particularly the ‘ritual journey’ theme which links back to work on the Tamang and elsewhere, but I shall stop here. Before moving on to a final section in which I try to make some sense of all this material, I note however that the Toni Huber has carried out research, as yet unpublished, on similar practitioners in eastern Bhutan and over

the border in the culturally-Tibetan region of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh,¹¹ and that Giovanni Da Col has reported something that sounds quite similar from the Tibetan region of Dechen in Yunnan.¹²

Analysis

So what does Bon refer to? One can provide a listing somewhat as follows:

1. *Bon* and *gshen* known from Dunhuang documents
2. The organized religion of Bon (*G.yung drung bon*) – with hereditary lineages, reincarnate lamas, monasteries etc and the associated use of *bon* as equivalent to *chos* and to Skt. *dharma*
3. *bon*, *lhabon* as invoker-priests of various kinds in Himalayas
4. *bombo* shamans (Tamang) – with myths of competition with Milarepa and other Tibetan lamas
5. Buddhist negative stereotypes of *bon*

The role of *bon* and *gshen* in non-Buddhist religious documents from Dunhuang (no.1) has been studied at some length (cf. Dotson 2008); the use of *bon* in such texts seems to have little relationship to the other senses of Bon listed above. The G.yung drung Bon tradition (no.2), to which those Tibetans who identify as *Bon po* today owe their allegiance, is also distinct and by now fairly well understood. As a result of recent historical work by scholars such as Henk Blezer and Dan Martin, and parallel work on early Rnying ma by David Germano and others, we now have a fair idea of the 11th and 12th century context in which both the G.yung drung Bon and Rnying ma traditions came into existence, out of a need among practitioners of the fragmentary ritual lineages that survived from the early Empire or developed in the immediately following period to create coherent traditions of religious practice competitive with the newly-

¹¹ Personal communication, May 2011 and December 2011.

¹² Da Col reports that “every village has a ritual expert named *yanglen penghen*” – i.e. *g.yang len bon rgan*, ‘elder Bon fortune summoner’. *Yang* here refers not only to wealth and prosperity but “good luck, vitality and all positive aspects of one’s life” (Da Col 2007).

imported Indian lineages of the “New Tantra” (gsar ma pa) followers (e.g. Martin 2001; Blezer 2009-10, 2010; Germano 1994, 2002, 2005).

The Tamang *bombo* (no.4) seems to be something of an outlier, and the negative stereotypes of Bon (no.5) also need not detain us here, although they continue to be a real issue for some Bon po populations today, both in those parts of Tibet under Chinese control and among the diaspora in India and Nepal. But what of the kind of Bon which has formed the main subject of this article (no. 3), and which appears to exist in various forms in Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and perhaps also Yunnan? One option is to take it at face value, and to argue that the areas where it occurs have not been fully ‘tamed’ or ‘Tibetanised,’ and that Bon is a generic label for these survivals from an earlier period of Tibetan religion. In this case, perhaps, such forms of Bon may have been much more widely distributed in pre-modern times.

Another option is to take the use of Bon in these contexts primarily as a result of relatively recent campaigns by Buddhist lamas, in which Bon has been utilised as a negative label applied for practices to be replaced by more orthodox Buddhist versions.¹³ This view would not entirely conflict with the first option, but might suggest that rather than looking for a consistent body of material over a large region, what we are encountering is more of the nature of a series of local religious complexes that have acquired a somewhat misleading common label, perhaps in recent times.

One can also read the material in a third way, suggested in part by Ramble’s account, also by Scott’s work on SE Asian Highlands (‘Zomia’). In this reading, these are areas that have made a certain choice not to be fully ‘tamed’. We note in particular the references to the incomplete nature of Guru Rinpoche’s work. This is quite different from what might be expected from ‘mainstream’ G.yung drung Bon. There the emphasis would be on the taming having been carried out by a Bon figure such as Dren pa Nam mkha’ rather than Guru Rinpoche. The village Bon practices do not however indicate a preference for an alternative process of ‘taming’ but, rather, signal that these communities choose to remain in significant part untamed.

Thus, in the cases we are looking at here, one might see ‘Bon’ less as an indication of primordality than as an assertion of distance from mainstream religion, whether Buddhist or Bon. The village festivals, with their conspicuously open sexuality or ‘obscenity’ (e.g. Chhoki 1994, Pelgen 2002) could be seen as acting this out quite

¹³ Toni Huber has suggested this may be part of the explanation for Tawang and Eastern Bhutan (personal communication, May 2011).

dramatically. Also, note the way in which the Khumbo *lhawen* appears to adopt the Buddhist ritual technology of *tormas*. Possibly the *torma* was a pre-Buddhist item in Tibet, but when the Buddhist lama's *torma* is on one side of the altar and the *lhawen*'s on the other side, there is an implied relationship between the two which is complementary, rather than simply historical and sequential. The collaboration between *lhawen* and *lama* may be friendly, but it also undercuts the pre-eminence of the lama that is so marked a feature of most 'mainstream' Tibetan religion, Buddhist or Bon.

Animal sacrifice is a critical issue (see Samuel 1994).¹⁴ If a community wanted to assert that it was not quite under the authority of the lamas (Buddhist or Bon po), then animal sacrifice was a good way to do it, at least until the 1950s. At that time, however, the authority of the lamas gave way rapidly to that of centralised state regimes, not only in China, but also, if under less destructive and tragic circumstances, in Bhutan, Sikkim and the culturally Tibetan regions of Nepal. Animal sacrifice, and for that matter the whole complex of *lha bon*-type observances, became increasingly irrelevant, and there was a rapid movement towards more normative forms of practice, which was encouraged in the Himalayan context by the presence refugee lamas from Tibet.

The Tamang still had frequent animal sacrifices in the 1980s (Holmberg 1989: 121), though they have come under pressure to abandon them in recent years. Te still held out at the time of Ramble's study, but things were clearly changing quite fast. The Kheng groups in Bhutan have mostly stopped animal sacrifices, in some cases quite recently, and hereditary Bon po, if and where they existed, are mostly a thing of the past. The overall social and religious environment is now of course quite different, and the issues are now more to do with modernity and development, not with the authority of the Buddhist lamas. Thus the Kheng districts are generally regarded in contemporary Bhutan as backward, underdeveloped, and poor. To the extent that village festivals and offerings to local deities have meanings within the contemporary State regimes, they figure as folkloristic survivals, which is essentially the frame of the current round of Bhutanese studies, and perhaps also as possible generators of tourist revenue.

¹⁴ More precisely, since no Tibetan lay populations have rejected the eating of meat altogether, this is a question of how far the killing of animals is ritualised. The abolition of animal sacrifice has not, at least not until very recently, had much effect on the killing and eating of animals. While the idea of freeing animals in order to generate positive karma and prolong one's own life goes back a very long way, the emphasis among a number of present-day lamas on vegetarianism and animal rights is a recent development in the Tibetan context.

But can we reach any overall conclusion about the meaning of Bon? Perhaps what the material in this article really does is simply to make again the point that there is no single thing called Bon. This is a term that has been used by Tibetans and culturally Tibetan groups in a variety of ways. We need to study these independently, with careful attention to how they have been used in the past, and how they are being used today. To the extent that this story has a wider moral, it can perhaps serve as another demonstration of the ways in which Western categories of 'religion,' ultimately of Protestant Christian provenance, continue to confuse our understandings of non-Western societies. If Western scholars from the beginning had been less caught up in the idea of a 'Bon religion' separate from 'Buddhism,' and more able to figure both *chos* ('Buddhism') and *bon* as complex, situationally-variable signifiers used in a variety of historically-specific contexts, we might have found the whole question of what Bon means less paradoxical and contradictory.

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