

Compte-rendu

Rossi, Donatella (ed.), *Fili di seta. Introduzione al pensiero filosofico e religioso dell'Asia*, Rome (Ubalдини Editore), 2018. 692 pp. EAN 988-88-340-1747-0.

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The present volume, *Fili di seta* ("Silk Threads", perhaps alluding to the classical Silk Road and its cultural continuity), edited by Donatella Rossi, Professor at the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Rome, is an introduction to "Asian philosophical and religious thought",¹ primarily intended for university students, but also, of course, for a broader audience. As a general introduction to the field, the volume opens with a chapter on Buddhism in India, followed by chapters focusing on Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Two chapters are devoted to each country, one chapter dealing with a non-Buddhist tradition in the country in question – Bön, Taoism, Korean shamanism, and Shintō respectively – followed by a chapter on Buddhism in each country. Islam is not dealt with, nor Hinduism, even in a wide sense, such as non-Buddhist Indian philosophical schools including logic or yoga. It would therefore have been a more accurate description of the contents of the volume if the title had specified that its scope is not "Asia", but "Central and East Asia". Having said that, however, the book provides overviews that are useful introductions to the topics dealt with, each chapter being accompanied by a bibliography and indices/glossaries in transcription as well as in the relevant script (except the opening chapter, where the Sanskrit and Pāli terms are in transcription only). *Fili di seta* will be an excellent resource for university teachers and the general public in Italy and beyond.

The present review will, however, concern only one chapter in the book, viz. the one entitled "Il bon", i.e. the Tibetan Bön religion (pp. 111-206), written by Francesco Maniscalco. I am not aware of an essay in any other language that provides a similar introduction to Bön in the context of a multi-author volume such as *Fili di seta*. In my opinion, it is entirely justified to devote a separate chapter to this tradition, in spite of the many fundamental elements it shares with Bud-

¹ All translations of titles and quotes from Italian are those of the reviewer.

dhism in Tibet, such as monastic organization, categorization of sacred texts (sutras, tantras, vinaya texts, philosophy etc.), ritual and meditational practices, cosmological and philosophical concepts, and pilgrimages to holy mountains. This chapter is therefore a welcome contribution to the existing literature on Bön.

It is, nevertheless, necessary to offer some critical remarks. To mention a few details first, the author refers to Anne-Marie Blondeau's article of 1971² when stating that a "conspicuous number of Tibetan Buddhist texts are the result of an adaptation of Bön texts, and not the other way round" (p. 111). In fact, Blondeau's article only deals with a single Buddhist text, the *Lha 'dre bka' thang*. It is very likely that other Buddhist texts are also based on Bön texts, but this question is not further discussed by Blondeau.

On p. 116 the author claims that one of the three Bön monks invited to England by Professor David Snellgrove in 1961, was Sangs-rgyas bsTan-'dzin, "the then abbot of the monastery of sMan-ri". Here a clarification is in order: sMan-ri Monastery was not re-established in exile until 1967, and Shes-rab Blo-gros (1935-1963), the abbot of sMan-ri, living in exile in India, retained the title of abbot until he passed away. Thereafter Sangs-rgyas bsTan-'dzin (1927-2017) was elected abbot in 1968 of the newly founded sMan-ri in exile, receiving the name Lung-rtogs bsTan-pa'i Nyi-ma. He should be clearly distinguished from the former head teacher (*slob-dpon*) of sMan-ri Monastery in Tibet, likewise bearing the name Sangs-rgyas bsTan-'dzin (1917-1978), who, having escaped from Tibet, taught at the newly re-established sMan-ri for a few years (p. 171).

A correction is needed as to the year of birth of the present reviewer, which is not, as claimed on p. 117, line 17, "1937", but 1945. A spelling error on p. 172, line 2 should be noted: "rGyal btsan" should be corrected to "rGyal mtshan". On p. 122, lines 11 and 12, "Alex Mackay" should be "Alex McKay" (as correctly given in the Bibliography). The noted Czech/Austrian ethnologist spelt his name "René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz", not "De Nebesky Wojkowitz" (p. 146). In the bibliography the mistakes, though small, are numerous: on p. 174, line 7 from the bottom, "381, band" should be "381. Band"; p. 175, line 6 from the bottom, "Untersuchungen" (plural) should be "Untersuchung" (singular) and "Morgenländische" should be "Morgenländische"; p. 176 line 13 from the bottom, "Denkschriften, 254 Bd." should be "Denkschriften, 254. Band", and so on. In a work intended

² "Le Lha-'dre bka'-than" in: M[acdonald], A[riane], ed., *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, Paris (Adrien Maisonneuve), 1971, pp. 49-126. The chapter under review wrongly has "136". "Adriene" should also be corrected to "Adrien".

for the use of students, even details of spelling should be correct, so as to instil the habit of accuracy in readers who are in a formative phase of their academic life.

While these are relatively trivial points, there is a more fundamental issue regarding the entire chapter which needs to be addressed in a review. In academic research, the concept of "Bön" can be studied in four different contexts, each having its own range of textual sources: (1) religion in Tibet during the period of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries CE); (2) the post-10th century religion styling itself *g.yung drung bon*, "Eternal Bön", which still exists as an organised monastic tradition today; (3) various Tibetan texts from the 10th-11th century which seem to preserve elements of 'imperial religion', but are not necessarily incorporated in the standard textual corpus of "Eternal Bön"; (4) contemporary religious beliefs and practices from the Himalayan margins of the Tibetan cultural area referred to locally as "Bön", sometimes including short ritual texts, more or less influenced by the first three categories. It is crucial not only to distinguish these four contexts – which seem to be related to each other, but in ways which are as yet far from clear – and to realize that we have no sources whatsoever that can be identified as related to Bön in any form, or any other religion in Tibet, before the 7th century CE. The crucial issue – for historians, archaeologists or anyone engaged in research – is that of *reliable* sources, which almost always means contemporary *textual sources*; and there simply is not a single Tibetan text available that can dated before the 7th century CE, at the very earliest.

The chapter under review relies heavily – although of course not exclusively – on the works of the late Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (1938-2018). No one would contest that the latter was a remarkable scholar – but a scholar in the traditional Tibetan sense, which means that while his familiarity with a wide range of texts was exceptional, his approach to textual sources was not that of critical historical research, which, as its basic premise, endeavours to exercise textual criticism in the sense of distinguishing between sources that are contemporary (or nearly so) with the events in question, and historical *narratives* composed at a later date. Namkhai Norbu does not make this distinction, and hence does not hesitate to project the contents of texts belonging to contexts 2 and 3 above back to the period of the Tibetan Empire, for which only texts belonging to category 1 can be regarded as valid historical sources.

The author of the chapter under review does not explicitly endorse Namkhai Norbu's view of Tibetan history and his use of textual sources, but neither does he explicitly and clearly subject the Tibetan scholar's view of history to a critical scrutiny. The result is a lack of clarity; thus, when the author entitles a section of the chapter, "The

Origins of Bön in Tibet" (pp. 123-136), it is not clear whether it is to be understood that the origins are described according to Namkhai Norbu's view of history, and of Bön in particular, or whether the intention is to present the *actual* origins of Bön. If the latter is the case, the reader is led down a dangerous path, as we have no means at all of saying anything about the origins of Bön; in fact, whether there was a religious system called Bön in the Imperial Period (as opposed to priests whose designation included the word *bon*), is far from certain.

In the same way it becomes misleading to speak of "Bön Before sTon pa gshen rab mi bo che", unless one wishes to present the historical *narrative* of "Eternal Bön" as elaborated from the 11th century onwards. Tönpa Shenrab, regarded by adherents of Bön as the enlightened Teacher of our world age, is, as has been conclusively shown by Kalsang Norbu Gurung in his doctoral dissertation from 2011 (University of Leiden), a literary construction, not a historical person, only emerging in texts of "Eternal Bön" from the 11th century onwards. Accordingly, to place texts before or after "the coming of gShen rab" (p. 160), is, historically speaking, meaningless, although it fits the historical scheme propounded by Namkhai Norbu, to whom the author refers.

This reliance on the writings of Namkhai Norbu gives rise to a further series of assumptions that do not withstand the scrutiny of historical textual criticism. Thus, the realm of Zhangzhung, a real polity located in what today is, in a general way, western Tibet, is attested in viable sources from the Imperial Period, but only in the form of a few personal names and other scattered references. To extrapolate a "Zhangzhung civilisation" from this, or from texts that came into being several centuries later, is to enter the realm of fantasy, from which the path is short to promoting the idea, as Namkhai Norbu does, of Zhangzhung as a vast and ancient realm and the fountain of Tibetan civilization. The author accordingly does not seem to have any second thoughts about quoting Namkha'i Norbu to the effect that, "Traditionally the origin of the teachings of Bön known as 'Eternal Bön' coincides with the birth of gShen rab Mi bo che in 'Ol mo lung ring, in Zhangzhung, c. 3.908 years ago" (p. 128). The word "traditionally" is somewhat misleading, as the sacred texts of "Eternal Bön" do not support the idea that Tönpa Shenrab ("gShen rab Mi bo che") was born in Zhangzhung, nor do they place his birth "c. 3.908 years ago"; usually they place his birth much further back in time, in fact, completely outside any conceivable historical context.

It could be argued that it is valid to give centre stage to a traditional Tibetan scholar. Namkhai Norbu was, however, a scholar who had a particular agenda – to uncover what he regarded as the authen-

tic sources of Tibetan civilisation through a study of carefully chosen texts that he believed reflected truly ancient sources. It is perhaps easy to forget that Namkhai Norbu himself was not a follower of what, over the last thousand years, has constituted Bön ("Eternal Bön"), a religion that has had a large number of great scholars, and still has its own deeply learned scholars today. If the present chapter had built on this tradition of learning, a different picture of Bön might have emerged. In particular, the importance of the monastic tradition of scholastic learning, in its essentials not much different from Buddhism, would have necessarily been accorded far greater importance than taxonomies of rituals, gods and other spiritual beings that form a considerable part of the chapter under review. Such non-human beings and rituals are certainly present in Bön, whether the focus is on popular beliefs or textual sources from various periods of time, but not to a significantly greater extent than in the various schools or traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

In spite of a somewhat one-sided approach to Bön (always in the sense of the post-11th century "Eternal Bön" – the only variety of Bön that can be studied on the basis both of textual sources and a living, contemporary tradition), Maniscalco's presentation of this religious tradition has the great merit of placing it where it belongs in the context of university teaching and hence in the minds of future researchers, namely as a separate religious tradition with a considerable number of adherents in Tibet itself and as an important element in Tibet's religious history. Without paying serious attention to this religion, which Maniscalco to his great credit certainly does, any account of Tibetan religion will remain incomplete.

