

Introduction

Tibet is universally regarded as the homeland of one of the major Buddhist civilizations of Asia. Introduced into Tibet in the seventh and eighth centuries, Buddhism soon became the dominant religion. Although Chinese influences were not altogether absent during the initial period of Buddhist activity in Tibet, it was above all to the Indian subcontinent (including Kashmir and the Kathmandu Valley) that the Tibetans turned for their sacred scriptures and traditions of philosophy, art and learning, and monastic life was organized on the whole according to Indian models.¹

With its many centres of learning and places of pilgrimage connected with the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni, India became, in the minds of most Tibetans, a holy land of religion. This remained true even after the Muslim conquest of northern India in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries caused Buddhism in India to disappear and gradually brought the flow of Tibetan pilgrims to a virtual standstill.

Not all Tibetans, however, regarded India as the source of their religious traditions. Since the tenth or eleventh century and until the present day there have been two organized religious traditions in Tibet: Buddhism and a faith that is referred to by its Tibetan name, Bon.²

Western scholars have adopted the Tibetan term *bön* (*bon*) together with the corresponding adjective *bönpo* (*bon po*) to refer to ancient pre-Buddhist as well as later non-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices in Tibet. Hence, in the context of Western scholarship, 'Bon' has no less than three significations:

1. The pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet which was gradually suppressed by Buddhism in the eighth and ninth centuries. This religion, only imperfectly reconstructed on the basis of ancient documents, appears to have focused on the person of the king, who was regarded as sacred and possessing supernatural powers. Elaborate rituals were carried out by professional priests known as *bönpo*. It is possible that their religious doctrines and practices were called *bön* (although scholars disagree on this point); certainly they were so designated in the later, predominantly Buddhist historiographical literature. In any case, their religious system was essentially different from Buddhism. Thus, the rituals performed by the ancient Bonpo priests were above all concerned with ensuring that the soul of a dead person was conducted safely to a postmortem land of bliss by an appropriate animal—usually a yak, a horse or a sheep—which was sacrificed in the course of the funerary rites. Offerings of food, drink and precious objects, and, in the case of kings, even of servants and ministers, likewise accompanied the dead. The purpose of these rites was twofold: on the one hand, to ensure the happiness of the deceased in the land of the dead, and on the other, to obtain their beneficial influence for the welfare and fertility of the living.

2. Bon may also refer to a religion that appeared in Tibet in the tenth and eleventh centuries, at the same time that Buddhism, introduced once again from India after a period of decline in Tibet, became dominant. This religion, which has continued as an unbroken tradition until the present day, has numerous and obvious points of similarity with Buddhism with regard to doctrine and practice, so much so that its status as a distinct religion has been doubted. Some scholars (among them the present author in earlier publications) have suggested that it could most adequately be described as an unorthodox form of Buddhism.³ The fact that the adherents of this religion, the Bonpos—of whom there are many thousands in Tibet and in exile today—maintain that their religion is anterior to Buddhism in Tibet, and, in fact, identical with the pre-Buddhist Bon religion, has tended to be either contradicted or ignored by Western scholars. Tibetan Buddhists, however, also regard Bon as a distinct religion, and it will be argued below that this claim is justified if one emphasizes aspects such as concepts of religious authority, legitimation and history rather than rituals, metaphysical doctrine and monastic discipline.⁴

3. Bon is sometimes used to designate a vast and amorphous body of popular beliefs, including divination, the cult of local deities and conceptions of the soul. Tibetan usage does not, however, traditionally refer to such beliefs as 'Bon', and since they do not form an essential part of Buddhism or of Bon (in the sense of the word outlined under point 2 above), a more appropriate term is that coined by R.A. Stein, viz. 'the nameless religion'.⁵

Even if one leaves this third sense of 'Bon' aside, the usual view of Bon in the West has been less than accurate. This is particularly true of the continuous, living religion called 'Bon' (point 2 outlined above) which has often been characterized as 'shamanism' or 'animism', and as such, regarded as a continuation of what supposedly were the religious practices prevalent in Tibet before the coming of Buddhism.⁶ It is worth noting that the argument in support of this view is a circular one, the presence of such elements in the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet being inferred from their existence in present-day popular religious practices. Further, the later, so-called 'developed' Bon religion was often described in distinctly unfavourable terms as a perversion of Buddhism, a kind of marginal counter-current in which elements of Buddhist doctrine and practice had either been shamelessly copied, or else inverted and distorted in a manner which was compared with the mediaeval satanic cults of Europe (no matter whether such cults ever actually existed or not).⁷ This view of Bon was, however, not founded on first-hand research, but on certain polemical writings by Tibetan Buddhist critics of Bon, who tended to employ standard terms of polemical invective. It is only since the mid-1960s that a more adequate understanding of Bon has emerged, first and foremost thanks to the efforts of David L. Snellgrove.⁸

The religious art and iconography of Bon in the second sense of the word outlined above are the topics of this book. This is the religion that emerged in the tenth and eleventh centuries (at least in its present form) and which still flourishes today. Of the pre-Buddhist (or, if one prefers, the pre-seventh-century) art of Tibet almost nothing is known, and iconographical expressions of folk beliefs are for the most part integrated in either the Bonpo or the Buddhist traditions.

An adherent of the Bon religion is called Bonpo. A Bonpo is a 'believer in Bon', and for him Bon signifies 'Truth', 'Reality' or the eternal, unchanging Doctrine in

which Truth and Reality are expressed. Thus, Bon has the same range of connotations for its adherents as the Tibetan word *chö* (*chos*, translating the Sanskrit term *dharma*) has for Buddhists.



Yungdrung (g.yung drung, Sanskrit *svāstika*), turning counter-clockwise in the manner characteristic of Bon. This ritual card, *tsakli* (tsag li), is painted in five colours representing the five elements, and inscribed with the 'Five Heroic Syllables': YANG, RAM, KANG, SRUM and OM (cf. Kværne 1985: 9 and 16).

Although limited to Tibet, Bon regards itself as a universal religion in the sense that its doctrines are true and valid for all humanity. The Bonpos also believe that in former times Bon was propagated in many parts of the world (as conceived in their traditional cosmology). For this reason, it is called 'Eternal Bon', *yungdrung bön* (g.yung drung bon). The importance of the term *yungdrung*, 'eternal, unchanging', which for Tibetan Buddhists, but not for Bonpos, translates the Sanskrit term *svāstika*, explains the frequent appearance in Bonpo iconography of the swastika, which is its symbol. In Bonpo usage, the term *yungdrung* corresponds in many respects to the Buddhist term *dorje* (*rdo rje*, Sanskrit *vajra*). The Bonpo swastika, however, turns to the left, i.e. counter-clockwise, while the Buddhist version turns to the right. This is but one of innumerable examples of a characteristic (although superficial) difference between Bon and Buddhism; in Bon, the sacred movement is always counter-clockwise. This is not, however, an expression of protest, much less of a spirit of perversion; it is, so the Bonpos believe, simply the normal ritual direction which contributes, ultimately, to moral purification and spiritual enlightenment. Several basic terms in the Bon religion contain the word *yungdrung*; thus, beings who have advanced on the path of enlightenment are known as *yungdrung sempa* (g.yung drung sems dpa'), corresponding to the Buddhist term *vajrasattva*, but in practice having the same range of meaning as the term *bodhisattva*. In this volume *yungdrung sempa* will be rendered 'Spiritual Hero', stressing the second element of the term *sempa* (*sems*, 'mind'; *dpa'*, 'hero').



Monks preparing a tormas (gtor ma) from flour and butter, representing a deity invoked during a New Year ritual of exorcism and regeneration, Bonpo monastery at Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India.

To the casual observer, Tibetans who follow the tradition of Bon and those who adhere to the Buddhist faith can hardly be distinguished. They all share a common Tibetan heritage. In particular, there is little distinction with regard to popular religious practices. Traditionally, all Tibetans assiduously follow the same methods of accumulating religious merit, with the ultimate end in view of obtaining rebirth in a future life as a human being once again or as an inhabitant of one of the many paradisiacal worlds of Tibetan (Buddhist as well as Bonpo) cosmology. Such practices include turning prayer wheels, hand-held or set in motion by the wind or a stream; circumambulating sacred places such as monasteries or holy mountains; hoisting prayer flags; and chanting sacred formulas or engraving them on stones or cliffs. It is only when these practices are scrutinized more closely that differences

appear; the ritual movement is, as already mentioned, always counter-clockwise and the sacred mantra is not the Buddhist “Om maṇi padme hūṃ”, but “Om matri muye sale du”. Likewise, the cult of the innumerable deities of Tibetan religion, whether Buddhist or Bonpo, may at first appear to be indistinguishable; but again, the deities are, in fact, different (although belonging to the same range of divine categories) with regard to their names, mythological origins, characteristic colours and objects held in their hands or adorning their bodies.

Even a cursory glance at the doctrines of Bon, as expressed in their literature or explained by contemporary masters, reveals that they are in many respects identical with those found in Tibetan Buddhism. It is this fact that until recently led Western scholars to accuse the Bonpos of plagiarism. The view of the world as suffering, belief in the law of moral causality (the ‘law of *karma*’) and the corresponding concept of rebirth in the six states of existence, and the ideal of enlightenment and Buddhahood, are basic doctrinal elements not only of Buddhism, but also of Bon. Bonpos follow the same path of virtue and have recourse to the same meditational practices as Buddhist Tibetans.

In view of the many manifest similarities between Bon and Buddhism, one may well ask in what the distinction between the two religions consists. The answer, at least to this author, would seem to depend on which perspective is adopted when describing Bon. Rituals and other religious practices, as well as meditational and metaphysical traditions are, undeniably, to a large extent similar, even identical. Concepts of sacred history and sources of religious authority are, however, radically different and justify the claim of the Bonpos to constitute an entirely distinct religious community.

According to its own historical perspective, Bon was introduced into Tibet many centuries before Buddhism and enjoyed royal patronage until it was finally supplanted by the ‘false religion’ (i.e. Buddhism) from India and its priests and sages expelled from Tibet by king Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan) in the eighth century. It did not, however, disappear from Tibet altogether; the tradition of Bon was preserved in certain family lineages, and after a few generations it flourished once more, although it never again enjoyed royal patronage.⁹

It is claimed that before reaching Tibet, Bon prospered in a land known as Zhangzhung and that this country remained the centre of Bon until it was conquered by the expanding Tibetan empire in the seventh century. Zhangzhung was subsequently converted to Buddhism and assimilated into Tibetan culture, losing not only its independence but also its language and its Bonpo religious heritage in the process. There is no doubt as to the historical reality of Zhangzhung, although its exact extent and ethnic and cultural identity are far from clear. It seems, however, to have been situated in what today is, roughly speaking, western Tibet, with Mount Kailash as its centre.¹⁰

A crucial question—for present-day Bonpos and Western scholars alike—is the authenticity of a specific Zhangzhung language. Just as the greater part of the canonical, sacred texts of the Tibetan Buddhists has been translated from Sanskrit, the scriptures of Bon have, so the Bonpos claim, been translated into Tibetan from the language of Zhangzhung. Numerous texts have titles that are given, first, in a non-Tibetan form, stated to be “in the language of Zhangzhung”, followed by a Tibetan translation of the title. As no texts have so far come to light that can be conclusively shown to be of Zhangzhung origin, it has not been possible to identify



A ngakpa (sngags pa), Bonpo tantric yogin in Amdo (northeastern Tibet). His long hair is bound up so as to form a turban-like topknot.

this language with any degree of precision. The issue of the Zhangzhung language has been hotly debated, especially since the publication of a bilingual Tibetan-Zhangzhung vocabulary by the Danish scholar Erik Haarh in 1968. R.A. Stein, on the other hand, has argued against the existence of an authentic Zhangzhung language.¹¹ While much more research is needed, it is at the very least clear that the sacred texts of Bon have preserved a large and authentic vocabulary from a Tibeto-Burman linguistic stratum closely linked to languages in the Himalayas and along the Sino-Tibetan border, such as the dialects of Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh), Tsangla (eastern Bhutan) and the dialects of Gyarong (Sichuan). These languages are only distantly related to Tibetan.

Many Zhangzhung words are used in Bonpo texts, quite independently of textual titles, and thus contribute towards giving Bonpo texts a different character from Buddhist Tibetan texts. Such words are (to quote only a few random examples) *shetün*, 'heart' (*she thun*, Tibetan *snying*); *nyiri*, 'sun' (*nyi ri*, Tibetan *nyi ma*); *werro*, 'king' (*wer ro*, Tibetan *rgyal po*); *rang*, 'horse' (*hrang*, Tibetan *rta*) etc. Some Zhangzhung words occur in the names of deities presented in this book, such as *tsamé*, 'woman' (*tsa med*, Tibetan *skyes dman*, cf. Kinnauri *tsamé*); *sé*, 'god' (*sad*, Tibetan *lha*, cf. Kinnauri *sat*); *ting*, 'water' (*ting*, Tibetan *chu*, cf. Kinnauri *ti*).

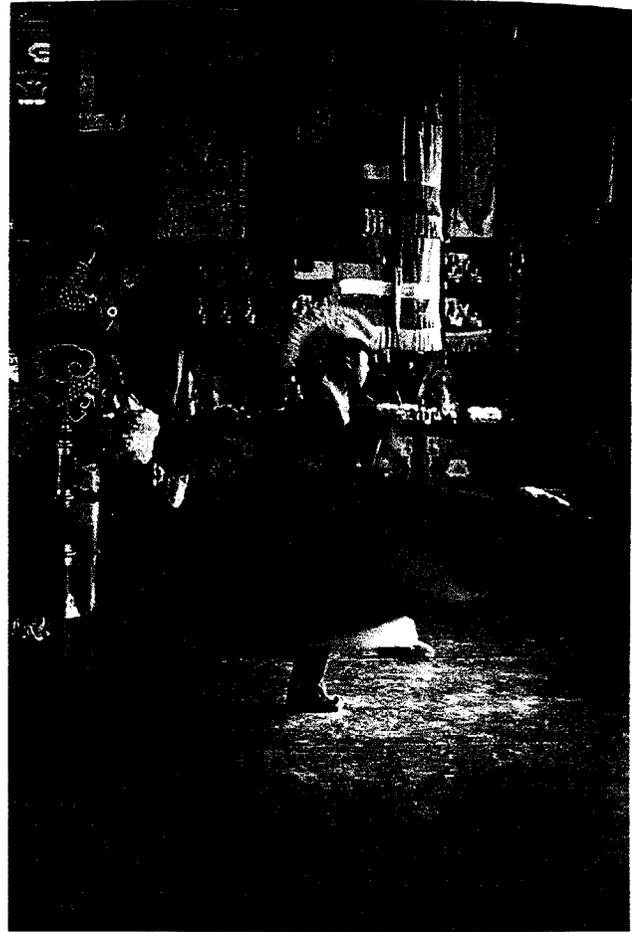
The ultimate homeland of Bon is, however—so the Bonpos claim—to be found even farther to the west, beyond the borders of Zhangzhung. The Bonpos believe that 'Eternal Bon' was first proclaimed in a land called Tazik (rTag gzig or sTag gzig). Although the name suggests the land of the Tajiks in Central Asia, it has so far not been possible to make a more exact identification of this holy land of Bon. Tazik is, however, not merely a geographical country like any other; in Bon

Lungtok Tenpé Nyima, abbot of the Bonpo monastery at Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India, wearing the robes and 'lotus hat' pesha (pad zhva), of a fully ordained Bonpo monk. Beside him is the hōru (hos ru), mendicant's staff, and on the low table in front of him, the other objects of a monk's paraphernalia, viz. a flat-bell, shang (gshang), a cup with lid, begging bowl and vase.



(Below) The abbot, assisted by a monk, dispenses consecrated water as a blessing during the celebration of the Tibetan New Year. The ritual life of Bon as well as Buddhism entails constant interaction between monks and lay people.





(Left) The protective deity Sipé Gyalmo, Queen of the Created World, (see Chapter Three).

(Below) One of the minor deities in the entourage of a tutelary deity.

