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The study of Bon in the West: Past, present, and future

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In the West, pre-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices in Tibet have generally been referred to by the Tibetan term *bon*. As Geoffrey Samuel has pointed out (1993: 320), “the special nature of Tibetan religion has often been explained in terms of the influence of Bon on Buddhism.” At the same time, and in conformity with Tibetan usage, *bon* also refers to one of the organised, monastic religious schools of present-day Tibet, a school which manifestly has many points of similarity with Buddhism. Accordingly, among the most pertinent questions which the study of *bon* in the West has attempted to answer, are: What is the relationship, if any, between early, pre-Buddhist *bon* and the present, organised religious school likewise styled *bon*? What is the relationship between this religious school and Buddhism? What is the relationship between *bon* in either sense of the word and popular, non-monastic religion? The present paper will present an outline of various responses to these questions, and suggest areas which would seem to be in particular need of research in the years to come.

In 1993, Geoffrey Samuel published a short but useful survey of Western research concerning Bon (referred to above), and the following year I published a similar survey (Kvaerne 1994). Inevitably, I shall repeat much of what has already been said, although the present paper will bring these surveys up to date and also offer some additional remarks.

Although several scholars, above all, perhaps, the Indian pundit Sarat Chandra Das and the German missionary A. H. Francke had already written about the Bon religion, the first scholar who set himself the task of dealing with it in a comprehensive manner and on the basis of all the sources which were available at the time, was Helmut Hoffmann. His study, *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion* (Hoffmann 1950) was completed in manuscript as early as 1944, but was only published in 1950. It was based on ethnographic material provided by Western travellers in Tibet and adjacent regions, as well as on the few Bonpo texts available in Europe at the time; it also made use of a selection of Tibetan Buddhist texts, mainly historical works, in which Bon is referred to.

Hoffmann’s work remains an impressive and in a sense, fundamental study. However, it is based on a particular theory of the development of the Bon religion. Briefly, this theory had two components. The first component concerned the nature of the ‘original’ (i.e. pre-Buddhist) Bon religion. Hoffmann claimed that this religion was characterised by the total dependence of the Tibetans on the natural

environment in which they lived. In order to cope with the fear and awe which this environment engendered in their minds, Tibetans worshipped nature spirits and made use of magic and divination. In a work published a few years later, he wrote: "...the Tibetans of those days were apparently completely subject to the powerful and formidable nature of their natural surroundings. Their completely nature-rooted and nature-dominated religious ideas revolved reverently and submissively around the powers and forces of their wild highland landscape whose divinities were reflected in the idea of numerous good and evil spirits the Tibetans thought to see all around them" (Hoffmann 1961: 17). In adopting this argument, Hoffmann only followed nature-romantic ideas which had been current in Europe since the early nineteenth century, but which by the 1950s were outdated both in anthropology and in the study of religion. However, in defining this early religion of Tibet, Hoffmann made use of two terms which were to prove to be tenacious in the study of Bon: *animism* and *shamanism*. Hoffmann maintained that it was possible to reconstruct, at least in part, this pre-Buddhist animistic-shamanistic religion by studying the modern popular religion and with the help of literary sources composed after the final triumph of Buddhism in the eleventh century. Further he maintained that "...we are in a position to say with some certainty that the original Bon religion was the national Tibetan form of that old animist-shamanist religion which at one time was widespread not only in Siberia but throughout the whole of Inner Asia, East and West Turkestan, Mongolia, Manchuria, the Tibetan plateaux and even China" (Hoffmann 1961: 14-15).

The second component in Hoffmann's theory was a certain periodization of the development of Bon. Although it is well known, it is necessary to briefly summarize it here. According to Hoffmann, the history of Bon can be divided into three periods. The first, the pre-Buddhist period, was that of the shamanistic-animistic religion outlined above, essentially identical with present-day folk religion in Tibet. The second period was characterized by the emergence of an organised priesthood and a developed doctrine under the influence of religions to the west of Tibet, a process in which, according to Hoffmann, Gnostic, Shaivite, and Buddhist Tantric elements all played a role. This was the religious establishment which confronted Buddhism when the latter was introduced into Tibet during the reign of the kings of the Yarlung dynasty. The third and final stage took place after the triumph of Buddhism. Adherents of Bon, now forced to retreat to outlying parts of the country, in order to ensure the survival of their religion copied essential elements of Buddhism, such as monastic life, religious texts, philosophy, liturgy, and iconography. Although Bon thus underwent a dramatic transformation, it retained, so Hoffmann claimed, a basic characteristic, viz. an implacable hatred of the new, dominant Buddhist religion. This hatred was expressed in the reversal of Buddhist customs; thus, circumambulation of holy objects was performed in a counter-clockwise direction, prayer wheels were rotated in the same contrary fashion, and so on. Bon became a kind of *heresy*, and

Hoffmann put much effort into presenting it as a distortion of Buddhism, characterised by perversion and negation, comparing it, in fact, with the supposed Satanic cults of mediaeval Europe. In *The Religions of Tibet*, Hoffmann goes to the extent of quoting a novel of Alexandra David-Neel, *Magie d'amour et magie noire, Scènes du Tibet inconnu* (Paris 1938) as if it were an ethnographic report: "...some Bon priests are supposed to lengthen their own earthly days by appropriating the life force of others who die a painful death by starvation. However, these victims must be voluntary, as otherwise the sacrifice is of no effect" (Hoffmann 1961: 107).

As is now well known, Hoffmann's account of the development of Bon in three historical stages, completely unknown in Bonpo sources, was based on a work written by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar belonging to the Gelugpa school, Thu'u-kwan Blo-bzang chos-kyi nyi-ma (1737-1802), completed in 1801. In this work, Chos-kyi nyi-ma discusses all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and also includes a short chapter on Bon. This chapter was translated into English by Sarat Chandra Das and published in 1881, only eighty years after it was written, and thus became the basis for Western conceptions of the history of Bon.

In 1988 Rolf A. Stein pointed out that this periodization, far from being invented by Chos-kyi nyi-ma, was adopted from a much older Buddhist source, viz. the *dGongs gcig yig cha*, a work dating from the early thirteenth century (Stein 1988: 31). Chos-kyi nyi-ma uses this periodization in a polemical context. In fact his attack on Bon is not so much due to ignorance and lack of sources, although that would certainly also seem to have been the case, as to the fact that, as pointed out by E. Gene Smith in 1969, he was "writing at a politically unfavourable time, a few decades after the Manchu campaign against the Bon-led rebellion in the state of Rab-brtan...in the Rgyal-rong" (Smith 1969-1971 vol.1: 1). In other words, Chos-kyi nyi-ma was writing in a specific political situation which no doubt determined his account.

Before moving on to scholars who have been more directly influential for contemporary Bon studies, brief mention must be made of a scholar who shared some of Hoffmann's ideas concerning the syncretistic nature of Bon, viz. Matthias Hermanns. Hermanns, who had lived in Amdo in the 1940s, was convinced that Bon was heavily influenced by Iranian religion and by Manichaeism, and in his work (Hermanns 1965), he argued that the biography of sTon-pa gShen-rab as found in the *gZer mig* was entirely of Manichaean inspiration (Hermanns 1965: 130-131). While Hermanns' claims were certainly wildly extravagant, the whole question of Iranian influences on Tibetan culture in general, and on the Bon religion in particular, remains in my opinion open; one suspects that such influences have made themselves felt, but conclusive evidence is still lacking. (See Kvaerne 1987: 163-174).

Although Hoffmann subsequently modified his views, his basic assumption that pre-Buddhist Bon was "shamanistic" and "animistic" became extremely

influential and has continued to be repeated by other, less critical authors. However, scholarship was soon to develop in new directions. Simplifying a complex process, it may be said that in the early 1960s two new factors became increasingly important: firstly, the presence of learned Bonpo monks in India and the West following the uprising in Tibet, and, secondly, the systematic study of Dunhuang documents (and royal edicts and other inscriptions from Tibet itself). Simplifying even further, one may say that the first factor dominated the study of Bon in England and the second in France.

In the 1950s and 60s, David L. Snellgrove had been one of the first Western scholars to make prolonged visits to Nepal, and he had travelled extensively in the northern parts of that country, where he came into contact with small but ancient Bonpo communities. Not only could he see for himself that the *ethos* of Bon was not one of perversion and negation (as Hoffmann had claimed), but he also discovered that the Bonpos possessed a vast and totally unexplored literature. Although this had been hinted at by earlier travellers to Tibet, such as J.F. Rock and George Roerich, no one had actually looked into this literature *in situ* before.

In 1960, Snellgrove met several learned Bonpo monks from Tibet. These monks had brought not only books, but also a vast treasure of traditional learning. Snellgrove was the first scholar in the West to seize the opportunity which these circumstances offered, and in 1961 he invited three of these monks to London where, for several years, he collaborated closely with them.

The first and most visible result of this collaboration was the publication in 1967 of *The Nine Ways of Bon* (London Oriental Series Vol. 18), which provided, for the first time in the West, a systematic presentation of the teachings of Bon in the form of the text and translation of excerpts from an important Bonpo canonical text. However, equally important was the manner in which the translation had been made: it was the result of line-by-line consultation with a Tibetan Bonpo scholar, the learned head teacher of sMan-ri monastery, Lopön Tenzin Namdak. For the first time, the understanding which the Bonpos themselves have of their religion and history was taken seriously, although it was by no means adopted in the new theory of the nature and history of Bon which Snellgrove proposed in the introduction to his book.

The most important aspect of this theory was that in spite of its polemical attitude towards Buddhism, post-eleventh century Bon was not a sinister perversion of Buddhism, but rather an eclectic tradition which, unlike Buddhism in Tibet, insisted on accentuating rather than denying its pre-Buddhist elements. Nevertheless, the real background of Bon was, Snellgrove stressed, mainly to be found in the Buddhist Mahayana tradition of Northern India, although in the case of Bon, this tradition could have reached Tibet by a different course than that which was followed by the particular Buddhist transmission which eventually came to prevail under the Tibetan term *chos*. Thus, independently of the official introduction of Buddhism into central Tibet in the seventh and eighth centuries

under the patronage of the Tibetan kings, Buddhism had also penetrated areas which today are in western Tibet but which at that time were part of the independent kingdom of Zhang-zhung. This form of Buddhism, essentially of a tantric type, adopted the name of *bon* and came to be regarded as the native religion of that kingdom. Thereafter Bon was propagated in central Tibet, where it inevitably came into conflict with *chos*. In the course of time, Bon, itself in reality a form of Buddhism, interacted with the other Buddhist traditions in Tibet, in particular with the Nyingmapa tradition, up to the present day. This historical model was restated in several publications (Snellgrove and Richardson 1968, Snellgrove 1987).

Snellgrove's work, not only with regard to substance, but also with regard to method, has been extremely influential, indeed crucial for subsequent studies. However, his interest was mainly focussed on the organised religious school which, starting in the tenth and eleventh centuries, can be traced continuously up to its present-day adherents in Tibet, Nepal, and in exile. He regarded this religion as fundamentally a form of Buddhism, as heterodox and eclectic rather than "heretical". He had less to say concerning Bon as a non-Buddhist or even pre-Buddhist religion existing in Tibet (as distinct from Zhang-zhung) before the introduction of Buddhism from India under the patronage of the Yarlung dynasty. This aspect of Bon was, however, the special field of the French Tibetologists from the 1960s onwards.

The course of the French school of Bonpo studies had been set as early as 1952 with Marcelle Lalou. Starting with Lalou, the French scholars have completely dominated the study of the extremely problematic Tibetan material from Dunhuang, the only material which, together with a small number of inscriptions in Tibet itself, actually physically dates from the Yarlung period. Lalou's interest in Bon was, however, limited, and in her book (Lalou 1957), one finds the often-quoted statement that "S'il me fallait définir en deux mots ce qui me semble le plus caractéristique du milieu Bon, je dirais: le sang et le poison" (Lalou 1957: 12) ("If I had to define in two words what seems to me most characteristic of the Bon milieu, I would say: blood and poison"). Bon is depicted as a ritualistic religion obsessed with bloody sacrificial rites and with administering poison to enemies. However, she also revealed a nature-mythological turn of mind when she mused, in terms similar to Hoffmann's, that, "Nor is it impossible that some of the events recounted are renderings by means of imagery of the impressive and dangerous phenomena of the Tibetan climate, and that they for the most part are simply inspired by the characteristics of the seasons that regulate the life of the pastoralists" (Lalou 1957: 10).

Needless to say, an excellent scholar like Lalou was perfectly aware that there was more to it than that; however, it was Rolf A. Stein who significantly developed the study of Bon in France. Stein's research in this respect has primarily focused on myths and rituals, and his material has been partly documents from Dunhuang,

partly the ritual compendium *Klu 'bum* which undoubtedly contains much ancient material, and partly but to a lesser extent more recent texts.

In his book *La civilisation tibétaine* (Stein 1962), Stein introduced a major conceptual innovation by distinguishing between popular religion, which he regarded as essentially non-Buddhist, on the one hand, and the Bon religion, not only in its contemporary, organised form, but also in its dynastic, pre-Buddhist form, on the other. In his book, popular religion was styled “the nameless religion” and dealt with in a separate chapter; it was allotted, somehow, a timeless existence as the authentic, autochthonous religious system of the Tibetan people. He regarded Bon, on the contrary, as a specific religious tradition, containing many non-Tibetan religious elements, primarily from India, which had been formed in Tibet in a certain historical period, perhaps simultaneously with the rise of the Yarlung dynasty.

Stein's preference has been for textual and historical specificity, as is consistently reflected in his immense and uniquely learned work. This has in fact all along been the hallmark of French Tibetology. Not long after the publication of Stein's book, an original and, as it turned out, controversial, study was published by another French Tibetologist. In a monumental article entitled, somewhat dauntingly, “Une lecture des Pelliot Tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, et 1290. Essai sur la formation et l'emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale de Srong-bcan sgam-po” (“A reading of PT 1286 etc. An essay on the formation and the use of political myths in the royal religion of Srong-bcan sgam-po”) (Macdonald 1971), Ariane Macdonald argued, on the basis of an analysis of certain Dunhuang manuscripts, that until the ascendancy of Buddhism, the official religion in Tibet during the Yarlung dynasty was not Bon at all, but a specific cult of the king regarded as a divine being. This cult was known as *gtsug* or *gtsug lag*. The complete triumph of Buddhism explains, so Macdonald maintained, the total silence of later sources with regard to *gtsug*.

Perhaps because of its somewhat inaccessible mode of presentation, Macdonald's article never inspired the broad debate one might have expected. It was only in 1985 that the salient points of her theory were discussed and refuted at length by R.A. Stein (1985: 83-133). However, both scholars would probably have agreed that “the religion of the early Tibetan royal court in the sixth to eighth centuries was an entirely different affair from the Bon religion as it exists today. Neither should be identified with any original Tibetan pre-Buddhist religion” (Samuel 1993: 320), although Stein subsequently documented concrete instances of loans (significantly using the word “emprunts”) in the later “organized” Bon from Dunhuang documents (Stein 1988: 55).

The Western scholars discussed so far have had, in spite of their erudition, a tendency to ignore, or at least to not take seriously, the understanding of Bon actually found among adherents of the Bon religion itself. The basic postulate of these scholars was, as we have seen, that there is no direct continuity between the

pre-Buddhist faith and the later Bon religion, and that the latter is, essentially, a form of Buddhism (no matter how heterodox or eclectic). Both postulates are firmly denied by contemporary Bonpos as well as by their entire literary tradition. However, a deeper appreciation of the beliefs and world-view of the many Bonpo monks and laymen in exile as well as in Tibet who over many years have so patiently and generously shared their time and knowledge with inquisitive scholars from the West, has gradually led to a shift of emphasis not only in my own case, but, I think, also in the case of other scholars. Some, including myself, would now maintain that it is perfectly legitimate, indeed necessary, to view Bon as a distinct religion, in the same way, perhaps, that the Sikh religion is distinct from Hinduism or the Druse faith is distinct from Islam. This reassessment of Bon stresses aspects such as historical tradition and sources of authority and legitimation rather than doctrine, philosophy, and external practices and monastic institutions.

Looking back, I think that an important factor in this gradual shift in perspective was the publication in 1972 of Samten G. Karmay's translation of a part of the history of Bon by the Tibetan Bonpo scholar Shar-rdza bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan (1859-1935). Although written in the 1920s, this text presents, with abundant quotations from older sources, the traditional Bonpo view of history. Karmay is by no means uncritical of this version of history – he suggests, for example, that with regard to the Bonpo tradition of two persecutions of Bon “the possibility that later Bon-po historians have made two persecutions out of what was in fact only one” (Karmay 1972: xxxiii). Nevertheless, Shar-rdza's work is an impressive and consistent statement of a coherent historical perspective which it seems impossible to ignore. I shall return to this below.

Our discussion has now brought us to the present time which is, of course, nothing but a transition to the future. I shall therefore say something about the present situation while at the same time suggesting certain future tasks and challenges. I must, however, emphasize that there can be no question of making anything even approaching a complete survey of all the ongoing research regarding Bon.

In a sense, the crucial question regarding the development of Bon is the context and nature of the religious beliefs and practices prevalent in Tibet at the time of the rise of the Yarlung dynasty and up to the final triumph of Buddhism. Without a clearer idea of the religion of this period, its relationship with later developments must necessarily remain obscure. On the assumption that we can reconstruct the pre-Buddhist religion neither on the basis of popular religion as recorded in recent centuries nor on post-tenth century literary sources, we are left with sources which are more or less contemporary with the Yarlung dynasty, i.e. the Dunhuang manuscripts and a limited body of epigraphic material. Unfortunately it does not seem that younger scholars take much interest in continuing research in these crucially important but extremely difficult texts. Nevertheless, I would emphasize that an adequate and coherent description of the

religion of this period is the single most important task in the study of Bon. Perhaps one can hope that archaeological excavations, which have begun to be undertaken on a small scale in Tibet in recent years, may bring new material to light and maybe even open up new perspectives.

While the study of the earliest sources with regard to non-Buddhist religion seems to have entered a period of hibernation, there is considerable activity focused on the subsequent period, i.e. the period of the second propagation of Buddhism in Tibet starting in the eleventh century. As far as Bon is concerned, this period is characterised by the emergence and consolidation of religious beliefs and practices, known as Bon, within certain family lineages and expressed in a growing body of texts. Of particular significance is the research directed towards historiographical and biographical texts from this period. Probably the most important contribution has been made by Anne-Marie Blondeau in the form of an article published in 1990 in which she analyses the contents of the earliest available historical texts in Bon and argues convincingly that the oldest among them probably dates from the twelfth century (Blondeau 1990: 37-54). Blondeau has continued research into these early texts, and also compared them with certain early Buddhist sources, especially the *sBa bzhad*.

The earliest of these texts, the *Grags pa gling grags*, on which all subsequent Bonpo historical texts seem to rely, is of extreme rarity. Until very recently only two manuscripts were known, one preserved in the University Library of Oslo, the other in the Bonpo monastery in India. A third manuscript, which is of particular interest as it is somewhat longer and more detailed than the other two, has now surfaced in Tibet. I have prepared a complete translation of this text, which I plan to publish as soon as possible. Taking this text as a point of departure, I hope other scholars will study and perhaps translate other Bonpo historical texts so that eventually a more complete understanding of the alternative view of Tibetan history as formulated by the Bon tradition may emerge.

In my article (Kvaerne 1994: 139), I wrote that "A title-list, and eventually a proper catalogue of the texts in the Bonpo Kanjur is a research project which should be given high priority". In the academic year 1995-96 I had the good fortune, thanks to a generous grant from the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, to carry out this project. I was able to invite a group of seven scholars, including four Tibetans, to Oslo. In the course of a year we compiled a detailed catalogue of the more than 190 volumes of the Bonpo Kanjur. Within a year or two, this catalogue should be ready for publication and will, hopefully, be of use in the exploration of this vast literary corpus.

With regard to Bonpo literature, a major issue has been the question of its origins. To Hoffmann, it seemed highly probable that "there is some justification of the Buddhist charges of plagiarism" (Hoffmann 1961: 108). Even Snellgrove, in his introduction to *The Nine Ways of Bon* (Snellgrove 1967), stated that "Much of this literature, e.g. some of their *sūtras* and especially the 'Perfection of Wisdom'

teachings, has been copied quite shamelessly from the Buddhists”, but he did add that “by far the greater part would seem to have been absorbed through learning and then retold, and this is not just plagiarism”.

Real progress in this controversial issue was, however, only made by Blondeau in her study “Le Lha ’dre bka’ than” (Blondeau 1971). In this article, the importance of which can hardly be overrated, she established a close textual correspondence between the Buddhist account, dating from the second half of the fourteenth century, of the epic journey of Padmasambhava to Tibet and a similar narrative in the Bonpo text *gZer mig*, the two-volume (“medium-length”) version of the biography of sTon-pa gShen-rab, of the journey of the latter from ’Ol-mo lung-ring to rKong-po in pursuit of the demon Khyab-pa lag-ring who had stolen his horses. Blondeau arrived at the surprising conclusion (surprising, that is, to Western scholars, but not, of course, to Bonpos) that it was not the Bonpo text which was a copy of the Buddhist original, but the other way round. Subsequently Samten G. Karmay has arrived at similar conclusions with regard to certain *rdzogs chen* texts (Karmay 1988: 216-223). This kind of comparative study should be continued, for it is the only way by which one may hope to define the origin and nature of Bonpo literature.

A closely related field of enquiry is that of the affiliation of ideas, though not necessarily of actual textual passages. Among the most significant contributions of this kind are several studies by Katsumi Mimaki based on the fourteenth century Bonpo doxographical text, the *Bon sgo gsal byed*. For example, Mimaki has compared the thirty-two marks of Buddha Śākyamuni with the list of the thirty-two marks of sTon-pa gShen-rab found in that text (paper presented at the 1998 IATS seminar), and the structures of various classifications of schools and doctrines according to Buddhist and Bonpo sources (Mimaki 1994: 117-136).

In my 1994 survey of research, I pointed out that “In addition to the study of literary sources, a complex iconographical tradition also awaits study” (Kvaerne 1994: 139). Hopefully, this situation has to some extent been remedied through the publication in 1995 of my book on the iconography of Bon (Kvaerne 1995). If nothing else, the book shows that the Bon religion has been capable of producing sculpture and painting which is of the highest standard and should thus, once and for all, lay to rest the notion, still entertained by some, that there is something ‘primitive’ about Bon.

In the same article, I expressed the hope that the immense ritual legacy of Bon would be studied while there are still senior Bonpo lamas alive who can pass on their vast store of knowledge. In fact, in the 1980s a fair number of articles and studies of Bonpo rituals were published (listed in Kvaerne 1994: 138 n.5), but in recent years this trend seems to have stagnated, with the notable exception of the remarkable book by Namkhai Norbu (1995).

Being written by a noted Tibetan *rdzogs chen* master, this book in a certain sense falls outside the scope of my paper. However, as it has been translated into

English and published for a Western audience and has a preface written by an Italian scholar, Adriano Clemente, it should be briefly referred to. Namkhai Norbu's basic idea is that what he calls "the ancient Bön tradition" (Namkhai Norbu 1995: xviii) was "the original wisdom of the Tibetans" (1995: xviii). This wisdom was characterized by "a practical and concrete knowledge of the various aspects of the energy of the individual in relation to the dimension in which he lives" (1995: xviii). However, these ideas, which for Namkhai Norbu represent the "genuine roots" of Tibetan culture, "undoubtedly derive from the ancient Bön tradition and civilisation of Shang Shung" (1995: xix). In other words, there is no difference between the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and the Bön religion associated with Zhang-zhung: "...the culture of the kingdom (*i.e. Yarlung*) was that of Shang Shung, as was its religion" (1995: xvi). The later Bon tradition, *i.e.* the tradition which still exists in Tibet as an organised religion, and which Namkhai Norbu calls "official Bön", was, however, influenced by Buddhism to the extent that "the importance of the original traditions was neglected in favour of the philosophical teachings derived from Buddhism...and the authentic principles of the ancient Bön culture were misconstrued and almost excised by the protagonists of official Bön" (1995: xviii). Although he regards Bon, as did Hoffmann, as "very probably based on elements common to the heritage of panasiatic Shamanism" (1995: xv), he considers, as opposed to Hoffmann, shamanism to be anything but primitive. As Clemente says in his Preface, "Understanding in our own time the value and significance of these rites means opening a door onto the immense panorama of the primordial experiences and knowledge of man" (1995: xiii).

In summing up, we return to the question of periodization of Bon. Geoffrey Samuel has proposed a model for the historical development of early Tibetan religion on the basis of an analysis of successive stages in the history of early Tibetan society (Samuel 1993: 436 ff.). The first period (before the seventh century) is designated "the original shamanic religion of the Tibetans" (Samuel 1993: 438), subdivided into two periods, that of a stateless society and that of proto-states. Samuel of course uses the word "shaman" in a different sense from Hoffmann. This is followed by a "court religion" connected with the rise of the Yarlung dynasty, characterised by the activities of *bon* and *gshen* priests, influenced not only by the "shamanic religion" but also by an earlier "court religion" of Zhang-zhung. Samuel emphasises that "The *bön* priests who formed part of the court religion at Lhasa were only one of a number of kinds of priests at this time." Contemporary Bon is regarded as "a Buddhist or quasi-Buddhist order," although "it seems likely that the modern Bön religion has preserved a significant amount of early material" (1993: 438).

This historical model is probably the most sophisticated one to be suggested to date, and taken as an analytical tool it can be extremely useful. In the absence of historical sources, some of its stages must, however, remain hypothetical. Personally I would suggest a simpler and in a sense more conservative model

employing only four categories: (1) an autochthonous, “pre-Buddhist” Tibetan religion (which may or may not have been styled *bon* at the time), corresponding to Samuel’s “original shamanic religion of the Tibetans”, and (2) an organised cult, perhaps focusing on the person of the king, influenced by religions in neighbouring cultures such as India (including, perhaps, Buddhism), or even Iran, established in Zhang-zhung as well as in Tibet, and which again may or may not have been called *bon*. This would correspond to the “court religion” both of Zhang-zhung and of Tibet. However, I would emphasize that even the distinction between the two categories mentioned so far is made for analytical purposes only, and that the sources do not allow us to define the extent to which we may in fact be dealing with different entities, the main problem here being that an “original shamanic religion of the Tibetans” has to be reconstructed entirely *a posteriori*. Further, we may, with Stein and Tucci, distinguish (3) a contemporary “folk religion” or a “religion without name” which has often been styled Bon in Western literature but is never thus referred to in Tibetan. While we cannot reconstruct an ancient “pre-Buddhist” religion on the basis of this contemporary “nameless” folk religion, we should not on the other hand dismiss all links between present-day popular religion and pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices. On the contrary, we find significant areas of continuity, particularly represented by the cult of ancestral, hence sacred mountains or deities identified with such mountains, or dwelling on such mountains, which is well attested from the period of the Yarlung dynasty, as well as in present-day popular religion, as has been documented in several important studies by Samten Gyaltzen Karmay (1996: 59-75). Finally, (4) the post-eleventh century, organised and eventually monastic Bon religion, styling itself *g-yung drung bon*, “Immutable Bon”, which has been the main focus of research in the years following Snellgrove’s first contact with its adherents around 1960, still needs to be defined in relationship not only to Buddhism, but to the other three analytical categories outlined above. In spite of its obvious links with Buddhism, I would prefer to regard it as a separate religion, for reasons given above.

Before closing, I cannot refrain from expressing mild despair at the tenacity of certain notions regarding Bon, which may still be found in the writings of otherwise excellent and well-established scholars, particularly in works intended for the general public. Thus a recent German guide book to Tibet writes of pre-Buddhist Bon as “a religion which presumably was originally strongly marked by animistic and nature-religious characteristics” (Everding 1993: 75). The author continues: “The priests, the *Bönpos*, worshipped the stars of heaven, they attempted to influence fate by means of sacrifices of animals and in certain circumstances even of humans; they practised all kinds of magic in order to exorcise evil spirits and to pacify malevolent demons”. “With the arrival of Buddhism, the Bon religion ...developed a systematic doctrine, adopted Manichaeism and Persian religious elements, and in the course of time its teachings gradually moved closer and closer to those of Buddhist philosophy” (1993: 76).

One of the most widely used guide books, viz. Stephen Batchelor (1987) refers to “the native Bön religion, an animistic cult governed by exorcists, shamans and priests” (Batchelor 1987: 15) and to “the primitive and less universal beliefs of Bön” (1987: 19), and Gyurme Dorje adopts the tripartite periodization of Bon of Chos-kyi nyi-ma as if it were an established fact (Gyurme Dorje 1996: 69-70).

In 1948, the Italian photographer Fosco Maraini accompanied Giuseppe Tucci on his last expedition to Tibet. In the Tromo valley, upon encountering Bonpo monks from the local Bonpo monastery, he styled them “the Etruscans of Asia”, thus eloquently expressing the aura of mystery which at the time surrounded Bon (Maraini 1952: 113). Today, the Bonpos are no longer the Etruscans of Asia. But as the contours of its history slowly emerge, Bon becomes in turn the basis of new myth-making. Projections of Western fantasies regarding Tibet multiply also with regard to Bon. In particular, it is now fashionable in certain circles to link Bon with shamanism; not with the northern Asian shamanistic complex, as Hoffmann imagined, but with Native American shamanism, a potent symbolical term in the New Age movement. As encounters between Bon and the West multiply, so also do misrepresentations. Bon, surrounded by an aura of mystification in which terms such as “Zhang-zhung” and “Tönpa Shenrap” abound, has become a commodity in the global supermarket of religions. Bon has become an object of New Age economic and ideological exploitation, in which the Tibetans, ultimately, are the losers. To reinsert Bon into its real historical and cultural context is therefore not only a meaningful academic pursuit, but is also a way for us, as scholars, to practise solidarity with the Tibetan people.

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