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## The *bla ma* in the Bon religion in Amdo and Kham

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### Introduction

In the early Bonpo tradition, the term *bon po* was used for those who believed in and practised the Bon religion, while the priests were called *gshen po*. After Buddhism was introduced into Tibet, *bon po* continued to be used for followers of Bon, whilst the adherents of the new religion were known as *ban dhe*. As the influence of Buddhism increased, the word *bla ma*, which translated the Indian term *guru*, “religious master”, came to be used not only by Buddhists, but also by Bonpos for their own priests, instead of the older term *gshen po*. Thus the term *bla ma* in the context of Bon is a good example of the strong influence of Buddhism on Bon.

Concerning the term *bla ma* in Bon before Srong-btsan sgam-po (d. 649), there are no authentic sources, only various legends<sup>1)</sup>. According to these legends, the first religious master (*gshen po*) in Tibet was sNang-ba mdog-can<sup>2)</sup>, although there were earlier masters in Zhang-zhung. All the ancient *gshen po* in Zhang-zhung and Tibet were lay people. They transmitted their teachings and rituals to their descendants so that specific traditions were passed on within a particular family lineage. As great importance was attached to such teachings and rituals, the masters often became prominent members of society. This was the origin of the *gdung brgyud*, the family lineage *bla ma*.

Until the coming of Buddhism, the family lineage (*gdung brgyud*) was the usual mode of transmitting religious teachings and rituals in Tibet. The family lineage is of course the normal way of reproducing the population, but if a family had special rituals and teachings, it could obtain a prominent social position. We do not know exactly when the Bonpos replaced the term *gshen po* with the term *bla ma*, nor whether the word *bla ma* existed in Tibetan before the introduction of Buddhism. However, it would seem that Bonpos quickly forgot the term *gshen po*, and early historical records, biographies, tantric texts and even some old prayer texts (*bsang yig*) refer to Bla-ma Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin and Bla-chen Dran-pa nam-mkha'. The family lineages are considered to be very important in Bon, and several such lineages still exist in Tibet. In Buddhism, too, several family lineages have been carried on until the present time.

A discussion of family lineages in Bon has to begin with that of gShen-rab Mi-bo, the founder of *gYung-drung-bon*, as it came to have an exemplary function.

According to the later textual sources of Bon, gShen-rab Mi-bo was born in the royal family of ancient Zhang-zhung. Before his final Enlightenment, he was a prince who had eight sons and two daughters. The Dunhuang manuscripts present a rather different figure of gShen-rab Mi-bo, probably much closer to the historical person, but it was the later version which came to dominate the Bon tradition completely. Bonpos believe that gShen-tshang<sup>3</sup>), the family lineage of gShen-rab Mi-bo, is the most sacred and important *bla ma* lineage in Tibet. Next to gShen-tshang, the most important lineages in Bon are those of Bru<sup>4</sup>), Zhu<sup>5</sup>), sPa<sup>6</sup>), and rMe'u<sup>7</sup>). Except for gShen-tshang, members of all of these lineages were disciples of gShen-chen Klu-dga' (995-1035), the most important discoverer of Bonpo *gter ma*. While the Bru lineage came to an end after two Panchen Lamas had been born into it<sup>8</sup>), the Zhu, sPa, and rMe'u lineages still exist.

In the early period of Bon, 'family lineage' meant a lineage passing from father to son (*pha bu'i gdung brgyud*). This type of religious family lineage still exists, as e.g. the Kha-rag<sup>9</sup>) *bla ma* of Kha-rag monastery in Kham. Kha-rag is a very old place name in the history of Bon. Bonpos believe that it was one of the forty-five 'gathering-places' (*'du gnas*) founded by Mu-khri btsan-po, the second king of the Yarlung dynasty, and gShen Nam-mkha' snang-ba mdog-can who invited hundreds of Bonpo masters from Zhang-zhung to Tibet. The *Dran pa'i rnam thar g-yung drung gsang mdzod* and the *bKa' brgyad brgyud*<sup>10</sup>) mention Kha-rag as one of the *'du gnas* of the reign of Mu-khri btsan-po.

According to the *bKa' brgyad brgyud*, as recorded in the history of Kha-rag by Bya Tshe-ring, the founder of Kha-rag monastery was Ngo-zhu Tshul-khrims rgyal-mtshan, one of the family lineage masters of Kha-rag. His family, known as Bru-sha rNam-sras spyi-ring, originally came from Bru-sha (Gilgit). It is difficult to establish dates for Ngo-zhu Tshul-khrims rgyal-mtshan and other *bla ma* of his lineage, so it is not known how many generations it encompasses. 'Jam-dpal blo-bzang rgyal-mtshan, the last Kha-rag *bla ma*, was born in the Earth-hare Year of the sixteenth *rab byung* (1939). He is currently training his son to be the next Kha-rag *bla ma*.

Mi-nub monastery in Nyag-rong in Kham is likewise ruled by the family lineage of Khod-po Blo-gros thogs-med (1280-1337). The present lineage master is Khod-po Nyi-ma 'od-zer. In the same way, in Tsha-lung monastery in rMe-ba county in rNga-ba, Dza-rong Nam-mkha' rin-chen, the lineage master of the monastery, was seriously ill when I visited him in the autumn of 1998. He was still training his son, who was born in 1982, as the next *bla ma* of the monastery. In Shar-khog in Amdo, lCags-mdud Zla-ba rgyal-mtshan, the master of lCags-mdud monastery and holder of the 'golden throne' (*gser khri*) of the monastery, is the last master of his lineage.

However, after the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet and especially after the second propagation of Buddhism, the contrast between the *gdung brgyud bla ma*, who were married laymen, and the ordained monks became apparent, and the latter

came to be regarded as more holy not only in the eyes of their disciples, but also in the eyes of society in general. Consequently, some *gdung brgyud bla ma* took monastic vows, but thereby the problem of how to ensure the continuation of the lineage arose. The solution was that the *bla ma* kept the monk's vows, while his nephew, i.e. a son of his brother, continued the religious lineage and became the next *bla ma*. In this way, a new family lineage system was created, the *khu dbon gdung brgyud*, the *bla ma* succession from uncle to nephew. An example of this system is the sNang-zhig-tshang *bla ma* of sNang-zhig monastery in rNga-khog. The present sNang-zhig *bla ma*, born in 1983, is the thirty-ninth in this lineage. Another example is the Mar-lo-ba *bla ma* of Dam-pa rang-grol monastery in rTa'u county in dKar-mdzes prefecture. The present *bla ma*, Nor-bu dbang-chen, born in 1967, is a successor of his uncle, rDo-rje. Tshul-khrims bstan-'dzin, born in 1937, the present *bla ma* in Thang-rgang monastery, succeeded his uncle, Shes-rab tshul-khrims<sup>11</sup>).

While the shift from a lineage system passing from father to son took place successfully in some monasteries, such as sNang-zhig, in other cases it was supplanted by a system of reincarnation.

For example, in rTse-zhig monastery<sup>12</sup>), after succession from father to son during five hundred years, the system was changed to succession from uncle to nephew, starting with A-lags Shes-rab who was succeeded by his nephew rTse-zhig Drung-ram-pa. However, after only a few generations, the monastery adopted the system of succession by reincarnation under strong influence from Bla-brang and other Buddhist monasteries in the area. In northern Amdo, rTse-zhig and Khyung-mo monasteries are the only Bonpo monasteries which originally had a *gdung brgyud* system of succession and then changed to the system of reincarnation, which they have retained until today. In these cases, the evolution of Bonpo *bla ma* from *gshen po* to *pha bu'i gdung brgyud* to *khu dbon gdung brgyud* and finally to the *sprul sku* system has been completed.

To date the adoption of the reincarnation system in Bon in Kham and Amdo is very difficult to recount, as there are no direct sources. Nevertheless, some indications have been brought to light through the fieldwork of the present author in Kham and Amdo in 1996 to 1998. Thus, in the Kokonor region, the most important Bonpo lineage is that of rTse-zhig. According to Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho (b. 1935), the most important Bonpo lama in the region at the present time, there was no Bonpo reincarnation system in Amdo before the tenth *rab byung*, i.e. 1567-1626<sup>13</sup>). This fits well with the fact that there is no reincarnation lineage in the Kokonor region which can be traced back more than five generations.

Likewise gTso-'phags, one of the 'Phags-pa nam-gsum, the three great saints who were very important in the history of Bon in Amdo, was very active in the The-bo area. We can find many traces of his activities, and his descendants still live in the The-bo valley. According to TGLG, the succession of gTso-'phags was

carried on in the family lineage for many generations. Later he appeared as a reincarnation and founded several monasteries for monks who observed monastic vows (*'dul dgon*). These monasteries have only been in existence for four or five generations<sup>14</sup>. In other words, the reincarnation lineage of gTso-'phags may be traced back only approximately 300 years, a generation (in the case of reincarnation) being calculated at sixty years.

There are also several religious centres which have remained relatively independent, such as sNang-zhig in rNga-khog, mTsho-mtho and gYung-drung lha-steng in rGyal-rong, and dGu-skyang and sKyang-tshang in mDzod-dge. sNang-zhig still retains the system of succession by family lineage. Both mTsho-mtho and gYung-drung lha-steng were very important for the eighteen kings of rGyal-rong in former times. The Li-shu *bla ma* of mTsho-mtho is currently the ninth generation, but we do not know when this lineage adopted the reincarnation system. As for gYung-drung lha-steng, it was under a long succession of abbots (*mkhan po*), and has never had a reincarnation system. The present head of the monastery is Bon-slob Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin (b. 1932) of rTogs-ldan monastery in rNga-khog, because a *bla ma* in his lineage was abbot of the monastery. Bon-slon has also organised the rebuilding of the monastery in the 1980s.

In the mDzod-dge region, sKyang-'phags, one of the three great saints, was very active. dGu-skyang was his main monastery. Unfortunately, there is no longer any descendant of sKyang-'phags in the monastery, but in sKyang-tshang, a monastery founded by one of his descendants, there is a reincarnation called Dri-med 'od-zer (b. 1935) who is the twenty-seventh generation in the succession from sKyang-'phags (sKyang-'phags *gdan rabs*) and the most learned scholar in the area at the present time. He claims that sKyang-tshang sKal-bzang mkhas-grub, the twenty-second in the succession of abbots (*mkhan rabs*) in the monastery, was recognised as a reincarnation of sKyang-tshang rGya-nag-tshang in the thirteenth *rab byung* (1756-1815)<sup>15</sup>. Presumably that would be the first incarnation in the sKyang-tshang lineage.

In Kham the *bla ma* lineage of the Khro-tshang monastery may be traced back five generations in the form of a reincarnation lineage, although the dates of the births and deaths of the *bla ma* are not clear. The last Khro-tshang *bla ma* is gTsug-phud 'od-zer. In sMon-rgyal monastery, six generations of reincarnations have succeeded one after the other, originating from a son of Kun-grol 'ja'-tshon snying-po (b. 1700). The present incarnation is gYung-drung gtsug-phud nam-rgyal (b. 1983). In 'Bud-rmad monastery, there is a *dbon sprul* reincarnation lineage. The name *dbon sprul*, 'nephew-reincarnation', is due to the fact that the first reincarnation was a nephew of Kun-grol 'ja'-tshon snying-po. As far as I know, the reincarnations in rDza-khog mentioned above are those whose lineages have the longest history in Kham; the other monasteries either retain the *gdung brgyud* system, or have reincarnation lineages which only stretch back two or three

generations. In fact, the oldest would seem to be that of sMon-rgyal monastery, dating from the latter part of the eighteenth century.

In addition, there are a few special *bla ma* who do not fit into the categories discussed above: the '*pho ba grong 'jug bla ma*, the 'professional' *bla ma*, and the *rgyal tshab bla ma*. The first will be described below. The second, for which there is no particular term in Tibetan, is a *bla ma* chosen in certain monasteries where the family or reincarnation lineage had come to an end. For example, 'Bo-la monastery in Dar-rtse-mdo was a branch monastery of the 'Bar-khams monastery. The *bla ma* of the 'Bar-khams monastery was also the *bla ma* of 'Bo-la, but after the former was converted into the dGe-lugs-pa, the monks in 'Bo-la monastery, which remained Bonpo, had to select one among themselves to be their *bla ma*. The present *bla ma* is Tshul-khrims bstan-'dzin (b. 1952). Similarly, in rGyal-rong monastery in Brag-mgo county, the *bla ma* of the two monasteries changes every few years among the monks who have taken a monk's vows from sMan-ri monastery. Likewise, in Sa-'brug monastery in Shar-khog, gYung-drung blo-gros nyi-ma is the *bla ma* elected by the monastery. However, the difference between him and the two *bla ma* mentioned above is that the Sa-'brug *bla ma* was elected as a 'professional' *bla ma* and then approved by the monastery as the permanent *bla ma*. This means that gYung-drung blo-gros nyi-ma will begin a new lineage, either in the form of a *gdung brgyud* or as a reincarnation lineage after his death.

The 'professional' *bla ma* is called *khri pa* in some monasteries, the incumbent being changed every few years. An example is the *bla ma* of dGu-skyang monastery who has to be changed every two years. It may happen that a monastery prefers to have a lineage *bla ma* instead of selecting an ordinary monk to be their *bla ma*. An example of this is lDong-dpal g-yung-drung me-tog gling monastery in gZi-tsha sde-dgu which was founded by a *bla ma* of the sKyang-'phags lineage. When this particular branch came to an end in the middle of this century, the monks asked a *bla ma* of bSam-'grub monastery in mDzod-dge, who was also of the sKyang-'phags lineage, to be the master of their monastery, rather than electing one among themselves.

The last category is the *rgyal tshab bla ma*, of which there are three types.

1. When a master has passed away, it may be considered necessary that someone should take his place and position in society soon after his death, especially if the deceased was one who kept religious vows, rather than waiting, perhaps for many years, for a lineage *bla ma* to succeed him. For example the lineage of sMan-ri *mkhan po* are the *rgyal tshab* of Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan. There is also a new *rgyal tshab* lineage starting at the hermitage of Shar-rdza bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, the present *rgyal tshab* being the *mkhan po* mThu-stobs rnam-rgyal (b. 1926).
2. When a *gdung brgyud bla ma* is too young to be the master of his monastery, the monastery may elect one of the monks to be the representative of the young *bla ma*. Thus, after the death of the 38th sNang-zhig *bla ma* bsTan-pa rab-rgyas (1930-61), there was no nephew to take his throne. The following sNang-zhig *bla ma*,

bsKal-bzang blo-gros rgya-mtsho, was born in 1983 and hence too young to take the responsibility of heading the monastery. Therefore the monks elected rGyal-'obs bsTan-'dzin to be the master of the monastery. He still has this position, although the young sNang-zhig *bla ma* was enthroned in 1988.

3. Similar arrangements can be quite convenient in the case of branch monasteries. Thus, a branch monastery of sNang-zhig is Cog-lo. Its head is the sNang-zhig *bla ma*, but since Cog-lo is quite far from sNang-zhig, the sNang-zhig *bla ma* cannot go there often, and a representative is chosen, the present one being Tshul-khrims rgyal-mtshan (b. 1919). However, while the sNang-zhig *rgyal tshab* is temporary, the sNang-zhig representative in Cog-lo is permanent.

As Bon is believed to have been at one time vigorous all over Tibet, the family lineage tradition is also likely to have been present in the whole of Tibet. However, with the passing of time and especially with Lhasa becoming the religious, cultural, political and economic centre, the family lineage system was in many cases substituted by the reincarnation lineage system, especially in dBus and gTsang. This was the case not only with regard to Bon, but in the older Buddhist traditions as well. In some cases, a family lineage tradition could come to a sudden end, as in the case of the Bru family lineage after two reincarnations of the Panchen Lama were found in that family. In dBus and gTsang, where Buddhism gradually became entirely dominant, only three Bonpo family lineages remain, viz. those of gShen, rMe'u and Zhu.

In Kham, on the other hand, being far from the central power of Lhasa and the dGe-lugs-pa school, and being divided into many small states and kingdoms, it was possible for many of the earlier religious traditions to survive and indeed to flourish. Hence the *gdung brgyud* system is still widespread in Kham, not only in Bon, but also among the rNying-ma-pa, although the latter were more strongly influenced by the reincarnation system.

In Amdo, the situation is quite different. In the wide grasslands to the west of Lake Kokonor it is difficult to find traces of the Bon religion and the *gdung brgyud* system. There are some Buddhist monasteries, most of them being dGe-lugs-pa except for a few scattered rNying-ma-pa and bKa'-brgyud-pa monasteries. East of Kokonor is the Tsong-kha area, where, not surprisingly, the dGe-lugs-pa is the most important tradition. Nevertheless, there are many traces of Bon in the area, and the Bon religion is still strong, especially in some agricultural communities in the valleys.

There are two Bonpo *bla ma* lineages in the Kokonor area, that of rTse-zhig and that of Khyung-mo. The former would seem to be the most important one in recent centuries. In the history of Bon in Kham and Amdo, there was a famous group of *bla ma* called the Eighteen Great *zhig* (Zhig-chen bco-brgyad), such as sTag-zhig, dPra-zhig, 'Bru-zhig, Shel-zhig, and sNang-zhig. According to the explanation of A-lag Bon-brgya<sup>16)</sup>, the first element of these terms (sTag, dPra etc.)

are the names of the tribes into which the *bla ma* were born, while the second element, *zhig*, which means “ruin” or “destroy”, refers to the destruction by the *bla ma* of heretical views. Traditionally rTse-zhig is one of the Eighteen Great *zhig* in mDo-khams; to it belong the rTse-dbus *bla ma* and rTse-dbus monastery, referring to the main lineage of the rTse-zhig tribe. The lineage of the rTse-zhig *bla ma* has been very active not only in the rGan-rgya pasture lands where the rTse-zhig monastery is located, but also throughout the Kokonor area, branch lineages of the rTse-zhig having spread to Bon-brgya and Ba-yan, and having generally exercised a strong influence on Bonpos in Khri-ka, Reb-skong, and rDo-sbis, rTse-zhig *bla ma* lineages being masters of several monasteries in those districts. A reincarnation of the lineage, called rTse-zhig *bla ma* Zhabs-drung bSod-nams g-yung-drung dbang-rgyal (1894-1949) was very active in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century both in political and religious affairs in Amdo. He was the *gzhi dpon*, the family priest, of the Tenth Panchen Lama and his family in rDo-sbis (Xiong hua county in Qinghai), and he had very close relations with Ma Pufang, the war lord of Qinghai. Thus he received a seal from Ma Pufang stating that it is “the seal of rTse-dbus-pa who is the *bla ma* of all the monasteries and the lay people of Tantric Bon in the East” (*shar phyogs sngags bon dgon grong spyi'i bla ma rtse dbus pa'i tham ga*).

Another lineage is the that of the Khyung-mo in the sTong-che valley in Khri-ka county. The Khyung-mo have historically practised three different lineage systems. In the earliest period there was a *gdung brgyud bla ma*, because Sog-btsun *ston pa* Ye-shes rgyal-mtshan (14th century), the founder of Khyung-mo monastery, was a lay master and his lineal descendants remained the masters of the monastery for generations. Then, at a time which is not certain and for reasons which are not clear, the monastery adopted the system of *'pho ba grong 'jug*. Although this system is generally rare in Tibet, it became well-known in Khri-ka. When a Khyung-mo *bla ma* dies, his soul enters the mind of a young person who in this way is able to remember his former life in Khyung-mo monastery. He is subjected to very strict tests by the monastery, including identifying objects which were used by him in his preceding life. If he passes the tests, he is installed as the Khyung-mo *bla ma*. There are no restrictions as to race or birth place as far as candidates are concerned. For example, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Khyung-mo sGrub-pa mthar-phyin was a Chinese from Xining, and it is reported that he was already sixteen years old when he came to the monastery to declare his status and that he did not speak a word of Tibetan. Nevertheless, he miraculously passed the examinations and spent the rest of his life in the monastery. The third period of the lineage is that of reincarnation. After the passing away of sGrub-pa mthar-phyin, the monastery adopted the reincarnation system. Thus the last two *bla ma* were rGal-'obs bsTan-'dzin dbang-rgyal and sTobs-ldan dbang-phyug, the latter being the present master of the monastery. We can see in this way that even a



remote valley was willing to adopt a new system, replacing their old tradition, the monastery thus complying with the dominant local culture.

Firstly, the function of the *bla ma* is still changing. In ancient Tibet, the division of labour was quite simple. The *gshen po* were priests, performing rituals and offering medical treatment. The *sku gshen*, the personal priests of the king, were likewise doctors. According to legend, Lha-Tho-tho-ri snyan-shal, the twenty-eighth king of the Yarlung dynasty, was without a son, so his two *sku gshen* practised ‘the medicine of the *klu*’ in the sMan-drang valley, finally enabling the king to have a son<sup>17</sup>). sTag-ri gnyan-gzigs, the thirty-first king, was blind; the *sku gshen* operated on his eyes and restored his sight<sup>18</sup>). Records of this kind show that the *sku gshen* also functioned as medical doctors.

The *gshen po* in general were only part-time religious specialists and also had to look after their land and animals. The first change in their function was that they became full-time professional religious experts. Although all the *gshen po* belonged to family lineages, they gradually became connected with special sacred places, known as *gnas sde*, ‘*du gnas*, *gsas mkhar* and *gsas khang*, and later the ‘*du khang* of monasteries. According to Bonpo sources, many such holy places were established during the period of the Yarlung dynasty, such as ‘the thirty-seven ‘*du gnas*’, ‘the thirty-six *sgrub gnas*’, ‘the twenty-four *gnas chen*’, and ‘the thirty-seven *sgrub sde*’<sup>19</sup>). In the course of the subsequent development of the the Bon religion, monasteries were built at the seats of the Bru, Zhu, sPa and rMe’u families, providing better opportunities for religious masters who no longer had to work as farmers or herdsmen.

Secondly, this change in the position of the *bla ma* caused many learned masters to appear. When a *bla ma* took religious vows – especially monastic vows – he could devote all his time to religious activities, including studies, gradually producing the mass of religious texts which have been preserved until our times. This certainly greatly increased their reputation. Likewise, the difference between religious and lay people was emphasized, resulting in two separate social groups. The *bla ma* are not only priests, but also scholars.

Thirdly, in the later development of Bon, the *gter ston*, ‘Treasure-discoverers’, have constituted another special group. According to Bonpo tradition, the *gter ston* do not have to be a *bla ma*, but could be herdsmen, farmers, or even thieves. Although some were illiterate, others became famous masters, such as gShen-chen Klu-dga’ (995-1035). Discoveries made by *gter ston* have continued until our own time, a recent and typical example being the activities of mKha’-spyod dBang-mo in Kong-po<sup>20</sup>).

Fourthly, the fact that people pay more respect to a *bla ma* who carefully keeps his religious vows than to a lay *bla ma* was the single most important factor for change in the evolution of the position of the *bla ma* in Bon. This also had the consequence that many monks (*grwa pa*) converted to Buddhism, as the latter religion was considered to uphold religious vows and monastic discipline more

strictly. Furthermore, the idea became universal that the lay tantrics (*sngags pa*) could only help people resolve problems of their present life whereas the *grwa pa* who kept religious vows could help people with regard to their next life, viz. help to ensure a rebirth in sTag-gzig 'Ol-mo lung-ring, the Bonpo equivalent of Shambhala.

In the spiritual life of Tibetans, whether Buddhist or Bonpo, religious practitioners who keep religious vows enjoy greater respect than those who do not. The gradual ascendancy of the monastic institutions where vows are strictly observed is, therefore, not surprising. Thus, the lCang-lung monastery in dPal-yul in Kham has several villages constituting its *lha sde*. However, since the monks of this monastery do not keep their religious vows, they are gradually losing influence. For example, the sDong-thog tribe with thirty-five families and the sBas-gong tribe with seventeen families were formerly completely Bonpo and two of the main tribes acting as patrons of the monastery, but nowadays they invite Bonpo monks only for resolving problems related to disease, hail, misfortune etc., whereas for funerary rituals they invite Buddhist monks who are considered to be more diligent in keeping their vows. In the Bonpo monasteries of sNang-zhig and rTogs-ldan the monks are known to keep their vows strictly, which is certainly one of the reasons why both monasteries are among the biggest in the Tibetan cultural area today. On the other hand, although the Kha-rag monastery has perhaps the oldest history in the Bonpo tradition, and the Kha-rag *bla ma* is one of the most important Bonpo *bla ma* at the present time, the monastery is not able to expand as the monks are believed to be lax in keeping their vows.

It is interesting to study the political situation of the Bonpo *bla ma*. Bon and Buddhism are of course two different religions in Tibet even if they have profoundly influenced each other. In Chinese policy, the Bon religion also belongs to the Association of Buddhists, and there is no separate association for Bon. There are few Bonpo representatives in the leading bodies of the Association of Buddhists in the Tibetan area. At this point, it must be mentioned that there is a difference in the names of the association in Chinese and Tibetan. In Chinese, Fojiao Xiehui is literally “the Association of Buddhists”, which might suggest that the Bon religion should not be included. This name is used by the government administration and appears in all official documents. However, in Tibetan this name is rendered Nang-bstan lhan-tshogs, “the Association of the ‘Interior Religion’” and not, as might be expected, Thub-bstan lhan-tshogs. Nang-bstan is defined as a religion the disciples of which have from sincere belief accepted the Three Precious Ones (*dkon mchog gsum*), i.e. *sangs rgyas*, *chos* and *dge 'dun* by formally taking refuge in them. The later Bon religion firmly maintains that it, too, accepts the Three Precious Ones and is thus to be counted as *nang bstan*, although it naturally substitutes Bon for Chos. It is probably for this reason that the Bonpos have never requested the authorities to be allowed to form a separate association.

Many would accordingly consider Bon to be a sect of Buddhism rather than a separate religion. Furthermore, in Buddhism, and especially in the dominant dGe-lugs-pa school, the majority of the *bla ma* are reincarnations, rendered in Chinese official terminology as *huofo*, “living Buddha”. This may be understood as the continuation of the same soul in successive bodies, but not as a family lineage from father to son. Therefore, many family lineage *bla ma* are not recognized as *huofo*, but are classified simply as laymen. Even if they are officially recognized as “living Buddhas”, their social influence is smaller than that of reincarnations. Even in the Bonpo community, the reincarnations, as we have seen, have a better reputation and greater access to resources than family lineage *bla ma*.

The gradual change of the status and function of the *bla ma* in Bon which has been described above, and especially the spread of the reincarnation system and that of monastic discipline (*'dul khrims*), has as far as Bon is concerned resulted in the loss not only of adherents but also of a distinct Bonpo identity, so that Bon is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from Tibetan Buddhism. This will beyond doubt lead to a gradual merging of religious feeling between the two religions.

\* All information concerning *bla ma* of Bonpo monasteries in Amdo and Kham in the present paper is based on field work carried out in 1996-98 as part of the Bon project by Professor Yasuhiko Nagano, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan.

### Abbreviations:

*KGBJ: sTod skyang zhes su grags pa A skyid skyang tshang dgon bkra shis g-yung drung dar rgyas gling gi byung ba cung zad brjod pa shel dkar me long* by Dri-med 'od-zer, MS.

*KZGG: gYung drung bon gyi bstan 'byung phyogs bsdus* by dPal-tshul, Lhasa (Bod-ljongs mi-rigs dpe-skrun khang), 1988

*LShDz: Legs bshad rin po che'i gter mdzod* by Shar-rdza bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, Beijing (Mi-rigs dpe-skrun khang), 1985

*TGLG: gTso tshang dgon pa'i lo rgyus* by lDong-rigs A-skal, MS. written in 1983 from memory

*TSLD: rTse zhid gi lo rgyus mdor bsdus* by Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho, MS.

## Notes

- 1) All of *bsTan 'byung*, the history of Bon religion, have recorded the legends concerning the history of lineage of Tibet's Kings before Srong-btsan sgampo.
- 2) *KZGG*, p.112.
- 3) gShen-tshang is the lineage of gShen-rab Mi-bo, the last gShen-tshang *bla ma* is Nam-mkha' dbang-ldan (1956-). The seat of gShen-tshang is Dar-lding village in bZhed-mthong-smon county of gZhis-ka-rtse Prefecture inTAR.
- 4) The seat of Bru-tshang was in 'Khrungs-gzhis village in rNam-gling County of gZhis-ka-rtse Prefecture inTAR.
- 5) The seat of Zhu-tshang is in Ri-zhing valley in rGyal-rtse County of gZhis-ka-rtse Prefecture in TAR.
- 6) The seat of sPa-tshang is in La-phug village of sKyid-rong County of gZhis-ka-rtse Prefecture in TAR.
- 7) The seat of rMe'u-tshang is in bZang-ri village in sNye-mo County of Lhasa in TAR.
- 8) The second Panchen Lama Blo-bzang ye-she, 1663-1737, and the fifth Panchen Lama bsTan-pa'i dbang-phyug 1854-1882. See Samten Karmay 1998 General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon, in his *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, p.119., Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- 9) Kha-rag monastery is in 'Dzin-khog valley of dPal-yul County in dKar-mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province.
- 10)The History of Kha-rag Monastery by Bya Tshe-ring, MS. p.4.
- 11)*Bon gyi 'dus sde chen po sNang zhig rgyal bstan phun tshogs gling ngam bkra shis g-yung drung gling gi chags rim lo rgyus mdor bsdus shel dkar phreng ba* by bsTan-'dzin phun-tshogs and 'Jam-dbyangs brtson-'grus, MS, p.20-24.
- 12)*TSLD*, p.4-6.
- 13)*TSLD*, p.6.
- 14)*TGLG*, p.6.
- 15)*KGBJ*, pp.72-73, 150.
- 16)*TSLD*, p.3.
- 17)*LShDz*, p.133.
- 18)*LShDz*, p.133, and *DGSG*, p.159.
- 19)*KZGG*, pp.491-499.
- 20)Span Hanna 1994 *Vast as the Sky: the Terma Tradition in Modern Tibet*, in Geoffrey Samuel, Hamish Gregor and Elisabeth Stutchbury, eds., *Tantra and Popular Religion in Tibet*, pp.1-13, New Delhi: Pradeep Kumar Goel.