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Erroneous Conceptions Frequently Shared about New Bon (*Bon gsar*)*

by Jean-Luc Achard
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1. Introduction

Within the field of modern Tibetology, the recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in the studies of the Bon tradition in both academic and non-academic circles.¹ This new production of works on Bon is obviously of uneven quality, in particular with regard to non-academic books or papers.² The view of Bon as presented in this latter kind of literature is historically of questionable interest since it takes for granted the very perspectives and theories Bon has elaborated about itself in its later narratives, after entering into contact with the new traditions that sprung up at the turn of the 1000s AD in Tibet. The traditional depiction of Buddha sTon pa gshen rab for instance is problematic for the historian and has been challenged by the recent discoveries of the dGa' thang bum pa stūpa in

* I would like to thank Marianne Ginalski for her corrections and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ See Dan Martin, “Bon Bibliography, New Combined Version” which, as of 2013, lists thousands of references dealing with Bon. In Tibet itself, Bon has also been more active than ever and numerous indigenous publications have recently appeared, largely broadening our knowledge of Bon and literally pulverizing the limits that were entangling it up to the 1990s.

² Or even Wikipedia entries, such as the one on Bon (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bon>, last checked on April 3rd, 2019) with perplexing statements such as “Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche elaborated the Southern Treasure with shamanism” which are senseless affirmations pushing us back decades, before Bon started to be carefully investigated by modern pioneers of the discipline, such as Karmay, Kvaerne, Blondeau, and later Martin, Ramble, Blezer, etc. (not to mention Yongdzin Rinpoche who battled for years, throughout his teachings in the West, against the conflation of Bon and Shamanism). If it is true that modern Bon teaches apotropaic rituals in its lower vehicles (together with particular theories related to illnesses, medicine, prophecies, etc.), these have nothing to do with Shamanism in the strictest sense of the word. Calling anything “Shamanism” or defining as “shamanistic” what does not display the standards of doctrinal rigor is certainly a dramatic shortcut which not only deprives Shamanism of its own particular features but also waters down specific religious traditions or systems which have nothing to do with Shamanism in the first place.

southern Tibet, with written documents introducing sTon pa gshen rab in ways quite similar to those of the Dunhuang manuscripts.³

As far as academic works are concerned, the best recent collection of papers and individual works about Bon is certainly that of the series *Bon Studies* directed by Y. Nagano and S.G. Karmay, an impressive set of volumes shedding an incredibly lucid light on Bon. This collection has produced some of the most important research works on this tradition, in particular a gigantic review of probably all Bon monasteries in Tibet and related cultural areas, offering a volume of information that was dramatically not available before.⁴ One should also mention the ongoing enormous amount of work produced by Charles Ramble in the field of Bon rituals, which should be available on the latter's forthcoming website.⁵

As would be expected, academic studies of Bon often challenge the tradition's own narratives as well as the validity not only of its historical claims, but also of its teachings and their sources. The borrowings of Buddhist historical frameworks (as seen for instance in the biographies of sTon pa gshen rab), organization of scriptures (such as the three turnings of the Dharma) and so forth, have certainly influenced academic opinions in a negative manner, to the extent that some have simply repeated the radical judgments of sectarian Buddhist scholars without having ever opened a Bon work.

The borrowings of doctrinal concepts and the claims of historical antiquity are obviously some of the most challenging aspects of Bon in modern Tibetology. For instance, the traditional scheme of three kinds of Bon recognized by modern Bonpos has been heavily criticized, but the fact remains that it is through this threefold scheme that modern Bon identifies itself and the various currents with which it is associated. Such a scheme cannot be dismissed inconsequently, without proposing a more fitting—and so far still lacking—approach to defining Bon.⁶

³ In blatant contrast with the way the later tradition presents its founding Buddha. On the material coming from the dGa' thang bum pa stūpa, see Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus & Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring (eds), *Gtam shul dga' thang 'bum pa che nas gsar du rnyed pa'i bon gyi gna' dpe bdams bsgrigs, passim*. See also Karmay, S.G., "A New Discovery of Ancient Bon Manuscripts from a Buddhist Stūpa in Southern Tibet" in *East And West*, 2009, vol. 59, nos. 1–4, pp. 55–84; J. Bellezza, "Straddling the Millennial Divide," *passim*.

⁴ See S.G. Karmay & Y. Nagano, *A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries and Temples in Tibet and the Himalaya*, *Bon Studies* 7, Osaka 2003.

⁵ See the bibliography *in fine* under Ramble.

⁶ No matter what one's opinion may be about this threefold scheme, it remains a fact that: 1. there were priests in pre-imperial and imperial Tibet that carried the name or title of *gshen* and *bon pos/mos* (roughly corresponding to religious figures that later Bon pos associate with "Old Bon" [*bon rnying*]), 2. there are religious practitioners (both monks and lay people) associated with post-dynastic Bon, roughly

Moreover, while it is a piece of evidence that the historical frameworks proposed in the traditional scheme of the three kinds of Bon do not correspond to any historical truth, this very scheme remains in my opinion the best to explain the post-dynastic presentation of Bon by Bonpos themselves: it explains why they are Bonpos, what they reject (as modern followers), how they both distinguish and relate to “ancient Bon” (if there ever existed such a trend), and so forth. This scheme should thus be taken for what it is—an *upāya* or a manner in which modern Bonpos approach their own “history”—and not for an empirical truth, since it is predicated on the dubious fact that post-dynastic Bon is regarded as the direct inheritor of a Bon tradition that supposedly existed in the 8th century. Therefore, the scheme of the three kinds of Bon should be used within the limits of its purpose, which is to explain the doctrinal differences between 1. an ancient Bon whose ritual practices are known in Dunhuang documents, 2. a post-dynastic Bon that is heavily dependent on both *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* literature as well as their religious and doctrinal conceptions, and 3. a New Bon phenomenon which is the late product of heavy interactions and local appropriations of current doctrinal and religious contents and was largely spread throughout Eastern Tibet (Khyung po, A mdo, and Khams).

In the numerous modern researches on Bon which have recently been published (such as in the *Bon Studies* collection mentioned above), one should note that the New Bon (*bon gsar*) tradition is barely touched upon.⁷ New Bon thus remains an obscure phenomenon to the extent that there are still several misconceptions regarding this system which are spread over academic and non-academic publications aimed at a general readership. Despite a number of studies dedicated to this subject,⁸ some of these vastly shared misconceptions are tenacious and are

appearing on the religious scene around 1000 AD and defined by later Bon pos as “Eternal Bon” (*g.yung drung bon*); and 3. there are adepts of New Bon (*bon gsar*), starting around the 14th century. Both Eternal Bon and New Bon claim to have their roots in an ancient religious tradition that they present as existing in the 8th century and even prior to that. There is no historical (archeological and so forth) evidence to sustain their claim. Rather, it would seem that “modern” Bon is a *gsar ma* phenomenon which arose together with numerous newer Buddhist lineages that started to appear during the early *phyi dar*, while still having roots and connections to dynastic and probably pre-Buddhist Tibet, although certainly not in the way they picture things.

⁷ New Bon is indifferently named *bon gsar*, *bon gsar ma*, *gsar bon*, and *gsar ma bon*, all referring to the same religious tradition. I will use only *bon gsar* for the sake of consistency.

⁸ See *inter alia* Achard, *Bonpo Hidden Treasures* (Brill, Leiden, 2004); *id.*, “A Fourfold Set of Emanations, Variegated Currents and Alien Elements: Contribution to the Origins and Early Development of New Bon and its Revelations,” *passim*.

being repeated without any attempt at verifying their validity within the texts of *bon gсар* itself. Among these, I will address four problematic issues, before discussing two cases of interesting interactions between Eternal Bon and New Bon. The four problematic issues are:

- the erroneous date for the beginnings of New Bon,
- the role played by ambivalent *gter ston*,
- the role played by Padmasambhava, and
- the doctrinal squabbles between Eternal Bon and New Bon.

2. *Erroneous date for the beginnings of New Bon*

Some people are of the opinion that New Bon started in the 18th century.⁹ It is true that this period witnessed the religious activities of important New Bon *gter ston*, starting with Sangs rgyas gling pa (Byang chub rdo rje, 1705–1735) and Kun grol grags pa (1700–?), to mention only two of the names most frequently referred to in this context. But these two individuals rather than being the founders of New Bon are heirs to a tradition much older than they.¹⁰

According to its own sources,¹¹ New Bon originates with Dran pa nam mkha' and Vairocana in the 8th century CE. This is a statement which is of course impossible to prove historically, since we have no *bon po* source dating back to the 8th century, indicating that New Bon originated at that time. Rather, the first historical traces we have of this system go back to the 14th century with the revelations of sPrul sku Blo ldan snying po (1360–1406).

At its inception, this system is not clearly separated from the Eternal Bon (*g. Yung drung bon*) tradition, since its initiator (sPrul sku Blo ldan) belongs to both the lineages of Eternal Bon and what was to become New Bon. However, because of some of the salient features—liturgical, etc.—of New Bon, adepts of Eternal Bon have felt the need to distinguish themselves from this new emerging system, which they regard as being too close to the rNying ma tradition.

⁹ See *inter alia* <http://okarresearch.blogspot.fr/2012/07/rimay-movement.html>.

¹⁰ On Sangs rgyas gling pa and Kun grol grags pa, see in particular Samten G. Karmay, *Feast of the Morning Light*, Bon Studies 9, Osaka, 2005. See also Achard, "Kun grol grags pa and the revelation of the *Secret Treasury of the Sky Dancers on Channels and Winds*," *passim*.

¹¹ Most of these sources are quite late. The most interesting of these, the *Dran pa bka' thang*, is an early 20th century work which describes the origins of New Bon at the time of King Khri srong lde btsan. On this issue, see Achard, "L'implémentation du Bon gсар au sein de la tradition du Bon Eternel d'après les sources tardives — contribution à l'étude transhistorique et étiologique de la tradition du *Bon gSar*," forthcoming.

Because of the dates of sPrul sku Blo ldan, it would seem that the mid-14th century marks the actual historical, datable beginnings of New Bon, despite the fact that there is, to my knowledge, no mention of the expression “New Bon” in Blo ldan's works.¹² The first occurrence and use of the expression still remains to be clearly established, while it seems that it did not take long for adepts of the Eternal Bon tradition to use it in a derogatory way. In all likelihood, Blo ldan envisioned his own revelations as “pure” Bon teachings, and despite some mysterious innovations (such as combining the mythologies of Shambhala with those of 'Ol mo lung ring),¹³ he certainly displayed great skills at inscribing his *gter ma* discoveries within the traditional framework of post-dynastic Bon.

There are several reasons why the origins of New Bon are associated with Blo ldan snying po. One of these is the fact that he considered himself an emanation of Padmasambhava, signing some of his works (such as his famed sMra seng dkar po *sādhana*, still used to this day even by Eternal Bon followers) with the name Pad 'byung Nam mkha' rin chen, *pad 'byung* being an abridged form of Padma 'byung gnas (Padmasambhava's name in Tibetan).

Another important reason for ascribing the beginning of New Bon to Blo ldan is the fact that he is actually the first of a lineage of *sprul sku* which branched into several lineages of New Bon incarnates, up to the present day.

3. The role played by some ambivalent *gter ston*

Among the many *gter ston* who are defined as ambivalent, i.e., as revealers of both Bon po and rNying ma *gter ma*, one of the most frequently referred to is assuredly rDo rje / g.Yung drung gling pa (1346–1405), even though his dates on the Bon po side are most certainly too

¹² The expression *bon gsar* and its variants are often used derogatorily amongst adepts of the Eternal Bon tradition. New Bon followers prefer the expression *gter gsar* (New Treasures), which somehow conflicts with the usage of the same expression for earlier *g.yung drung bon* treasure revelations. See the defense of these New Treasures by Shardza Rinpoche (Shar rdza rin po che, bKra shis rgyal mtshan) in Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings*, pp. 186-187.

¹³ This combination is rather clumsy to say the least. There is no trace of any *Kalkin* reign or lineage of *Kalkin* kings in the mythology of 'Ol mo lung ring, nor is there any Mount g.Yung drung dgu brtsegs in Shambhala (not to speak of the birthplace of a Buddha, as mythological as it may be). Furthermore, Shambhala is supposed to be located north of the Land of Snows, while 'Ol mo lung ring is conceived as lying west of Tibet. For more on 'Ol mo lung ring, see sKal bzang nor bu, "'Ol gling bkod pa rgyud don snying po," *Bon sgo*, vol. 11, pp. 25-32; D. Martin, "'Ol-mo-lung-ring, the Original Holy Place," *Tibet Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 48-82.

ancient to be reliable.¹⁴ So far, I have not researched ambivalence in his tantric revelations, but I have explored quite extensively his two main rDzogs chen *gter mas* of the Bon tradition. The first one is the *Tshe dbang bod yul ma*, which contains the famed story relating how Dran pa nam mkha' had two sons, Tshe dbang rig 'dzin and g.Yung drung/Padma mthong grol.¹⁵ The contents of the cycle itself are difficult to classify among the three traditional series of Dzogchen¹⁶ but the cycle definitely resembles other Bon corpora that one can more or less define as a blend between *Sems sde* and *Man ngag sde*, although there is strictly no reason to classify the cycle under the rubric of *Klong sde*.¹⁷ The cycle does not contain any explicit reference to the traditional *Man ngag sde* practices of *khregs chod* and *thod rgal*, but obviously contains some doctrinal material akin to *khregs chod* (most notably in the *sNyan rgyud rtsa ba'i tshig rkang*). Despite the mention of Padma mthong grol in the narrative of the cycle, the whole corpus does not contain any particular

¹⁴ See Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p. 219.

¹⁵ This narrative is most probably one of the inspirational sources of later *gter ston* of the *bon gsar* tradition. Such a narrative has been considered as one of the potential sources used by 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po in his version of the *bsGrags pa bon lugs* biography of Padmasambhava. On this biography, see Blondeau, "mkhyen-brtse'i dbaṅ-po: la biographie de Padmasambhava selon la tradition du *bsgrags-pa bon*, et ses sources," *passim*. See also the translation of the same work by 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse in Ngawang Zangpo, *Guru Rinpoche, His Life and Times*, pp. 183-205.

¹⁶ I.e. *Sems sde*, *Klong sde*, and *Man ngag sde*. Except for a relatively limited number of cycles (such as the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*, the *Ye khri mtha' sel* and a few others), most of the g.Yung drung Bon teachings of rDzogs chen are rather of a *Sems sde* flavor or an odd mixture of *Sems sde* and *Man ngag sde*. Conversely, as far as I have been able to figure from the literature available to me, nearly all (if not all) the rDzogs chen teachings associated with New Bon can be categorized under the *Man ngag sde* label. According to traditional accounts of rDzogs chen, there was no classification into the three series (*Sde gsum*) until the Buddhist master Mañjuśrīmitra ('Jam dpal bshes gnyen, *7-8th century) organized them into these categories. The classification is therefore purely "Buddhist," which is probably why it is rarely used in Bon in general. There are however important exceptions to that, starting with Shar dza bKra shis rgyal mtshan and his *Treasury of Space and Awareness (dByings rig mdzod)* for instance. See Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows*, pp. 120-121. Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche is of the opinion that *Klong sde* "is strictly a Nyingmapa matter" (*Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*, p. 193).

¹⁷ *Klong sde* being sometimes defined as a bridge (*zam pa*) between *Sems sde* and *Man ngag sde*, such an idea would not seem too inappropriate in this context. However, the cycle itself does not contain any trait characteristic of *Klong sde* as traditionally defined in the rNying ma school, such as the "four symbols" (*brda bzhi*) and so forth. As I have suggested in the previous note, there are conflicting opinions in Bon regarding the existence of *Klong sde* teachings in this tradition. I will return to this issue in a forthcoming paper.

trait that one would definitely associate with New Bon.¹⁸

The second cycle is the *rDzogs chen gser thur* which is itself clearly of a *Man ngag sde* nature, even though it lacks detailed material on *Thod rgal* itself. It does not have any trait associated with New Bon either, and is also considered as a perfect example of a g.Yung drung Bon cycle.¹⁹

To judge simply by looking at the *gter mas* revealed by rDo rje/g.Yung drung gling pa, it is clear that it is not because a *gter ston* has revealed both Bon po and rNying ma *gter mas* that he should be associated with New Bon. There are however counter-examples, such as for instance the two following interesting cases:

- bDe chen gling pa (1833–1893) is said to have discovered Buddhist teachings²⁰ and he is of course one of the leading figure of New Bon in Eastern Tibet in the 19th century, as well as a lineage holder of numerous g.Yung drung Bon lineages of transmission; and
- 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–1892), who is an eminent Sa skya figure who “discovered” a biography of Padmasambhava which can definitely be associated with New Bon.²¹

Another crucial element among ambivalent *gter ston*—which was noted decades ago by A-M. Blondeau—is the fact that many of these *gter ston* are regarded (or considered themselves) as emanations of Vairocana, the 8th century translator, clearly associated with the transhistorical roots of New Bon.²² A quick search in Kong sprul's *gTer ston brgya rtsa'i rnam thar* shows numerous example of this, such as Bon po Brag tshal, Nye mo Zhu yas, Bon po Lha 'bum, *sprul sku* Ra shag chen po, and so forth.²³

¹⁸ New Bon was probably still in its infancy with Blo ldan snying po to justify, at the time of the diffusion of the *Tshe dbang bod yul ma*, the possible classification of this cycle under the New Bon label. Karmay has shown (*op. cit.*, pp. 218-219) that rDo rje/g.Yung drung gling pa had obvious connections with the Bru family who, at that time, exemplified g.Yung drung Bon orthodoxy in Central Tibet.

¹⁹ On the *rDzogs chen gser thur*, see Karmay, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-218; *ib.*, “Dorje Lingpa and His Rediscovery of the “Golden Needle” in Bhutan,” *passim*.

²⁰ See Achard, *Bon po Hidden Treasures*, p. xii n. 9.

²¹ See note 14 *supra*.

²² This was obviously the case with rDo rje/g.Yung drung gling pa (Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p. 217).

²³ See Kong sprul, *gTer ston brgya rtsa'i rnam thar*, *Rin chen gter mdzod*, Sechen ed., vol. 1, pp. 341-765. For the searchable file, see: <http://rtz.tsadra.org/index.php/Ter-dzo-KA-006>.

The case of bsTan gnyis gling pa (Padma tshe dbang rgyal po, 1480–1535) and his *rDzogs chen gser zhun* would certainly fit well here if it were not for the sMan ri abbot Nyi ma bstan 'dzin (1813–1875), who explicitly said that this *gter ma* cycle does not belong to New Bon.

Many of these ambivalent *gter ston* are styled so due to a relative confusion with regard to their names. In this respect, Kong sprul's approach to identifying these figures is sometimes quite unfounded, except for his explicit will to build bridges between rNying ma pas and Bon pos, in line with his *Ris med* philosophy. The inclusion of the Bon (actually mostly New Bon) texts in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* has been exhaustively discussed by A-M. Blondeau in a famous paper that has remained an unmissable work up to the present day.²⁴

4. The role played by Padmasambhava

The most frequent wrong idea concerning New Bon is certainly the belief that the texts of this system are necessarily associated with Padmasambhava and invariably connected to or dependent upon rNying ma literature. It is true that some cycles are heavily centered upon this personage, and in this respect they are quite parallel to what can be found about this figure in the rNying ma tradition, although they are far from identical.²⁵ But there are numerous texts and collections within New Bon works that are not connected to him at all. For instance, even if bDe chen gling pa (1833–1893) had numerous—nearly daily—visions of Padmasambhava (as can be seen in his autobiographical works), not a single one of his *gter ma* is related to or contains descriptions of practices centered upon Guru Rinpoche.²⁶ Rather, all his

²⁴ A-M. Blondeau "La controverse soulevée par l'inclusion de rituels bon-po dans le rin-chen gter-mjod. Note préliminaire." See full references in the bibliography.

²⁵ Some cycles blend typical rNying ma mantric formulas (such as the mantra of Padmasambhava), with formulas that are a trademark of g.Yung drung Bon (such as the use of *Aḥ Oṃ Hūṃ* instead of *Oṃ Aḥ Hūṃ* used in the Buddhist schools as well as in New Bon), together with New Bon liturgical style, and so forth. See for instance the practices of Padma thod phreng rtsal in the famed *Mi shig gu drag* cycle revealed by Mi shig[s] rdo rje (b. 1650) who regarded himself as the second Blo ldan snying po. See Achard, "A Fourfold Set of Emanations," p. 87. The *Mi shig gu drag* cycle is also known as the *Padma thugs kyi rtsa rgyud*, and also as the *Gu ru drag po'i rdo rje gur khang* (which definitely sounds more rnying ma than bon po); see *id.*, p. 110 n. 125 for the line of transmission that passes through Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal, before reaching Mi shig rdo rje (who is styled as Mi shig O rgyan gling pa).

²⁶ See Achard, *Bon po Hidden Treasures*, p. xv-xvi, p. 173, *et passim*. One of bDe chen gling pa's revelation of *gter ma* is however associated with Padmasambhava (*op. cit.*, p. xix), but except for a scanty reference in his *Autobiography*, it has left no trace in the latter's collected revelations.

revelations are associated with Dran pa nam mkha', mKha' 'gro 'Od ldan 'bar ma, and Vairocana.²⁷ Therefore, conceiving New Bon texts as entirely associated with or dependent upon Padmasambhava is a mistake and an over-simplification that does not correspond to reality.

Moreover, it seems that it would be daring to jump to conclusions when identifying g.Yung drung mthong grol and Padma mthong grol as being the same person as Padmasambhava. Recently,²⁸ Yongdzin Rinpoche has clearly differentiated g.Yung drung mthong grol from Padma mThong grol, presenting the first one as an individual whom he defines as being totally different from Padmasambhava. Several reasons may have prompted him to develop such a notion, an interesting innovation to add to several of Yongdzin Rinpoche's newest theories (such as the various conquests of Zhang zhung, the three Dran pa nam mkha', etc.), the core one being certainly the necessity to integrate the role Padma/g.Yung drung mthong grol played in New Bon into the more orthodox vision of history developed within the g.Yung drung Bon tradition.²⁹ In this perspective, g.Yung drung mthong grol *must* necessarily be a different individual with no dependency upon

²⁷ All three are the non-historical figures (traditionally ascribed to the 8th century) to whom New Bon traces back its origins. According to the later narratives elaborated in New Bon circles, Padmasambhava does not play any decisive role (as he does among rNying mas) in the elaboration of New Bon texts (defined as a blend between purely Buddhist works and Bon po works). Only Dran pa nam mkha' and Vairocana are actually mentioned as the "founders" of this trend. See Achard, "L'implémentation du *Bon gsar* au sein de la tradition du Bon Eternel."

²⁸ Mostly during private talks and oral teachings.

²⁹ So far, I have not found in the New Bon works at my disposal explicit elements differentiating Padma mthong grol from g.Yung drung mthong grol. It would rather seem that the names are interchangeable. It appears clearly that Padma mthong grol is conceived to be identical to Padmasambhava. For example, the form behind Padma mthong grol is clearly that of Padma thod phreng in, *inter alia*, the *Rig 'dzin kun gyi yang rtse lo rgyus gsal ba'i me long* revealed by Shel zhig g.Yung drung rgyal po (see *Bon gyi brten 'gyur chen mo*, vol. 32, p. 112). But in the same text, this figure is designated as g.Yung drung mthong grol (p. 78), which demonstrates that there is no difference between the two names. In the early 18th century, Sangs rgyas gling pa (Byang chub rdo rje, 1705–1735) went a step further with totally syncretic works in which standard Buddhist technical terms coexist with more typical Bon jargon. His *gTer byung lo rgyus* is replete with such unambiguous references to Padma 'byung gnas (p. 2), 'Chi med gu ru Padma 'byung (p. 7), O rgyan rin po che and Ye shes mtsho rgyal (p. 11), as well as other Buddhist figures such as Śrī Śiṃha (Shri seng ha, p. 11), Sukhasiddhi (Su ka sid[d]hi, p. 11), and even Ma cig lab sgron (p.11). In his own system, Sangs rgyas gling pa follows a narrative and a lexicon which obviously do not try to accommodate to the standards of g.Yung drung Bon, using explicitly Buddhist jargon such as *chos 'byung* (p. 10, instead of *bstan 'byung*), *lus rnam snang chos bdun gyi 'dug stang[s]* (p. 13, when one would expect *rang bzhin cha lugs lnga ldan* in a Bon context), and *chos skor* (p. 14, instead of *bon skor*).

the great Guru of the rNying ma tradition.

The justification of this integration is demanded by the role played by the three Father and Sons (*yab sras gsum*, who, as we have seen above, are Dran pa nam mkha' and his sons, Tshe dbang rig 'dzin and Padma/g.Yung drung mthong grol) in several cycles of the g.Yung drung Bon tradition, starting with the *Tshe dbang bod yul ma*, or specific g.Yung drung Bon cycles in which Padmasambhava plays an explicit role, such as in the *rDzogs chen gser zhun* by bsTan gnyis gling pa.³⁰

5. Doctrinal Squabbles between Eternal Bon and New Bon

One would certainly expect an established tradition such as that of Eternal Bon to be rather tolerant with multiple local *bon po* developments that self-connect to non-controversial patriarchs of the same tradition. However, this is definitely not the case. The main issue remains, as always with various Tibetan lineages, doctrinal hegemony no matter what. It would seem that the criticisms towards New Bon were somehow rather mild, as long as the concerned ritual and literary traditions remained local and did not overshadowed the sMan ri doctrinal authority. *dGe bshes* having received their diploma in sMan ri often went back to their homeland and tried to implant the sMan ri style of rituals and practices there, often to the detriment of local lineages.³¹ This certainly did not help in maintaining a relatively peaceful coexistence between the two traditions.

During one of his trips to rGyal gtso monastery in 1907, Shardza Rinpoche (bKra shis rgyal mtshan, 1859–1934) met several *dge bshes* coming from sMan ri in Central Tibet. At first, these monks showed interest in Shardza's *Collected Works* and even requested the transmissions of "reading authorizations" (*lung*) from him but, later, during their discussions with him, the subject of New Bon was brought up and these *dge bshes* made open criticisms about this tradition, which

³⁰ Other cycles revealed by rDo rje gling pa and presented as being affiliated to Bon (and more generally New Bon) do not necessarily show typical "Bon" formulations of mantric syllables, using (as we have seen above in note 24) for instance the "Buddhist" *Om Aḥ Hūṃ*, instead of the standard *Aḥ Om Hūṃ* as used in g.Yung drung Bon. See for instance his *Yab sras bcud dril gyi shog chung* included in the *Rin chen gter mdzod*, vol. 39, pp. 779-801.

³¹ One may wonder if this is a reason why so many Bon rDzogs chen texts, cycles, and lineages simply vanished throughout the history of Bon in general. As can be seen in Shardza's *Legs bshad mdzod*, there are numerous rDzogs chen cycles mentioned in this work among the discoveries of Bon po *gter ston* that are completely unknown (at least to me), and that may certainly not be extant. The existence of the sMan ri corpus and its rather hegemonic wide spread certainly played a role in this disappearance.

greatly displeased him.³²

Despite the wide fame that he had already achieved by that time (he was 49 in 1907), Shardza sought the approval of two of his most illustrious peers in the person of Grub thob Nyi ma rgyal mtshan and rGyal ba blo gros who both looked through his *Collected Works* and concluded that they showed neither influence from Buddhism nor from New Bon.³³

Nearly two decades later, Shardza's *Collected Works* were again carefully scrutinized by Phun tshogs blo gros (the then sMan ri Abbot), at the latter's request.³⁴ Shardza sent a print of his *Works* to the Abbot who, after a supposedly careful study, declared that they were in perfect harmony with the tradition of mNyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1356–1415), the emblematic authority in the sMan ri tradition.³⁵

However, according to Lopön Tenzin Namdak (private conversation, Paris, 1998), the copy that was sent to the Abbot still had references to the *Klong drug* tantra³⁶ in the context of the explanation on the "Seven Bases."³⁷ As this would certainly have fed potential criticism regarding borrowings from Buddhist sources, Shardza was asked to

³² The context is not very explicit but it seems clear that these *dge bshes* questioned both the contents of some of Shardza's works (which they thought had a New Bon flavor), as well as his personal lineage, which harbors some of the most important New Bon lineage holders of his era : the Fifth Kun grol rin po che (Rig 'dzin bDud 'dul gling pa, ?–1901), bDe chen gling pa (1833–1893), and of course dBal 'bar stag slag can (dBra ston bsTan 'dzin dbang rgyal, 1832–?).

³³ Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows*, p. 71. One can certainly interpret their decision as a politically correct statement in an environment where New Bon was heavily criticized by *dge bshes* hailing from sMan ri or g.Yung drung gling. If Shardza Rinpoche's rDzogs chen works are generally viewed as being free from Buddhist or New Bon influence (dixit, for instance, Lopön Tenzin Namdak), it is an undeniable fact that his works such as the *dByings rig mdzod* borrowed entire sections from Klong chen pa's *Theg mchog mdzod* and *Tshig don mdzod*, while his famed *Kun bzang snying tig* has numerous passages directly copied from 'Jigs med gling pa's *Ye shes bla ma*. Furthermore, his *sKu gsum rang shar* relies upon the *sKu gsum don rgyud* revealed by gSang sngags gling pa, a very important New Bon treasure which connects back to the scheme of the '*chi med yab sras gsum*, as well as to a typically rNying ma approach to *thod rgal* practice with its various kinds of *khrid* guidance, such as black guidance (*nag khrid*), white guidance (*dkar khrid*), and so forth. These kinds of *khrid* do not appear under these headings in g.Yung drung Bon traditional jar-gon.

³⁴ Shardza had met him earlier in 1921, during one of his trips to Central Tibet. He was already 63 at that time and in a position of authority likely to justify his own literary choices of influence (Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows*, p. 91).

³⁵ Achard, *op. cit.*, p. 98. This examination of his works in sMan ri took place in 1926.

³⁶ This text is one of the *Seventeen Tantras* [*rGyud bcu bdun*] collection of the rNying ma tradition. On these texts, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, *passim*.

³⁷ On the Seven Bases, see Achard, "La Base et ses sept interprétations dans la tradition rDzogs chen."

modify the reference to the quote, so that instead of *Klong drug las*, the text read *rDzogs chen ye khri bshad rgyud las*. This is a very interesting change since it definitely demonstrates that Shardza was clearly aware of the borrowings of the *rDzogs chen Ye khri* cycle from the *Seventeen Tantras* and related material. Since there exists no such text in the *rDzogs chen Ye khri* cycle entitled *bShad rgyud*, Shardza coined the name as a way of referring to the *Klong drug* by designating it as an *explanatory Tantra (bshad rgyud)* of the *Ye khri* itself.³⁸

The issue of integrating Buddhist texts and teachings into new corpora of works within New Bon has been a recurring subject that Shardza Rinpoche had to face several times. Despite his veneration for mNyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan and his admiration of the canonical curriculum of studies followed in sMan ri and other g.Yung drung Bon monasteries in Central Tibet, he was several times exposed to criticisms from sMan ri *dge bshes*. One of the most famous episodes in this regard happened in 1920 with *dge bshes* Shes rab grags pa, in between rTogs ldan dgon pa and sNang zhig dgon pa. This was the start of a campaign that the *dge bshes* launched against Shardza upon his return to Central Tibet. However, it would seem that the point of contention was the differing approaches the two masters had about spiritual practices: Shes rab grags pa vouched for a definitely scholastic approach while Shardza defended a more retreat-oriented perspective. The result their respective engagement yielded is interesting in that traditional accounts among the “Shardza party” report that the *dge bshes* died of leprosy years later, while Shardza himself reached the Rainbow Body (*‘ja’ lus*) at the end of his life.³⁹

6. Two Eternal Bon Lineage Holders and their connection to New Bon in modern times

As a conclusion, I would like to briefly discuss the issue at stake by illustrating it with the examples of two important figures that one generally does not associate with New Bon.

³⁸ In *L'Essence Perlée du Secret* (p. 224-231), I have shown how Klong chen pa relied on a text of the *Ye khri* cycle. My opinion now is that the entire section on rDzogs chen teachings from this cycle (it contains both tantric and rdzogs chen instructions) is actually borrowed from earlier sNying thig texts. At the time *L'Essence Perlée du Secret* was published, this newly available material from ancient sNying thig was not available. I hope to come back to the issue in a publication about the *Ye khri* and its sources.

³⁹ On this realization, see Achard, “Le Corps d’Arc-en-ciel (*‘ja’ lus*) de Shar dza Rin po che,” *passim*. For more on the score to settle between Shes rab grags pa and Shardza, see my short contribution to the issue based on information collected from Yongdzin Rinpoche in Achard, “What of Shardza and New Bon?” (unpublished).

The first is the influential abbot Yongs 'dzin Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin (1912–1978) who exemplifies the pure orthodoxy of g.Yung drung gling monastery in Central Tibet. He was born in the Hor region, located in the contemporary district of dKar mdzes in Khams, and belonged to the rMe'u lineage. In 1925, the young Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin entered the sPa dgon monastery (g.Yung drung rab brtan gling) where he took the vows of *dge bsnyen* from sPa ston bsTan pa 'brug grags (1892–1959?), the famed disciple of the New Bon *gter ston* gSang sngags gling pa (1864–1959?). gSang sngags gling pa was an ardent treasure revealer who played an important role in the spread of the teachings composed by Shardza Rinpoche, and also in the diffusion of the *Bon bKa' 'gyur* whose transmission he actively disseminated throughout Eastern Tibet. The early spiritual training that Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin received was done under the guidance of bsTan pa 'brug grags who trained him in the lore of the *Secret Treasury of the Sky Dancers on Channels and Winds* (*rTsa rlung mkha' 'gro gsang mdzod*) revealed by Kun grol grags pa (1700-?). This cycle is one of the most important New Bon set of teachings, mostly focused on *rdzogs rim* yogas performed during a practice program lasting twelve years for yogis of higher capacities and six years only for those of intermediate capacities.⁴⁰ Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin is said to have engaged in this program, successfully completing the number of mantra recitations, and so forth. The practice of this *Secret Treasury of the Sky Dancers* is not authorized either in sMan ri or in g.Yung drung gling and affiliated monasteries. It is considered as one of the most syncretic works by Kun grol grags pa, focusing upon the Buddhist deity Vajrayogini and using a wide range of Buddhist and New Bon terminology.⁴¹

The second figure is none other than Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak (Yongs 'dzin Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag, b. 1926) who incarnates for many what g.Yung drung Bon actually stands for. As a young monk, the Lopön was first trained as a painter assisting his uncle but he has, through his extensive studies and practices, become one of the luminaries of Bon and probably one of the most knowledgeable individual about rDzogs chen.⁴² As one of the most important religious figures in sMan ri (both in Tibet before exile, and then in India), and evidently as the head of Triten Norbutsé Monastery in Nepal, his

⁴⁰ Kun grol grags pa, *Lag len nor bu'i phreng ba*, p. 311.

⁴¹ On this cycle, see Achard, "Kun grol grags pa and the revelation of the *Secret Treasury of the Sky Dancers on Channels and Winds*," *passim*.

⁴² His knowledge of the teachings of the Great Perfection is unparalleled since he has studied nearly all texts available in the rNying ma, g.Yung drung Bon, and New Bon traditions.

monastic responsibility for the future of the sMan ri lineage was to ensure the careful education of the monks following his training. In this perspective, sticking to the traditional curriculum and maintaining its canonical rigor became the pillars ensuring that the traditional Bon po culture was handed over to the newer generations with as little alteration as possible. Therefore, in elaborating the curriculum following the ancient tradition of sMan ri as elaborated by its founder (mNyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan), not a single work of New Bon was allowed into the collections of texts to study. Thus, since Lopön Tenzin Namdak is the holder of New Bon transmissions, this implies that the curriculum training he collated for the sMan ri monks is actually a very limited expression of all the lineages that he himself holds. Among these are:

- the *Profound Cutting* (*Zab gcod*) instructions revealed by Nyag gter gSang sngags gling pa, including the famed New Bon *gcod* cycle entitled *Byams ma snying thig*; and
- the *Long-Life Practice of Dran pa nam mkha'* (*Dran pa tshe sgrub*) also revealed by gSang sngags gling pa.⁴³

The line of transmission for these two cycles is: 1. gSang sngags gling pa → 2. rGyal tshab Blo gros rgyal mtshan (his name is actually Blo gros rgya mtsho, 1915–1952, he was Shardza Rinpoche's nephew and, like his uncle, he is said to have reached Rainbow Body at the end of his life) → 3. brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan (?–1985) → Lopön Tenzin Namdak.

These New Bon transmissions appear to have been handed over by brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan, an important meditation master affiliated to the rTse drug monastic establishment which was founded by sPrul sku Blo ldan snying po in the late 14th century. As a refugee in sMan ri (Dolanji), brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan gave Lopön numerous transmissions, as well as reading authorizations and private guidance in numerous teachings practiced in rTse drug, including a very large corpus of New Bon cycles. It looks as if the new lineages and treasures of New Bon started with Blo ldan snying po (and others after him, such as Mi shig rdo rje, and so forth) in rTse drug had come a long way to eventually reach back to masters concretely incarnating the purest orthodoxy of the sMan ri tradition. More recently, the new Lopön of sMan ri, Lopön Trinley Nyima (b. 1962) has even incorporated some of Shardza Rinpoche's teachings into the curriculum he is in charge of. As centuries passed, it would appear that the frontier dividing the two

⁴³ Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rnam dag, *Bon phyi nang gsang gsum gyi dbang gi brgyud rim mu tig phreng ba*, p. 71.

traditions has become increasingly porous, which is probably to the benefit of New Bon as it is one of the least known and studied lineages in the West, while its religious impact in modern Eastern Tibet is outstandingly gigantic.

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