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DONATELLA ROSSI

AN OVERVIEW OF TIBET'S RELIGIONS



WHEN speaking about the religions of this fascinating country that its inhabitants aptly style “the land surrounded by snowy mountains” (Tib. *gang ri ra ba'i yul*), we must consider the combination of mythical narratives, rituals, ethical and salvific norms, and ontological beliefs, and take into account the distinct expressions of such a combination, with particular emphasis on lineages and local domestication (textual and ritual). Long before Buddhism became the official creed of Tibet during the eighth century of this era, textual sources (mostly pertaining to the Bon religion) mention the existence of what we may call priests, for lack of a better equivalent. From the very beginning of the Tibetan monarchy these *gShen* or *Bon-gShen* were the protectors of the figure of the king, but also carried out several functions that were of crucial importance in order to maintain harmonious relationships between human beings and all the different types and classes of entities that according to old

cosmologies populated the Universe. Knowledge was transmitted to the Bon priests through a lineage, sometimes a family one, initiated by an ancestor or a deified figure. As to the origin of the Universe, some mythologies inform us that Nothingness was there at the beginning. Then wind came into being and, whirling under its own power, generated vapour. Out of the combined action of vapour and wind, fire was generated, which led to the creation of a luminous cosmic egg. The luminous cosmic egg hatched under its own power, and the Ancestor and Ancestress of the human race were born. They produced male and female offspring, from which the so-called Four or Six Original Tribes of Tibet eventually appeared and developed.

Always, according to traditional Bonpo sources, the constitution of the Universe would have included the mythical appearance of several types of gods and beings. Some of the gods are said to have at first lived in darkness, and to have later come out into light

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through an act of will. Ancient Bonpo beliefs would see the environment divided into three main spheres: sky, earth, and subterranean world, all populated by different gods and beings. People felt the necessity of maintaining good relations with those beings, some of which had their abodes in sacred power places such as mountains, lakes and so on. Some of those entities were and still are considered to be the custodians of fabulous treasures—not only material ones, but most importantly, treasures that may advance individuals toward spiritual evolution. In order to maintain a good rapport with sometimes very difficult to please and not so compassionate entities, and to repair offenses created by certain human behaviours (such as pollution of the environment), people needed the intercession of the Bon priests. The priests would perform rituals of propitiation and offerings, re-enacting the mythical moment when the bond between human beings and those entities was established, so as to guarantee peace and prosperity to both people and livestock. In Tibet some illnesses (for example epilepsy, some kinds of mental diseases, even AIDS) are still considered to be a provocation or retaliation sent by certain classes of beings. In such cases, if a medical diagnosis reveals that the illness cannot be cured



by medicines only, astrological calculations and divination are undertaken in order to determine where the illness is coming from and what is the best way to proceed, that is, what should be the most appropriate ritual to be performed in order to help clear the illness and restore well-being.

It is also a traditional belief that, when the time was ripe, the original Tibetan kings would return to their heavenly abodes by way of a special cord made of rainbow light, called *mu thag*. Unfortunately one of those original kings, called *Gri-gum*, cut his cord while fighting with a demon, and from then on it became necessary to establish funerary and burial practices for royalties. To that purpose special Bon priests were invited to Tibet from the neighbouring kingdom of Zhang-Zhung, and this is how the practice of funerary rituals is supposed to have been introduced into Tibet. The kingdom of Zhang-Zhung played an influential role in Tibetan culture and history. With Mount Kailash at its center, it seems to have covered a vast area to the west and possibly northeast of Tibet. Marriage alliances were established between the royal families of Zhang-Zhung and Tibet, and Zhang-Zhung priests and masters were invited to Tibet to offer their wisdom and supernatural skills. Eventually, around the seventh/eighth centuries of this era, the kingdom of Zhang-Zhung was conquered and annexed to the then-expanding Tibetan empire.

The teachings of the Everlasting Bon, or *g.Yung drung Bon*, are said to have been spread into Tibet from the kingdom of

Zhang-Zhung. *g.Yung-drung Bon* is the name attributed after or around the eleventh century to what can be considered as a systematization of Bon beliefs and doctrines (See P. Kvaerne *The Bon religion of Tibet*, 1995). Followers of the Bon religion, called Bonpo, maintain that its tenets were first expounded by the Teacher sTonpa gShen-rab Mi-bo-che, who is considered to have made his appearance on earth much earlier than the historical Buddha, and ruled a country to the west of Tibet called sTag-gzig. According to some western scholars, this country could be “vaguely identified with Persia” (D.L. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 1980), or could be “a name which in Tibetan literature refers to the Iranian (or Iranian-speaking) world” (G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, 1980). While the Bon tradition maintains that sTon-pa gShen-

rab Mi-bo-che was born 18,000 years ago, other Tibetan scholars calculate his birth to have occurred about 3,900 years ago (Namkhai Norbu, *Zhang Bod kyi Lo rgyus Ti se'i 'Od*, 1996). After sTon-pa gShen-rab Mi-bo-che entrusted his teachings to worthy successors, some of which were his sons



since he was not celibate, the Everlasting Bon is believed to have spread from the country of sTag-gzig toward the East, reaching India, China, the kingdom of Zhang-Zhung, and from there Tibet.

Bon enjoyed royal patronage until the eighth century when, according to the official Buddhist account, king Khri-srong lDe'u-btsan completely accepted the new creed. Traditional sources also relate that the greatly revered yogi and master Padmasambhava was involved in that process, and that he conquered all the gods and demons that inhabited Tibet at that time by binding them to an oath of protection and respect for the Buddhist spiritual law (Tib. *chos*). It has been speculated that the noble class near to the king resented the great influence and power that Bon priests had, and that at first the conversion to Buddhism was restricted to the royal family and the noble class only. In this respect, it may be interesting to relate an unedited version of the story concerning this change of faith that had dramatic consequences for the religious history of Tibet, contained in a Bonpo text redis-

covered during the last century in Eastern Tibet. The text describes how the king was so impressed by the spiritual feats of the yogi Padmasambhava that he offered his kingdom to him as an act of devotion; he then invited Buddhist scholars from India, patronized the translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan, and established the monastic order. Suddenly however, the king falls ill. At first, Chos formulas and scriptures are recited, but to no avail. Padmasambhava then requests that Bon priests be summoned to save the king's life. They at first refuse to go, on the account that the deities and protectors worshipped by the ancestors were annoyed at the turn of events. Eventually they consent to go, but in exchange they request that the king promise to respect Bon and make no difference between Bon and Chos. They succeed in curing the king's illness. Meanwhile, the invited Buddhist teachers declare to the king that they will stop preaching if Bon is not removed from the picture. The

king is caught in a great impasse. He decides to settle the question with a doctrinal debate between the parties. They end up even. Then the king suggests a contest of magical powers. The outcome is a draw again. At this point the great yogi Padmasambhava intervenes, stating that Bon and Chos are equal and that they have to be equally respected. The king, however, does not officially proclaim this.

According to Bonpo sources this is when the persecution of Bon commenced. The priests were given the choice of converting to the new faith, going into exile or committing suicide by swallowing water until death. In order to preserve the



Two monks

PHOTO: JANWIJ SHARMA

Bon doctrines, major groups of texts were hidden in various locations in Tibet, to be rediscovered from the 11th century onwards. The process of text discovery has continued up to the present century. Texts were hidden in rocks, caves, or even statues, to be retrieved at more favourable times thanks to the clairvoyance of accomplished masters who would thus help maintain the continuity and authenticity of the transmission.

From the second half of the ninth century through the end of the tenth we enter a period of uncertainty in Tibetan history; the empire disintegrated, with scattered local authorities presumably holding the power. Even though a consolidated or global sense of religious identity was not in place at that time, Buddhism and Bon were kept alive in private houses and families, upon whom organized religion always depended for patronage. In the small eastern principalities, and in the new kingdoms that later appeared in the west, Tibetans



continued to develop their spiritual practices and faiths.

At the end of the tenth century we begin getting glimpses of a resurgence in Tibetan religious history. This is confirmed by the invitation from the king of Western Tibet to a famous Indian scholar and master, Atisha (982-1054), in 1042. Atisha's mission was to redeem Tibetan Buddhism by refuting the tantric practices (often considered socially unacceptable due to their unconventional content) prevailing in the country at that time.

As is known, Buddhist doctrines had evolved during the first centuries of the Common Era into the central concept of *bodhicitta* (Tib. *byang chub sems*), which refers to the generation of the wish for enlightenment in order to save all beings from suffering. This concept promoted the ideal of the spiritual hero or heroine (Sskr. *bodhisattva*, Tib. *byang chub sems dpa'*), someone who would deliberately decide to work for the benefit of all sentient beings until their final liberation. Tibetan Buddhism is based upon this Mahayanic principle, and from the eleventh century onwards four major schools begin to appear (*rNying-ma*, *Sa-skya*, *bKa'-rgyud* and *dGe-lugs*), with Bon still present, albeit in a very marginalized fashion. The

dGe-lugs-pas eventually prevailed in power and influence in the middle of the seventeenth century, thanks to repeated alliances with the Mongols, and established themselves as the orthodoxy, giving birth to the Tibetan theocracy with the Dalai Lama at its head. Each different school emphasized a different aspect of the Buddhist teachings, some stressing studying over meditation or vice versa, and a phenomenal doctrinal corpus of oral and written instructions was handed down through various lineages.

The teachings that I find most interesting due to their deep metaphysical content are those of the so-called Great Perfection (Tib. *rdzogs chen*), because, in my opinion, they represent the culmination of Tibetan Buddhism in the definition of the inscrutable Absolute. These teachings are revered and practiced by both *rNying-ma-pas* and *Bon-pos*.

In Buddhism there is no concept of a creator God. The creator of all our states and afflictions is our mind. This mind, which is caught in the distress of duality, acts and reacts according to the false conviction that an "I" and "other" exist. But when one is re-educated to understand that in fact the nature of reality and of all phenomena is emptiness, one



BODNATH

PHOTO: CLIFFORD OWEN



can discover the infinity of one's true potential, the enlightened state. This state, also called the Nature of the Mind, the Mind-itself, the Pure-and Perfect-Mind is beyond description; it is said that even the Buddhas do not have the capacity to describe it, and in practice, it is impossible to experience and perceive this absolute state by any other means than by being in that state itself. A Tibetan Bonpo text (D. Rossi, *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion*, 1999) affirms:

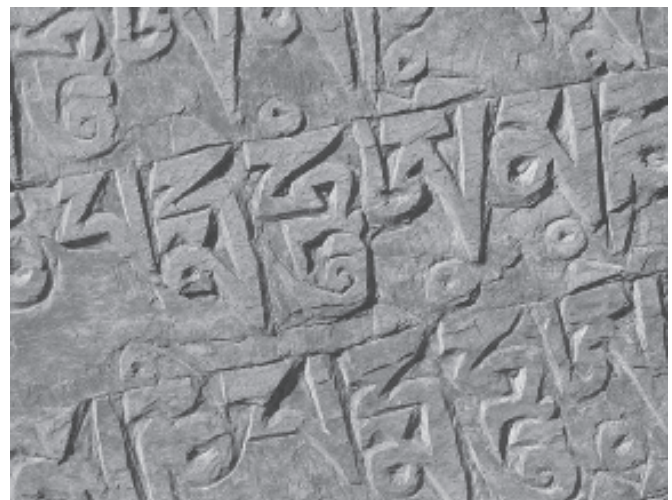
The Mind-itself is like the eye, without which other things cannot appear by themselves.
Since it is naturally concealed in itself, it can only be discovered by entering its secret nature.

Nonetheless, this state of enlightenment is explained as a dimension in which awareness (Tib. *rig pa*) is the mediator for one's expressions, and as a clarity or wisdom that allows an individual to see things as they truly are, rather than projecting deluded assumptions. Believing in the idea of an independent self is like looking at reality from a little hole, instead of standing on the top of a summit and having a 360-degree view. So what is taught is to understand one's limitations, and at the same time to unveil the infinite potential that is considered the true way of being of our nature. However, that cannot be accomplished by applying one's limited mind to it: we need to leap and cross the threshold of our finite, dualistic view of good and bad, acceptance and rejection, and have the courage to love without attachment and, without turning back to the distraction of duality, exist in the state that is styled "beyond birth and death," the state of Absolute Reality. This state is not found in the past or in the future, but in a timeless present where the three times coalesce, and not outside of oneself, but at the very heart of oneself. In this respect, another Tibetan Bonpo text (D. Rossi, *op. cit.*) affirms:

The Pure-and-Perfect-Mind is immutable and everlasting. Since it exists from the origin as that which is primordially encompassing, where's the difference between big and small? When one observes the means of a mighty king, possible and impossible do not exist. That quintessence, the Pure-and-Perfect, existing from the origin as the quintessence of the mind, is without both joy and sorrow, it is from the origin without distinctions of cause and effect; being without conceptuality, it clearly shines forth in all sorts of ways. Th[is] Essence unites everything, it is all-encompassing; it is the blissful Expanse encompassing everything without exception, where not even the name of suffering exists; where everything, without excep-

tion, is Primordial Enlightenment.

The religions of Tibet are a multi-faceted, complex and vast phenomenon. They represent an aspect of the response of the Tibetan people to challenges faced during the course of history vis-à-vis natural and supernatural environments. They contribute to define the totality of the Tibetan cultural identity, an identity that I believe we all have a responsibility to cherish and preserve. In their diversity and complexity, Tibet's religions are a gift and an inspiration to all humankind in its search for peace.



MANI INSCRIPTION

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