

The Bon Religion of Tibet: A Survey of Research

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The study of the history and philosophy of Buddhism in Tibet has made great progress in recent decades. A major contribution in this regard has been that of Professor David Seyfort Rugg, whose masterly studies of Tibetan Buddhism, both in its historical and philosophical dimensions, have played a major role in extending the scope and preserving the academic integrity of Buddhist studies in the West. The study of the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, as well as that of non-Buddhist elements in Tibetan religion, is, by comparison, still a young discipline, in need of careful attention if it is to be pursued successfully.

However, the study of Tibetan religion and philosophy—both in their Buddhist and non-Buddhist manifestations—has now, for reasons beyond the purely academic ones, come to a crucial juncture. In Tibet today, there is a rapidly growing nationalistic fervour. There is a deep sense among Tibetans of being a *nation* with a long and proud history. This is a new phenomenon, for it is something rather different from the traditional sense of belonging to a religiously defined culture. This new and restless nationalism, to a large extent caused by mounting frustration, especially among young Tibetans, at cultural, economic, and political discrimination, has turned Tibet into a politically tense and culturally changing area in Asia. At the same time, it is a situation in which scholarly research into the history, culture, and religion of Tibet will not remain without consequences for the Tibetans themselves.

Viewed in this perspective, research into what is regarded by contemporary Tibetans as ‘really’ or ‘originally’ Tibetan—especially pre-Buddhist and popular religious traditions—becomes a culturally significant and politically sensitive task.

Turning, then, to the pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious traditions, we note that they are frequently referred to by Western scholars by a single term, viz., the Tibetan word *bon* (the corresponding adjective is *bon po*). In other words—and without embarking upon a discussion of the various suggestions re-

garding the etymology of this term¹—in the context of Western scholarship, Bon can signify both the pre-Buddhist religion which was gradually suppressed by Buddhism, *and* a later religion which manifestly has many points of similarity with Buddhism and which, it has been claimed, only emerged at the same time that Buddhism became dominant in Tibet, i.e., around the eleventh century AD. The fact that the Tibetan adherents of this religion, of which there are many thousands both in Tibet itself and in exile, maintain that their faith is anterior to Buddhism in Tibet—in other words, that there is no distinction between pre- and post-Buddhist Bon—has tended to be dismissed by scholars.

Research into Bon has, in the West, accordingly focused on questions such as: What were the beliefs and practices of the pre-Buddhist religion? To what extent has it survived in later popular religion? What is the character of the later Bon religion—is it simply an erratic form of Buddhism, or is it in some fundamental sense a non-Buddhist religion?

The present article will limit itself to examining how scholars have dealt with these and related questions during the last fifty years and especially in recent decades. An attempt will also be made to single out the most promising areas of future research.

The first scholar who set himself the task of dealing with the Bon religion 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*, was completed in a manuscript form as early as 1944, but was only published in 1950. It is based on ethnographic material as well as the extremely limited number of Bon texts available in Europe at the time; it also made use of Tibetan Buddhist texts, mainly historical works, in which Bon is referred to.

Hoffmann's work remains an impressive study. He was a learned and well-qualified linguist and utilised a wide range of sources. However, his book is based on a particular theory of the development of the Bon religion. Briefly, this theory is as follows. The "original" (pre-Buddhist) Bon religion was characterized by the total dependence of the Tibetans on the natural environment in which they lived, hence (and in adopting this argument Hoffmann only followed ideas which were current at the time) they worshipped nature spirits and made use of magic and divination. Accordingly, this early Tibetan religion could be defined by two key concepts: *animism* and *shamanism*. It is possible, Hoffmann maintained, to reconstruct this religion, at least in part, by studying the modern popular religion, in which much of it has been preserved, and with the help of literary sources, mainly historical chronicles composed after the final triumph of

¹ Summed up by D.L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, London, 1967, 2.

Buddhism in the eleventh century. This historical reconstruction of the pre-Buddhist religion is the first component in the model proposed by Hoffmann.

The second component is a theory of how this religion developed during the period of the royal dynasty following the introduction of Buddhism. During this period, the ancient religion was systematized and an organised priesthood was introduced. This process was strongly influenced by the regions to the west of Tibet which were dominated by religious syncretism and in which, according to Hoffmann, Gnostic, Shaivite, and Buddhist Tantric elements all played a role. The third stage, according to Hoffmann's theory, in the development of the Bon religion, took place after the final triumph of Buddhism. In order to avoid being completely superseded by Buddhism, the adherents of the Bon religion copied essential elements of the new faith, such as monastic life, canonical texts, philosophical speculation, iconography, and so on. In the course of this process, however, Bon underwent a dramatic transformation, but it did, according to Hoffmann, retain one basic trait, namely an implacable hatred of the new, dominant Buddhist religion. This hatred was expressed in the reversal of certain Buddhist customs; thus, the circumambulation of holy objects was performed in a counter-clockwise direction, instead of clockwise. In this way, Bon became a *heresy*, a kind of perverted Buddhism, characterised by inversion and negation.

This account of the development of Bon in three historical stages is essentially based on a treatise completed in 1801 and written by the Buddhist scholar (belonging to the Gelugpa school), Thu'u bkvan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi rna (1737–1802).² In this work, in which he discusses all the religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, he also deals with the doctrine of the Bon religion. His treatise has been influential in the West as an English translation by Sarat Chandra Das on the chapter on Bon appeared only eighty years after its completion.³ Now that an abundance of Bonpo texts are available, it has become obvious that the Gelugpa scholar was highly selective in his choice of sources as well as careless in his use of them.

In a later book, *Die Religionen Tibets*, published in Freiburg in 1956, Hoffmann repeats his account of Bon in a very explicit and clear-cut manner. He particularly stresses the interpretation of Bon as a kind of anti-Buddhism. The same view is expressed in his book *Tibet: A Handbook*, published in Bloomington as late as 1975—rather surprisingly because by that time numerous Bonpo texts were available in the West. Hoffmann's work, originally fruitful, had become ossified and now represented a dead end.

² *Grub mtha' thams cad kyi khungs dang 'dod tshul stan pa legs bshad shel gyi me long.*

³ S.C. Das, "The Bon (Pon) Religion", *JASB*, 50, 1881, 187–205.

In the meantime, the French Tibetologist R.A. Stein had taken up the study of Bon, basing himself on other sources than Hoffmann. His primary interests were Tibetan cosmogonic and anthropogonic myths, as well as non-Buddhist rituals. His material was, on the one hand, the ritual compendium *Klu 'bum*, which focuses on the cult of chthonic and aquatic spirits, the *klu*, and which undoubtedly contains much ancient material, and, on the other hand, the Tibetan texts brought to light early in this century in the deserted Buddhist monastery at Tunhuang in north-western China. This material, of which a considerable part had been brought to France early in this century by Paul Pelliot, had already been utilised by Marcelle Lalou (especially noteworthy as far as Bon was concerned was her article “Rituel bon po des funeraillles royales [fonds Pelliot tibetain 1042]”, *JA*, 1952). Stein rapidly became—and has remained—the master of the study of the extremely problematic non-Buddhist Tibetan material from Tunhuang.

In his book *La civilisation tibétaine* (Paris, 1962), Stein introduced a major conceptual innovation by distinguishing between popular religion, which he regarded as essentially non-Buddhist, and which he styled “the nameless religion”, and the Bon religion, which he regarded as a specific religious tradition encompassing many non-Tibetan elements. For Stein, in other words, the relationship between Bon and popular religion was not one of chronological or lineal continuity. Both were, in essence, pre-Buddhist but quite distinct.

The turning-point, however, in the study of Bon came with David L. Snellgrove. In the 1950s and 60s, 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, in areas which belong to the Tibetan cultural domain. Here he came into contact with small communities of Bonpos; this was, in fact, the first significant encounter between a Western Tibetologist and an ancient and well-established Bonpo milieu. 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.

Ironically, the possibility of exploiting this literature came about through the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which caused a large number of Tibetan monks to seek refuge in India and Nepal. They brought not only books, but above all, a vast repository of traditional learning. As far as Bon was concerned, Snellgrove was the first scholar in the West to seize the opportunity which these circumstances offered, and in the early 1960s, he invited no less than three Tibetan Bonpo monks to London. For several years, he collaborated closely with these Tibetan scholars. For the first time, Bon was studied on the basis of how its contemporary adherents actually view themselves and their religion. This

collaboration resulted in the publication in 1967 of the book *The Nine Ways of Bon* (London, 1967), which contained a systematic presentation of the teachings of Bon in the form of the text and translation of excerpts from an important Bonpo canonical text. Further, in his introduction to the book, Snellgrove presented a completely new understanding of the origin and nature of Bon. The most important aspect of this new theory was that in spite of its polemical attitude towards Buddhism, 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 Mahāyāna 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.

Snellgrove's theory can be, in brief, outlined as follows. Independently of the official introduction of Buddhism into central Tibet in the eighth century 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 an independent kingdom known as Zhang-zhung. This form of Buddhism, essentially of a tantric type, came to be regarded as the native religion of that kingdom, and eventually was known as Bon. Thereafter Bon was propagated in central Tibet, where it inevitably came into conflict with the form of Buddhism which had been imported directly from India. As time progressed, Bon unfolded and developed in close interaction with Buddhism, in particular with the Nyingmapa tradition with which it was to remain closely connected up to the present day. This historical model was restated in his and H. Richardson's *A Cultural History of Tibet* (London, 1968), and again in his *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (London, 1987).

My own interest in Bon began independently of Snellgrove when, as a young student, I spent some months of 1966 in India. There I came into contact with several of the Tibetan Bonpo scholars who had previously worked with Snellgrove but who had now returned to India. My initial interest was in certain meditative traditions of Bon. My research in this particular field resulted in an article, entitled "Bonpo Studies: The *A khrid* System of Meditation", which was published in *Kailash* in 1973. Later on, my interests shifted towards historical studies for which I tried to lay a foundation by translating a "chronological table" (*bstan rtsis*) of the Bon religion originally composed in 1842. This translation was published in *AO* in 1971, and most of the datings of events and historical figures in the Bon religion have subsequently been based on this

work.⁴ In *IJJ* in 1974, I also published an analysis (“The Canon of the Tibetan Bonpos”) of a Tibetan catalogue of the Bonpo Kanjur and Tenjur which constituted a practically unexplored corpus of some three hundred volumes. Unfortunately, no complete set of the Bonpo Kanjur was available; in fact, it was not known at the time whether even a single set had survived the Cultural Revolution in Tibet.

In an article published in *Numen* in 1972 (“Aspects of the Origin of the Buddhist Tradition in Tibet”), I maintained, following Snellgrove, that the Bon religion was a peculiar but authentic form of Buddhism, and that there was no clear link between this religion and the pre-Buddhist priests, known as *bon po*, who were active in Tibet during the period of the royal dynasty (seventh to ninth centuries AD). I denied that this religion could be characterized as “shamanistic” or “animistic”, and I entirely rejected Hoffmann’s theory of the historical development and “heretical” character of Bon.

In the meantime, the Tibetologists in Paris, joined in the early 1970s by the Tibetan scholar Samten Gyaltsen Karmay who had been trained in Western academic methodology by Snellgrove in London, continued research on the Tunhuang documents, and Paris now became the main centre of Bon-related research. The leading scholar was undoubtedly R.A. Stein. He dealt with the funerary rituals of the ancient faith in his article “Un document ancien relatif aux rites funéraires des Bon po tibétains”, which had appeared in *JA* in 1970. He also explored the nature of the language of Zhang-zhung, from which the Bonpos claim their holy scriptures are translated. The results of his work on the language were recorded in his article “La langue *żañ zuñ* du Bon organisé”, published in *BEFEO* in 1971. Stein concluded that the fragments of this language found in Tibetan texts are for the most part late fabrications. He had also studied a number of Tun-huang manuscripts containing myths which are very clearly non-Buddhist, and hence, by implication, pre-Buddhist. These myths were subjected to a structural analysis in “Du récit au rituel dans les manuscrits tibétains du Touen-houang”, published in 1971 in *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*. In the same volume there was included Ariane Macdonald’s monumental article (close to 200 pages) entitled “Une lecture des Pelliot Tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, et 1290” in which she provided a brilliantly original interpretation of the Tun-huang texts relating to the non-Buddhist concepts of the period of the royal dynasty. This somewhat esoteric heading had the sub-title, “Essai sur la formation et l’emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale

⁴ I have since published new material, in the form of studies of other *bstan-rtsis* (“A New Chronological Table of the Bon Religion”, in H. Uebach & J.L. Panglung, eds., *Tibetan Studies*, Munich, 1988, and “A Bonpo *bsTan rtsis* from 1804”, in T. Skorupski, ed., *Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Tring, 1990).

de Sroñ bean sgam po”. In this article, the pre-Buddhist religion is discussed on the basis of a wide and penetrating study of the Tun-huang documents, leading to a surprising conclusion: the religion which existed in Tibet when Buddhism was introduced was not at the time known as *bon*; this name was ascribed to it at a later, retrospective stage. The pre-Buddhist religion, in which the king, regarded as a supernatural being, was the focus of the cult, was known as *gtsug*. Furthermore, *gtsug* was characterised by an elaborate eschatological doctrine. In answer to the question why there is no trace whatsoever of *gtsug* in the later tradition, Macdonald maintained that it had been so completely suppressed by the Buddhists that even its name had been forgotten. As for Bon, it was regarded by her as a somewhat peripheral phenomenon during the royal period, chiefly concerned with divination.

Macdonald’s article did not receive the attention it deserved. It was only in *BEFEO* in 1985 that a full discussion of the salient points of her theory were discussed by another Tibetologist, namely, R.A. Stein in his “Tibetica Antiqua III: A propos du mot *gcug lag* et de la religion indigène”, where he refutes the main theses of Macdonald concerning the meaning of the word *gtsug*.

Another French Tibetologist, who has made major contributions to the study of Bon, is Anne-Marie Blondeau. In a long article published in *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou* in 1971 (“Le Lha ’dre bka’ than”), she established a close textual affiliation between the Buddhist account, dating from the second half of the fourteenth century, of the epic journey of the Indian siddha Padmasambhava to Tibet in the eighth century, and a similar narrative in the Bonpo text *gZer mig*, which according to Blondeau was from approximately the same period, i.e., the fourteenth century. She arrived at the surprising conclusion (surprising, that is, to Western scholars, but not, of course, to Tibetan Bonpos) that it was not the Bonpo text which was a copy of a Buddhist original, but the other way round. This established the hitherto unsuspected originality of Bonpo literature, and initiated Blondeau’s extensive research into the interaction between Tibetan Buddhist traditions, especially those focusing on the figure of Padmasambhava, and corresponding developments within Bon. Subsequently, she has published several substantial articles, e.g., “Le ‘découvreur’ du *Mañi bka’ ’bum* était-il bon po ?” in *Tibetan and Buddhist Studies Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Alexander Csoma de Körös* (ed., L. Ligeti, Budapest, 1984) and “mKhyen brce’i dba’ po: La biographie de Padmasambhava selon la tradition du bsGrags pa Bon, et ses sources” in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata* (eds., G. Gnoli & L. Lanciotti, Rome, 1985).

Thus, the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s saw an unprecedented expansion of research into the Bon religion, in its pre-Buddhist as well as its later aspects. In spite of its diversity, so far as the sources and methods are concerned,

there was a tendency in all this scholarship to ignore the understanding of Bon found among adherents of the Bon religion itself. The basic postulates of all this research, viz., that there is no direct continuity between the pre-Buddhist and the later Bon religion, and that the later religion is, essentially, a Buddhist tradition, are, however, denied by contemporary Bonpos as well as by their entire literary tradition. Some scholars, including myself, gradually acquired a deeper appreciation of the concepts and world-view of those Bonpo monks and laymen in India, and eventually also in Tibet, who so generously shared their time and knowledge with us. While this appreciation did not signify a radical break with previous research, it has led to a shift of emphasis. First of all, it has been realized that it is perfectly legitimate, indeed necessary, to view Bon as a distinct religion. This is, in fact, in accordance with the universal Tibetan view, Bonpo as well as Buddhist. This reassessment of Bon stresses such aspects as historical tradition and sources of authority and legitimation, rather than doctrine, philosophy, and external practices and institutions.

Secondly, there is a renewed emphasis on the study of the ritual traditions of Bon, an interest nurtured by the immensely rich and complex ritual activities in the Bonpo monastery in India. A contribution to this study is my book, *Tibet, Bon Religion: A Death Ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos* (Leiden, 1985), and articles by Blondeau, Canzio, Karmay, and myself, published from 1985 onwards.⁵

Before concluding this section on on-going research, mention must be made of a distinct tradition of Bonpo studies in Italy. I am not referring to the observations regarding Bon (most of them regarding mythology) made by Giuseppe Tucci in his *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (Rome, 1948) and several subsequent works, but to the movement, partly academic, partly spiritual, represented by the disciples of the Tibetan lama Namkhai Norbu, who from the early 1970s until a few years ago was professor at the University of Naples. Namkhai Norbu is a prominent teacher of the tradition known as *rdzogs chen*, “the Great Perfection”,

⁵ R.O. Canzio, “Aspects of Ceremonial Behaviour in Bon-po Monastic Life”, in B.N. Aziz & M. Kapstein, eds., *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, New Delhi, 1985; S.G. Karmay, “L’âme et la turquoise: un rituel tibétain”, in A.W. Macdonald, ed., *L’Ethographie*, Numéro spécial “Rituels himalayens”, nos. 100–101, 1987; A.M. Blondeau & S.G. Karmay, “‘Le cerf à la vaste ramure’: en guise d’introduction”, A. M. Blondeau & K. Schipper, eds., *Essais sur le rituel*, 1, Paris, 1988; P. Kværne “Le rituel tibétain, illustré par l’évocation, dans la religion Bon-po, du Lion de la parole”, in *Essais sur le rituel*; R.O. Canzio, “Etude d’une cérémonie Bonpo—le *Nag-zhgz bskang-ba*: structure et exécution”, in *Essais sur le rituel*; A.M. Blondeau “Questions préliminaires sur les rituels *mdos*”, in F. Meyer, ed., *Tibet: Civilisation et société*, Paris, 1990; R.O. Canzio, “‘Extending to all Beings the Far-Reaching Arm of Liberation’: Bonpo Texts on the Manner of Commencing the Practice of the Outer, Inner and Secret Teachings”, in T. Skorupski, ed., *Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Tring, 1990.

which is found in the Nyingmapa tradition as well as in Bon. Several of his pupils have written dissertations dealing with Bon, but so far only one book has been published, a translation and study by Giacomella Orofino of several short *rdzogs chen* texts which appeared in her *Insegnamenti tibetani su morte e liberazione* (Rome, 1985).

There will, of course, be no consensus as to what the most important or promising areas of future research are. It should, however, be noted that scholars today are in the privileged position of having access to a vast and still practically unexplored literature. Not only have hundreds of volumes of Bonpo texts been published in India since the 1960s,⁶ but in the course of the 1980s many Bonpo texts were brought to India by pilgrims from various places in Tibet. A number of Bonpo texts have also been published in China and Tibet in recent years; of the greatest importance is the fact that a complete handwritten copy of the Bonpo Kanjur was brought out from its hiding place in Nyarong in eastern Tibet and subsequently printed in Chengdu in 1985. A complete set of this Kanjur was acquired by the Library of Congress in 1990, and subsequently by several libraries in Europe. The publication of the Bonpo Kanjur signifies that a major literary tradition awaits exploration. Before that only my article of 1974 presenting a nineteenth-century catalogue of the Kanjur, and a catalogue of the holdings of Bonpo texts in the library of the Tōyō Bunko by S.G. Karmay, had been published. This could be supplemented by a fairly detailed analysis of the narrative of the twelve volumes of the texts known as the *gZi brjid*, which I published together with a study of a series of Bonpo paintings, in *Arts Asiatiques* in 1986 ("Peintures tibétaines de la vie de sTon pa gčen rab). A title-list, and eventually a proper catalogue of the texts in the Bonpo Kanjur is surely a research project which should be given high priority.

In addition to the study of literary sources, a complex iconographical tradition also awaits study. In this field, in fact, very little has been accomplished beyond stray descriptions of individual pieces, with the exception of the description of a set of ritual cards contained in my above-mentioned book on the Bonpo death ritual, and the analysis of the paintings referred to in connection with the *gZi brjid*.

A vast field, which has only begun to be explored, is the study of rituals. These can still be seen and studied in India and Nepal, and, potentially, also in Tibet. However, it must be clearly understood that a study of rituals without access to the texts on which they are based, will yield no meaningful results.

⁶ A large part of those published between 1965 and 1975 are described by S.G. Karmay, *A Catalogue of Bonpo Publications*, Tokyo, 19.

We are still in the privileged position, perhaps for a few years only, of being able to benefit from the experience and erudition of a number of learned Tibetan Bonpo scholars, in exile as well as in Tibet itself, who grew up and were trained before the Chinese occupation. They represent a vast repository of knowledge which will, unfortunately, in all probability not be fully exploited while they are still alive.

As for the tasks awaiting us in the years to come, I would particularly point out the following:

1. We still do not have an adequate and coherent description of the pre-Buddhist religion. Unfortunately, this will not be easy to accomplish because the relevant material (inscriptions, Tun-huang documents, later historiographic sources) is extremely complex and problematical.

2. A critical but unbiased examination should be made of the historiographical literature of the Bonpos themselves. A substantial start has been made by S.G. Karmay who has published the text and translation of the history of Bon by Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan (1859–1935) (*The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, London, 1972). This text, however, is relatively recent, being composed in the 1920s. It is for this reason that I have prepared for publication an edition and translation of the oldest historical text available, namely, the *Grags pa gling grags*. This text, which according to A.M. Blondeau dates from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, seems to be the main source of the entire historiographical literature of Bon. It is an extremely rare text, only two hitherto unpublished manuscript copies being known. A brief summary of this and several related texts were published by A.M. Blondeau in 1990 (“Identification de la tradition appelée *bsGrags pa Bon lugs*”, *Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Tring).

3. A vast field of study is presented by mythological and legendary material, including cosmology and sacred geography. Studies of this material will not only contribute to our understanding of the difference between Bon and Buddhism, but also to an unveiling of the influences which have been exerted by neighbouring civilizations on Tibetan culture. R.A. Stein has discussed such influences emanating from China and from India, and I have discussed the possibility of Iranian influence, particularly on Bon. The latter influence has been generally taken for granted, but it seems to me that it should not be left out because it still awaits its attestation by conclusive proof (see my “Dualism in Tibetan Cosmogonic Myths and the Question of Iranian Influence”, in C. Beckwith, ed., *Silver on Lapis*, Bloomington, Ind., 1987). In another article, “Mongols and Khitans in a 14th-century Tibetan Bonpo Text”, *AOH*, 1980, I have discussed the possibility of early Tibetan contacts with Mongolian and proto-Mongolian culture. A yet different approach to this field would be an analytical study of

myths and legends; here, a beginning has been made in the form of short articles by S.G. Karmay and myself.⁷ Finally, a Bonpo guide book (*dkar chag*) to the sacred Mount Kailasha, written in 1844, has been recently published by Namkhai Norbu and Ramon Prats (*Gaṅs Ti se'i dkar c'ag: A Bon-po Story of the Sacred Mountain Ti-se and the Blue Lake Ma-pan*, Rome, 1989), providing abundant information on the sacred geography of that region.

4. Finally, there is an urgent need for an extensive documentation of rituals and an analysis of their structure, symbolism, and function, including, as already indicated, a proper study of the texts on which they are based and which usually form an integral part of the actual rituals. This would, hopefully, also make it easier to discern which rituals or ritual components are genuinely non-Buddhist, and thus—perhaps—be of use in interpreting the earlier documents. At the end of this brief survey, one may ask about the ultimate purpose of the study of the Bon religion which would go beyond the obvious motivation of filling in blank spaces in our knowledge of human culture.

For me at least there are two main motivations. The first one is, so to speak, professional. The Bon religion is an extraordinary example of a syncretistic process which one can study on the basis of a vast literary and historical documentation spanning more than a thousand years. In the universal history of religions, the Bon religion is an outstanding example of a dynamic, syncretistic process resulting from a protracted and complex interaction between a “universal religion” (Buddhism), a local “nameless religion” (to use Stein’s expression), and elements from other cultures (Chinese, Indian, Turcic, proto-Mongolian and Iranian).

The second motivation is more general. In 1964, Walther Reissig published a book about the history of the Mongols entitled *Ein Volk sucht seine Geschichte*. The Tibetans, too, are seeking their history—not that it is lost or forgotten, but rather they seek confirmation and a new understanding of their history as a crucial part of the ideological foundation of the struggle for national survival in which they are at present involved. This ideological foundation includes an awareness of their own history, the assurance of historical roots stretching far back into the past throughout the vast land known as Tibet. The Bon religion is an important aspect of this new awareness because it is, in a unique way, part of the early history of Tibet and thus claims to be, in a special sense, the indigenous religion of the Tibetan people.

⁷ S.G. Karmay, “A *gZer-mig* Version of the Interview Between Confucius and Phyva Keñ-tse lan-med”, *BSOAS*, 1975, and P. Kvaerne, “A Preliminary Study of Ch.VI of the *gZer mig*”, in Michael Aris & Aung San Suu Kyi, eds., *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, Warminster, 1980.