

# Tibetan Religious Polemics: Bon Buddhism or Buddhist Bon?

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The paper examines how the identity of Bon is shaped in confrontation with Tibetan Buddhism. It distinguishes between 1) an older, loosely organized complex of local myths, spirit cults and funerary rites, and 2) a later, monastic Bon religion that claims an ancient founder, Gshen rab mi wo, but is historically visible only from the 10th–11th centuries. Early Buddhists both construct and denigrate “Bon” as a single inferior religion dependent on gods and problematic funeral practices. Later Buddhist polemics accuse institutional Bon of plagiarizing Buddhist scriptures and doctrines. Bonpo responses appeal to their elaborate doctrinal systems and to Gshen rab’s alleged precedence over Śākyamuni, though historical evidence is weak. The author suggests that large-scale borrowing from Buddhism functioned as a survival and systematization strategy, so that Bon, though heavily Buddhicized, still constitutes a distinct religion with its own ritual substratum.

**Keywords:** Bon, Tibetan Buddhism, Gshen rab mi wo, religious polemics.

## 1) Introduction

In this paper, I explore the question of Bon’s origins and its relationship with Tibetan Buddhism by emphasizing the aspect of confrontation between Buddhist and Bon followers. In the first section of the paper, I present the Buddhists’ stance regarding Bon’s doctrines and its provenance, and in the second section, I outline the possible counterposition from the Bon perspective. The thesis of this paper is that although Bon has been significantly influenced by Buddhism, this does not suffice to disqualify it as a distinct religion.

## 2) Bon Buddhism?

Before presenting a few Tibetan Buddhist positions on Bon, it is necessary to clarify

the usage of the word *bon*. There have been various attempts to define and list the meanings of *bon*. In my view, it is crucial to distinguish between at least two usages: 1) The continuum of myths and beliefs about various spirits/gods, along with practices involving divination, healing, and funerary rituals conducted by priests, who might have been known as *bon po* or *gshen*. These beliefs and practices likely originated in the pre-imperial period of Tibet and began to face challenges and marginalization with the advent of Buddhism during the imperial period. Forms of this ancient tradition may still persist in various evolved forms at the fringes of the Tibetan cultural sphere. 2) The institutionalized monastic religion<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> A distinction could also be made between two types

emically claimed to have been founded by Gshen rab mi wo in the very distant past (thousands of years BCE) and brought to Tibet very early in its history. From an etic perspective, based on historical sources, the origins of this religion can be traced back no earlier than the 10th-11th c., during the early *phyi dar* period of Buddhist dissemination.

The term *bon*, in the first usage, refers to what might be termed a traditional religion (or a “nameless religion,” as described by R. A. Stein). That kind of religion is characterized by the absence of unified, centralized, and canonized beliefs and rituals. Instead, these practices are passed down from generation to generation within communities and are closely linked to their identity. However, since in traditional religions doctrines and rituals are very rarely put down in writing (which could automatically entail their standardization), it is extremely difficult to assess, in the absence of many historical records, the exact characteristics of this ancient Bon. Much of what can be said about it remains hypothetical. What is more certain is that the first generalizations about this religion came from the outside, from a religion that defined itself more clearly and had ambitions to present itself as superior to others, i.e., Buddhism.

As S. Schaik pointed out, analyzing certain earliest Tibetan texts, it was the Buddhists who were the first to conceptual-

ize the manifold of beliefs and rituals of Tibetans as a unified whole and belittled them as the bad or the little religion (*chos ngan pa; chos chu ngu*) and, conversely, referred to themselves as the good or great religion (*chos bzang po; chos chen po*)<sup>2</sup>. Following Schaik, one could say that the Buddhists were responsible for creating the referent for my first usage of the word *bon* (although using the word *chos* instead of *bon*).

Two main arguments by the Buddhists can be extracted from the earliest Tibetan texts criticizing Bon in the first usage. First, the followers of ancient Bon are deplored for being dependent on gods/spirits by propitiating them and believing that good or bad outcomes are the consequences of correct or incorrect propitiation. The suggested alternative is to disassociate from the gods by believing in the determinant efficacy of one’s actions, namely in the theory of karma<sup>3</sup>. The second argument is less clearly formulated but seems to be related to funeral rituals. The critique likely revolves around the unclear necessity of embalming the corpse, interring it in the tomb, etc., as well as the violence resulting from accompanying animal sacrifices.

The implicit meaning of Bon po funeral rituals might have been the belief in the possibility of the body’s continued existence in the land of gods or even potential resurrection on earth, while animal sacrifices could have served as ransoms to evil spirits that might otherwise harm the

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of institutional Bon: the earliest one known as eternal or auspicious Bon (*g.yung drung bon*), and the new Bon (*bon gsar*). The latter is a separate lineage that emerged in the 14th century. Although it is intertwined with eternal Bon, it is often considered distinct from it. See, for example, Achard (2022).

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2 Schaik 2013: 232–236. In one of the edicts of Khri srong lde brtsan, a contrast is also drawn between the religion of the Buddha (*sangs rgyas kyi chos*) and the old religion of Tibet (*bod kyi chos rmying pa*) (Ibid. 238).

3 Ibid, p. 233–235.

deceased. According to Buddhists, these funerary rites are misguided because they imply attachment to the bodily/samsaric existence, thereby losing sight of the goal of ultimate liberation, and in the case of sacrifices, causing unnecessary violence to other sentient beings<sup>4</sup>.

Having touched upon the earliest Bon, let us now turn to a review of the Buddhist response to institutional Bon. According to D. Martin, the most comprehensive of the early Buddhist critiques on institutional Bon is found in “The Textbook of the [Buddha’s] Single Intention” (*Dgongs-gcig yig-cha*) by Sherab Jungne (1187-1241), which later became one of the main sources for Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma’s (1737-1802) influential Buddhist polemical presentation of Bon doctrines in “The Crystal Mirror” (*Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long*)<sup>5</sup>.

Both texts classify Bon teachings into three distinct phases<sup>6</sup>: 1) the “emergent/outburst Bon” (*rdol bon*); 2) the “deviant Bon” (*khyar ba’i bon*); and 3) the “transformed/translated Bon” (*bsgyur bon*). The first two phases are covered briefly and largely correspond to the referent of my first usage of the term *bon*. What is new in Buddhist polemical works regarding Bon is that they create a narrative detailing the development of Bon. The first period is described as the introduction of Bon to Tibet by Gshen rab mi wo, where he introduces rituals to suppress demons, worship ancestral gods above, and protect homes with exorcisms.

The second period is distinguished by the introduction of various funeral rituals from neighboring countries, which supposedly had been previously unknown in Tibet.

Finally, the third and final phase corresponds to my second usage of the word *bon*. This phase is marked by the continuous process of translating Bon scriptures, or more precisely, the forging of Bon scriptures by plagiarizing their content from Buddhist scriptures. What is also alluded to, although not explicitly stated, is that to conceal plagiarism, Bonpos coined new words and slightly adjusted the “translated material” to give the impression of unique content. However, what is explicitly emphasized by the Buddhist authors of both polemical texts is that the Bonpos not only plagiarized the texts but also impudently hid them as supposed treasures (*gter ma*) originating from ancient times.

The Buddhist argument that Bon plagiarized their teachings appears to have strong validity. Even a cursory examination of how the Bonpos divide their scriptures into *Bka’ gyur* and *Bka’ brten* (the equivalent of Buddhist *Bstan gyur*) and their subsequent subdivisions reveals significant borrowing from Buddhists. This is further evident in the doctrinal content adopted from the Buddhist repertoire, as seen in concepts such as the noble truths, bodhisattvas, emptiness, *pāramitās*, and a list of abhidharmic mental factors<sup>7</sup>. However, the highest Bon teaching of *rdzogs chen*, though shared with the Rnying ma school, may not necessarily be adopted from Buddhists but could stem from a

4 Ibid, p. 249–253. Kvaerne 1985: 6–7.

5 For the influence of the “Crystal Mirror’s” presentation of Bon doctrines on modern scholars’ opinions about Bon, see Bjerken (1998).

6 Martin 2001: 187–197; Jackson 2009: 321–324.

7 See, for example, Martin 2004.

common heritage<sup>8</sup>. In brief, the prevailing tendency<sup>9</sup> among Buddhists in the *phyi dar* period is to cast a shadow on the Bonpos. They accuse the Bonpos of hypocritically disguising themselves as something they are not, effectively reducing them to nothing more than heretical Buddhists.

### 3) Buddhist Bon?

Let us now look from the Bonpos' perspective at what counterarguments they could offer to defend their stance against Buddhist attacks. Regarding the early Buddhist critique of Bon rituals, a good strategy would be to suggest, in line with later Bon teachings, that these rituals form merely one stage/vehicle out of many in their system. For example, according to the two most famous Bon doctrinal classifications, the nine ways/vehicles of Bon (*theg pa rim bgu'i bon*) and the four gates with the treasury as the fifth (*sgo bzhi mdzod lnga*), the propitiation rituals for gods and funerary rites would belong only to the initial stages of the Bon teachings, namely, to the second (*snang gshen theg pa*) and fourth (*srid gshen theg pa*) vehicles, or the gate of black water (*chab nag*)<sup>10</sup>. This could imply that the latter stages are preparatory and not necessarily essential to Bon teachings. The Bonpos could also point to the lower Buddhist tantras of the *kriyā* or *caryā* class and assert that these often

uphold similar mundane goals and rituals, involving *mantras-dhāraṇīs*, *mudrās*, and *maṇḍalas*, etc.

However, a more serious Buddhist accusation is the alleged Bon plagiarism of Buddhist scriptures. To counter this, Bonpos typically resort to the historical precedence argument. This argument maintains that Bon teachings are much older than Buddhism because their founder, Gshen rab mi wo, lived thousands of years before Buddha Śākyamuni. Thus, the teachings of the Buddha are not entirely original but could have been influenced by Bon teachings that had long encapsulated the essentials of Buddhism, such as good and bad actions and their consequences (*karma*), the truths of suffering, and liberation from it<sup>11</sup>.

In a stronger interpretation, Bonpos could even claim that Śākyamuni is merely one of the many later manifestations of Gshen rab mi wo, implying that the teachings of Śākyamuni and his later interpreters are just an offshoot of what was taught by Gshen rab mi wo. Therefore, the similarity of Bon texts to Buddhist texts is not due to Bon plagiarism but because they are the original versions of what Śākyamuni intended and Gshen rab mi wo taught<sup>12</sup>. This idea is advocated, for example, by Rongton Sheja Kunrik

11 Karmay 1969: 33-35.

12 Actually, the historical precedence argument of the Bonpos is not unique. When Buddhism began entering China from the 1st century AD, Confucianism and Daoism on one side, and Buddhism on the other, engaged in debates about mutual superiority. One of the main Daoist arguments to assert their superiority over Buddhism was the claim that Buddhism is actually a form of Daoism. They maintained that the reputed founder of Daoism, Lāozī, after leaving China, traveled to India and there became the Buddha. See, for example, Zürcher 2007: 288-320.

8 Esler 2005: p. 49-52.

9 However, there are some exceptions of much more tolerant and accommodating Buddhist views with regard to Bon. These predominantly belong to the Buddhist thinkers of the nineteenth-century *ris-med* movement.

10 Snellgrove 1967: 9-10, 16-18.

(1367-1449), who claims that many Buddhist texts are corrupted by *tirthikas* and that Bon texts convey true Buddhism<sup>13</sup>.

The Buddhists could still press the Bonpos into a corner, demanding hard evidence that Gshen rab mi wo lived earlier than Buddha Śākyamuni. And here, the situation could become challenging for the Bonpos, because Gshen rab mi wo isn't mentioned in any non-Bon po texts (as might be expected if he were the progenitor of all teachings), his name first appearing only in the Dunhuang manuscripts. From the scarcity of mentions and from the general character of his name, i.e., "the great man of the priest family" (*gshen rabs mi wo*) or "the great man of the highest priests" (*gshen rab mi wo*), it appears much more likely that Gshen rab mi wo is a fictional figure, a generalization and embodiment of the functions of Bon priests<sup>14</sup>.

However, interestingly, the life story of Gshen rab mi wo is far from being a copy of Śākyamuni's. Despite both renouncing secular life and becoming monks at around 30, and passing away at similar ages, approximately 80, in contrast to Śākyamuni, most events in Gshen rab mi wo's life (e.g., according to his biography in *Gzer mig*) are recounted before his renunciation<sup>15</sup>. Gshen rab is depicted as a righteous king, enjoying all the benefits of secular life by marrying several times and fathering multiple children. He skillfully uses divination, propitiation, exorcism, and other rituals to train and empower people to combat evil spirits in various regions of the world, himself constantly fighting them and be-

ing challenged by the most evil of them – Khyab pa lag ring.

The life story of Gshen rab conveys the message that although lay rituals are effective in certain contexts and to some extent, the archdemon is ultimately disarmed and loses his evil nature, transforming into a disciple of Gshen rab, only when the latter sets an example by becoming a monk. Therefore, the story suggests an implicit hierarchy in Bon teachings, placing secular rituals below monastic life and alluding to the highest ideals in Bon, similar to those in Buddhism. Although drawing on the life story of Gshen rab provides unique insights that set Gshen rab apart from Śākyamuni in some ways, this still in no way exonerates Bon from the accusation of plagiarism.

I assume that the only reasonable way for the Bonpos to defend against the accusation is to admit it but at the same time clearly elucidate the reasons that led to it. In my view, plagiarism was the only path that allowed for Bon's survival in the face of Buddhist persecution and constant pressure. Bon histories mention two historical Bon persecutions by the Buddhists, although only the second persecution under Khri srong lde brtsan is corroborated by Buddhist sources. This Bon persecution, vividly illustrated by the episode of Padmasambhava driving away or taming the local gods, occurred as a result of Bon, in the first sense, being perceived as one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of Buddhism. The early Bon, being a traditional religion with no centralized authority and unified doctrines, could in no way stand against the highly developed, centralized, and intensively proselytizing Buddhist religion.

13 Martin 2001: 129-130.

14 Bellezza 2010.

15 Kværne 2007: 84-90.

Therefore, to avoid extinction or complete assimilation by the Buddhists, certain Bonpos, after familiarizing themselves with Buddhist teachings, may have resolved to adopt elements from Buddhism. This could have been done for at least two reasons. First, the adoption of various framing ideas and doctrines from Buddhism might have worked as a defensive shield against future attacks from Buddhists (potentially showcasing that Bon is the same or almost the same as Buddhism) and, secondly, to bind together one's own diverse and scattered beliefs into a more unified and cohesive system.

This proved to be a successful combination. The old layers of beliefs-mythology and rituals were topped with a Buddhist-inspired unifying narrative of a soteriologically oriented goal, more abstract and philosophically refined doctrines, and a backtrace to the unifying creator – Gshen rab mi wo. Thus, even though the Bon religion in the second sense is like a two-story building with a strikingly prominent second story that was constructed clandestinely replicating another building's blueprint, the first story (and probably the foundations), although hardly noticeable, upon examination, can be appreciated as an antique structure of substantial architectural interest.

## Conclusions

The modern usage of the word *bon* can refer to two different, yet related, objects of inquiry: a) the ancient traditional religion in Tibet, which apparently lacked centralized and unified beliefs and rituals, but

was known to Buddhists for its supposedly notorious god propitiation and funeral rituals; b) a continuation of the previous, but in a different avatar: an institutionalized monastic religion which started to take shape from the 10th-11th c. and is said to be founded by Gshen rab mi wo.

The newly arriving Buddhists in Tibet were the first to conceive of the referent for the first usage of the word *bon*, singling out its religious beliefs and funeral rituals for criticism as not conforming to Buddhist standards. The later institutionalized Bon was equally subject to Buddhist criticism; however, the main argument this time was Bon's alleged plagiarism from Buddhist scriptures and doctrines.

The Bon response to the initial Buddhist critique could either question the Buddhist standards by mirroring their critique back at them or deemphasize the importance of Bon's beliefs and rituals as merely one of many stages / vehicles in their system. The Bon counterargument to accusations of plagiarism rests on the historical precedence argument, claiming that their founder Gshen rab mi wo lived earlier than Buddha Śākyamuni, and therefore Buddhist scriptures may already reflect the influence of Gshen rab mi wo's teachings.

However, in the absence of solid evidence for Gshen rab mi wo's priority over Buddha, my suggested strategy would be to acknowledge the borrowing of Buddhist doctrines and Bon's historical Buddhicization, but to justify it as a right to survival. Without the intentional adoption of Buddhist doctrines, Bon teachings might have been exterminated or assimilated into Buddhism.

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