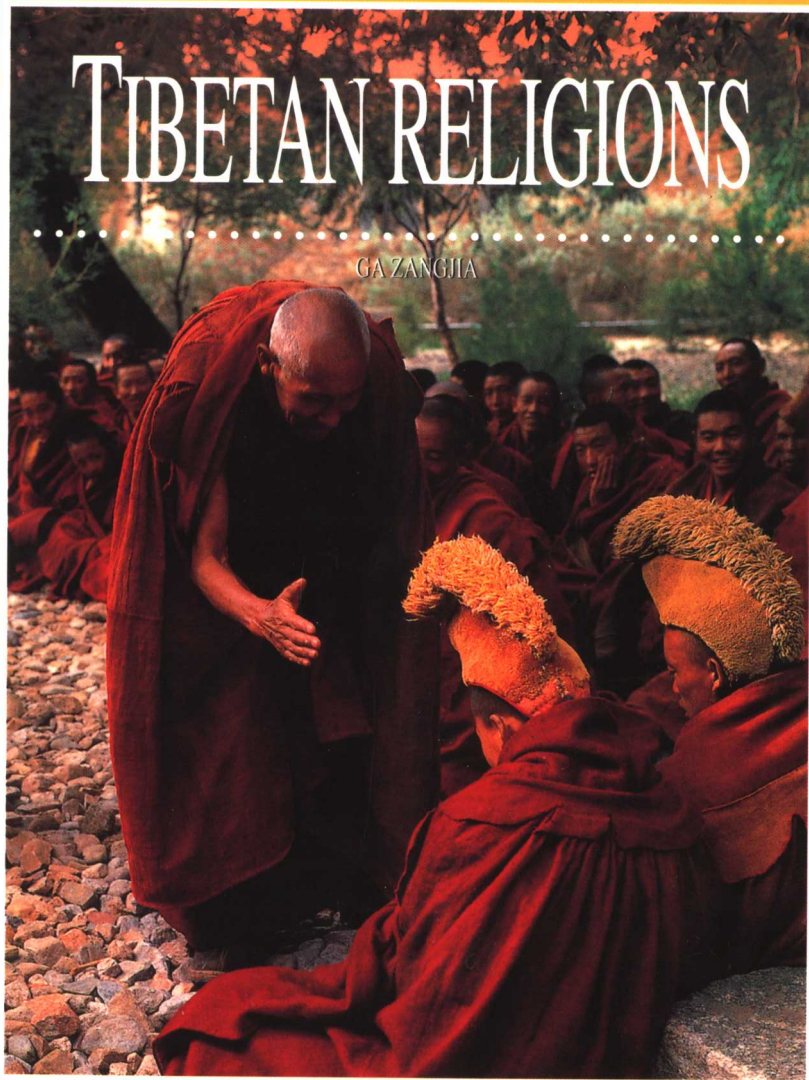


Series of Basic Information of Tibet of China

TIBETAN RELIGIONS

GA ZANGJIA



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

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The Potala Palace.

Introduction

In order to understand Tibetan religious practices, it is necessary to begin with the Bon religion, for it is an indigenous religion of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau enriched with regional and cultural characteristics. As an orthodox religious culture in Tibetan areas before the spread of Buddhism, the Bon religion was an important component of Tibetan traditional culture. Originating in remote antiquity, it underwent all the historical courses that ancient Tibetan society followed, and, consequently, advanced the civilization of Tibetan society in its early stages. At the same time, the Bon religion, claiming broad mass foundation, played an indispensable role in the later development of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism absorbed many aspects of Bon, such as religious rituals and Buddhist guardian deities. Undeniably, the impact of Tibetan Buddhism on the Bon religion was powerful, even destructive. "With Buddhism spreading into the Tibetan areas continuously, the high prestige the Bon religion had once held among Tibetans was challenged and declined gradually, and, in the end, its orthodox position was replaced by Buddhism. From then on, the Bon religion began to collapse and had to retreat to certain remote areas to preserve its minor influence.

Therefore, throughout the Tibetan areas, except for a few remote districts, it is difficult to detect today the existence of the pure Bon religion." However, as the oldest culture aspect on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Bon religion is still survives with great vitality.

The origination, formation and development of Tibetan Buddhism maintained innumerable ties with the historical process and culture evolution of Indian Buddhism. In a rather exaggerated way, Tibetan Buddhism is a "production" of the religious culture transplanted to the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau from Indian Buddhism. Meanwhile, during its course of formation and development, Tibetan Buddhism was once influenced greatly by traditional Tibetan culture, especially the Bon religion. It was the theoretical structures and ideological modes of the Bon religion that Tibetan Buddhism once adopted in the process of receiving or digesting the Buddhist culture emanating from India. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhism distinguished itself from other Buddhist branches by its plateau characteristics, which lay in the similarities and differences between Buddhism and the Bon religion.

As a kind of social and culture phenomenon of human beings, Tibetan Buddhism has exerted extensive and profound influence on the Tibetan race, gradually infiltrating Tibet's politics, economy, culture and other fields. What's more, it has also made its way into many minority nationalities. Groups such as the Mongolian, the Tu, Yugu, Naxi, Moinba and the Lhoba, are still pious Buddhist followers today. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism has proven to be one of the broad and influential religions in China as well as an important component of Chinese Buddhism.

Generally speaking, the role of Tibetan Buddhism was greatly weakened after the peaceful liberation of Tibet in 1951, especially after 1959, when Tibet carried out democratic reform, along with popularization of science and culture in Tibetan areas as well as abolishment of feudal serf system, which was characterized by the integration of politics and religion. But up to now, Tibetan Buddhism still maintains its broad and profound influence. Not only is it a social and cultural phenomenon, but also a significant component of

Tibetan traditional culture.

Besides Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon religion, relatively unknown to ordinary readers, there are still remnants of Islam and Catholicism in Tibet, both claiming a number of followers as well as sites of religious activities and active clergy.

A view of Zidru Monastery in Dinqin County. The largest of its kind in Tibet, the monastery has more disciples than other Bon religious monasteries in the eastern Tibetan areas. Its history can trace back to 2000-3000 years ago.





The Living Buddha Damzengwangzha of the Kurujam Monastery of the Bon religion in Ngari.

The Bon Religion

Strictly, the Bon religion is a kind of phenomenon of religious culture, as it retains an ancient form of this, and is richly characteristic of a specific territory and nationality. The reason is mainly attributed to the fact that the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and its Tibetan nationality have never broken away from the prevalent atmosphere of religious culture since pre-historic society; that is, secular culture has been merged into religious culture, and there has never been a distinct dividing line between them.

According to archaeological excavations, as early as the Paleolithic Age, the forefathers of the Tibetan nationality have labored, lived, and multiplied in today's Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, known as the Roof of the World. The Tibetans followed the tradition of an ancient religion, which is closely related to their daily life, namely what was later called the "Bon religion". It is a prolonged historical course for the origination and development of the Bon religion, during which it established close relations with all aspects of Tibetan society, as well as the geographical environment. Therefore, apart from the situation of the prehistoric society of the Tibetans, it is difficult for us to grasp the historical origins of the Bon religion.

According to the ancient historic book *The History under Pillars*, the Tong, Tang,

Sei, Mo were four patriarchal clans that appeared earliest in the Land of Snows. They should be called the "Four Surnames" in a more correct sense, as until today there are also many Tibetans that continue to carry these four names. So, it is clear that the four clans or surnames are the origination of the Tibetan nationality.

After a prolonged age, the history of Tibet became clear: "Thereafter, (It) was ruled in succession by Seven Masang Brothers, 25 small principalities, 12 small principalities or 40 small principalities." From the frequent change of rulers and the social structure that kept dividing and reincorporating, we can learn the historical process and basic features of the prehistoric development of Tibet, as well understanding that it was a primitive society at that time.

When Tibetan society developed to a certain stage of civilization, the ideology of spirits and deities came into being, and there appeared many gods such as those of mountain, water, land, heaven and so on. As to the worship of spirits and deities, related Tibetan historical materials date it back to the late stage of the Primitive Society, but the detailed conditions are not available. Whatever, the ideology of the spirits and deities of the Tibetans gradually took form with the development of the ancient society. The view of "shamanism", or "animism", enabled the forefathers of the Tibetans to piously kneel down before various spirits and deities who were said to have magic powers. They presented all kinds of sacrificial offerings to express their worship, appreciation, or atonement, and they also prayed for good luck. *The History under Pillars* records: "Twelve talents, including Bonpo Sei, Bonpo Mar, Bonpo Tung, Bonpo Ao, offered sacrifices to the spirits and deities." This occurred in the 4th century BC. The twelve talents refer to the twelve Bonpos of the Bon religion. Here, the word "Bonpo" means "sorcerer" or "priest", and the words after "Bonpo" above are four surnames. It was from the "Bonpo" that what was later called the "Bon religion" emerged. According to many Tibetan historical records, the twelve Bonpos mentioned above were special features at that time, being both the priests



The Longevity Buddha worshipped in the Zidru Monastery.

in charge of all spiritual cultural activities and the tribal chief of 12 small principalities. Many countries in different ancient periods saw figures serving as both priests and kings, who were characterized as being half human beings and half deities. The phenomenon that those sorcerers served as kings, and at the same time those kings practiced sorcery is regarded as a general social and cultural phenomenon of a certain historical process.

As the Tibetan society developed furthered, about the 4th century BC, there emerged the first kingdom and its Tsampo (king) with a written record. It was an epochal change for Tibetan ancient society, as the old dispersed primitive society split up and a new united slave society began to emerge. Due to the basic change of social form, former sorcerers serving as kings at the same time gradually lost their power to rule. Thereafter, deprived of their positions as tribal chiefs, they sought refuge in sorcery, leading it to develop towards the features of a religion. This eventually led to the separation of religious power from political power. Probably at that time, the traditional religion of the Tibetans, the Bon religion began to take shape. Despite initial immaturity, after the supernatural exaggeration of the sorcerers, the Bon religion possessed its own extreme mythical religious rituals worshipped by the local people.

In a word, the Bon religion, originating in Tibetan ancient society and experiencing historical evolution and development, became a human religion with relatively mature scriptures as well as systematic teachings and rituals, compared with a natural religion which initially worshiped natural phenomena such as heaven, land, sun, moon, constellations, thunder and lightning, mountains and rivers and so on. The Bon religion underwent three stages in history, namely the periods of Dor-Bonism, Cha-Bonism and Jo-Bonism.

1.Dor-Bonism: The Ancient Bon Religion

In the period of Dor-Bonism, the religion began and slowly developed. It was from about the 4th century BC,

when Nyatri Tsampo, the first king in Tibetan history, reigned, to the 2nd century BC, and the reign of the eighth king Zhigum. This period was also what called in Tibetan historical books the period of "Seven Heavenly Kings". With regard to religious conditions, Tibetan scripture records: "At that time, the Bon religion had only magical powers to subdue demons and evils of the lower world, worship gods of the upper world, and pray for the prosperity for local people in the middle world. Something about the view of the Bon religion, however, hadn't yet appeared." It is known that the Bon religion at that time, with more primitive characteristics of sorcery, hadn't yet formed its theoretical system. As for the exact definition of its sorcery and its relationship to religion, it is difficult to come to a fixed conclusion from so many diverse views. Actually, in the early stage of history, primitive religion was mixed with sorcery, and it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. So some suggest sorcery was the forefather of religion.

Generally speaking, in the period of Dor-Bonism, the Bon religion was characterized by its worship of deities and demons, which traced its origins to Shamanism or Animism. Ancient people took it for granted that natural phenomena were endowed with living and supernatural magic powers, so the initial stage of natural religion was called Shamanism. It was a religion that emphasized pantheism, featuring chaos mythology, and believed in magic powers. What's more, its sense of fear overrode other religious feelings. This kind of religious belief rose naturally from all kinds of factors that universally lay among the experiences of human beings, such as phenomena of death, sleep, dreams, illusory elements and so on. Through the process of simple logical thinking, a natural mental entity independent of the existence of the body came



The painting of Principal Deity Dalha of the Bon Religion, also in Tibetan known as Tangka Principal Deity Dalha of the Bon Religion, which is enshrined in the Zidru Monastery.

into being. In the process of the development of ideology, the mental entity was regarded as the essence of life, thus leading to the worship of souls, spirits and ghosts. All creatures in the earth have spirits, and these spirits were considered as the factor in the vitality and life that it endowed all things in the world. For instance, in the period of Dor-Bonism, Tibetans universally held the view that illness was caused by spirits and it was the spirits that controlled their fates. From these features of the Bon religion, it is clear that in the period of Dor-Bonism, the Bon religion belonged to the sphere of natural religions.

2. Cha-Bonism: The Yungdrung Bon Religion

The emblem Yungdrung (Nazi swastika which is the reserved Buddhist emblem) was introduced into Tibet along with Buddhism in the 7th century. The Yungdrung Bonism adopted this emblem as the sign of Bonism, and systemized the doctrines which included the way to pray for good fortune, medicine, victory in warfare, and how to arrange the proper funeral rituals, and the magic methods to tell true from false, and separate the guilty from the innocent. The period of Cha-Bonism, mainly known as the Yungdrung Bon religion, started from the reign of the eighth Tsampo Zhigum (in the



Kampos Soinam Jamei of the Zidru Monastery.

second century) to that of King Songtsan Gampo (in the 7th Century). It was an important stage when the Bon religion underwent qualitative change. The eighth king of the Tubo kingdom, Tsampo Zhigum, took several open measures to promote the development of the Bon religion. As one of his efforts, "Tsampo Zhigum invited three masters of the Bon religion respectively from Kashmir, Bolue, Zhangzhung to drive away evil spirits and had luck as well as practice other religious activities. Among them, one had the ability to ride on a drum to soar up to the sky to seek Terma (known as "concealed treasures", which means some treasured scriptures were buried by former masters in the hope they would be revealed for the benefit of future generations) by depending on his exorcising sorcery and other witchcrafts. He also performed his power to cut a piece of iron into two parts by using the feather of a bird. The second person was known for his power of fortune telling by using colored threads, oracle, fresh blood, and so on. The third person was adept at all kinds of funeral and death rituals." The quotation shows that Tsampo Zhigum introduced sorcery from neighboring areas to refresh or reform the outdated Bon religion. From then on, it began to emerge from its primitive and immature form into a new stage when superb practical magic was introduced.

According to *Historical Collection of Tibet and the Han*, when Tsampo Zhigum reigned over the country, the teachings of Shengyidorben of the Bon religion were introduced from Zhangzhung and Bolue of the western regions. After his son Pude Gungyal came to the throne, the teachings of Zonghetewo appeared, and there arose the Tanbonposhenpoche School of the Bon religion. It showed that during the period of Tsampo Zhigum, the Bon religion started its great change, beginning to form its theoretical system of religion and overcoming its previous lack of teachings and rituals. Obviously, the so-called theoretical system of religion was far from the "theoretical system' in the strict sense. In fact, it was only rough religious views or teachings and that it was called a "theoretical system' was only in



The Living Buddha Zidru Dinqinse of the Zidru Monastery, who was studying in 1998 at the Tibetan Department of Chinese Institute of Buddhist Studies.

A Lama with the Zidru Monastery of Dinqin County showing a pair of bronze cymbals, an ancient relics introduced from the Han. Inside it is carved with a design of "two dragons playing with a pear" and words "built in the Xunade Age of the Ming Dynasty", namely in the 15th century.



comparison with its previous form. Nonetheless, it was a great improvement. *History and Doctrines of Different Buddhist Sects* says: "Before the arrival of the three masters, the views that the Bon religion held could not be pointed out. After that, views and teachings of the Bon religion emerged. It was said that the Bon religion in the period of Cha-Bonism emerged from the Siva School." Here "the three masters" referred to the three masters of the Bon religion who were invited by Tsampo Zhigum from Kashmir, Bolue, Zhangzhung. And "the Siva School" is a kind of religious sect of India. Shitai'an pointed out in his book *Tibetan Civilization*: "Zhigunba, a famous Tibetan mythologist in the 12th century, said that when he referred to the period of Cha-Bonism, this was the starting point when philosophical system of the Bon religion came into being. He also embraces the view that the phenomenon was influenced by the teachings of the Siva School." Siva is one of principal gods of Brahmanism and Hinduism, representing the god of destruction, suffering and dance. *On Deva Nirvana* has it that the whole world was the body of Siva, and Siva, with two other gods, Brahma and Vishnu, indicated the creation, perseverance, and destruction of universe. So, sometimes, you can't find the statue of Siva to have been worshiped in

some monasteries of the Siva School, and instead, it was replaced by a cow or the male genitalia as symbols of creation. *Records on Folklore in Tibet* also recounts the process: "Thereafter, Master Qingqoin, a famous scholar of the Bon religion, introduced into Tubo the theories of six philosophical sects in the period of Buddha Sakyamuni, and combined those theories with local Bon religion to form a new theory of the Bon religion, namely Cha-Bonism."

We can learn from this that, during the period of Cha-Bonism, the Bon religion, not only eliminated or threw away much outdated cultural dross from its formal contents and forms, but also managed to introduce or assimilate foreign religious culture from India that contributed to advancing the development of society. In other words, Cha-Bonism was formed by combining the ancient Bon religion, Dor-Bonism with introduced religious ideology. After prolonged assimilation, it turned out to be a new religion with theoretical content. Certainly, the close relationship between Dor-Bonism and Cha-Bonism cannot be overlooked as the latter was formed on the foundations of the former.

Here it deserves to be mentioned that a famous figure called Shenrab Miwo played a crucial role in the development of the Bon religion, and he was regarded as its patriarch. *New Red Annals* records: "At that time, Master Shenrab Miwo, who was born in Dashi, translated many scriptures of the Bon religion in the Zhangzhung area and made efforts to propagate it (the Bon religion)." Here "at that time" refers the period of Tsampo Pude Gungyal, the son of Tsampo Zhigum. *Mirror of Genealogy of Tibetan Kings* has a more detailed account:

During the period of Tsampo Pude Gungyal, the Yongdrongling School of the Bon religion had arrived in Tubo. Its patriarch was called Shenrab Miwo, born at Ermolhingren in Dashi. Many scriptures of the Bon religion, such as the Eight-Volume Kangqinbogyi and so on, were translated in Zhanzhung and prevailed in Tubo. The Bon religion can fall into nine sects, four sects in the Cause Bon Religion, and five sects in the Effect Bon Religion. The five sects of Effect Bon Religion discuss the ways to enter its highest

stage, the Yongdrong Great Perfection. The four sects of Cause Bon Religion are Namshen Beitogyain Sect, Chishen Beicungyain Sect, Chashen Jushigyain Sect, and Dushen Cunchegyain Sect. The Namshen Beitogyain Sect was adept at calling for good fortune and increased prosperity as well as praying for the gods to cure the sick; the Chishen Beicungyain Sect engaged in death and funeral rituals, such as throwing funerary vessels and sacrificial offerings, performing rituals before the construction of one's house and tomb, and dispersing all disasters; the Chashen Jushigyain Sect usually practiced divination to tell good from evil, right from wrong; and the Dushen Cunchegyain Sect was involved in the rituals of exorcising evil spirits from the living, disciplining the corpse to prevent a ghost coming back to cause harm to the living, protecting a child from harm from ghosts, as well as practicing divination by astrology, capturing and driving off demons and ghosts. All sects used to shake rattle-drums as they practiced rituals.

The record above describes the principal content of the Yongdrong Bon Religion as well as how Shenrab Miwo, the patriarch of the Bon religion, built it up. However, as an important historical material, the record also contains errors. For instance, it points out that Master Shenra Miwo was born in Dashi, namely ancient Persia or today's Iran, which is groundless. If we analyze and deduce it from a scientific view, we will easily find that it lacks convincing historical foundation, although all historical books concerning the Bon religion stick to this view.

With regard to the doctrines of the Bon religion at that time, the famous Tibetan scholars Donggar Lobsang Chilai gave a brief account in his book *On Politico-religious System in Tibet*: "the new Bon religion was called Namshen, which denied the view of transmission of life and death, but it admitted the existence of gods and ghosts. It embraces the view that gods protect the life of human beings when they are alive, while ghosts not only control the life of human beings, but also can take their souls after death. So, people should worship gods who are protectors of human beings and drive off ghosts harming people." Until today, no historical works written by scholars of the Bon religion are

available, and the histories of the Bon religion we read today are all written by scholars of Tibetan Buddhism or from Terma, concealed treasures. *Legend of Yeshechogyé* recorded in detail religious rituals of the Bon religion: Every autumn there would be a religious ritual called "god sacrifices of the Bon religion", in which three thousand each of male yaks, sheep, goats and so on would be killed, along with one thousand each of female yaks, sheep, goat and so on. In spring there would be the sacrifice to dismember deer, in which four deer would be butchered with their four hoofs broken as a sacrifice. In summer there would be the sacrifice to commemorate their forefathers, in which wood and grain would be burned with the smoke rising to the sky. One should offer alms to redeem his life when he was sick, and the alms differed according to the economic conditions of the giver, from killing at most a thousand each of male and female animals to at least killing one male and female animal each. After one's death, animals also would be killed as sacrifice to capture or drive off any ghosts. In addition, there were other rituals such as calling for good fortune, dispersing evil spirits, divination, prediction and so on.



Lamas of the Zidru Monastery are pleasant and surprised at their own images on the screens of a video camera.