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# From a Land in the West: An Examination of the Possibility of Persian Influence on the Tibetan Bon Religion

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From a Land in the West: An Examination of the Possibility of Persian Influence on the  
Tibetan Bon Religion

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Religious Studies from  
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by

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## Introduction

Since coming to light during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bon, Tibet's "other" religion, has consistently posed a problem for Western scholarship. Claiming to be the original religion of Tibet, to the untrained eye Bon looks exactly like Tibetan Buddhism. Both Bon and Tibetan Buddhism accept a karmic worldview and have the same religious goal of reaching nirvana. They include many similar rites and even identical practices such as the practice of *dzogchen*. These overt similarities have led some scholars to view Bon simply as a variant of Buddhism that plagiarized their beliefs and chose to distinguish itself from all other schools of Buddhism in Tibet. Though these similarities clearly exist, the Bon tradition itself traces its origins thousands of years before the birth of the Buddha, claiming that their founder, Tonpa Shenrab, brought Bon to Tibet from Omlolungring (*Ol-mo lung-ring*), a land in "the west." According to Bonpos, the teachings found within their tradition belong to Tonpa Shenrab and the similarities shared between the two religions exist because Tonpa Shenrab manifested himself as the historical Buddha to teach under the guise of a new religion.

It is undeniable that throughout Tibet's history both Bon and Buddhism influenced each others' development, but what of Bon's claim of being a separate tradition that originated in a land west of Tibet? For one possible answer, scholars have turned to Persia and looked for Iranian influence within the Bon religion. This paper will investigate the possible connections between early Persian religion, in particular that of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, with Bon. First, this paper will present the theories on the origins of Bon including both the traditional explanation as well as scholarly opinions. From there, the discussion will move to a comparison between Tibet's oldest known religious practices and Zoroastrianism in an attempt to find similarities between the traditions. Following this analysis, the paper will discuss Tibet's possible knowledge

of Persia and Persian religions to see how much Tibet knew of this foreign culture. Within the Bon religion there exists remnants of a unique language that points to a distinct culture within the wider Tibetan cultural sphere. This topic will be the next focus of the paper. Next, the location of the Bon holy land as well as the figure of Tonpa Shenrab will be looked at in detail to see if they provide evidence of a connection to Persia. The paper will conclude by discussing the relationship between Persian and Bon cosmology including the theme of dualism as well as a comparison between particular Persian and Bon deities. As it stands, no hard evidence suggests that Bon originated in Persia. However, what does exist between these traditions is similar cosmological views in Zoroastrianism and the earliest known religious practices in Tibet as well as an emphasis on cosmogonical and cosmological dualism within Persian religion and Bon. Through a dialogue between Tibet's indigenous beliefs and Buddhism, Bon developed into a completely different type of religion than Zoroastrianism with fundamental differences in basic beliefs. What remained in Bon are trace elements of ancient Tibetan practices contributing to Bon's unique place in Tibetan culture. Furthermore, at some point in Bon's development the religion adopted a dualistic cosmology since it is not evident whether this dualistic cosmology existed in Tibet's early religion. These similarities, along with Bon's traditional account of its history, is what has led some scholars to place Bon's origins within a Persian context. Though certain basic similarities exist, they are not nearly strong enough to say that Bon is related to Persian religion.

#### Theories on the Origin of Bon

Bon claims to be a very ancient religion that existed in Tibet prior to the introduction of Buddhism. According to traditional Bon dating, Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Bon was born in the year 16,016 BCE and died in the year 7,816 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The legend of Tonpa

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer*, (Brill: Boston, 2001), 10

Shenrab states that he was born a prince in Olmolungring in the land of Tagzig (*sTag-zig*). Though not specific, Tagzig has always been placed to the west of Tibet within the Bon tradition. While tracking a demon, Tonpa Shenrab came to Tibet and taught its inhabitants the teachings of Bon. From that point on Bon remained the prominent religion in Tibet and was propagated by its kings until the introduction of Buddhism. Songsten Gampo, who ruled the Tibetan Empire during the 7<sup>th</sup> century was the first Tibetan king to bring Buddhism into Tibet's cultural fold. Though significant to many Tibetan Buddhists, it seems that Songsten Gampo's introduction of Buddhism had little affect on Tibet's culture at first and according to Bon tradition, Bon continued to be the driving force in Tibet's religious life as well as Tibet's state religion. Bon would lose its status as Tibet's state religion under the rule of Trisong Detsen during the 8<sup>th</sup> century who adopted Buddhism and invited the great yogic master Padmasambhava as well as the great monastic figure Shantarakshita to establish the religion in the country. As Bon tradition tells it, many of the ministers and other governmental officials who remained loyal to Bon were exiled in 784 so that Buddhism could truly become the dominant religious and political force in Tibet.<sup>2</sup> This event created the fundamental tension between Bon and Tibetan Buddhism that has remained throughout Tibet's history. After this point in history, Bon would never regain its prominence it once had in Tibet.

When Bon was first studied by Western scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many scholars placed the religion under the broad category of “Shamanism.” To these early scholars, “Black magic, fetishism, sorcery, divination, demonolatr, necromancy, exorcism, ecstatic trance, spirit possession, and various other supernatural powers were all thought to lie at the heart of Bon Shamanism.”<sup>3</sup> Of these early scholars, none was as

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- 2 Alexander Berzin, “Bon and Tibetan Buddhism,” The Berzin Archives, [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/comparison\\_buddhist\\_traditions/tibetan\\_traditions/bon\\_tibetan\\_buddhism.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/comparison_buddhist_traditions/tibetan_traditions/bon_tibetan_buddhism.html) (accessed April 9, 2010).
- 3 Zeff Bjerken, “Exorcising the Illusion of Bon 'Shamans': A Critical Genealogy of Shamanism in Tibetan Religion,” Digital Himalaya,

influential as Helmut Hoffman. Hoffman attributed much to the early field of Bonpo studies and “is recognized as the first scholar to explore the Bon tradition in any serious or systematic way.”<sup>4</sup> Hoffman recognized that Bon had existed in two distinct phases, which he described as “the profound changes of the Bon from primitive paganism towards a heretical sect of Lamaism.”<sup>5</sup> According to Hoffmann, these profound changes occurred during the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. Bon then incorporated an extraordinary amount of Buddhist religious material into its own religion including the doctrine of karma, the six realms of existence, and the goal of nirvana. While adopting these Buddhist beliefs, Bon still maintained its “shamanistic” tendencies leading to Hoffmann's designation of Bon as “a heretical sect of Lamaism.” Though Hoffmann's work set the foundation for further Bon studies, his view of Bon was simply that, “a heretical sect of Lamaism.” In describing Bon after its adoption of Buddhist ideas, Hoffmann states “just as the medieval Satanists desecrated the Host, so the Bon-po turned their sacred objects not in dextral but in a sinister fashion.”<sup>6</sup> Hoffmann clearly judges Bon and depicts the religion in a negative light viewing it as a perversion of the Buddhist religion. While Hoffmann's influence on the field of Bon studies is undeniable, his clear Buddhist bias has caused most scholars to reject his views of the Bon religion. Rather, more modern scholarship attempts to understand Bon on its own terms rather than interpreting the religion as a negative shamanistic force that willfully attempted to distort the Buddhist tradition.

One of the first scholars to view Bon as its own tradition is David Snellgrove.

Snellgrove spent much time living and working with various Bonpo scholars throughout his career showing no Buddhist bias that was so prevalent in Hoffmann's work. While

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[http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret\\_06\\_01.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_06_01.pdf) (accessed April 9, 2010).

4 Bjerken.

5 W. Hessig, review of *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion*, by Helmut Hoffmann, *Folklore Studies* 10, no. 1

6 Bjerken.

Hoffmann viewed Bon as existing in two phases, one prior to the introduction of Buddhism and the other post Buddhism's introduction to Tibet, Snellgrove says that “although Bon has often been understood by Western Scholars as referring primarily to certain (never clearly specified) pre-Buddhist religious practices of the Tibetans...the term Bon is in fact never used in early Tibetan works with any such meaning.”<sup>7</sup> He further states that the term *bon* originally referred to a class of priests that would perform religious rituals, rather than an organized religion. To Snellgrove, the word Bon, which designates the religion today, came into use “in deliberate opposition to the new use of *chos*, which now had the meaning of Sanskrit *dharma* limited specifically to the religion of Shakyamuni.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the tension that exists between the two traditions, Bon forming after the introduction of Buddhism would account for the many Buddhist ideas prevalent in Bon like karma, reincarnation, and the six realms of existence, being that Bon simply took these ideas from Buddhism. For whatever reason then, Bon attempted to remain distinct from Buddhism while simultaneously adopting ideas from the new religion. Therefore, the Bon that Tibetans practice today has little to no resemblance to any pre-Buddhist religion, but rather came into being as a form of Buddhism that for whatever reason decided to remain distinct from other forms of Buddhism practiced in Tibet.

Samten Karmay has a different interpretation however. According to Karmay, the key to the origins of Bon lies in Zhang-Zhung, a land in Western Tibet. Zhang-Zhung became the last part of Tibet that was incorporated into the Tibetan Empire between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries lending to its unique place in Tibetan culture. Citing the similarities between the description of Olmolungring and the area around Mt. Kailash, Karmay concludes “Ol-mo lung-ring must probably therefore be identified as the area around Kailasa which was once the central part of Zhang-zhung.”<sup>9</sup> Mt. Kailash has long been

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7 David Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 20.

8 Snellgrove, 20

9 Samten Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A History of Bon* (New York: Oxford University Press,

known as a holy site for religions of the Indian subcontinent. For Hindus, the mountain is the abode of Shiva. Many sites surrounding the mountain are also associated with Padmasambhava's introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. Interestingly enough, Mt. Kailash has also demonstrated the tension between Bon and Buddhism. In the biography of the Buddhist saint Milarepa, there is an account of him battling a Bonpo master over control of the sacred mountain. Milarepa's powers eventually overwhelm the Bonpo master claiming Mt. Kailash for the Buddhists as well as representing Buddhism's triumph over the religion of Bon. Since Mt. Kailash has religious significance to many religions, Karmay speculates that the population surrounding Mt. Kailash could have learned various beliefs from Buddhists and Hindus traveling to the mountain. When Buddhism was formally introduced to Tibet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Bon had already adopted beliefs that paralleled those found in Buddhism from earlier contact with Indian religions. Though proponents of this theory believe that Bon, as it is known today, formed during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, what developed was a continuation of these religions practices from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The source of Bon, then, lies within the wider Tibetan cultural sphere. However Bon's homeland does not fall under the original territory claimed by the Central Tibetan regime, which could have caused Bon's designation of coming from outside of Tibet. To Karmay, this region west of Central Tibet became the location where, along with indigenous beliefs, ideas from Buddhism and Hinduism were adopted by the peoples of Mt. Kailash forming the basis for the Bon religion.

When compared to Snellgrove, Karmay cites the most evidence to support his claims of Bon existing in some form before the introduction of Buddhism. Karmay's theory also posits that Tibetans knew of the Bon tradition during the Royal Period of Tibetan history between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century. Karmay cites two documents from the Dunhuang caves discovered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that likely date from Tibet's Royal Period to support

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1972), xxx.



this claim. The first document is Pelliot Tibetan 972. According to Karmay, “the author remarks that ordinary men have faith in Bon, described as *mu stegs*, the 'non-Buddhist religion'.”<sup>10</sup> This document sets up Buddhism in opposition to the pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet, likening “the adherent of Bon to an insect caught in a spider's web: the more he struggles, the more the web tightens around him.”<sup>11</sup> Karmay assumes that *mu stegs* naturally refers to Bon; however he does not necessarily explain his assumption. Regardless of whether *mu stegs* refers to Bon, this text portrays *mu stegs* in a negative light and proclaims Buddhism's superiority, showing that an alternative religion does exist and demonstrating the inevitable tension between Buddhism and Tibet's indigenous religion mirrored so well in Bon's traditional accounts of Tibetan history.

The document *PT 239/II*, one concerning funeral rites, also sets up this contrast between Buddhism and Bon. The text states “the tradition of ‘black men’, the customs of black funerary rites, the Bon (religion) is the archetypal myth of rituals which require the ritual objects of offering.” On the other hand, the text describes Buddhism as “the tradition of white gods’ religion, the customs of ‘white men’, the religion of white funerary rites.”<sup>12</sup> This text does not contain the ambiguity of the first text Karmay cites since it clearly names a particular ritual system with the label “bon.” The theme remains though that Buddhism is superior to whatever religion or religions that existed in Tibet, demonstrating the need for Buddhism to establish itself over these indigenous practices, which in this particular case would be funeral rites.

Another text from Dunhuang again demonstrates that there was another at least somewhat organized religion in Tibet that could oppose Buddhism. The text states that “previously in Tibet, internment was practiced according to the Bon religion.”<sup>13</sup> This

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10 Samten Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies of History, Myths, Rituals, and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998), 159.

11 Karmay, 1998, 159.

12 Karmay, 1998, 160.

13 Sam van Shaik, “Buddhism and Bon IV: What is bon anyway?”, Early Tibet,

passage then relates to a specific practice exclusive to a religion referred to as Bon. The importance of Karmay's theory that Bon formed around Mt. Kailash before the introduction of Buddhism is that this theory is closer to the traditional history of Bon, being that a set of religious practices referred to as "bon" by the new religion of Buddhism, in one form or another, was common throughout the landscape by the time that Buddhism came to Tibet. According to tradition, Tonpa Shenrab brought the Bon teaching to Tibet from a land in the West. Though the historicity of this claim can be disputed, there appear to be shared aspects between Bon and religions that originated in Persia. Since Buddhism clearly set itself up in opposition to these religious practices they classified as Bon, these religious practices seem to be the basis of the Bon tradition, proving that Bon is more than simple plagiarism of Buddhism. The fact that there were religious practices referred to as Bon by Buddhists suggests that Buddhism was not the source for the tradition, which Bon itself claims is Tonpa Shenrab, a man from the West.

#### The Royal Religion of Tibet

When looking at Bon's claim to be the indigenous religion of Tibet, it becomes important to understand what religious practices existed prior to Buddhism's introduction and if these practices see any forms of continuation in the later Bon faith. According to legend, the first seven kings of the Yarlung valley and supposed founders of what would eventually be the Tibetan empire were semi-divine beings who were connected to heaven through a daemon cord attached to their head. When these mythical kings passed away, their bodies would dissolve into light leaving no body behind. This direct connection with heaven came to an end however when the last of these seven kings Drigum Tsenpo's (*Gri-gum-bstan-po*) chord was cut by a rebellious minister leaving Drigum Tsenpo's body to remain on earth. Drigum Tsenpo's death created a new need for a royal death ritual. According to the story, *bon-po* priests from Zhang-zhung filled this need and began a

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<http://earlytibet.com/2009/08/24/buddhism-and-bon-iv/> (accessed on Nov. 1, 2009).

tradition of royal burials in Tibet.<sup>14</sup> The few things known about Tibet's indigenous religion stem from the remains of these particular tombs and presents a religion that is clearly contrary to many ideas shared by both later Bon and Buddhism.

Compiled from certain Dunhuang manuscripts as well as archeological remains from Tibetan tombs, evidence is clear that "the Tibetans believed in two regions of the dead: one was a land in which men and animals lived a continued life of joy and plenty, the other was a region of darkness and suffering."<sup>15</sup> Not only did Tibetans posit a linear worldview with death as a definite end, they believed that those lucky enough to reach this Tibetan version of heaven would at the end of times be resurrected to live in this world anew. In order to arrive at the land of joy and plenty, the spirit of the dead would have to face many challenges that required possessions found in worldly life. The funeral ritual would include offerings of food, clothing, and other objects that were felt to be needed in this next life. Along with material objects, animals were also sacrificed in order to help the deceased in his journey; offerings were also made to various malignant spirits in order to ensure that they would not interfere with the funeral process. Chinese sources along with some Tibetan sources report that along with animal sacrifice, human sacrifice occurred within this system "to provide a 'ransom' for the deceased or to provide him with servants or companions."<sup>16</sup> Sacrifice of living beings and the idea of an afterlife as well as a resurrection conflict with the teachings of Bon and Buddhism. Both Bon and Buddhism propose a cyclical worldview in which sentient beings are reborn within six realms of existence until they awaken and understand the fundamental truths of the universe. Despite these fundamental differences between Tibet's indigenous religion and what Bon now espouses, many aspects of this funeral rite as well as specific terminology from this period of Tibetan history continue to this day in Bon rituals.

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14 Per Kvaerne, *A Death Ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos* (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1985), 6.

15 Kvaerne, 1985, 7.

16 Kvaerne, 1985, 7.

This can most clearly be seen in the present-day Bon funeral ritual. Instead of focusing on a journey to a heaven however, the Bon funeral now centers on consciousness transference. The goal of consciousness transference is to guide the deceased's consciousness to a higher rebirth or ideally to nirvana. Though the goal of the funerary rite accommodates different ontological beliefs, many aspects of the modern ritual reference the ritual of the ancient Tibetans. The Bon ritual begins by offering "a small figure of dough in the shape of a man, representing the deceased."<sup>17</sup> The Bonpos use this offering in a similar way as the ancient Tibetans used sacrifice, mainly as a form of appeasement and distraction to the malignant spirits who could do the ritual harm. The dough figure, or *glud*, as well as other offering cakes are thrown away outside of the house of the deceased in an attempt to lead the spirits out of the house so that the ritual can continue uninhibited. Tibetan Buddhists also offer a *glud* in their funerary rites. Due to Buddhism's status as a foreign religion, Tibetan Buddhists must have adopted this practice of *glud* from an indigenous source, most likely the Bon religion. The *glud* marks a uniquely Tibetan aspect of the ritual that by crossing the borders of Buddhism and Bon references the ancient religious practices of Tibet.

Another holdover found in the ritual of the Bon funeral can be seen in the use of offerings to the deceased; however instead of an offering of physical objects, Bonpos use *tsag-li* or ritual cards with pictures of the represented offerings. The first round of these offerings correspond to the six senses accepted by Bonpos and Buddhists: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought. Each offering then is in reference to these senses. For example, a card with pictures of musical instruments represents an offering of the enjoyment of sound while a card with food on it represents the enjoyment of taste. The

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<sup>17</sup> Kvaerne, 1985, 13.

represented offerings give “a wide range of precious or useful objects in connection with the burial of the kings.”<sup>18</sup> The offerings made in this ritual echo those offerings made during the ancient royal funerals, however instead of offering physical objects, the offerings are represented in the form of these ritual cards. Though no longer perceived as objects necessary for use in the afterlife, the ritual references elements of the old funeral rites and reinterprets them to fit into this new religious context.

Similarly, the next category of *tsag-li* offered portrays six animals, yak, horse, sheep, *khyung* or garuda (a mythical bird), dragon, and lion, which in this ritual context represent the six mental qualities. The first three animals, the yak, horse and sheep, “played an important role in the ancient religion with which the *bon-po* priests were associated, being sacrificed in the course of the mortuary rituals.”<sup>19</sup> Each of these animals had a specific function for the deceased in the old Tibetan ritual. The sheep would lead the deceased to the land of the dead, the horse would be a mount for the deceased, and the yak would either fight demons on the way or lead them astray. The *khyung*, dragon, and lion, all mythical creatures, represent sky, atmosphere, and snow-mountain, a cosmological scheme common to many regions of Tibet. After all these material desires have been offered to the deceased, he becomes “like a king”<sup>20</sup> invoking the royalty that the ancient ritual once served. Now that the deceased has received these offerings, the deceased can face the deities that will confront him in the intermediate state between death and rebirth.

This Bon funeral ritual clearly draws heavily on the rituals of Tibet’s ancient religion. Not only has the Bon ritual incorporated many of the materials used for the ancient ritual symbolically through the use of *tsag-li*, both rituals essentially serve a similar purpose. Despite the different beliefs in the afterlife, both rituals prepare the deceased for what

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18 Kvaerne, 1985, 17.

19 Kvaerne, 1985, 19.

20 Kvaerne, 1985, 19.

they will face in the hereafter. For the ancient ritual, the material objects buried with the deceased as well as the animals sacrificed provided the deceased with goods that would help him reach heaven. The modern Bon ritual symbolically provides the same goods to the deceased in order to fulfill his material desires. Once these desires have been fulfilled, he can then recognize the many deities he will encounter in hopes that he will react appropriately and achieve enlightenment. Both rituals give the deceased the ability to reach a place of everlasting joy, whether it be heaven or nirvana. Bon, though having fundamental differences in belief, references this ancient ritual and recasts its performance through the lens of a samsaric worldview, combining indigenous practices with imported beliefs.

As seen with the death ritual, the fact that present-day Bon draws heavily from the ancient religious practices of Tibet cannot be denied. Along with the death ritual, R.A. Stein points out that many particular words found in the Dunhuang documents discussing *bon-po* are carried over to later Bon documents. This evidence suggests that the form of Bon that developed during the 11<sup>th</sup> century saw itself inline with Tibet's previous religious traditions. By using specific vocabulary to reference the old tradition of Tibet, these Bon texts invoke a sense of continuation from the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet despite Bon's incorporation of many foreign ideas. This ancient religion clearly influenced the Bon religion as it is known today, with the authors of much of the principal 11<sup>th</sup> century Bon texts looking to Tibet's ancient traditions as a source of inspiration or perhaps legitimacy.

All this suggests strong connections between present-day Bon and Tibet's ancient religion, bolstering Bon's claims to predate Buddhism in Tibet. However, Bon further claims to originate outside of Tibet, to the west. If similarities between Tibet's ancient religion and the religious traditions of Persia exist, then these similarities could help legitimize Bon's claim of originating in "the west". It is to these connections that this

paper now turns.

### Zoroastrianism

Like the ancient practices of India, the religion of ancient Persia stems from an Aryan Vedic tradition. The focus of the religion seems to be ritual and sacrifice involving *haoma*, the Iranian word for soma, an unknown substance used to invoke altered states of consciousness for ritual purposes. Western scholarship famously has viewed Zoroaster as a reformer of this basic Indo-Iranian religion. Rather than a sacrificial system, Zoroaster emphasized the worship of Ahura Mazda, a supreme God for whom Zoroaster acted as prophet. Though Zoroaster as a reformer is the common portrait of this prophet, when comparing the old and young forms of the *Avesta*, the principle text for Zoroastrianism, there appears to be a continuation of the Iranian practices of sacrifice, bringing into question how much of a reformer Zoroaster really was. Furthermore, there is the question of the cosmological perspective of the religion, whether its worldview is monotheistic, dualistic, or some combination of both. By answering these questions and tracing what is known about the basic practices and beliefs of Zoroastrianism, its potential influence on Bon can be determined.

The *Avesta* as it is now known by scholars was discovered during the 18<sup>th</sup> century within groups of Zoroastrians living in India. The manuscripts found were relatively late, stemming from the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. onward. By analyzing its script, scholars have determined that the *Avestan* script was invented between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prior to a script, the Zoroastrians maintained the *Avesta* through oral transmission much like the Vedas in India. The text itself is divided into two parts, the Old Avesta and the Young Avesta. The Young Avesta appears to have been composed over a period of roughly a thousand years, with its oldest parts dating from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, while the new sections date to around the same time as the invention of the script. The Old Avesta,

consisting of five *Gathas* or “songs,” appears as a more homogenous work than the Young Avesta making it hard to determine if any particular *Gatha* is older than any of the others. Based on the “archaic character of Old Avestan as opposed to Young Avestan or Old Persian, most scholars today wisely put a lapse of about four centuries between the two groups,”<sup>21</sup> dating the Old Avesta to approximately 1000 B.C.E. Zoroastrianism clearly originated deep in the past, as demonstrated by its central texts; it thus predates any material evidence available on Tibetan religion by some 1500 years.

When the Avesta was first studied, scholars viewed the contents of the Old Avesta as autobiographical sermons given by Zoroaster. These teachings were taken as Zoroaster’s attempts to reform ancient Iranian religion. However, more recent scholarship has generally viewed the text of the Old Avesta as hymns to the gods used for the performance of sacrifices. Since there are no other Iranian texts dating from the same time as the Old Avesta, scholars have had to compare the Old Avesta to the Vedas, especially the Rg Veda, in their analyses and interpretation of Zoroaster’s *Gathas*. These comparative interpretations with the Vedas have shown that the Old Avesta and the Vedas stem from “a single common linguistic and cultural background” and that both texts “belonged to the same literary genre,”<sup>22</sup> sharing similar ideas on ritual and religion.

One of these shared ideas is that of cosmic order, known as *Aša* in the Old Avesta.

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21 Jean Kellens, *Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2000), 100.

22 Clarisse Herrenschmidt, “Zarathustra’s Ritual: Conserving a Charismatic Domination?”, *History of Religions* 43, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176571?origin=JSTOR-pdf>, (accessed on Januray 22, 2010), 3.



Corresponding to the Vedic idea of *rta*, maintaining *Aša* becomes the goal of ritual in the Old Avesta. Both *Aša* and *rta* refer to the ordered structure of the cosmos and “is the fundamental principle of the Mazdean cosmogony”<sup>23</sup>. These rituals preserve the order of the universe by presenting offerings to deities. Unlike the Vedas, which discuss many different deities to perform sacrifices to, the Old Avesta contains only rituals to be performed to the high god of Zoroastrianism: Ahura Mazda. The supremacy of Ahura Mazda in the Old Avesta is what makes Zoroastrianism unique within the greater Indo-Iranian tradition and is the reason why many people consider Zoroastrianism to be the first monotheistic religion. In the Old Avesta, the source of *Aša* is solely Ahura Mazda who “engendered it [*Aša*] at the dawn of time, which makes it an abstraction that defines the ideal functioning of the universe, as well as a minor god.”<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of time when Ahura Mazda first created *Aša*, the deity started natural cycles that would allow life to flourish in the world. Though Ahura Mazda started these cycles, he did not finish them, making ritual necessary. Since Ahura Mazda did not make these cycles eternal, “the primordial achievement must be magnified, for if not, the god might allow the work to be undone.”<sup>25</sup> Along with reminding the creator of his duty to help keep *Aša*, “the god must be aided in maintaining the permanent cohesion of the universe.”<sup>26</sup> Not only does ritual serve as worship to the deity, but it also maintains *Aša* itself. By performing ritual, Zoroastrians commemorate Ahura Mazda as the producer of order as well as mimic the deity by producing order within the ritual itself, referencing the beginning of time and the creation of the cosmos.

Another key difference between the Old Avesta and the Vedas is how each tradition views the opposite of cosmic order. The Vedas view the opposite of *rta* simply as the

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23 Kellens, 2000, 101.

24 Kellens, 2000, 101.

25 Kellens, 2000, 101.

26 Kellens, 2000, 101.

negation of *rta* or *anrta*: disorder. In the Old Avesta, the opposite of *Aša* is not a simple negation of the term; rather the term gets its own noun *druj-*, which in its most basic sense approximates to “deception”. This “deception” however does not equate to disorder, rather *druj-* refers to “a bad order, a false or deceptive order.”<sup>27</sup> Since *druj-* implies a false and deceptive order, the Old Avesta adds a particular moral judgment to this force opposing *Aša*, a judgment not readily apparent in the Vedas’ discussion of *anrta*. This distinction between *Aša* and *druj-* then indicates another theme prevalent in Zoroastrianism: dualism. The Old Avesta associates *Aša* with “the order of the day which is real, certain, because it can be seen,”<sup>28</sup> while *druj-* becomes associated with “the indistinct, mystifying, and threatening order of the night.”<sup>29</sup> These two forces are eternally in opposition with one another, with each having a distinct type of order. By performing the rituals described in the Old Avesta, Zoroastrians help the world remain in the right order associated with *Aša* while preventing the wrong order associated with *druj-*. This framework pervades the Zoroastrian tradition, lending it a dualistic view of the world focused on right and wrong and the eventual triumph of good over evil. Unlike the in Vedas, dualism provides both ethical and cosmological explanations of the universe, emphasizing *Aša* as right and *druj-* as wrong.

Along with maintaining *Aša* and worshiping Ahura Mazda, the rituals of the Old Avesta promise worldly benefits as well as benefits in the afterlife. The ritual starts with the invocation of particular gods followed by offerings that give strength to the gods and help assure their immortality. By providing these things, the performers hope to receive the same power and eventually immortality from the gods. The gifts that the performers give mirror what they hope to receive from the ritual, meaning that in order to obtain immortality from the gods, they must offer immortality to the gods. The ritual

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27 Kellens, 2000, 101.

28 Kellens, 2000, 101.

29 Kellens, 2000, 101.

accomplishes this task by offering the soul or *uruuan* of a sacrificed cow. The soul of the cow “arrives in the divine world by the ritual road and is...the substitute of the human *uruuan* and travels in anticipation of the road that it will one day travel toward the beyond.”<sup>30</sup> Along with the *uruuan* of the cow, the performer gives a particular part of his soul known as the *daena* to escort the soul of the cow on its journey. With giving offerings to Ahura Mazda and various other deities within the Zoroastrian pantheon, this ritual anticipates the demise of the performer and helps prepare them for the journey he will take upon his death. If he has served Ahura Mazda during his life, the practitioner will travel this very same road to “the infinite lights and the tent of Ahura Mazda”<sup>31</sup> upon his death. If he has not served Ahura Mazda and therefore has aided *druj-*, he will travel to the “long darkness and the tent of the Lie.”<sup>32</sup> Again, the dualism is very apparent with two separate realms, with one realm associated with *Aša* and the other associated with *druj-*. Ritual as presented in the Old Avesta demonstrates how worshiping Ahura Mazda assists the preservation of right order and triumph of light. By offering strength and immortality to the gods, the performer aids their continuing struggle against *druj-* as well as prepares himself for his eventual death.

With ideas of light and dark permeating Zoroastrianism, the struggle between good and evil lends itself to an eschatological worldview and the belief of an impending victory of truth over lie. In the end of times, Ahura Mazda will finally defeat *druj-* and its associated deities and establish a rule of everlasting goodness and light. While dualism of light and dark creates a conflict to be resolved in the eschaton, the eschatology of Zoroastrianism reinforces the supremacy of Ahura Mazda, demonstrating the more monotheistic aspects of the tradition. In Zoroastrianism, the eschaton becomes “the triumph of monotheism, the good God Ahura Mazda having at last won his way through

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30 Kellens 2000, 102.

31 Kellens, 2000, 102.

32 Kellens, 2000, 102.

to complete and final ascendancy.”<sup>33</sup> These conflicting views of dualism and monotheism lead to a unique worldview that attempts to deal with the problem of evil that is inherent in all monotheistic traditions. Ahura Mazda is supreme and all good, yet there remains another force that causes suffering in existence whose source is not Ahura Mazda. This distinct paradigm has led James W. Boyd and Donald A. Crosby to conclude that “Zoroastrianism combines cosmogonic dualism with eschatological monotheism” resulting in “a religious outlook that cannot be categorized as either straightforward dualism or straightforward monotheism.”<sup>34</sup> Once the eschaton arrives and Ahura Mazda is victorious, this cosmological dualism will cease to exist leaving only *Aša* and no *druj*-. Before the eschaton arrives however, “there is a vital truth to dualism”<sup>35</sup> that dictates morality and ritual within the tradition. Clearly, it is hard to consider Zoroastrianism as either exclusively dualistic or exclusively monotheistic, but through eschatology the tradition reconciles these beliefs, providing a distinct framework for the religion.

Now the question becomes, what traits of Zoroastrianism are to be found in Tibet’s ancient religion? First, both religions believe in an afterlife that is divided into two realms: a realm of goodness and a realm of suffering. Over time, the beliefs and practices that were born out of the Vedic tradition would accept a cyclical worldview dominated by the ideas of rebirth and karma. The idea of reincarnation is commonly depicted as being introduced with the earliest Upanishads, a religious development which focused on the esoteric meaning of the Vedas rather than the sacrificial instructions that the text prescribed. Considering that the Vedas and the *Avesta* are similar texts from seemingly related traditions, the fact the Zoroastrianism maintains to this day a linear worldview remains unique to other traditions related to the Indo-Iranian religion. Tibet’s ancient

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33 James W. Boyd and Donald A. Crosby, “Is Zoroastrianism Dualistic or Monotheistic?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, no. 4 (1979), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1462275> (accessed on January 22, 2010), 575.

34 Boyd and Crosby, 1979, 558.

35 Boyd and Crosby, 1979, 558.

religion, like Zoroastrianism, also believed in a dualistic afterlife where one would spend eternity upon death; Bon, upon organizing in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, adopted a karmic world view such as is posited by the Upanishads. Both religions, then, provide a similar view on death and the afterlife that has disappeared from related traditions but remains in Zoroastrianism. Despite these similarities, however apparent, it is not enough evidence to conclude whether Zoroastrianism had any specific influence on Tibet's ancient religious practices simply since so many other religions share this particular view.

Along with similar views on the afterlife, both religions believe in a physical resurrection. For Zoroastrianism, this resurrection will come when Ahura Mazda defeats *druj-*, creating an eschatological shift in the universe. Scholars have pointed out that the ancient Tibetan religion too believed in a physical resurrection, though the exact details of what that resurrection entails are scarce. Since the idea of reincarnation so thoroughly integrates in Tibetan culture through both Buddhism and Bon, at some point during the religious development of the people of Tibet they must have abandoned the belief in an afterlife and eventual resurrection. The ancient religion of Tibet must have abandoned this belief too as it evolved into the Bon religion as it is known today, as was the trend throughout the subcontinent. As previously mentioned, Zoroastrianism never abandoned this belief despite the tendency of other related traditions. A possible reason for Zoroastrianism maintaining the belief in the afterlife is its fundamental belief in an eschaton. Without an eschaton, there could be no ultimate supremacy of Ahura Mazda and without an afterlife, there could be no resurrection. Perhaps then an eschaton was not fundamental to Tibet's ancient religion like it is to Zoroastrianism. If there was not such an emphasis on an eschaton, there would exist a critical difference between Zoroastrianism and Tibet's ancient religion bringing into question the source of Tibet's ancient tradition and Bon itself. Due to its unique fundamental belief of an eschaton

within the realm of Vedic traditions, it seems that if Zoroastrianism was indeed the source of religion within Tibet, Bon would have kept a strong emphasis on a resurrection and eschaton instead of eventually accepting a karmic worldview.

Another similarity found in both religions is a theme of journey to the next realm. Through a ritual context, each religion offers a means to prepare the individual for the trip he will undertake as he travels into the realm of the dead. The main difference when comparing each religion's ritual is the point of time that the ritual is performed. Zoroastrianism performs its ritual for the beneficiary in anticipation for his eventual death while also paying homage to Ahura Mazda and his entourage. The ancient Tibetan religion as well as the Bon ritual however are performed posthumously and serve to guide the soul or consciousness of the dead into the next realm, whether it is envisioned as a place or a state. All three rituals imply a sacrifice, though Bon makes offerings through *glud* as opposed to the physical sacrifices of Zoroastrianism and the ancient Tibetan religion. Through sacrifice, both Zoroastrianism and the ancient Tibetan religion provide companions for the journey into the next realm. While the ancient Tibetan religion makes these sacrifices for the benefit of the deceased, Zoroastrianism rather has the beneficiary offer a particular part of his soul to be a companion for the soul of the sacrificed cow as it travels to Ahura Mazda.

Zoroastrianism's cosmology also always directs their ritual as a means to serve Ahura Mazda. Helmut Hoffman in his research of Bon believed that evidence suggested that in Bon's ancient practices there existed what he refers to as "supreme being ideology,"<sup>36</sup> which would give Tibet's old tradition a high god that would appear very similar to Ahura Mazda. This claim however was later debunked by the research of R.A. Stein and Giuseppe Tucci who "found no support for the 'supreme being ideology'"<sup>37</sup> and

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36 Bjerken.

37 Bjerken

certainly any remnants of a high god on the level of Ahura Mazda no longer exist in Bon's modern form. Also, the Zoroastrian ritual attempts to mimic Ahura Mazda in his creation of the universe by maintaining *Aša* and ensuring his impending victory over *druj-*. For Zoroastrians, Ahura Mazda dictates the reason and the context of the ritual making him the focus and goal of the rite. Without more material on Tibet's ancient practices, whether or not the overwhelming presence of a high god that Ahura Mazda plays in Zoroastrianism exists within ancient Tibet's cosmology cannot be said. These differences clearly show that these rituals were far from identical. What the religions share then is an emphasis on being prepared for whatever awaits in the journey to the next world, though many key differences do exist in how in their ritual, which again questions Bon's Persian heritage.

The similarities found between these religions seem to share basic common assumptions about the nature of the afterlife. Both religions believe in a realm for the dead divided into two separate spheres, a resurrection, as well as a journey to that next realm. In the legend of the Yarlung kings, upon the death of Drigum Tsenpo, *bon-po* priests were invited from Zhang-zhung to perform the king's funerary rites. Since Zhang-zhung became a base for foreign influence, the funerary rites brought by the *bon-po* priests could have originated in Persia. The fact that these similarities exist however does not prove that Persia was the source of Tibet's ancient religion. Many religions share these beliefs that are found in Zoroastrianism and Tibet's ancient religion. Due to the old age of Zoroastrianism, the religion became incredibly influential in the development of many religions of the Near East, especially Judaism and Christianity. Zoroastrianism could be an original source for these ideas such as resurrection and an afterlife divided into two realms, however until more particulars of Tibet's ancient religions are uncovered, many of the defining characteristics of Zoroastrianism cannot be adequately

compared in detail to Tibet's ancient religion, leaving the true source of the religious life of ancient Tibet a mystery.

### Tibet's Knowledge of Persia

Tibet is often portrayed as a country in isolation that knew very little of the modern world until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Tibet has had much contact with the outside world and has been subject to its influence. For instance, Tibet's early medieval period was a time of transregional activity; Tibetans had extensive contact with the regions and culture of Central Asia, China, and India. By the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Turks had established an empire that "impinged on the borders of all the great Old World Civilizations, including the Central Asia city-states and India."<sup>38</sup> The Turks' main objective once they were established was to encourage trade between their neighbors. Once trade had begun, economic prosperity followed, allowing for stability and education to take root. A key sign for cultural progress is the development of language and literacy; Beckwith notes, "by the end of the seventh century, nearly all of settled Eurasia had become literate."<sup>39</sup> Tibet was also subject to this trend of language development. The Tibetan king Trisong Detsan set up a massive translation project where "a huge number of Sanskrit works (and some Central Asian and Chinese texts) entered Tibetan Culture."<sup>40</sup> Along with fostering cultural development within all these regions, trade naturally encouraged intercultural contact, causing an exchange of ideas between different ethnic and religious groups. Central Asia became so fundamental to the economic powers involved that frequent wars between all interested parties, including wars fought between Tibet, Persia, and Arabia were fairly common during this time period. The fall of the Tibetan Empire around the year 840 is intimately tied with the collapse of trade with Central Asia and the Turks. By

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38 Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 178.

39 Beckwith, 1993, 180.

40 Beckwith, 1993, 183.



the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Central Asia had fallen into an economic depression causing mass dissolution of the empires that were involved. In Tibetan history, this marks the beginning of the Dark Age, where the empire fell apart and there were no forms of monastic Buddhism. Tibet clearly was subject to trends found throughout Eurasia, showing its extensive connections with the Turkish trade routes. The trade between Tibet and Central Asia not only acted in the trade of goods, but the trade of ideas as well, presenting a means for Tibet to gain knowledge of other cultures throughout this time period.

Along with the inevitable exchanges of ideas along the Turkish trade routes, the Tibetan court of Trisong Detsan appeared to have direct knowledge of Manichaeism. Manichaeism was a gnostic religion founded by the Persian prophet Mani who lived from 216 CE to 276 CE. Mani viewed himself as a great synthesizer of religious traditions. He adopted “the doctrine of the fundamental struggle between Spirit and Matter as the basis for the solution of the problem of evil” from Zoroastrianism, while he looked to Buddhism for “the essential lessons for conduct of life.”<sup>41</sup> Mani also had great reverence for the figure of Jesus and viewed him as living the ideal life. Though Mani's syncretistic teachings appealed to a wide base of people, his teachings were often deemed heretical by the religions who influenced him with Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Christians alike viewing Manichaeism with particular suspicion. In a written defense of the choice to make Buddhism the state religion of Tibet, Trisong Detsan makes a reference to this Persian religion. He states “the great Persian heretic Mar Ma ne of insatiable heresy has borrowed (something) from all systems in order to fabricate a system deviating from all others.”<sup>42</sup> R.A Stein claims that “Mar Ma Ne” corresponds to the Chinese “Mo Mo-ni,”

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41 Mary Boyce, “An Introduction to Manichaeism,” *The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies*, <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/Manichaeism/manichaeism.htm> (accessed on April 12, 2010).

42 Geza Uray, “Tibet’s Connections with Nestorianism and Manichaeism in the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History, and Culture*, ed. Ernst Steinkeller and Helmut Tasucher

the name of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, as it is found in Chinese documents from the 8th century. This vague reference indicates that the Tibetan court knew about the religion of Manichaeism. By the time of Trisong Detsan's rule, Manichaeism had already established itself in China. In 732, an edict by the Chinese emperor Hsuan-tsung actually condemned Manichaeism as posing as Buddhism,<sup>43</sup> so Tibetan knowledge of Manichaeism could have come from China.

The source of this knowledge is difficult to determine since the Tibetan court's feelings towards Manichaeism could have been easily inherited from China's court which also viewed the religion suspiciously, however the language used in Trisong Detsan's endorsement of Buddhism seems to suggest another possibility besides indirect knowledge of Persia through China. Tibetans were certainly in the habit of borrowing words from Chinese, but in the text, the word used for "Persian" is *par sig*, which does not correspond to the Chinese word for "Persian," *po-szu*. Previous scholars assumed that *par sig* had been derived from Sanskrit. However, the Sanskrit word for "Persian" is *parasika*, which would not be transliterated into Tibetan as *par sig*. "This Tibetan form can only be explained as borrowing either from Sogdian or from early Middle Persian,"<sup>44</sup> leaving open the possibility of direct contact with the source of Manichaeism. The term *par sig* is also used as the word for "Persian" in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century translation of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosabhyasa*, suggesting that it was the common term throughout Tibet. "Parsi", similar to the Tibetan *par sig*, is now a commonly used term to denote members of the Zoroastrian community in India, however these Zoroastrians did not migrate to India until the 10<sup>th</sup> century, further suggesting the term came from Persia, rather than from a secondary source. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Manichaeism had made itself known to Tibet to the extent that Trisong Detsan felt it necessary to comment on it in his

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(Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 408.

43 Uray, 1983, 408.

44 Uray, 1983, 409.

defense of Buddhism. Much like Buddhism setting itself in opposition to the indigenous beliefs of Tibet in an attempt to gain influence on a foreign land, Buddhism again had to protect itself from this Persian religion, which seems to have also been a contending influence in Tibet. The origin of the Tibetan word for “Persian” challenges the assumption that Tibet’s knowledge of Manichaeism came secondhand through the Chinese, suggesting a more intimate connection with Persia, with the Tibetan court at least knowing of the existence of a Persian religion.

In other cases of Tibet’s knowledge of Persia, China acted as the conduit between the Tibetan and Persian cultural spheres. Evidence suggests that the Tibetan royal court had been familiar with Greek Medicine. Tibetan historians point out that a doctor of the court was named Ga-le-nos, which likely refers to the medical tradition of the Greek physician Galenos, not to the Greek physician himself. What links Galenos to Persia is his successor, Bi-ji, which seems to be a Tibetan rendering of the Sogdian word for “physician.” Sogdiana was a state that existed on the eastern fringes of Persian culture. During this period, Persian doctors were commonly found practicing in China. Due to the commonality of these doctors, Bi-ji would have most likely come to Tibet through China, demonstrating China’s conduit function.<sup>45</sup>

Another example of Persian culture that came to Tibet by way of China is the use of the lion as a national symbol. The lion had always been a symbol of power and royalty in Mesopotamia and Persia that eventually spread to India, as can be seen in many of the Ashokan pillars of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. During the 8<sup>th</sup> century, an important aspect of Iranian New Year rites was a ritualized lion dance. These Iranian New Year rites seemingly traveled through Central Asia to China and eventually Tibet. In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century Chinese sources report that the Chinese army on the border of Tibet saw a

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<sup>45</sup> Per Kvaerne, “Dualism in Tibetan Cosmogonic Myths and the Question of Iranian Influence” in *Silver on Lapis: Tibetan Literary Culture and History*, ed. by Christopher Beckwith (The Tibet Society: Bloomington, 1987), 164.

performance of the lion dance, most likely performed by Sogdians.<sup>46</sup> Not only does this lion dance demonstrate the travel of the symbolism of the lion to Tibet, but it also gives a particular account of an Iranian ritual performed within Tibet. Though sources suggest that the ritual was performed by Sogdians rather than ethnic Tibetans, the fact that a Persian religious rite was practiced so close to the Tibetan cultural sphere gives reason to at least acknowledge the possibility of Persian religion penetrating the Tibetan landscape. The Tibetan court would eventually incorporate the lion into its symbolism and the symbol of the lion would generally begin to be associated with Tibet, becoming an example of Tibet incorporating elements of Persian culture into its own.

#### Language of Bon

A key claim of traditional Bon is that its teachings were translated into, rather than composed in, Tibetan. Bon traces its travels to Tibet through the languages of its teachings. Bon claims that the original teachings were in the language of Tagzig, home of the founder of the Bon religion Tonpa Shenrab. Before the teaching of Bon arrived in Tibet, “it was transmitted to India, China, and Zhang-zhung. From these it was transmitted to Tibet; therefore there was a ‘Triple Transmission.’”<sup>47</sup> According to tradition, Bon established itself in these three countries before it came to Tibet. The most important of these countries was Zhang-zhung, which did not become a part of Tibet until Songstan Gampo was able to capture it during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. A traditional Bonpo historian writes, “Whenever the doctrines of Bon spread to Tibet, India, or China, most of them reached those countries from Zhang-zhung.”<sup>48</sup> The emphasis on Zhang-zhung shows the importance of this land in the mind of Bonpos in that it became something resembling another holy land for Bon when the exact location of Tagzig had been lost. Though “some other texts were translated from the languages of India, China, Sum-pa,

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46 Kvaerne, 1987, 164

47 Karmay, 1972, 20.

48 Karmay, 1972, 22.

and Me-nyag into Tibetan,”<sup>49</sup> when Bon entered Tibet, the “greater number of Bon texts were translated into Tibetan from the language of Zhang-zhung.”<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately there are no known Bon texts in any Indian or Chinese languages, or any complete documents in the language of Zhang-zhung.

The existence of a Zhang-zhung language separate from Tibetan has been questioned. However, there are words in Bonpo texts that are unique to Bon and that very well could be the remnants of a Zhang-zhung language. For instance, “heart” in Tibetan is *snying*, but is *she thun* in the language of Zhang-zhung; this term is used throughout Bon literature.<sup>51</sup> Many Bon texts often include an introduction in the Zhang-zhung language, framing the text and claiming to link it to its original language source. Though no complete texts exist, “it is at least very clear that the sacred texts of Bon have preserved a large and authentic vocabulary from a Tibeto-Burman linguistic stratum closely linked to languages in the Himalayas and along the Sino-Tibetan border” which “are only distantly related to Tibetan.”<sup>52</sup> These remnants of language suggest that Bon’s origins could lie in a culture separate from that of Central Tibet. This culture would have had a distinct language used specifically to depict its religious beliefs. Further study of the Zhang-zhung language could clarify the origins of Bon and needs to be the focus of more scholarship. Also, the content of the passages that exist in the Zhang-zhung language need further study. Seeing what type of religious content these passages contain could also help separate what aspects of the Bon religion are indigenous to Zhang-zhung and what could have been adopted from Central Tibetan culture. There must be a specific reason why the earlier translators of Bonpo texts, indeed if there were any significant translations made, kept these particular passages in the language of

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49 Karmay, 1927, 22.

50 Karmay, 1972, 26

51 Kvaerne, 1996, 13.

52 Kvaerne, 1996, 14.

Zhang-zhung, displaying some reverence for the language itself. Ever since the introduction of the written word, language and texts have always been revered within Tibetan culture. Understanding the Zhang-zhung language and its religious significance could be critical to determining the origins of Bon and could point towards religious ideas that were critical to Bon at an earlier stage in its development.

The word “Bon” itself might provide a link to the West, since the word can be found in modern Persian. In the Persian language, “bon” had specific religious connotations. “Bon” in Persian means “root,” “foundation,” or “bottom,” and stems from the word “banu” as well as the ancient Indian word “bhanu,” both of which mean “light.”<sup>53</sup> The Persian word “bun” also has similar meaning to the Persian “bon” and in 9<sup>th</sup> century Pahlavi documents, the word “bun” refers to “basic text” of Zoroastrianism.<sup>54</sup> The term then could be imported and refer to the foundation of the Bon religion, which Bon tradition places in the Persian cultural zone. The many connotations of the word “bon” in Persian language “expresses the essence of the early Tibetan Bon.”<sup>55</sup> The name that the Bon tradition then gives itself could be Persian word that perhaps is an attempt to place the religion's origins to the west of the Tibetan cultural sphere by using a foreign word from the culture of Persia.

#### Location of the Bon Holy Land

Bon traces its origins back to a place called Olmolungring, the birthplace of Tonpa Shenrap, in the land of Tagzig. No consensus on the exact location of this country has ever been reached, with some even suggesting that Olmolungring could be a mythical land more like Shambala than any specific location. Though it does have a mythical aspect to it, Bonpos have composed documents giving directions to Olmolungring,

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53 Stanimar Kaloyanov, “Irano-Tibetica. Some Observations on the Tibetan Bon,” *The Tibet Journal* 15, no. 7, (1990), 77.

54 Kaloyanov, 1990, 78.

55 Kaloyanov, 1990, 78.

suggesting that the majority of Bonpos think of it as a real place.<sup>56</sup> “The idea of Ol-mo-lung ring was a malleable one in Bon traditions, and varied according to different authors throughout Bon history,”<sup>57</sup> making it particularly hard to define exactly what Olmolungring means to the Bon religion. Despite these varieties of opinion, Bon legend generally points to the west as the site of Olmolungring. The word Tagzig again suggests Persian origins since the word itself “can be found both in Persian and Arabic to refer to either Persia or Arabia.”<sup>58</sup> Legend suggests then that the Bon holy land lies somewhere to the west of Tibet, possibly falling within the general realm of Persian influence. Tracing the different accounts of the location of the Bon holy land demonstrates an attempt in the Bon tradition to make itself distinct from Buddhism by placing its origins in the West rather than India. The West then represents a source that cultivated the origins of Bon and produced its founder Tonpa Shenrab that is fundamentally different than Buddhism. Without Olmolungring, Bon loses its grounding for its traditional history lending a religious significance to the location of the holy land, whether it be fact or myth.

In their article “Two Traditions of Ancient Tibetan Cartography”, L.N. Gumilev and B.I. Kuznetsov attempt to determine the location of Olmolungring. To do this, they examine a Tibetan map which they date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.<sup>59</sup> According to the authors, this map confirms Olmolungring's location and identity as the Persian Empire, producing a direct correlation between the Bon holy land and Persia. Gumilev and Kuznetsov translate the Tibetan names on the map and identify their locations, many of which correlated to specific places throughout the Near East and Persia to determine their conclusion. In the center of the map appears the Nine Stacked Swastika Mountain and

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56 Karmay, 1998, 106.

57 Dan Martin, “Ol-mo lung-ring, the Original Holy Place,” *The Tibet Journal* 20, no. 1 (1995): 49.

58 Berzin.

59 L.N. Gumilev and B.I. Kuznetsov, “Two Traditions of Ancient Tibetan Cartography”, *Vestnik Leningradskogo Universiteta*, no. 7 (1969): 565.

the name Bar-po-so-brgyad which they translate to Parsargadae in Greek or Parsogod in Persian, the capital of Cyrus the Great.<sup>60</sup> Specifically, the Nine Stacked Swastika Mountain is Cyrus the Great's tomb. According to their interpretation, it would seem that Bon placed a certain amount of significance on Cyrus the Great, as the author of this map would have placed it in the center. The text also names many of the specific sites situated around the tomb, again contributing to the importance of this particular site. With the Nine Stacked Swastika Mountain in the middle, six different divisions appear on the map. Gumilev and Kuznetsov go on to identify on the map Babylonia (Rgya-lag-od-ma), Jerusalem (Grong-khyer-lang-ling), Alexandria (Ne-seng-dra-ba'i-grong-khyer), as well as many other sites of the ancient Near East. The authors conclude that "the coincidence of the Tibetan drawing with Hellenic descriptions removes any possible doubt about the genuineness of the map and about the correctness of our identification."<sup>61</sup> This map would certainly show that Tibet had extensive knowledge of the Near East, suggesting an intimate contact with those cultures. The intimacy could be so great that the Tibetan author would feel inclined to make Cyrus the Great's Tomb the significant feature of the map, as well as the defining feature of Olmolungring.

In "Ol-mo lung-ring, the Original Holy Place," Dan Martin discusses "Two Traditions of Ancient Tibetan Cartography" and questions Gumilev's and Kuznetsov's scheme. Using *Mdo-'dus*, the shortest form of Tonpa Shenrab's biography, Martin relates each of the map's locations to a specific place and event in Tonpa Shenrab's life. He argues then "that it ought to be read as a map of places of significance in the sacred biography of Lord Shenrab,"<sup>62</sup> not as an ancient map of Persia and the Near East. Furthermore, he suggests that "the maps were preceded by the textual accounts, that the maps may, in fact, be little more than tabulated charts based on the geographical coordinates provided in the

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60 L.N. Gumilev and B.I. Kuznetsov, 566.

61 L.N. Gumilev and B.I. Kuznetsov, 571.

62 Martin, 1995, 66.



text.”<sup>63</sup> The map would then have to be put to a later date than *Mdo-'dus*, which would certainly be later than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. The earlier date given by Gumilev and Kuznetsov is extremely unlikely considering that writing was not introduced to Tibet until much later in its history, making Martin's dating based on the *Mdo-'dus* much more reasonable.

Martin also questions Kuznetsov's accuracy in naming the locations on the map and points out many inconsistencies in Kuznetsov's logic. For instance, Rgya-lag-od-ma, which Kuznetsov takes as Babylonia based on his translation of the word as “Country of the Chaldeans,” according to Martin really means “Broad Branched Bamboo” in Tibetan. The pronunciation of Rgya-lag-od-ma is “Gyalawoma” which does not correspond to Chaldea. Rgya-lag-od-ma is also the birthplace of Kong-rtse ‘Phrul-gyi-rgyal-po who, in *Mdo-'dus*, is labeled as Chinese. His name Kong-rtse is usually the Tibetan version of Confucius, which raises the question of how such a Chinese name could come to Babylon. Another key location that Kuznetsov wrongly identifies according to Martin is that of Grong-khyer-lang-ling, or, as Kuznetsov identifies it, Jerusalem. Though Martin acknowledges that “ling” could correspond to “laa-yim”, the last syllable in the Hebrew word for Jerusalem, he thinks it stretches the possibility of Jerusalem being marked on the map, especially since the word *lang-ling* in Tibetan means “swaying” which would not refer to any part of the name Jerusalem. Turning to *Mdo-'dus*, Tonpa Shenrab visits Lang-ling when he is three. In Lang-ling, he bathes in the Mu-la-had Ocean and has the King Sa-la prostrate to him, recognizing his holiness. If Kuznetsov was right, then Tonpa Shenrab would have visited Jerusalem when he was three and one of his father's wives would be of Israeli descent.<sup>64</sup> This claim that Tonpa Shenrab had such a close relationship to the city of Jerusalem certainly proves interesting but still seems highly

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63 Martin, 1995, 66.

64 Martin, 1995, 21-22.

improbable. Gumilev and Kuznetsov, in their interpretation of this map, place Bon's origins in a specifically Persian milieu. However, Martin views the map as a biographical tool that acts as an atlas to Tonpa Shenrab's life. The map then does not provide enough proof for the intimate contact between Tibet and Persia that Gumilev and Kuznetsov claim in their own work. Rather, Martin's interpretation, derived from Bon sources, gains greater weight than that of Gumilev and Kuznetsov by pointing out the inconsistency of Kuznetsov's translations and showing the maps distinct connection to *Mdo-'dus*.

In the same article, Dan Martin demonstrates how complicated it is to use different Bon sources to determine the exact location of Olmolungring. By using different sources, Martin attempts to establish a few possible locations for the Bon holy land, emphasizing their particular differences. The first scheme he uses is the list of the Eighteen Great Countries of Jambu Island. This list "forms the core of geographical passages to be found in nearly every Bon history,"<sup>65</sup> giving this list particular importance. This scheme also developed prior to Mongol incursion into Tibet during the 13<sup>th</sup> century and places Tibet in the center with Tagzig to the west and divided into two different parts.<sup>66</sup> Though it is not specific, it is clear that this scheme places Tagzig in the simplest of Bon descriptions of the holy land, that it exists west of Tibet. Lining this first schema up with actual geographic reality would place Olmolungring between Northern Pakistan and the Northeastern Afghan region of Takhar.

For the next scheme, Martin again uses *Mdo-'dus* to determine the location of Olmolungring. In this account of Jambu Island, Mt. Kailash is this time in the middle with Olmolungring to the northwest and Tibet to the northeast. This schema views the area around Mt. Kailash as being separate from Tibet, which would display Zhang-zhung

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65 Martin, 1995, 50.

66 Martin, 1995, 51

cultural differences from that of Central Tibet. In accordance with the placement of countries in *Mdo-'dus*, Olmolungring would exist in an area consisting of Badakhshan in Northern Afghanistan and the area around the Pamirs, and would end at the Tarim River basin, placing Olmolungring further to the north and to the east compared to the first scheme.

The last scheme locates Olmolungring by following the four rivers that flow from Mt. Kailash as described in *Mdo-'dus*. This last scheme would suggest the largest area of the three, including Baltistan, Gilgit, Northern Pakistan and possibly Badakhshan and Uttar Pradesh, India.<sup>67</sup> These schemes clearly differ, suggesting multiple interpretations as well as a developing idea of the exact status of Olmolungring. However, it is clear that they all point to the west. Interestingly enough, none of Martin's three schemes puts Olmolungring specifically in Persia, rather they all fall into areas between Persia and Tibet. These areas certainly fell under the influence of Persian culture and religion throughout history, but these middle lands between Tibet and Persia also fell under the influence of the Tibetan Empire at its height. The fact that these schemes fall into locations that were both subject to Persian and Tibetan influence could point to a significant cultural memory of exchanges that occurred between these two cultures. If these schemes are accurate, they provide a location for Bon to arise out of an area where Persia and Tibet and interacted with each other during the times of the Tibetan empire. As the trade of the Turks shows, this general area was subjugated to the influence of many different cultures and civilizations. If Bon were to come from these particular areas, it could have drawn from a myriad of traditions which would not necessarily suggest direct contact between Persia and Tibet.

Tonpa Shenrab

Due to the extraordinarily early date that Bon gives its founder, Bon makes the claim

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<sup>67</sup> Martin, 1995, 56-57.

that its religion is the oldest in the world. Tonpa Shenrab, being already enlightened, took birth as a prince of Olmolungring to teach others the true religious doctrine. He developed a rivalry with a demon named Khyabpa Lagring (*Khyab-pa lag-ring*) who would continue to challenge Tonpa Shenrab throughout his lifetime. His first visit to Tibet was not for religious purposes; rather it was to take back seven horses that Khyabpa Lagring had stolen from him. While he was in Tibet, he taught the Vehicle of Cause, the lower vehicle in Bon, to the local Tibetans to wean them away from their practice of animal sacrifice. The remaining teachings of Bon would come to Tibet from Olmolungring when the time was right.<sup>68</sup> There is little to no evidence of Tonpa Shenrab ever having lived, especially with tradition placing his dates so far into the past. The story of Tonpa Shenrab however remains fundamental to the Bon religion, providing the teachings of Bon with an origin and a distinct figure to act as an authority for the entire religious tradition.

In his article “Who was the Founder of the 'Bon' Religion?” B.I. Kuznetsov again attempts to place Bon in a Persian cultural context by placing Tonpa Shenrab in Persia during the reign of King Cyrus the Great. The *History of Buddhism* written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Tibetan historian Taranatha gives the Tibetan names for four founders of non-Buddhist religions. Kuznetsov identifies the first three religions by the name of their founders. Paygambar, the Iranian word for “Prophet” appears to be Muhammad, while Ardo refers to Zoroaster. The “southern commune” as it is called refers to Mani, the founder of Manichaeism. The last of these teachers was named Mathura.<sup>69</sup> According to certain Bon texts, though Kuznetsov does not specify which texts, Tonpa Shenrab’s Iranian name is Dmura, which approximates Mathura. Mathura then also corresponds to the name Mithra, which relates to Mithraism, an offshoot of Zoroastrianism and one of

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68 Karmay, 1998, 109.

69 B.I. Kuznetsov, “Who was the founder of the ‘Bon’ religion?” *Tibet Journal*, vol. I, no. 1 (1975), 113.

the mystery cults that became prominent during the Roman Empire. Tarantha states that one of these four founders had Cyrus the Great as a disciple, though he does not specify which founder. Cyrus the Great did adopt Zoroastrianism as his state religion; however it is unlikely that Cyrus the Great could have been the disciple of Zoroaster simply because their dates would clearly not match. Therefore, according to this account Cyrus the Great would have been a disciple of Mathura, which Kuznetsov identifies as Tonpa Shenrab.<sup>70</sup> Not only then would Tonpa Shenrab have been the founder of the Bon religion, but would have served as spiritual master to Cyrus the Great.

In the Hebrew Bible however, the character of Mathura could have another relationship with King Cyrus. When speaking of King Cyrus, the Book of Ezra 1.8 refers to a “Mithredath the treasurer” whose name would correspond to Mithra or Mathura, but he does not appear as a teacher to King Cyrus. Rather, King Cyrus gives him the task of returning vessels from the Jerusalem Temple to the Jews that he had stored in “the house of his [that is, Cyrus’s] gods.”<sup>71</sup> That Mithredath was chosen to return these vessels could mean that his position held some religious significance; however the details of his position are unknown and there is no suggestion that he acted as a religious mentor to Cyrus the Great. While previous rulers of the Achaemenid dynasty appeared tolerant to different religious beliefs, Xerxes, who ruled during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, “was heavily committed to Zoroastrianism of an orthodox variety” and “reversed the practices of religious tolerance of his predecessors.”<sup>72</sup> According to Kuznetsov, this intolerance led to a persecution of Old Iranian religion, which would then have caused a mass migration from Sogdiana, part of northern Persia to the western borderlands of Tibet, with the migrants bringing along the religion of Mathura. The results of this mass migration

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70 Kuznetsov, 1975, 114.

71 Ezr. 1.7.-1.8.

72 Robert J. Littman, “The Religious Policy of Xerxes and the 'Book of Esther,’” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 65, no. 3 (1975), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1454354?seq=11> (accessed on April 12, 2010).

would place this particular strand of Persian religion much closer to Tibet and places these migrants in a region that would be subject to a Tibetan cultural influence under the Tibetan Empire allowing once again for the two cultures to mix.

Kuznetsov claims that the biography of Tonpa Shenrab was compiled in Iran in Aramean letters. The biography was then subsequently translated into the Zhang-zhung language from Persian, then later translated into Tibetan.<sup>73</sup> “This work partly exists in Persian and even in ancient Russian,”<sup>74</sup> states Kuznetsov, claiming that the material evidence for Tonpa Shenrab's biography in these languages does exist. From this biography Kuznetsov extrapolates that Tonpa Shenrab attempted to unite Persian and Medean religions into one “universal” religion. Interestingly, Bon today claims to be a universal religion in that it preaches a universal message and explains universal truths, though this could also be attributed to the influence of Buddhism, another universal religion. In his account, Kuznetsov portrays Tonpa Shenrap in very similar terms to Zoroaster. To Kuznetsov, Tonpa Shenrab “emphasized the dualism of light and dark, good and evil, and called on everyone to aspire to good and truth,”<sup>75</sup> all of which seem to be the main concern of Zoroaster and displays a similar emphasis on a rigid morality. Furthermore, “he believed that a life after death did exist, either a paradise or a hell relegated according to man's merits.”<sup>76</sup> Belief in an afterlife does not coincide with Bon now since the tradition adopts a karmic worldview, like Indian religions, however the indigenous religion of Tibet that Bon incorporated into its milieu certainly did. Kuznetsov suggests then that the Bon religion, as tradition states, did not come from Persia in the form that it is seen today. Rather, the religion must have adapted and incorporated ideas of karma and rebirth after it had left its homeland.

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73 B.I. Kuznetsov, “Influence of the Pamirs on Tibetan Culture”, *The Tibet Journal* 3, no. 3 (1978), 35.

74 B.I. Kuznetsov, “A Letter from Leningrad”, *Tibetan Review* 8, (1973), 20.

75 Kuznetsov, 1978, 36.

76 Kuznetsov, 1978, 36.

Unfortunately, Kuznetsov does not provide much evidence for his claims, which appear to be unique to him. Kuznetsov seems to have a deep desire to place Tonpa Shenrab directly into Persian culture and tends to cite evidence that frankly no one else acknowledges. For instance, he claims that there exists a partial biography of Tonpa Shenrab in Persian and ancient Russian. If this claim is true, the text would provide substantial evidence that the basis of the Bon religion did arise out of Persian culture. However, no other scholars of the Bon religion have made the claim that this text exists. Though Kuznetsov insists that Bon religion is just Tibetan Mithraism, Kaloyanov reports Zhukovskaya's view that "Shenrab could have been a Persian, a worshiper of Mithra's cult, although she thinks it impossible that Mithraism earned a solid ground in early Tibetan nomadic society."<sup>77</sup> Though his attempts to make Bon distinctly Persian are not convincing, Kuznetsov at least makes an effort and provides a starting point for more scholarship in this particular field. In any event, Kuznetsov's research, as flawed as it may be, points towards the middle lands between Tibet and Persia. If any remnants of Persian religion exist in Bon, it is very likely that the cultural contact would have happened in this broad geographic location. Further research is needed in these particular areas between Ancient Persia and Tibet to see to what extent any religious practices relating to Bon exist in these territories, perhaps providing critical information for understanding the development of the Bon religion.

Samten Karmay points to potential origins of Tonpa Shenrab other than Persia. The name "Shenrab" (*gshen rab* or *gshen rabs myi bo*) appears at least six times in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Though this "Shenrab" does not seem of much significance in these documents, "he at least seems to be an indispensable 'priest' who has the capacity of communicating between the living and the dead."<sup>78</sup> The text itself is dated to the late 9<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Kaloyanov, 1990, 78.

<sup>78</sup> Karmay, 1998, 111.

or early 10<sup>th</sup> century, but in the account Shenrab himself is dated to the period before the Buddha. The manuscripts also give what already seems to be a mythic account of this Shenrab's life, showing that some time must have elapsed between his life and the composition of the text. Karmay believes that this figure then can be dated to living at least prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> century. If this Shenrab is the historical inspiration for Bonpo stories about their founder, then this would link the later Bon tradition of the 11<sup>th</sup> century to a period prior to Trisong Detsen's rule during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. If Tonpa Shenrab and the Dunhuang *gshen rab* is the same person, it appears that the character of Tonpa Shenrab underwent similar mythical revisions as that of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha.<sup>79</sup> The Bon tradition would have at some point decided to revise the history and life of Tonpa Shenrab in an attempt to make him appear similar to the Buddha. Instead of portraying him as a priest, the Bon tradition chose to present him as a prince and eventual renunciate who taught ultimate liberation rather than performed rites and rituals. Shenrab as a priest figure would seemingly fit into the religion of the Yarlung kings, especially since his religious role had a specific relationship with the dead. Shenrab could also easily be related to the term “bon” due to his designation as a priest. Perhaps this Shenrab, due to his religious function, and the title “bon” became greatly elaborated on, providing the basis for the Bon tradition. This Shenrab would connect the mythical Tonpa Shenrab to pre-Buddhist religious practices. Over time, later Bonpos would connect this particular figure to the teachings of Buddhism that were incorporated into the Bon tradition. Though it may be impossible to know exactly who Tonpa Shenrab was, these Dunhuang documents place Tonpa Shenrab before Buddhism's introduction to Tibet and indicate that he was known to Tibetans as a religious figure.

#### Dualism and Cosmology

The most commonly examined source of Persian influence on Bon is its cosmogony

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<sup>79</sup> Karmay, 1998, 111.



and cosmology. Bon has many variations of its creation myths, all with subtle differences. Almost all Bon cosmogonical myths, however, involve cosmic eggs from which the world emerged.<sup>80</sup> One account, known as *mDzod phug*, is included in the Bon canon and considered to be the word of Tonpa Shenrab. In this account, Namkha (*Nam-mkha*), who represents space, creates Trigyel Kugpa (*Khri-rgyal khug-pa*) who is light and Mebum Nagpo (*Med-'bum nag-po*) who is darkness. From Light and Darkness emerged an egg of light and an egg of darkness. The eggs begot Sangpo Bumtri (*Sangs-po 'bum-khri*), king of existence, and Munpa Serden Nagpo (*Mun-pa zer-ldan nag-po*), king of non-existence. Soon these gods created corresponding queens for themselves, with each couple giving birth to an equal number of male and female children. The spawn of Munpa Serden Nagpo, would become the demons in Bonpo cosmology and would live in the north. Each child then willed a partner of the opposite sex into existence, maintaining the duality throughout the lineage. One particular god of light is “ordered to assign beings and things with their functions and their opposites, for example medicine for illness, but also demons for men,”<sup>81</sup> continuing the theme that everything must have its opposing force. Bon depicts its form of dualism as both a cosmogonical and cosmological dualism where one source spawns two separate opposing forces that then bring this world into existence.

Duality also plays an important role in Bonpo rituals. Duality “forms one of the fundamental tenets of Bonpo doctrines,” as “any ritual or ceremony the Bonpo perform... is viewed from this angle of dualism.”<sup>82</sup> Most of these rituals are performed to either receive benefits from a god or to counteract the effects of a demon. When Bonpos perform a ritual, they attempt to raise the influence of one force and lower the influence of another. Humanity is considered to harbor both of these oppositional forces within,

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80 Karmay, 1998, 127

81 Karmay, 1998, 128.

82 Karmay, 1998, 132.

despite being descendents of the gods. Though gods and demons are in opposition, they cannot be considered fundamentally separate from each other since they come from the same source (Space). Both of these forces then exert influence over humanity's behavior and become the source for their actions, in opposition to the Buddhist framework where life's main influences are internal or based on actions in a past life.<sup>83</sup> Dualism in Bon is an active force that has real consequences for believers. Bon developed a religious system in response to these forces that included various rites and rituals to enhance or deter the influence of light and dark. Bon now accepts the idea of karma and rebirth, but the belief in dualism and its effects point to an origin that did not accept an Indian view of cyclic existence. Since the religion of the early Tibetan kings did not accept karma and rebirth, the idea of karma would have been later picked up from Buddhism.

In order to determine the extent of possible Persian influence on Bon's cosmological framework, dualism within Zoroastrianism must be examined to see if Zoroastrian dualism matches with the dualism of Bon. Examining Zoroastrian dualism is particularly tricky since the concept evolved and changed throughout the history of the religion. When tracing the development of the concept of dualism, Ahura Mazda's supremacy continually seems to be deemphasized in favor of two equally powerful forces that act as protagonists to each other. Along with the development of dualism in Zoroastrianism, the dualism of Manichaeism should also be considered especially since Manichaeism's influence spread throughout Central Asia and China. If any of these interpretations of dualism matches the concept of dualism within the Bon tradition, then it would forge another possible connection between Bon and the land to the West.

The first type of dualism found in Zoroastrianism is based strictly on Zoroaster and the *Gathas*. The earliest versions of the Zoroastrian sacred text espouse cosmogonical

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<sup>83</sup> Karmay, 1998, 132.

dualism in the form of “the two primeval Spirits (*mainiiû pauruiê*) who are twins.”<sup>84</sup> These twins’ “ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving are two: the good and the evil (*vahiiô akəmchâ*).”<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, “between these two [ways] the wise men (*hudâ*) have rightly chosen, and not the foolish ones (*du‘dâ*),”<sup>86</sup> emphasizing the choice each individual makes in determining which one of these twins should be followed. The *Gathas* then present dualism as existing on a spiritual realm as well as a mental realm in the form of a moral choice. Both powers also contain a creative force; however their creations exist in different form. The good creative force is purely positive in that its creation produces phenomena. The evil creative force can only respond to the good force’s creation by contaminating and disrupting it. The dualism portrayed in the Old Avesta does not entail a type of physical dualism since ultimately all material comes from the source of good. Rather, dualism as described in the *Gathas* displays two spiritual forces in the universe; humanity must decide which of these forces they will decide to follow. Along with establishing free will, this dualism also sets the conflict of Zoroastrian eschatology. It seems then that Zoroastrianism’s most ancient view on dualism gives mankind the freedom of choice between these two primeval spirits, determining their allegiance for the oncoming eschaton where good will triumph over evil.

The next development in Zoroastrian dualism is what came to be known as Zurvanism. In Zurvanism, “Zurwân, or time, fathered the twins Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) and Ahriman (Angra Manyu); having promised the scepter to the firstborn, he made Ahriman, who came to light first, king for 9,000 years, a ‘limited time,’ after which kingship was to be bestowed on Ohrmazd for ‘endless time’.”<sup>87</sup> Clearly, Zurvan dualism

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84 Gherado Gnoli, “Iranian Cosmogony and Dualism,” *The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies*, <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/cosmology/dualism.htm> (accessed March 23, 2010)

85 Gnoli.

86 Gnoli.

87 Gnoli.

creates a quite different cosmological view of the world when compared to Zoroaster's dualism. Ahura Mazda no longer holds the supremacy that he once did and now becomes a force only equal to Angra Manyu. Ahura Mazda's preeminence is lost to the role of Zurvan or time, an impersonal power that simply creates these two forces as opposed to the active role that Ahura Mazda displays in the Old Avesta. This development of the supremacy of Zurvan fundamentally changes mankind's role in the cosmos. "In the Gathas the role and value of God and man's moral freedom were exalted above all, in the syncretistic version the role and value of the creator God were debased and man subjugated to the omnipotence of time (*zamân*), from which the soul cannot release itself."<sup>88</sup> The strong ethical base in Zoroastrianism no longer exists within Zurvanism, deemphasizing the role of choice in mankind's nature. Zurvanism is considered a "syncretistic version" of Zoroastrianism since the tradition seemingly was born out of contact between Zoroastrianism and Babylonian concepts of cosmology during the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Since Zurvanism seems to be a blend of two culturally different religious traditions, determining the exact relationship between Zoroastrianism and Zurvanism can be a challenge, but 9<sup>th</sup> century Zoroastrian texts seem to interpret the tradition "either as the continuation of an Iranian religion parallel to Mazdaism, a Mazdean heresy, or simply a theological trend peripheral to orthodoxy."<sup>89</sup> Regardless of its exact relationship to Zoroastrianism, Zurvanism would have a lasting effect on Iranian culture, laying "the foundations of a religious fatalism that deeply influenced medieval Persia"<sup>90</sup> and presenting a worldview quite different from ancient Zoroastrianism.

As Manichaeism developed in Persia, the religion seemingly adopted dualistic ideas from classic Zoroastrianism. Like Zoroaster, "in formulating his version of dualism Mani abided by one of the fundamental tenets of Mazdaism, that creation is the work of a good,

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88 Gnoli

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wise, and omniscient God.”<sup>91</sup> Along with this God, “in Manichaeism there is particular emphasis on an omnipresent evil, which man must fight with all his force during his earthly life.”<sup>92</sup> Mani’s interpretation returns to the Zoroastrian theme of mankind’s moral obligation and ability to aid in the fight against evil, a theme that was seemingly lost in Zurvanism’s emphasis on the supremacy of time and the equal powers of the two opposing spirits. Mani’s emphasis on the role of mankind in the struggle between good and evil is seemingly a response to Zurvan fatalism. “Manichean and Turkish documents from Central Asia demonstrate that Manicheans reacted against Zurvanite dualism by attacking those who affirmed that Ohrmazd and Ahriman were brothers or that God had created both good and evil.”<sup>93</sup> By re-emphasizing mankind’s role in the order of the cosmos, Mani references Zoroastrianism of the Old Avesta and dismisses the Zurvan development. The dualism of Manichaeism is especially important to consider when relating to dualistic ideas in Bon. From the documents that Uray discusses, it is clear that the Tibetan Empire under Trisong Detsan knew of Manichaeism demonstrating that the religion could have entered the Tibetan cultural sphere. Manichaeism therefore could have acted as a vehicle for Zoroastrian dualism to enter Tibet’s religious life. If the dualism of Mani parallels the dualism found in Bon, the spread of Manichaeism throughout Asia could be the cosmological source for Bon.

Unfortunately, the dualism found in Bon most closely resembles the dualism in the Zurvan tradition rather than Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism. Both Zurvanism and Bon believe in a passive power that begot the light and dark forces in the universe that led to the creation of the world. This view of a passive power being the origin of light and dark conflicts with the Zoroastrian and Manichean idea that a supreme God created the universe and that an opposing force attempts to disrupt God’s creation. In Bon, the idea

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91 Gnoli.

92 Gnoli.

93 Gnoli

of a supreme high god is nonexistent and the two forces appear to be equal to each other and mirror each others' creations. Furthermore, the element of choice that is so strong in both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism is not apparent in Bon. Bon views humans as descendents of the gods and “as he is descended from the gods man naturally seeks protection from them.”<sup>94</sup> A moral choice then does not play into Bon’s worship of the gods like it does in Zoroastrian thought. Kuznetsov attempts to assert that Tonpa Shenrab had a very strong moral base that emphasized the triumph of light over dark, but in Bon’s cosmological schema, morality seems to play no part in the struggle of gods and demons. Bon also describes mankind as containing both opposing forces within their nature, an idea that is absent in Zoroastrianism. Since both gods and demons descend from a single source in Bon cosmogony, despite their opposition they cannot be completely separate from each other. The idea that gods and demons are not completely separate directly contradicts both Zoroaster and Mani’s assertion that God is ultimately good and separate from evil in the world. Lastly, no form of eschaton can be found in Bon where the gods ultimately triumph over evil, rather they are permanently in opposition with each other, exerting their influence on existence as long as it continues. Since the dualism found in Manichaeism differs from that of Bon, Bon could not have inherited its dualistic worldview from that tradition despite it being known by the Tibetan court during the 8th century. Both Bon and Zurvanism share a belief in an original source for both light and dark, but if Bon did inherit this idea from Zurvanism, the method of transmission still remains unknown.

#### Deities of the Bon Religion

Though the dualism in Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism appear unrelated to the dualism in Bon, Bonpo dualism does appear to be quite similar to Zurvanism which could suggest a connection between Bon and Persia. However, if Bon truly inherited dualism

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<sup>94</sup> Karmay, 1998, 132.

from Persia, both would likely have parallel pantheons, whether or not Bon came from Persia or just incorporated Persian beliefs into its milieu. Again, Kuznetsov attempts to draw these parallels between the deities of Bon and the deities of Persia in order to establish Bon's origins in Persian culture. The first connection he makes is between Ahura Mazda and Sangpo Bumtri. Both share similar roles within their respective cosmologies. On the name of Sangpo Bumtri, Kuznetsov approximates *sangs-po* to the word *sangs-rygas*, which is the Tibetan word for the Sanskrit term *buddha* meaning "awakened."<sup>95</sup> To Kuznetsov, this translation to "awakened" relates to "wisdom," the meaning of the Persian word *mazda*. However, in this particular Tibetan translation of the word *buddha*, *sangs-rygas* translates to "purified" and "expanded" respectively. So while "awakened" could be stretched to mean "wisdom," the Tibetan words themselves share no related meaning to the word "wisdom." Citing Chinese sources, Kuznetsov relates the name Bum-khri which means "Hundred Thousand, Ten Thousand", to the name *ahura*. Kuznetsov cites Chinese sources from as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century to claim that "the name of the chief divinity of Tibet was pronounced something like 'ahura' as is evident from an ancient Chinese transcription."<sup>96</sup> According to Kuznetsov then, Bumtri is just a bastardized version *ahura*. Tibetans would have translated *mazda* into *sangs-po* and kept the word *ahura* since "it was impossible to translate the name *ahura* because in Tibetan there was no concept of 'God' which corresponded to the Iranian concept or of the words 'lord, master' as epithets of the Supreme God."<sup>97</sup> Following Kuznetsov's logic, the name Sangpo Bumtri and Ahura Mazda are identical, though due to his mistranslation it seem unlikely that he is correct .

Kuznetsov continues to analyze the similarities between Sangpo Bumtri and Ahura

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95 B.I. Kuznetsov, "The Highest Deities of the Tibetan Bon Religion", *The Tibet Journal* 7, no. 2 (1981), 48.

96 Kuznetsov, 1981, 49.

97 Kuznetsov, 1981, 49.

Mazda in their depictions. The key features of depictions of Sangpo Bumtri that point to Ahura Mazda are his serrated crown and his throne supported by an eagle with a snake in its peak. “In ancient Iran the eagle was the symbol of Ahura Mazda and this god was portrayed either in the form of a disc with eagle’s wings and tail or as an eagle with the trunk of a man, the latter’s head bearing a serrated crown”<sup>98</sup>. The eagles or garudas that support the throne of Sangpo Bumtri are a key feature of his depiction; however, the characteristic of having a “serrated” crown is an imprecise description, especially considering that Sangpo Bumtri wears different styles of crowns in different depictions.

In his approximation of the deity, Per Kvaerne understands Sangpo Bumtri as a native Tibetan deity. In Kvaerne's translation, he sees *sangs-po* related to the word *Tshangs-pa*, which is the Tibetan name for Brahma, generally considered the creator god in the Hindu pantheon. Despite this connection to a Hindu god, Kvaerne asserts that “there is no doubt that Sangpo Bumtri is an authentic Tibetan deity”<sup>99</sup> and doubts any possibility of a foreign source for the god. By stating that Sangpo Bumtri is a Tibetan deity, Kvaerne means to distinguish Sangpo Bumtri from Tibetan gods of either Buddhist or Hindu origin. Given that Kuznetsov's logic seems flawed considering his mistranslations, Kvaerne assessment of the deity appears more likely to be the case.

Though both gods have similar roles in creation and slight similarities in depiction, exactly where each one fits into their cosmogonies is ultimately different. In Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda is the highest possible god and is uncreated. Sangpo Bumtri forms a part of a Bonpo triad that includes Shenlha Okar (*gShen-lha 'Od-dkar*) and Tonpa Shenrab. Within Bonpo tradition, “gShen-lha 'Od-dkar [Shenlha Okar] is one and the same as Khri-rgyal khug-pa [Trigyel Kugpa], the primaeval god”<sup>100</sup> who was moved by the emergence of Mebum Nagpo to create a world that would not be full of

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98 Kuznetsov, 1981, 50.

99 Kvaerne, 1996, 26.

100 Karmay, 1998, 133.



darkness. Sangpo Bumtri on the other hand, creates the other gods. Thus, the act of creation is divided into two: the physical world and its inhabitants. “In the triad, gShen-lha has the function of the master, whereas [Sangpo] is companion to [Shenrab] and [Shenrab] himself is the guide or savior of this world,”<sup>101</sup> meaning that Sangpo Bumtri’s role does not exactly correspond to Ahura Mazda. Sangpo Bumtri’s similarities with Ahura Mazda are intriguing, though again Kuznetsov’s sources do not seem the most reliable. However, Sangpo Bumtri does not share the same stature as Ahura Mazda, leaving the possibility that there is no connection at all.

The next Persian god that Kuznetsov attempts to place within the Bon framework is Mithra, the god of daylight. In the biography of Tonpa Shenrab, Kuznetsov claims that “the god-priest ‘White’ (i.e., daylight) is second after Ahura Mazda” and takes this to be Tonpa Shenrab, “who is considered to be the incarnation of that divinity.”<sup>102</sup> Referencing a particular depiction of Tonpa Shenrab, Kuznetsov highlights the short skirt, serrated crown, swastika scepter, which looks much like a dagger, and the sun that supports Tonpa Shenrab’s throne. Similarly, in Roman depictions of Mithra, he too wears a short skirt and has a dagger; however instead of being in seated meditation, he is slaughtering a bull. Kuznetsov explains Tonpa Shenrab’s connection to the bull by referencing his biography and its references to the god White Light, whose throne is supported by a bull. The Tibetan word for priest (*gshan*) also has specific connotations of animal sacrifice with a ritual dagger, which seems appropriate since sacrifice was essential to the old Tibetan funerary rites. Both his name and Tibetan textual evidence does suggest that Tonpa Shenrab may have served some priestly function; however, the particular nature of his priesthood remains unknown. Also, when Tonpa Shenrab came to Tibet he taught Tibetans Bon so that they would stop their practice of animal sacrifice, though this detail

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101 Karmay, 1998, 133.

102 Kuznetsov, 1981, 50.

of his life story could have also been added later since Bon did indeed adopt a karmic worldview identical to Buddhism, which would ultimately condemn the killing of animals. Looking at the depiction that Kuznetsov references, there does not appear to be any particular references to a bull. Kuznetsov also says of Tonpa Shenrab's skirt that "it is obvious that gShen-rab's attire is not suitable for the Tibetan climate,"<sup>103</sup> however this does not seem to be of much concern to Tibetan artists who often depict many deities in types of attire that would not keep them warm in the harsh Tibetan climate. Finally, Tonpa Shenrab has been depicted in several different ways, from Tantric yogi, to monk, to being ordained with jewels. To identify one with the true Tonpa Shenrab would seemingly be very difficult. Again, Kuznetsov points out similarities in the depictions of Mithra and Tonpa Shenrab, yet he does not account for the sheer variety of ways that Tonpa Shenrab is represented within Bon art.

The last deity that Kuznetsov accounts for is Satrig Ersang (*Sa-trig er-sangs*) who he identifies as the goddess Astarte-Anahita. According to Kuznetsov, "the Tibetan transcription *Sa-trig* conveys the name Astarte (Elamitic: Shutruk) and the word *er-sang* is an epithet from the Tibetan verb *sang-ba* (to purify, be purified)"<sup>104</sup>. In reality though, the name Satrig Ersang is part of the Zhang-zhung language, with *sa-trig* signifying wisdom and the meaning *er-sang* still unknown, though it could be related to *sang-ba* much like Kuznetsov suggests.<sup>105</sup> By translating the name into Tibetan, Karmay states that Satrig Ersang means "Wisdom, the Loving Mother."<sup>106</sup> Kuznetsov reasons that "the primary factor which allows us to affirm the identity of Sa-trig and Astarte is that they coincide in nature and attributes,"<sup>107</sup> being that both goddesses represent a mother figure. He also points out that both goddesses are supported by lions. While lions supporting her

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103 Kuznetsov, 1981, 50.

104 Kuznetsov, 1981, 51.

105 Kvaerne, 1996, 25.

106 Karmay, 1998, 133.

107 Kuznetsov, 1981, 51.

throne does appear as a key feature in Satrig Ersang's depictions, identifying both goddesses as the same simply because they share similar roles as mother goddesses is unfounded. If we allow Kuznetsov's logic, Satrig Ersang could be as easily identified with Prajñā, the mother of the Buddhas. Once again, though Kuznetsov brings to light similarities between Satrig Ersang and Astarte-Anahita, he fails to place his reasoning within a historical context, leaving his conclusion doubtful.

From this comparison of the Persian and Bon pantheon, it seems unlikely that any of these major Bon deities come from a Persian source. Some of the deities share slightly similar roles within their respective pantheons, but these similarities are clearly generic and vague. Since these pantheons share no strong connections, Bon most likely did not inherit its cosmological framework from a Persian context. Per Kvaerne, in his discussion of the possibility of Iranian influence on Bon's cosmology, suggests that there is nothing specific that makes Bon's cosmology similar to Persian cosmology. Kvaerne points out three weaknesses to this theory of Iranian influence. First, Kvaerne states "no name or term of Iranian origin so far, to the best of my knowledge, has been conclusively identified in Tibetan mythology."<sup>108</sup> Throughout its history, Tibet has borrowed many words from both India and China. It would seem that if Tibet had extensive contact with a Persian religion, they would have incorporate some Persian words into its mythological vocabulary. Geza Uray notes that the Tibetan word for Persian, *par sig*, does suggest some form of direct contact, however, no such words have been noted in any discussions of Bon mythology. The second weakness Kvaerne discusses is the possibility of other sources of influence; "above all, Indian traditions of a dualistic kind."<sup>109</sup> No other culture has had such an influence on Tibet as India, so India could be a legitimate source for Bon's dualism. The third weakness is "that there is no consensus as to what type of

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108Kvaerne 1987, 166.

109Kvaerne 1987, 166.

Iranian influence should be postulated.”<sup>110</sup> When discussing the connection between Persia and Bon, scholars have tended to generalize the “Iranian elements” found in the Bon religion. Some scholars have named specific traditions, mainly Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Zurvanism, but there remains no consensus on which of these religions specifically influenced Bon. In looking at these three traditions, Zurvanism cosmogony seems to be the most likely contender for influence on the Bon tradition, but considering that the specific historical context of the transmission remains unknown as well as the possibility that dualism could have come from India leaves doubt in the comparison. Since it cannot be said with certainty that Persia influenced Bon's dualistic cosmogony or its pantheon, unless more evidence arises, the Persian connection to Bon seems doubtful.

#### Conclusion

Despite the particular elements that appear similar in both Bon and Persian religions, there is no substantial evidence that any strong Persian elements were incorporated into the Bon tradition. What is found in these religions are similar frameworks that allow followers to comprehend and make sense of the world around them. Evidence suggests that prior to the introduction of Buddhism, Tibetans saw the world in a very similar way to that of the early Zoroastrians. Both accepted a continued existence after death, a realm of heaven and hell, and a journey needed to these particular realms of the dead. Furthermore, both traditions sought to use some form of a cosmogonical and cosmological dualism to explain the positive and negative forces apparent in their lives. Certainly the early Tibetan religion and Zoroastrianism when compared show many key differences. For Tibetan religion, there is no evidence to suggest that there is or was a god equivalent to the majesty of Ahura Mazda. Though both religions have dualistic tendencies, they are dualism of different flavors. Zoroastrian dualism emphasizes moral behavior and a clear distinction between good and evil. Bon, on the other hand, takes

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<sup>110</sup>Kvaerne 1987, 167.

dualism to be more ambiguous, with humanity containing both light and dark as fundamentals of their nature. As Buddhism came to Tibet, Bon would attempt to cover up many of these ideas as it adapted to survive new religious trends. These past aspects of the old Tibetan religion that are similar to ideas found in Persian religions are the reason why some scholars have attempted to place Bon's origins in a Persian context. Until more evidence comes to light, what is found are religious ideas from two distinct traditions that resonate with one other and were born out of similar worldviews on the nature of humanity and existence.

Since the evidence available does not place Bon in Persian contexts, what other sources could have contributed to the origin of Bon? The region around Mt. Kailash has always held religious significance to the people of the subcontinent, being important to both the Hindu and Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, the Himalayas have long been associated with ascetic practice with both Hindu and Buddhist ascetics traveling to the mountain range in order to find solitude. One possibility for the origin of Bon then could be that these Indian ascetics traveling to the Himalayas, Mt. Kailash in particular, could have taught the mountain inhabitants yogic practices prior to the formal introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. These teachings would have been Hindu and Buddhist in origin, but were not specifically labeled as such. This theory would account for Bon's claim of being older than Buddhism, being that the teachings came to the Tibetan cultural zone before Buddhism's formal introduction.

Of the Bon yogic practices, the practice of *dzogchen* could also provide more clues to the origin of Bon. The unique aspect about *dzogchen* practice is that both Bon and Nyingma, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, claim to be the original proprietors of its teachings. The practice of *dzogchen* itself remains unique in the many Buddhist yogic practices of Tibet, being that its language when discussing the primordial nature of

humanity does not coincide with any other Buddhist teachings in both India and Tibet. Researching the *dzogchen* tradition and determining its origins will not only help clarify the origins of Bon, but it will also lead to a better understanding of the interaction between the Bon and Buddhist traditions.

Along similar lines of Buddhist and Hindu ascetics coming to the Kailash region, the possibility of Buddhism coming from Central Asia should also be researched. If Buddhist teachings from Central Asia came to Mt. Kailash, this would validate Bon's claims of its teaching arriving from the west. A better understanding of the Zhang-zhung language as well as the Zhang-zhung culture itself would also greatly aid the search for the origins of Bon since the area of Zhang-zhung is so fundamental to Bonpo identity. Furthermore, tracing the geographical boundaries of Bon's influence and seeing how far west traces of Bon practice can be found would provide a means of determining the likelihood of Iranian influence in the religion. Perhaps this further research will lead scholars back to Persia as a possible influence on Bon, but unless more concrete evidence can be found to suggest such a connection, scholars must look to other possible origins of the Bon tradition.

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