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Drenpa's Proclamation: The Rise and Decline of the Bön Religion in Tibet

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The publication of this volume has been anticipated for several years, not only because the text is among the most important for an understanding of the Bon tradition, but also because the authors are among the most erudite and respected specialists on Bon. The volume does not disappoint in any way. Throughout its more than six hundred pages, readers are offered superb scholarship, beautifully presented in a finely designed hardback binding on excellent paper. It is not only the authors, but also the publishers, who should be congratulated on this magnificent production.

Drenpa's Proclamation: The Rise and Decline of the Bön Religion in Tibet, or to give it its Tibetan title, the *bsGrags pa gling grags* (henceforth *GLG*), describes at length, and from a Bon perspective, the rise and decline of the Bon religion in the context of the advent of Buddhism. Probably first appearing around the late twelfth century, it is attributed to an earlier eighth-century sage, Dran pa Nam mkha'. Unlike various Buddhist narratives that glorify the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, the *GLG* describes these events in much more pessimistic terms, because it believes they entailed the large-scale alienation of Tibetans from their ancestral religion of g.Yung drung Bon. Hence Buddhism's heroes can be described as Bon's villains, and Buddhism's triumphs as Bon's disasters, while Buddhism itself is often portrayed either as derivative of Bon, or as a corruption of an earlier and more pure original Buddhism.

The *GLG* has never been translated in its entirety before, so the appearance of this volume greatly enhances our capacity to understand the history of Tibetan religions. One of the most important aspects of the *GLG* is that it presents a detailed explanation of

why, when, by whom, and for whom Bon *gter ma* (rediscovered Treasure teachings) were buried. For students interested in a holistic understanding of Tibetan history, the *GLG* can therefore very fruitfully be read in parallel with its closely contemporaneous Buddhist counterpart, Myang ral's *Zangs gling ma*, which performed the same functions in relation to Buddhist *gter ma*, and which acted as a template for the subsequent *bKa' thang* genre. The differences and similarities between the two narratives are highly instructive, but regrettably, cannot be investigated in a short review such as this.

The main part of the volume consists of the translation of the *GLG*, but this is preceded by a scholarly introduction of eighty-six pages that is a major work of scholarship in its own right. Particularly valuable for a wide readership is the preliminary discussion (1–8) of the different usages of the polyvalent term “Bon,” a topic that has been much debated for many decades, but which, I believe finds its clearest answers in the fourfold but often intertwined classifications proposed in this introduction. University teachers would do well to rely on this source when introducing the complex notion of Bon to their students. “Eternal Bon” or *g.yung drung* Bon is introduced as the leitmotif of the *GLG* (8–11).

The introduction continues with a discussion (11–14) of the date of the *GLG* and its possible origins. Although often thought of as a *gter ma* or rediscovered Treasure teaching, the *GLG* does not usually describe itself in such terms. Rather, it is structured as a commentary on some short root verses occurring right at the beginning of the text. Interestingly, these root verses are the same as those found at the start of another text similarly attributed to Dran pa Nam mkha', the *rNam 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig* from the *Gal mdo*, a famous collection of Bon texts that has already attracted scholarly attention in relation to its innovatory use of philosophical reasoning to establish the view of rDzogs chen (see *Gal Mdo* 1972). Per Kværne and Dan Martin further suggest that the *GLG* is one of a group of texts attributed to Dran pa Nam mkha' that first appeared among the rMa clan in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Then comes a very useful overview (14–19) of the narrative of the *GLG*, presented in clear and simple headings, along with location references to the main translation, making it much easier for the reader to navigate this complex text. The introduction then proceeds with a learned analysis (19–30) of nine “central topics” in the *GLG*: Mount Tise and Lake Mapang; Zhangzhung; Śākyamuni and Dharma; Nyat'ri Tsenpo, the first king of Tibet; King Drigum Tsenpo and the first suppression of Bon; King Songtsen Gampo; the three Indian beggars and the *stūpa* Chari Khashor; Padmasambhava, Śāntarakṣita, and King T'risong Detsen; and King T'risong Detsen and the second suppression of Bon. Pages 30–62 are devoted to a valuable discussion of the *GLG*'s understanding of the ancestral religion of Tibet. While there is no reason to suppose that the authors of the *GLG* had any direct knowledge of the non-Buddhist religion of the empire, the construction that the *GLG* puts on this topic is instructive. A salient feature is the portrayal of Buddhism as a potent pollutant, the slightest presence of which in Tibet is enough to make the ancestral deities withdraw their protection from the king and his realm, with catastrophic consequences for the entire country (33–35).

Pages 37–42 provide an erudite analysis of the various terms for priests not only as used in the *GLG* but also looked at comparatively, using a wide range of textual sources such as Dunhuang manuscripts, as well as more recent ethnographic sources. This is followed by a similar analysis of the privileges and compensations the priests received. Pages 44–50 continue with an equally erudite study of rituals, both in the *GLG* and in a wide range of other relevant sources, both historical and ethnographic. Pages 50–58 continue with a

similarly erudite and comparative study of supernatural powers, deities, and demons; pages 59–60 discuss eschatology and funerary rituals; and pages 61–62 describe religious buildings, monuments, and places.

Pages 62–83 are devoted to textual matters, describing questions of authorship, sources for the text, extant texts of *GLG* in manuscript or printed form, previous studies and translations, the title of *GLG*, and the authors' editorial and translational policies. Pages 62–66 discuss issues of authorship, both actual and ascribed. It seems likely that *GLG* was the hand of a single individual, since the narrative is sufficiently coherent and well organized to suggest that likelihood. However, the text seems to date from the eleventh century, so its notional ascription to the complex, plural, and ostensibly much earlier figure of Drenpa Namkha cannot hold. Pages 66–68 discuss earlier sources repurposed in the *GLG*, notably, the root verses (*rtsa tshig*) that also exist in another earlier Treasure text also attributed to Drenpa Namkha. Similarly, the Tibetan translation of the Indian *Lokaprajñapti* is used for the *GLG*'s cosmological sections.

Pages 68–75 discuss in detail the extant manuscript and printed witnesses of the *GLG* that were used for the edition and translation. These include five manuscripts and six printed versions. Pages 75–76 detail the seventeen secondary sources that have already quoted extensively from the *GLG*, eight of them being authored by Per Kværne, and one by Dan Martin. Pages 77–81 collate the various titles given to the *GLG* in the above and other sources, in both the Tibetan and Zhang zhung languages. Pages 81–83 describe the protocols followed in preparing the diplomatic edition, which has used the five manuscript editions, but not the six printed editions. The Dolanji manuscript (of the five manuscript editions above) has been reproduced as the base text, with all variants in other versions given as notes on the right-hand margin, or when necessary, in indented italicized small print below the main text. The Wylie transcription has been used throughout, which is convenient for Western academics and for the typesetters too, but which probably makes the book a little less accessible to most Tibetans. Scribal contractions (*bsdus yig*) have been written out in full, although numerals have been retained where they are used in abbreviations. Proper names have been capitalized, and the text conveniently divided into paragraphs. A photograph has images of sample pages of the five manuscripts used. Pages 83–85 introduce the translation itself.

The English translation of the *GLG* (87–334) comprises the bulk of the book. The translation is on every page heavily annotated with erudite footnotes, which are absolutely essential to the scholarly reading of a highly challenging work such as this. We can therefore be grateful that the authors chose to publish with the scholar-friendly Vajra Academic series, rather than choosing one of the many academic publishers that privilege cosmetic values over scholarly values and would thereby have forced these indispensable aids to reading into considerably less accessible endnotes.

The *GLG* is long and complex, and I will not attempt to provide a detailed precis here. At the beginning of the work come the short root verses found also in the *rNam 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig* (87–91). It should be noted, however, that as well as its central narratives such as the decline of Bon at the hands of Śāntarakṣita, Padmasambhava, and Khri srong lde btsan, the very much longer *GLG* commentary follows Tibetan literary convention in locating these events within their greater frameworks.

Thus, the commentary itself starts with the cosmology of our 'Dzam bu gling universe complete with a geographical description of the known world (92–120). This is followed by a description of the successive appearances of the 1,002 and Seven Enlightened Ones

(*sangs rgyas*) (120–29), and the Four Ages (129–30). Shenrab Miwo’s life and enlightened activities are described next (130–52), followed by the Bon interpretation of Śākyamuni as his emanation (152–56), the subsequent transformation of Bon into Buddhism (156–58) and their consequent close relation (158–59), and the duration and degeneration of the doctrine (159–61). Pages 162–236 provide a fascinating account of the Tibetan religious scene in the centuries before the reign of King T’risong Detsen, as understood by a g.Yung drung Bon author of probably the late twelfth century. Starting with the visit of Tonpa Shenrab to Tibet, it describes the divine ancestors of the Tibetan royal house, and how they descended to earth (162–82). The privileges given to ancient priests are also described. The problematic reign of Drigum Tsenpo is dealt with at considerable length (187–216), followed by the reinstatement of Bon and the reigns of a number of subsequent kings/.

The final part of the *GLG* tells of the complex series of events leading to the eventual decline of Bon. In essence, the decline of Bon came down to “Three Indian Beggars.” These three had accumulated a vast stock of merit by constructing a great *stūpa* called *Bya ri kha shor*. This occurred at the time when the kingdoms of China, India, and Tajik were sorely oppressed by the Tibetan kings, who had been rendered invincible through the support of their Bon priests. The kings of China, India, and Tajik formed an alliance to try to contain the Tibetans, but knew they could not do so while the Tibetans remained invincible through their Bon priests. One wonders if this might be a reference to the actual historic alliance made by the Pallava monarch Narasimhavarman II (r. 695–728) with his Tang counterpart Emperor Xuanzong, to repel the powerful Tibetan Empire’s military raids into India and China alike. The *GLG* continues to describe how the “Three Indian Beggars,” now at the end of their lives, offered a solution to the anti-Tibetan alliance. Their accumulation of merit had given them the power to have any aspiration come true; hence they made the aspiration to bring Buddhism to Tibet, to undermine the Bon religion that had made the Tibetan kings invincible. They duly reincarnated as Śāntarakṣita, Padmasambhava, and King T’risong Detsen, and, after various vicissitudes, went on to fulfil their past aspirations by successfully displacing Bon with Buddhism. Thus, the grand and mighty Tibetan Empire was ultimately laid low by three common beggars.

This section has an interesting retelling of the famous Indian Buddhist narrative of the taming of Rudra from the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* tantra: through the evil acts of two incestuous fallen gods, half of Buddhism in India had degenerated from the pure and faithful calque of Bon first created by Shenrab’s representative Śākyamuni, becoming a false doctrine with many evil spells. The followers of the perverted Buddhism fought and defeated the true Buddhists of India. The latter, in desperation, requested a military intervention by the virtuous Bonpo Tibetan kingdom, who indeed managed to defeat the perverts for a while (240–44). Shortly after, the demon Rudra again subverted Indian Buddhism, which was once again saved by the intervention of Tibetans, this time Bon priests, who were the ones who actually subjugated Rudra, rather than the Buddhist *herukas* of Buddhist mythology.

In summary, this is a work of rare scholarship that provides an invaluable basis for the understanding of Bon and wider Tibetan history. It cannot be recommended too highly, and it should be considered essential reading.

REFERENCES

Gal Mdo: Texts Concerned with the Logical Establishment of the Authenticity of the Rdzogs-chen Teachings of Bon. 1972. Dolanji, India: Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre.

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