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The Emergence of a Myth : In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon

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CHAPTER ONE

THE FOUNDER OF BON SHENRAB MIWO

BON AND YUNGDRUNG BON

The culture and history of Tibet have been heavily influenced by its religious traditions. Buddhism and Bon⁷ are the two primary religions in Tibet. Since Tibetan Buddhism is divided into four major sects that have some degree of autonomy, Bon is known today as the fifth major religious sect in Tibet. Although many scholars considered Bon to be an entirely separate religion, Bon, in fact, has a lot of overlap and similarities with Buddhist traditions.

Buddhism was introduced in Tibet from India and rapidly developed since the 7th century AD. In the 8th century, Buddhism or *Chos* as it is known in Tibet (the Bonpos call it *dam pa'i chos*, meaning ‘holy dharma’) was recognized as the state religion. Tibetan Buddhists consider Buddhism to have been founded by the Buddha Śākyamuni, and similarly, the Bonpos consider Bon to have been initiated and founded by Shenrab Miwo. Both Tibetan Bonpos and Buddhist historians maintain that Bon existed in Tibet before Buddhism was introduced, but there is little evidence to support this claim. It is more likely that Bon emerged and developed alongside Tibetan Buddhist sects from around the 10th century AD. The earliest written Bon text that we presently know is the collection of the *Klu 'bum*, consisting of three volumes. The *Klu 'bum* contains descriptions of some of the activities of Shenrab, which are partly comparable to the activities of Shenrab recorded in Dunhuang Tibetan documents, and to accounts in Bon sources from later centuries. This collection is said to have been discovered in 913 AD by three Indian or Nepalese ācāryas (see Karmay 1977, p. 7).⁸ Therefore, Bon as we now

⁷ In this dissertation, the term Bon, when it is not followed by any classifying term, is used as a noun. In other cases, e.g. Bon tradition, Bon text, Bon teaching and so on, it is used as an adjective. ‘Bonpo’ is used here for the followers of this tradition.

⁸ Another *Klu 'bum* text was discovered later in 1017 AD by Shenchen Luga (see Martin 2001, p. 244).

know it started to emerge at the time of the *Klu bum*. This is the position that I will be arguing in this dissertation.

The Bonpo and Buddhist descriptions of the nature of the Bon tradition that existed in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism are very different, which suggests that there are different motivations behind their claims. Tibetan Buddhist scholars, on the one hand, argue that the nature of Bon before the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet was mostly uncivilized, barbaric and heretical, and that the importation of Buddhism was necessary to change that (Sakya 1966, p. 48-49, p. 65, p. 167). On the other hand, Bonpo scholars argue that Bon religious practices, before the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, were highly civilized, and its priests were close to taking control of political authority in the royal court by influencing the King Trisong Deutsen (8th century AD). They claim that it did not happen only because a couple of the King's ministers were against Bon and persuaded the King to reject it and embrace Buddhism instead.⁹

It has often been noted that many aspects of the indigenous ritual practices that existed in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism can be found in Bon today. However, some of these ritual practices have also been incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism (cf. Stein 1972, pp. 240–41). While it is certain that these practices did not derive from Buddhism, it does not necessarily follow that these practices were *therefore* derived from early 'Bon' practices. Regardless of the claims made, and the motivations behind these claims, we cannot prove that Bon existed in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism.

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON BON

As Geoffrey Samuel (2005, p. 121) writes, until the 1950s, Western perspectives on Bon religion were derived entirely from the Buddhist sources. Until that time, particularly the presentations of Bon by some well-known Tibetan Buddhist lamas were taken as historical fact. There are many different perspectives on Bon that

⁹ Cf. Khyungpo 1915, p. 50.

have been expressed by various scholars so far, but here I shall only discuss three of them which have been particularly influential: 1) Helmut Hoffmann's division of Bon into the 'old Bon' of animism-shamanism and the 'systematized Bon' of plagiarized Buddhism, 2) Samten Karmay's categorization of the original Bon and later Yungdrung Bon, which is different from that of Hoffmann's, and 3) Rolf Stein's argument that the religion called 'Bon' was only established as an organized religion from the 10th or 11th century onwards, despite being linked to the old ritual practices of Tibet.

Helmut Hoffmann's 'old Bon' and 'systematized Bon'

Helmut Hoffmann (1961) divided Bon into two parts, 'old Bon' and 'systematized/organized Bon'. Old Bon mainly consisted of the ritual practices that existed in Tibet in the pre-Buddhist era, and continued until the emergence of present-day Bon at the turn of the first millennium. Systematized or organized Bon refers to the living tradition of Bon, which is known today as Yungdrung Bon. According to Hoffmann, the transition from 'old Bon' to 'new Bon' can be summarized in 'three stages'. The first stage, or 'old Bon', he categorizes as a primitive animist-shamanist popular religion. The second stage involved the gradual assimilation of Buddhist elements and the incorporation of Gnostic-Buddhist syncretism from the land of Zhangzhung.¹⁰ The third stage arose with the complete assimilation of Buddhist beliefs, after the collapse of the Zhangzhung dynasty, resulting in the modern Bon tradition (cf. Kvaerne 1972, pp. 28–29). As Per Kvaerne has pointed out, Hoffmann's interpretation of these three stages certainly derived from the religious history called *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long* written by Thūukwan Lobzang Choekyi Nyima (1732–1802), although he made adjustments according to his own observations of Bon. Hoffmann's interpretation

¹⁰ The land of Zhangzhung is believed to have been an independent kingdom that existed until the 7th-century AD. It was supposedly located in western parts of Tibet (cf. Beckwith 1987, pp. 16, 20, 43).

of Bon history, while hypothetical, is significant in that it points out that there was an intermediate period when the old practices of Tibet, whatever they were called then, were integrating or mixing with the newly arrived Buddhist religious practices, and that this must have taken place before Bon was systematized or fully developed as a religion.

Samten Karmay's original Bon and Yungdrung Bon

Other pioneering Bon scholars like Kvaerne (1972) and Karmay (1983)¹¹ agree with Hoffmann's division of Bon into two parts, although they disagree with his description of the three-stage transition between them. In particular, Karmay argues that 'old Bon' was the original Bon religion, and that it existed from the Yarlung dynasty (ca. 7th–9th century AD) until the beginning of the second millennium. His argument is based on a few references to Bon in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts (cf. Pelliot tibétain 972 and Pelliot tibétain 239/II). Like Hoffmann, Karmay also refers to later Bon as 'organized Bon', which he associates with what Tibetan Buddhists call 'transformed Bon' and Bonpos call Yungdrung Bon. However, Karmay further writes that the 'organized Bon' from the 11th century cannot be entirely dissociated from the original Bon that existed during the Yarlung royal period.

Karmay's hypothesis that later Bon, or Yungdrung Bon, is connected to the older indigenous practices of Tibet is plausible, although we do not have sufficient evidence to identify early indigenous practices as the original Bon practices. Not even the evidence that Karmay presented from the Dunhuang manuscripts is sufficient in this regard.¹² Therefore, we cannot argue, at least until we have

¹¹ I have read the English version of the article published in Karmay (1998, pp. 157-168).

¹² Karmay (1983; Reprint 1998, pp. 160-68) presents the following passages from the Dunhuang documents, along with his English translation, as evidence for the existence of Bon as a religion before 9th-century AD. Pelliot tibétain 972: "*mu stegs bon la yid ches ste/ mo bon dag la srid ma ltos/*" "Have faith in Bon, the 'non-Buddhist doctrine' Do not put your trust in the *mo bon*." Pelliot tibétain 239: "*bon yas 'dod smrang/*" "The Bon religion is the archetypal myth of the rituals which require ritual objects of offering." Pelliot tibétain 1040: "*bon 'di gsang ba'i*

sufficient evidence, that any religion or practice called ‘Bon’ existed before the turn of the first millennium, even though the terms *bon* and *bon po* are found in the Dunhuang Tibetan documents.

Rolf Stein’s organized Bon as the Bon religion

Karmay’s hypothesis bring us closer to the perspective of Rolf Stein, who argues that the religion called ‘Bon,’ although linked to the old practices of Tibet, was only established as ‘organized Bon’ from the 10th or 11th century onwards. As Stein (2003b, p. 587) argues, the collective old practices of Tibet did not have a specific name. He points out that the term *bon* or *bon po* seems to have been used to refer to a person who performs a specific ritual, and was not used, as it is today, to refer to a follower of the Bon religion.¹³ Even some old Bon texts, such as the *mDo ’dus*, the *Klu ’bum nag po* and the *Srid rgyud kha byang chen mo*, still preserve this old meaning of the term *bon po*, as Stein observed. One may argue that the Tibetan term *bon po* originated etymologically by adding a nominal particle *po* to the term *bon* to designate a performer of *bon* practice. The term *bon po* is found in the Dunhuang Tibetan documents, and one may assume that a religion called *bon* existed at the time when these documents were written. However, as said above, we do not have any evidence to support the existence of *bon* as an organised religion (cf. Hoffmann 1961 and Karmay 1983) during the Dunhuang-period. Therefore it is probably correct to say that the name Bon for the later developed

bon” “This Bon is the secret Bon.” “Pelliot tibétain 1248: “*pa’i bu tsa bon rabs*” “The account of Bon, entitled the son of the father.” Both the occurrences of *bon* in Pelliot tibétain 972 do not seem to be referring to ‘old Bon’, but to *bon po*. The references in Pelliot tibétain 239, Pelliot tibétain 1040 and Pelliot tibétain 1248 are all ambiguous. Therefore, this evidence is not sufficient to support the theory that the early indigenous practices should be categorized as ‘old Bon’ practices. For further discussion on these passages, I shall refer the reader to Blezer 2008, pp. 426-28.

¹³ Following Stein, Blezer (2008, pp. 426-34) also argues for this thesis.

and organised religion is derived from the old Tibetan term *bon po*.¹⁴

When Buddhism was first introduced to Tibet there were no sectarian divisions. These divisions only began to develop around the 10th century AD as different masters with different teachings rose to prominence in the various regions of Tibet. Although these various Buddhist sectarian movements derived from Indian Buddhism, they adapted the Buddhist teachings to local practices and traditions. During this period, Bon also began to emerge and was formalized as a religious sect. Bon has adopted many of the characteristics of Buddhism, perhaps even more than it has adopted the indigenous practices of Tibet. Therefore, the present-day Bon may be viewed more or less as a hybrid of early Buddhism and indigenous Tibetan practices. The practice of appropriation is common in the development of Tibetan cultural practices and literary writings. Due to the adoption of indigenous Tibetan practices Bon was largely thought of, and categorized as, a form of ‘shamanism.’ However, some critical publications about Bon doctrinal, biographical and religious texts (see Snellgrove 1967, Karmay 1972, 1998, Kvaerne 2000, Martin 2001, Bjerken 2001¹⁵, etc.) have changed this perception of Bon as a form of ‘shamanism’ to some extent.

THE FOUNDER OF BON SHENRAB MIWO

Since the emergence of the Bon religion, its adherents have had to cope with issues relating to its lineage and founder. According to Bonpos, their religion was founded by a person called Shenrab Miwo. Traditionally, Shenrab Miwo is not only regarded as the founder of the Bon religion of Tibet, but also is considered to

¹⁴ I hypothesize that it was Buddhist masters who first used the term *bon* or *bon po* to delineate a separate religious group and to exclude them from the Buddhist community. However, this seems to have provided the opportunity for the Bonpos to build a separate identity and to claim that their tradition was older than the Buddhist sects and that it was the native religion of Tibet. I cannot develop my arguments for this hypothesis any further in this dissertation, as it would require me to engage substantially new research (but I plan to address this in the future).

¹⁵ Bjerken has meticulously discussed the tradition of labeling Bon a form of Shamanism in chapter two of his PhD dissertation (2001, see also revised version in Bjerken 2004).

be ‘an enlightened one’ (Tib. *sangs rgyas*, Skt. *buddha*) and is most frequently referred to as Tonpa (Tib. *ston pa*). Most Bonpos even believe that he lived some 18,000 years ago or at least long before the birth of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Bonpo scholars claim that Shenrab was born in the land called Olmo Lungring, which is said to be situated to the west of Tibet. However, careful study of Bon materials shows that the formatting of this belief basically reveals an attempt to transform the Bon myth¹⁶ into a historical narrative that can compete with Buddhist narratives.

Previous Studies on Shenrab Miwo

In the 18th century a Gelukpa lama called Thuṭukwan Lobzang Choekyi Nyima (1732–1802) wrote a history of Tibetan religion called *Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long*.¹⁷ Part of this text was later translated by Sarat Chandra Das (Das 1881). According to this history, Shenrab was one of the eighteen teachers of Bon and he was born in Olmo Lungring in the land of Zhangzhung. He is believed to have possessed the ability to see into the future as well as other magical powers, and his magical teachings were later brought to different countries by many of his

¹⁶ I am aware that the myth is an involved, multifaceted and also much debated issue. That theoretical discussion should not detain us here. I also do not presume to be an expert on all the different applications of this term. However, for the sake of the reader of this dissertation, I shall state how I use the term here, in a rather specific way. In this dissertation, I chose to use the word ‘myth’ for a story that is not or not exactly historical, but that has a perceived historical value in the community that transmits the story. This should not be misunderstood at any cost with a false story or fairy tale, because this story, as said, is regarded as a true account by certain group of believers in Tibet, and it is also the origin of their religious identity. Since I am not certain about the existence of Shenrab Miwo, I consider his presumed life ‘account’ as it is narrated in the *mDo ’dus* and as it underpins Bon identity as a myth. In this way, I also distinguish Shenrab Miwo’s life ‘account’ from the presumed life ‘account’ of the Buddha, which following general custom, I here designate as a legend, because the religious figure about whom the ‘account’ is written can historically be more or less validated.

¹⁷ Gene Smith (2001, p. 148) believes that the content of this history by Thuṭukwan Lobzang Choekyi Nyima (1732-1802) could have been heavily influenced by the political situation in Tibet at that time.

students. Thuṭukwan further writes of a thirteen-year-old boy from the *gshen* family who was captured by a demon for thirteen years, and during that period learned the art of seeing into the future and various other magical techniques. Although not explicitly, Thuṭukwan was obviously implying that this boy later became known as Shenrab Miwo. Das seems to follow Thuṭukwan's story that Shenrab obtained his precognitive abilities and magic powers from a demon during his teenage years. Since Das's translation of Thuṭukwan's work, this account of Shenrab has been quoted in many secondary writings (cf. Li 1948, Banerjee 1981 and Bansal 1994). We know that Das had very limited access to primary Bon sources. One of his main sources of information was a history of Bon written in around the 14th or 15th century that he edited and published in 1915 shortly before his death in 1917. It seems that Das did not have an opportunity to study and comment on the life of Shenrab as it was recorded in this text, but he did indicate a resemblance between the names *gshen rab* and Śākya, the Buddha, when he described the term *gshen rab* in his introduction to the edited volume (Khyungpo 1915, p. 1).

After the *gZer mig*, a middle length biography, was translated into English by A. H. Francke in several series of *Asia Major*, the Bon account of the life of Shenrab Miwo became widely available to Western scholars (see Francke 1924, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1930 and 1949). Although Francke's translation only goes up to chapter eight out of eighteen chapters in total, it has been highly valuable for the study of Bon. Hoffmann (1961) later summarized all eighteen chapters of the *gZer mig*.¹⁸ Hoffmann studied the life of Shenrab in detail and seems to be the first Western scholar to compare the life of Shenrab (according to the *gZer mig*) to the legend of Śākyamuni Buddha and the legend of Padmasambhava. Hoffmann (1961, p. 85) writes that the 'twelve deeds' in the life of Shenrab are very similar to those found in the legend of the Buddha as recorded in the *Lalitavistara*. He concluded that the *gZer mig* was greatly influenced by the Buddha legend, and he even stated

¹⁸ Hoffmann's main source for his study was the *gZer mig*, as the *mDo 'dus* then was not accessible outside Tibet.

that the Bonpos plagiarized the Buddhist work. The similarities between the life of Shenrab and the life of the Buddha have also been noted by Giuseppe Tucci, who wrote that Shenrab's biography faithfully follows the Buddha legend in many respects (Tucci 1980, p. 240). He also pointed out that there are aspects of Shenrab's story that are indigenous to the world of Bon, although they do not give us any further insight into Shenrab's personality. In general, he follows Hoffmann's theory very closely.

This same issue has been brought up by Snellgrove (1967, p. 8). He agreed with Hoffmann and Tucci that the inspiration and the framework for the account of Shenrab's life derived from the life of Śākyamuni, and that it was supplemented with indigenous Tibetan material. A little later, Snellgrove (1967, p. 13) rephrased this theory, strongly arguing that the life of Shenrab was deliberately fabricated.

“It is generally agreed that the story of Shenrab's life is a deliberate fabrication, for which the inspiration was the life of Śākyamuni. *gshen rab* just means ‘best of *gshen*.’ But a study of the local traditions and legendary material from which the story has been pieced together would be a worthwhile literary task.”

He also implied that the name Shenrab is just a description of a title, ‘the best or highest priest among *gshen* priests’, and not a personal given name as maintained by the Bonpos.

Kvaerne (1972, p. 35) has also suggested that Shenrab Miwo was not a historical figure, but ‘a religious hero’. He stated that the biography of Shenrab recorded in the *gZer mig* was partly copied from the legend of Padmasambhava and partly from conventional biographies of Śākyamuni. However, Kvaerne has reviewed his position with regard to the *gZer mig* being partly copied from the legend of Padmasambhava (Kvaerne 1979). This change seems to have been influenced by a study by Anne-Marie Blondeau (1971, pp. 34ff), who concludes

that the account of Shenrab recorded in the *gZer mig* influenced the account of Padmasambhava in the *bTsun mo bka' thang*. I will elaborate upon this in chapter five.

Karmay (1975) also discovered similarities between the life of Shenrab and Buddha Śākyamuni. He wrote that Shenrab Miwo occupies a position very similar to that of Śākyamuni, although there is no source available to establish Shenrab's historicity, the dates of his life, his racial origin, his activities or the authenticity of the enormous number of books either attributed directly to him or considered to be his word. Karmay further stated that the later Bonpo authors wove fact and legend together to construct Shenrab's life account. A similar view is presented by Dan Martin (2001, p. 33), who argues that the stories about Shenrab, as recorded in the *gZer mig* and the *gZi brjid*, seem to be compiled from various saintly and heroic legends taken from stories about Buddha Śākyamuni and Padmasambhava, as well as from themes from the story of Gesar and Rāmāyana literature.¹⁹

Most of these scholarly studies of Shenrab have been carried out using two biographical sources, the *gZer mig* and the *gZi brjid*. This is because the oldest account, the *mDo 'dus*, was not accessible outside Tibet until its publication in India in 1985. Although the basic themes of all three accounts are same, this oldest account contains stories that are to some extent different from the stories contained in the two sources mentioned above. In particular, when we take a closer look at the *mDo 'dus*, we find elements of the story that are similar to the legend of the Buddha, not only in terms of narrative motif, but also in terms of presentation and style. Some of these aspects of presentation and style are not found in the two latter accounts of Shenrab Miwo. I will discuss them in chapter four of this dissertation.

¹⁹ Some scholars such as Namkhai Norbu (1996), Lhakpa Tsering (2003) and Dmitry Ermakov (2008) have also discussed the life of Shenrab, but their accounts merely represent traditional accounts and are not reviewed here.

Dates of Shenrab Miwo's Life

Shenrab's life-span according to the *mDo 'dus* was eighty-two years. He is said to have lived for two years longer than the Buddha Śākyamuni who died at the age of eighty. A detailed comparison between these two figures will be presented in chapter four. Although the *mDo 'dus* recorded the life span of Shenrab to be eighty-two years, later Bonpo authors interpreted this as eighty two *gshen* years, and multiplied it by a hundred to make 8200 human years. Therefore, later Bonpos believed that Shenrab died at the age of 8200 years, which would mean he was born in the Palaeolithic period.

In the *mDo 'dus*, we only find three phrases relating to Shenrab's age. These are: *gshen lo brgya(d) cu*, 'when gshen [rab] was 80 years old'; *lo ni gnyis phyi shol btab*, 'postponed two years'; *da ni brgyad bcu rtsa gnyis lon* 'now having reached the age of eighty-two'. However, these phrases in no way justify the claim that Shenrab lived 8200 years and I have not found any Bon source written before the *mDo 'dus* that asserts that he lived that long. As mentioned above, later Bonpo authors calculated one *gshen* year to be equal to a hundred human years, presumably on the basis of the following passage found in the *mDo 'dus*.²⁰

“*mi lo brgya (alt. brgyad) dang gshen zhag gcig/
zhag ni sum brgya drug cu lo*”

“Hundred (alt. eight) human years are equal to one day of gshen, [thus] 360 days make one year.”

As quoted here, the *mDo 'dus* informs us about a calculation system, in which a hundred (or eight) ordinary years is to be understood as the same as one day of *gshen*, and one year (in both cases) requires 360 days to complete.²¹ However,

²⁰ See the *mDo 'dus*, p. 221 for this passage excerpted from the edition of the *mDo 'dus* published in the Bon *bKa' gyur*. For more details about three different versions of the *mDo 'dus*, see *infra* footnote 38.

²¹ I am grateful to Dan Martin for pointing out this passage

there is no mention of one *gshen* year being equal to one hundred human years. As the term *gshen* had already been interpreted to mean a non-human or a celestial being by the time that this source was written (*mDo 'dus*, p. 4, 44, 37), the second passage stating that one hundred years equals one *gshen* day seems to be referring to the life span of a celestial being or ‘an enlightened one’. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the author(s) of this source were familiar with the idea that celestial beings had a very long life, an idea that had already spread throughout Tibet by the time the *mDo 'dus* was written. It is likely that the Bonpo author was employing the term *gshen* to refer to ‘a celestial being’ or ‘an enlightened one’, as many Bon sources indicate that *gshen* is equivalent to ‘the Buddha’.

There is an earlier Buddhist source called the *Pāyāsi-sutta* (chapter xxiii of the *Dīgha Nikāya*)²² which may be one of the sources that have influenced this calculation system. There is a passage explaining the time difference in the heaven of the Thirty Three Gods (Skt. *trayastrimśa*) and the human world. According to this Nikāya text, one hundred years for a human being is equal to one day in this heavenly realm. This matches the passage in the *mDo 'dus*, “one hundred human years is equal to one *gshen* day”. I have not been able to determine whether or not there existed a Tibetan translation of this *Pāli Nikāya*, but it is apparent that the Bonpo author was aware of the calculation system through this text or other related Buddhist texts.²³

Beyond the information given above, no specific dates for Shenrab’s birth and death are mentioned in the *mDo 'dus*. In recent centuries, Bonpos have developed a chronological account of Shenrab’s life. There are several different dates proposed for Shenrab’s birth, although the date that is most widely accepted

²² The *Dīgha Nikāya*, the collection of Long Discourses, is one of the five *Nikāyas* in the *Pāli Sutta Piṭaka*, and it consists of thirty-four suttas. See Walshe 1987.

²³ I have been informed by Professor Lubotsky that this calculation system existed in Vedic literature long before this time. I believe that there are also other sources that might have informed the Bonpo author regarding this calculation system, although I have not been able to present them here,

by traditional Bonpos is 16,017 BC. Needless to say, almost all the dates are based on traditional accounts of Sherab's life and on the assumption that the religion of Bon existed before the birth of the Buddha.

Furthermore, if we look at the chronological table by Nyima Tenzin (cf. Kvaerne 1971, p. 220ff.), it is easy to see that the years after Shenrab's death were also multiplied according to the '*gshen* versus human' system of time. Based on this calculation system, we might consider that the sons and disciples of Shenrab actually lived much longer than Shenrab himself, an average of nearly 120 *gshen* years, which is about 12,000 ordinary years. If these years are recalculated without using the '*gshen* versus human' system, we might end up with the dates of the birth and the death of Shenrab sometime near those of the Buddha. The point I shall suggest here is that later Bonpo author's dating of the life of Shenrab is probably based on information about the life of the Buddha, yet the dates were calculated using the '*gshen* versus human' system of time.

In the earliest known chronological table of Bon masters, compiled in 1804, a brief note on Shenrab's birth is given. The author Tsultrim Gyaltzen, who is popularly known among the Bonpos by his Sanskrit name Śīla Dhvaja, recorded the birth of Shenrab as having occurred around 20,995 BC (see Kvaerne 1990, pp. 160–61). He wrote,

“22799 years have passed till now (i.e. 1804 AD) since [Shenrab] was born from the right arm pit of his mother in the year of wood-mouse, in the first month of spring, at the rising of the star *rgyal* [Skt. *puṣya*, one of the twenty-eight *nakṣatras*], on the fifteenth day of the month, at day break.

Tsultrim Gyaltzen further recorded that Shenrab died around 12,795 BC (see Kvaerne 1990, p. 162). I could not find out what source he used to calculate the

year of Shenrab's birth.²⁴ However, it is obvious that he estimated the year of Shenrab's death based on the calculation system of one hundred human years being equal to one *gshen* year. He wrote that one hundred days is equal to one *gshen* day, thus he calculated that one hundred human years is equal to one *gshen* year. Based on this system, he calculated that Shenrab lived a life of 8200 years. This resulted in his dating of Shenrab's death at around 12,795 BC.

In his chronological table from the late 19th century, Nyima Tenzin (1813–1875 AD) used a similar calculation system, but he recorded the birth of Shenrab as being nearly five thousand years later than the date recorded in by Tsultrim Gyaltzen in his chronological table. Yet again, without giving any reference to the source of his information, he estimated the birth of Shenrab to have been in 16,017 BC (Kvaerne 1971, pp. 220–21). Like Tsultrim Gyaltzen, he also believed that Shenrab's life span was 8200 years and that he died in 7818 BC. These dates for Shenrab's birth and death have been accepted by many Bonpo scholars, and are used to claim that the Bon religion has existed since ancient times. One of the reasons that these dates have been widely accepted could simply be due to the high position held by Nyima Tenzin as the abbot of Menri monastery, which has been considered to be the main seat of Bon since the 15th century. The abbots of Menri have played a significant role in the development of the Bon religion since the foundation of the monastery in the early 15th century, and have held authority over Bon religious groups all over Tibet. Their work is regarded as authoritative compared to the works of other Bonpos. Therefore, the Bonpos never question this date, although there is some disagreement about the month in which Shenrab was born, and the month in which he died.

Towards the end of the last century, Namkhai Norbu estimated the birth of Shenrab to be in 1917 BC (Norbu 1997, pp. 156-58. Cf. also Namkhai Norbu 1996, p. 69). Norbu argued against the traditional dates, provided above, by stating

²⁴ He referred to a sūtra called *Dung lo ljon pa* (Kvaerne 1990, p. 154, 160). Cf. *rGyud dung lo ljon pa bdud rtsi sgrub pa spyad kyi mdo* in the *Bon bKa' 'gyur* volume 182.

that they are beyond what we can reasonably judge given our limited capacity to know history, but his estimated date also lacks evidence. He calculated the birth of Shenrab to be in 1917 BC, based on information from a 15th century Bon history by Khyungpo Lodoe Gyaltsen, titled *rGyal rabs bon gyi byung gnas*.²⁵

The chief [Shenrab] of the doctrine [Bon] was born in the Wood-mouse year. [He] lived a life of 3500 years and died in the Water-sheep year. Lishu was born after the death of teacher [Shenrab]. When he [Lishu] was 2500 years old in the Water-pig year, Trisong [Deutsen] began persecuting Bonpos.

Norbu calculated his date by considering all of these factors: the birth of Shenrab in the year of the wood-mouse, his death in the year of the wood-bird (probably his own calculation because it is different from the year mentioned in the above passage by Khyungpo Lodoe Gyaltsen), the birth of Lishu Tagring²⁶ and the persecution of Bonpos. He estimated that the persecution of Bonpos by the King Trisong Deutsen happened in 783 AD, which was the year of water pig as mentioned in the above passage. Without questioning Lishu's lifespan of 2500 years, he calculated back from the year of the persecution of Bonpos in 783 AD to determine that Lishu was born in 1717 BC. He estimated the birth of Shenrab to be two hundred years before the birth of Lishu Tagring by making astrological calculations based on the information that Shenrab was born in the year of the wood-mouse. Why he goes back two hundred years is not sufficiently explained. It therefore seems that Norbu calculated the birth years of both Shenrab Miwo and Lishu from the time of the persecution of the Bonpos by the King Trisong Deutsen in 783 AD.

²⁵ Khyungpo 1915, p. 59: “*bstan pa'i gtso bo shing pho byi ba la sku 'khrungs/ mi lo sum stong lnga brgya bzhugs/ chu lug lo la gshegs/ ston pa 'das nas li shu 'khrungs/ des dgung lo nyis stong lnga brgya bzhes dus chu phag lo la khri srong gis bon bsnubs pa'i dbu zug go/*”

²⁶ According to the Bonpos, Lishu Tagring is said to have been active during the reign of the King Trisong Deutsen in the 8th-century AD.

In his argument, Norbu rejected the traditional claims that Shenrab lived a life of 8200 years or 3500 years, but he seems to have no problem with the other claim recorded in the Bon History by Khyungpo Lodoe Gyaltsen, which is also beyond reasonable judgement, that Lishu Tagring was 2500 years old when the King Trisong Deutsen persecuted Bonpos. Like the traditional claims, Norbu's argument is not supported by sufficient historical evidence. Norbu's dates have been accepted by a few scholars (Wangdue and Trinlay 2001, p. 27, and Lhakpa Tsering 2003, p. 50), however they have also failed to provide any evidence for these dates. They may agree with Norbu, because these dates take the development of Bon out of the Palaeolithic era, while still supporting the claim that Bon is older than Buddhism.

Dondup Lhagyal (Lhagyal 2000, p. 438) proposed another time frame for the life of Shenrab. He writes that Shenrab Miwo was a priest during the reign of King Drigum Tsenpo, who is traditionally believed to be the eighth king of early Tibet, reigning more than twenty generations before the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (d. 649). It seems that Lhagyal through this statement is trying to find a neutral ground between two different perspectives. Firstly, that Bon, as traditional scholars claim, existed before the founding of Tibetan Buddhism, and secondly, that Bon emerged on the basis of the theories and concepts of early Indian Buddhism.

Table: Different dates of Shenrab Miwo by Tibetan scholars

Source	Born	Died	Lived
Khyungpo Lodoe Gyaltsen (15 th century)	16,017 BC (wood mouse)	12,518 BC (?) (water sheep)	3,500 years
Tsultrim Gyaltsen (written in 1804)	20,995 BC (wood mouse)	12,795 BC	8200 years (82 <i>gshen</i> years)
Nyima Tenzin 1965a (late 19 th century)	16,017 BC (wood mouse)	7,818 BC (water hare)	8,199 years (82 <i>gshen</i> years)
Namkhai Norbu 1997	1917 BC (wood mouse)	1835 BC (wood bird)	82 years

What is common in many of the above estimations is that they assume that the religion of Bon existed before Buddhism or at least before the founding of Tibetan Buddhism. Unfortunately, all of these dates are entirely speculative, built on assumptions derived from Bon sources written many centuries or even millennia after they claim that Shenrab lived. These dates are based on the view that Shenrab really did exist and that he taught the Bon religion. Since there is no historical evidence to support his existence, none of these dates can be taken as factual.

References to *gshen rab myi bo* in Dunhuang documents

In Dunhuang Tibetan documents the name *gshen rab myi bo* appears in six different documents (altogether ten times), in legendary or mythic stories that pertain to ritual events from the 7th–11th century AD (cf. Karmay 1998, p. 111, Stein 2003b, pp. 598–600). This suggests that the name existed before the emergence of Bon and its founder. On almost all occasions, the name is listed among others who are all identified as priests performing funeral rituals. A detailed study of this name and its function has already been conducted by Stein (2003b). Here I will briefly present the relevant information from Stein’s work. For a detailed discussion I refer the reader to Stein’s article.

As recorded in Pelliot tibétain 1068, Shenrab Myiwo²⁷ together with Durshen Gyi Mada²⁸ and Shentsha Lungdra, were asked by Kyi Chugi Jonpa to cure his sister Kyinam Nyagchig.

“The brother invited three priests: *pha* (father/priest) Shenrab Myiwo, Durshen Gyi Mada and Shentsha Lungdra and said to them, “My sister Kyinam Nyagchig was lying with her hair raised up and... What kind of

²⁷ I use a slightly different spelling here, i.e. Shenrab Myiwo, because this is how the name is given in Dunhuang documents.

²⁸ According to the *Srid rgyud kha byang chen mo* (p. 314), he was invited to perform the funeral ritual of Shenrab. He is called *srid pa’i bon po*, the title that is generally attached to Mucho Demdrug in Bon texts.

rite do you have [that you can perform] and what sort of diagnosis pertains to the *bon (po)?*” *Pha* Durshen Mada, Shenrab Myiwo and Shentsha Lungdra replied, “the *bon (po)* has rites and the *gshen (po)* has diagnosis. If it is illness, she can be cured, but if she is dead then no cure is possible”.²⁹

In Pelliot tibétain 1134 (lines 61–66), Shenrab Myiwo was again invited together with Durshen Mada and Karshen The’uzhug to perform a funerary ritual. In Pelliot tibétain 1136 (line 51–54), the father Tsang Hodei Hosdag (Tib. *rtsang ho de’i hos bdag*) and his son Mabon Zingkye consulted *pha* Shenrab Myiwo about someone’s death. Pelliot tibétain 1194 (lines 5, 16–19) also contains passages in which Shenrab Myiwo and his companions, Durshen Mada and Galshen Tho’uyug (cf. Karshen The’uzhug), were consulted for a sheep sacrifice during funeral rituals. However, the details of this passage are not entirely clear to me. The text Pelliot tibétain 1289 (line v3.12) seems to be a recitation of ritual, in which Shenrab Myiwo is described as carrying a big flat bell (Tib. *gshang dril chen*) in his left hand and a feather (Tib. *gshog the ra ther bu*) in his right hand. In the IOL Tib J 731 (line r123–26), *pha* Shenrab Myiwo and Durshen Mada were again invited to perform a ritual.³⁰

In the above passages, Shenrab Myiwo was mostly referred to as *pha* ‘father’, which is probably due to his position as the head priest. He was invited to perform rituals for the deceased and was consulted about issues such as illness and mortality. In the Dunhuang documents he is linked to two important aspects of Bon, the performance of *gto* ritual and medical diagnosis (Tib. *dpyad*), and he is also linked to these two activities in the *mDo ’dus*. Furthermore, the Dunhuang

²⁹ Pelliot tibétain 1068, [line 87] “*mying po dral pos pha gshen rab myi bo dang dur shen gyi rma da* [88] *dang gshen tsha lung sgra gsum zhig gnyerde / lcham skyi nam nyag cig ni dbu skra* [89] *gnam du yer sro shig ni lhags gyis ma mchisna / pa la gthod ji mchis / bon* [90] *la / ga byad ci mchis shes bgyisna / pha dur gshen rma da dang gshen rab myi po dang gshen* [91] *tsha lung skra gsuM gyi mchid nas / bong la gthod mchis gshen la / dpyad mchis* [92] *gyis / na sde sos ba ni mchis / shisde ba ni ma mchis gyis /*” See Imaeda 2007, pp. 91-92.

³⁰ See Imaeda 2007, p. 147, 157-58, 248, 267.

description of the priest called Shenrab Myiwo carrying a flat bell is still relevant for Bon today. The flat bell is considered to be a typical religious symbol and an instrument of Bon. A flat bell is also said to have been carried by the priest called Dto mba Shi lo, the founder of Dongba Jiao, also known today as Moso Shamanism, which exists in south-eastern borderland of Tibet in Yunnan Province (Rock 1937).

WHY SHENRAB MIWO, THE FOUNDER?

Many religious traditions around the world credit a most extraordinary figure,³¹ whether historical or fictitious, as their founder. The choice of founder's name also sometimes determines the name of a particular religious tradition. This usually happens a long time after the traditions themselves have been established. Having a founder of a religious tradition is convenient not only to authenticate the tradition itself, but also to attract followers. Thus, the founder carries an important role in the promotion and the development of the tradition.

After the reintroduction of Buddhism in Tibet from late 10th century AD, it started to diverge to form the various branches of Tibetan Buddhism. Most of these branches also credit their most extraordinary figure as their founding figure (such as Padmasambhava, the Karmapa and Tsongkhapa). However, all of them acknowledge Śākyamuni Buddha as their original founder, because Śākyamuni Buddha was already indisputably acknowledged as the founder of Buddhism.

In the case of Bon, the situation was different. The Bonpos started to claim that their founder of was not Śākyamuni Buddha and that Bon was not introduced from the land where Tibetans then felt that Buddhism originated (i.e. India).³² Tibetans, who followed 'Bon practices,' began to organize their religious tradition

³¹ Cf. Freedman and McClymond (2001) in which several specialist authors have discussed in detail about five religious figures: Śākyamuni Buddha, Moses, Confucius, Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad, considered the founders of, respectively, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam.

³² Cf. Khyungpo 1915, p. 10ff.

in contradistinction to Tibetan Buddhist sects, around the turn of the first millennium AD. In this situation, the Bonpos must have realized the importance of having a religious founder. To begin their quest for a founder, they seem to have made use of whatever oral or written stories were available to them at that time. Apart from Tibetan Buddhist legends and early Bon sources like the *Klu 'bum*, they possibly also had access to some fragmented early Tibetan sources or oral traditions, comparable to the narratives that appear in some Dunhuang Tibetan documents. It is apparent that the Bonpos have made use of these early Tibetan sources when determining the name of their founder.

As I have discussed in the previous section, the name of the founder of Bon, Shenrab Miwo, apparently is a reproduction of the name Shenrab Myiwo given in the mentioned Dunhuang documents. Why did Bonpos choose Shenrab Myiwo as their founder? There is no definitive answer to this question, as there is no textual evidence explaining this choice. However, I offer the following speculations based on available information. Firstly, the name Shenrab Myiwo carries a lot of meaning in itself. The word *rab* means the 'best' or the 'supreme,' while *mi bo* means 'the best man.' The origins of the Tibetan word *gshen* are not well known, but it seems to be referring to 'a priest' in most occurrences in the Dunhuang documents (Stein 2003b). Given this, the name, Shenrab Myiwo, can be translated as 'the supreme *gshen* priest, who is also 'the best man' as Snellgrove (1967) and Stein (2003b) suggested. According to the Dunhuang documents, there is another figure, Durshen Mada, who accompanied Shenrab Myiwo in performing many ritual activities. However, since the name Durshen Mada specifically indicates his position as a priest that performs funerary rituals, he might have been an unsuitable choice as the founder of Bon. This theory has already been developed in Blezer (2008, pp. 438–39) and therefore I refer the reader to the discussion there. Secondly, Shenrab Myiwo is referred to as 'the father' on many occasions as mentioned earlier. This may be taken to mean that he was chief among the priests of the ritual in general. An old Bon text, *Klu 'bum*, also

describes Shenrab Miwo as the head priest of the rituals. Thirdly, Shenrab Miwo seems to have been known in other traditions as well. In his PhD dissertation, Lhakpa Tsering (2003) pursued a comparative study between the founder of Bon, Tonpa Shenrab Miwo and the founder of the Dongba tradition, Dto mba Shi lo. As he suggested, it seems obvious that Tonpa Shenrab and Dto mba Shi lo are phonetically similar, although we cannot be certain about which name is the original one. He estimated that the Dongba tradition was founded during the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD). If his estimation is correct, then this could also explain why Bonpos considered Tonpa Shenrab to be their founder. It is possible that the life account of Shenrab Miwo as well as the traditions that developed into what we know today as the *mDo 'dus* also began to emerge around the Tang dynasty or little later.

