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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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# INTRODUCTION

## ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

In the introduction to his groundbreaking publication, *The Nine Ways of Bon* (1967, p. 13), David Snellgrove rightly pointed out that Bonpos have incorporated all types of Tibetan religious practices within their framework, by accepting everything and refusing nothing since the emergence of Bon.<sup>1</sup>

“The Bonpos merely pose the problem nicely for us by having arranged all types of Tibetan religious practice within the framework of their ‘Nine Ways.’ Regarded in this way, Bon might indeed claim to be the true religion of Tibet. Accepting everything, refusing nothing through the centuries, it is the one all-embracing form of Tibetan religion.”

Despite the limited view of Bon that is held by some Tibetan Buddhist masters and even by some known scholars in Western academia, Snellgrove’s description accurately summarizes the nature of the Bon tradition as it was up until the end of the last century. This observation is still valid in some cases, but this all-inclusive nature of Bon seems to be slowly fading away. This is due to ongoing attempts to categorize Tibetan religious elements as belonging to either the Buddhist or the Bon traditions. Many Tibetan Bonpos and their Western followers, particularly after Bon’s expansion in the West over the last two decades, are trying harder than ever to claim that Bon religious practice existed in Tibet before the founding of Buddhism. Bonpos deny the fact that some elements of Buddhism were integrated into Bon and the study of Buddhist texts is discouraged in some Bonpo monasteries and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> David Snellgrove’s contributions to Bon studies are acknowledged by Bonpos as he opened up the opportunity for them to promote Bon in the West, especially when it was misunderstood and misinterpreted.

In this PhD dissertation, I will try to explain how the Bonpos accepted all of the religious practices<sup>2</sup> that were available in Tibet, whether from Buddhism or from other foreign traditions. I will explain that by investigating the emergence of the hagiography of Shenrab Miwo, who is considered to be the founder of Bon religion.<sup>3</sup> This PhD research project is part of a larger research program, “The Three Pillars of Bon: Doctrine, Location & Founder; Historiographical Strategies and their Contexts in Bon Religious Historical Literature.” As outlined in the original proposal for this research program (see Blezer 2004), the overall aim is to understand the process of the formation of Bon religious identity in Tibet at the turn of the first millennium AD. In this dissertation, I have focused on one of the three pillars mentioned above, namely the construction of the life account of the founder of the Bon religion.

The process of constructing the life account of the founder of Bon as presented in the hagiographical literature dates from around the turn of the first millennium AD. The creation of the hagiography seems to have been triggered by the emergence of competing Buddhist sects, at a time when Tibetan Buddhism was undergoing a major renaissance. In later periods, these hagiographical narratives were perceived as authentic sources outlining the history of Bon. The Bon tradition developed extremely fast and within a century or two, it became an important rival of the Tibetan Buddhist sects that were by then already established. Tibetan Buddhist followers subsequently tried to question the authenticity of Bon doctrine, while Bonpos claimed that their religion (cf. Tib. *chos*, Skt. *dharma*) originated far before the birth of the historical Buddha.

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<sup>2</sup> In Tibetan, ‘religious’ practice (Tib. *chos/bon*) is a wider term, which includes any activities carried out for the benefit of self or others, and in a formal sense those activities based on the manuals written by religious masters.

<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation, by the term ‘Bon religion’ I refer to organised Bon that we see emerge around the end of the first millennium AD.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are many questions that may be asked about the religious tradition of Bon and its founder. Many things are still unclear, even after the publication of a number of books and articles on this issue. Most authors argue that already before the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism old ritual practices existed in Tibet that were called Bon, but a number of scholars also question whether that name is at all applicable to those old Tibetan ritual practices, which, as is well known, to some extent have been integrated into what later became known as Bon. Did these practices function as components of one individual religion as the Bonpos now claim? If yes, what was that individual religion? Was it known as 'Bon' or something else? Was it initiated by Shenrab Miwo? I must admit that most of these questions cannot easily be answered until we find hard evidence such as contemporaneous textual sources or archaeological artefacts. Given that the only resources currently available are semi-historical records that date from the turn of the first millennium AD, we cannot provide conclusive answers to these questions. Nevertheless, I shall try to answer the following key questions in this dissertation: Who was Shenrab Miwo and why is he considered to have been the founder of Bon? How did the hagiography of Shenrab Miwo emerge and how did this contribute toward the development of Bon?

To attempt to answer these questions, and to introduce the framework of my research, I would like to put forward several hypotheses for which I will present evidence in the following chapters. I hypothesize that Shenrab Miwo was not yet recognized as the founder of Bon during the Dunhuang period,<sup>4</sup> although he was

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<sup>4</sup> The Dunhuang period was from approximately the 5<sup>th</sup> until the early 11<sup>th</sup>-century AD. It takes its name from a locality called Dunhuang in Central Asia, which possessed a library contained within a cave. The cave, which was discovered in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, contained thousands of manuscripts written in various languages. Stein (2003b, p. 591) has proposed that the cave was closed in 1035 AD, while Rong (2000, p. 274) argues that it was closed in 1002 AD. The documents discovered in the cave are now kept in various libraries and museums around the world. Some of these documents have been translated into several languages and some have also

known as an important religious figure as evidenced by references found in the Dunhuang Tibetan documents. Shenrab Miwo was designated as the founder of Bon only some time after the introduction of Buddhism, probably during the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet, starting the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century AD, apparently in a bid to compete with the developing Buddhist movements in Tibet at the time. The choice of Shenrab Miwo as the founder of Bon was first canonized with the creation of the *mDo 'dus*, which is the oldest account of his life. As we will see later in this dissertation, the basic narrative patterns in the *mDo 'dus* are based on older prototypes found in the Tibetan Dunhuang documents, Tibetan translations of legends of the life of the Buddha, stories passed down through oral traditions, and other textual fragments that existed in Tibet at that time.

## SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

There are three complete accounts of the life of Shenrab Miwo available today: a short (*mDo 'dus*), a mid-length (*gZer mig*) and a long account (*gZi brjid*). The exact dates of the first two accounts are unknown, but we know that they already existed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. These two are cited in the works of Bonpo scholars from that time, e.g. Tsultrim Palchen (1052–1106 AD), Meton Sherab Ozer (1058/1118 – 1132/1192 AD) and Paton Osal Gyaltsen (c. 11–12<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>5</sup>

There are considerable problems in dating the shortest and oldest account, the *mDo 'dus*, accurately. As I will discuss in chapter two, the information for dating the *mDo 'dus* is based on the assumption that it is categorically related to other Bon texts (i.e. the four great sūtras), which, apparently, are dateable to the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. There are many aspects of the *mDo 'dus* that suggest that it is considerably older than the *gZer mig*, the middle-length account of Shenrab Miwo. Since the *mDo 'dus* is the main text that I will be using for my comparative

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been digitized. Two very important websites regarding these documents are: <http://idp.bl.uk> and <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp>.

<sup>5</sup> See *infra* p. 32 (note 36) and p. 46.

analysis in this dissertation, my first task is to determine the approximate date that it was written. With an approximate date for the creation of the *mDo 'dus*, I can at least create a preliminary historical reference point for understanding the development and inclusion of its narratives.

The account of Shenrab's life as presented in the *mDo 'dus* has many similarities to the legend of the life of Śākyamuni. For example, Shenrab was also born into a royal family, had a luxurious upbringing, subdued the demon Māra with his miraculous powers, renounced his worldly life and became a monk, practiced austerity, achieved 'enlightenment' (Skt. *bodhi*) and gave religious teachings.

In this dissertation, narratives from the *mDo 'dus* will be compared to parallel narratives from the *rGya cher rol pa*, which is the Tibetan translation of the *Lalitavistara*. The *rGya cher rol pa* is one of the earliest accounts of the life of the Buddha available in Tibet. As I will show in chapter three, the *rGya cher rol pa* predates the discovery of the *mDo 'dus*. There are some other Buddhist sources that also contains narratives similar to those found in the *mDo 'dus*, and these will be examined here as well. As we will see in chapter four later, comparing these Buddhist narratives to the *mDo 'dus* not only reveals close resemblances, but also suggests that the *mDo 'dus* was derived from these Buddhist texts.

I will also discuss how the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* made use of narratives other than those found in the legend of the Buddha. For example, the *mDo 'dus* gives descriptions of four kings who are all closely related to Shenrab Miwo. These kings are the *hos* King Dangwa Yiring, the *dpo* King Barwe Dronmacan, the Kongpo King Karpo, and the magical King Kongtse. I have not found the names of the first two kings in old Tibetan documents, and therefore I am not certain as to whether the first two kings are historical figures. There are some references to *hos* in the Dunhuang Tibetan documents,<sup>6</sup> although these may not be fully relevant here. We know slightly more about the two latter figures from Dunhuang sources

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<sup>6</sup> See *infra* p. 100.

and early Tibetan inscriptions. Particularly, the magical king Kongtse is a Tibetan version of Kǒng zǐ (孔子, Confucius), the famous Chinese sage who is said to have lived around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Karmay (1975a) equates Kongtse with Confucius, Lin (2007) partly agrees but argues for Kongtse being a Tibetan image of Confucius and Gurung (2009) demonstrates that the role of Kongtse in Bon sources is comparable to the role of Shenrab Miwo.

In the *mDo 'dus*, some personal names are also mentioned in relation to Shenrab, including the names of his parents, his ancestors and his siblings. As I will discuss in chapter six, these names seem to have been constructed or imported by the author(s) from older Tibetan sources, very much like the name Shenrab Miwo was imported from the Dunhuang documents (see chapter one).

## OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

In the first chapter, I will explain the Bon religion to some extent, specifically by reviewing the three well-known perspectives on Bon held by Western academic scholars. This chapter will be a stepping-stone to enter into a detailed investigation of the founder of Bon, Shenrab Miwo. I will look at the traditional accounts of Shenrab Miwo's life and review the studies of this subject by previous scholars. This will be followed by an overview of the key dates relating to his life as presented in both traditional and contemporary accounts. Then I will look at the name *gshen rab mi bo* found in the Dunhuang Tibetan documents and speculate as to why he was credited as the founder of Bon by later Bonpos.

The second chapter presents a textual history of the *mDo 'dus*. Based on all available evidence, I will attempt to determine the most plausible date for the creation of this crucial Bon source, which later became a model for other writings on the life of Shenrab. To find an approximate date, I will first study the colophon of the *mDo 'dus* and show what are the traditionally known beliefs about the origin of this text. This will be followed by a discussion of the discovery of the *mDo 'dus* and related texts, known as the four great sūtras. Thereupon, I will discuss

quotations and references to the *mDo 'dus* found in other Bon sources.

In the third chapter I will briefly introduce some legendary accounts of the life of the Buddha that may have been used to construct the hagiography of Shenrab, and discuss their history and origins.

The fourth chapter is the main portion of my research, in which I compare similarities between the accounts of Shenrab Miwo, 'the Buddha of the Bon religion' and the legends of Śākyamuni, 'the historical Buddha'. The comparative analysis in this chapter is carried out mainly between the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa*, but also extends to the Jātaka stories. This reveals the parallels between the two stories and shows that many of the narratives in the *mDo 'dus* were most likely appropriated from these Buddhist sources. The parallel features include: both figures descend from heaven, the dreams and visions of their parents, their miraculous births, their education, travelling to teach, their ascetic lives, witnessing the four sights, their departure from home, becoming monks, practicing austerity, Māra performing magical tricks to hinder their practice, their attainment of 'enlightenment,' Māra's sceptical view of this accomplishment, and the episode of the tigress from the Jātaka stories.

The fifth chapter examines the family relationship between Shenrab Miwo and the four kings as presented in the *mDo 'dus*. Although not all of them were necessarily kings, the four kings that Bonpos remember as such are the King of *hos*, the King of *dpo*, the magical king Kongtse and the King of Kongpo. As we will see later, they are described as both fathers-in-law and patrons of Shenrab. The narrative accounts of the four kings are particularly interesting, because they reveal the process of constructing a life account of Shenrab Miwo that differs somewhat from the life story of Śākyamuni Buddha. These accounts also show how the range of Bon teachings attributed to Shenrab was extended. Since the crucial point of the relationships between Shenrab and the four kings seems to be to extend his family, I will discuss Shenrab's six marriages (to four princesses and two goddesses) and the birth of his ten children.



Next I will look at the many names that in the *mDo 'dus* are identified as belonging to Shenrab's ancestors or to members of his family and show that the mythical account could not have been successfully completed without these names. These names are also key elements to distinguish the story of Shenrab from that of the Buddha, so I will discuss how these names entered the *mDo 'dus*. I will also study some other early Bon sources where these names occur, albeit in a fragmented way, and discuss their possible origins. Many names were compiled from various parts to form one name, or one existing name was modified to form another. This information is itself sufficient to show how the *mDo 'dus* narratives were compiled from other Tibetan narratives available at that time.