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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 SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

The early followers of what is known today as Bon certainly adopted local practices of Tibet, although those practices may not have been considered part of any organised religion at that time. Attributing those pre-Buddhist ritual practices of Tibet to Bon is actually a later interpretation. In fact, Bon emerged and developed side by side with the Tibetan Buddhist sects, starting about a thousand year ago. Both Bonpos and Tibetan Buddhists adopted many local Tibetan ritual practices, although Bonpos did so more prominently and probably also more consciously than did Buddhists. The philosophy and religious system of Bon is still rooted in Indian Buddhist ideology and thus Bon shares a common heritage with the other Tibetan Buddhist sects.

As Stein (1972 and 2003b) rightly pointed out, these old ritual practices seem to have had no particular name, although there were certain ritual specialists who were designated as *bon po*. This term merely seems to have been used to refer to a person that performed a specific ritual, in contrast to the way it is used today, that is, to refer to the followers of the Bon religion. The name Bon for the new religion was probably given as a result of identifying the religion with the activities of those early ritual specialists known as *bon po*.

In order to compete with the Buddhist claim that their religion was founded by the Buddha Śākyamuni, Bonpos began to claim that their religion was founded by Shenrab Miwo, and that it was much older than Buddhism. The followers of Bon also began to formalize their religion by appropriating Buddhist literature and adjusting it to their own purposes. In this way, Bonpo authors also adjusted the legendary narratives of the Buddha and formed the legends of Sherab Miwo.

As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, the life account of Shenrab not only resembles the legend of the Buddha Śākyamuni, but actually derives from it. What Bonpos take to be the life story of their founder is actually an indigenized

version of the life of the Buddha. When Bonpos were incorporating old Tibetan ritual practices into their newly established sectarian movement, perhaps to challenge the Tibetan Buddhist sects, they seem to have realized the importance of having a founder too. In order to compose what I consider to be the earliest complete account of Shenrab Miwo, the *mDo 'dus*, the Bonpo made use of old Tibetan documents, including fragments of text that were similar and contemporaneous to Dunhuang Tibetan documents. They probably also made use of oral narratives, they demonstrably used narratives, written or oral, based on Buddhist literature that was translated into Tibetan, and perhaps also used other older Bon texts.

The narratives in the *mDo 'dus*, which probably is the oldest account of the life of Shenrab, have more similarities to the legend of the Buddha (see chapter four) than the life accounts which were written later. I have carried out a study of the fragmentary and complex history of the *mDo 'dus*, but the exact date that it was written is unfortunately still uncertain. The colophon in this source does not help to establish the date that it was written, because the presumed source language of the original text is hard to establish and the existence of the translator has not been historically validated and furthermore, the existence of this text before the 10th century cannot be verified. The second option for estimating the compilation date of the *mDo 'dus* is to determine the date when the four great sūtras (*mDo chen po bzhi*) were discovered. Conventional evidence proves that these four sūtras existed from the 11th century AD, and many Bonpos believe that the *mDo 'dus* is one of these four. By analysing events as they appear in later narratives — the meeting of the two caretakers with a student of Zhuye Legpo, their meeting with a student of Lhari Nyenpo and their conversation about Shenchen Luga's discovery — I have limited the possibilities down to two dates: 1070 AD and 1081 AD. The fact that the passages from the *mDo 'dus* have been quoted in Bon sources from the 12th century onward and that it was already known by its short title then also support these approximate dates.

THE FIRST GROUP OF SOURCES: THE *RGYA CHER ROL PA* AND OTHER BUDDHIST LEGENDS

As an approximate date for the writing of the *mDo 'dus* has now been established, we can proceed to determine the earlier sources from which these narratives were derived. The main source probably was the *rGya cher rol pa*, a Tibetan translation of the *Lalitavistara* that is dateable before 836 AD. Other Buddhist legendary sources from around the same time, such as the Tibetan translation of *Jātakamālā* and the sūtra *mDzangs blun*, also are possible sources that may have been used when compiling the *mDo 'dus*.

A comparative analysis of the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa* not only reveals parallels between the stories of Shenrab and the Buddha, but it also shows the dependency of the former source upon the latter. Several motifs that are used in the Buddha legend, such as the white elephant entering the mother's womb, the blossoming of flowers, and the occurrence of other auspicious signs are adopted into the narrative of the *mDo 'dus*. Furthermore, the gestation period of ten months, the birth from the mother's right arm-pit and even the events that occurred afterwards, such as the appearance of Brahmā and Śakra, a nāga bathing the baby, the instantaneous growth of lotus flowers where the baby laid his first steps and the prophecy that he would become a great teacher, correspond almost entirely to the legend of the Buddha. These simply are restatements of the Buddha's birth story, as known from the *rGya cher rol pa*.

Shenrab's story about leaving his family, his assistants and the comfort of his palace to embrace solitary life after witnessing the four incidents is also taken from the account of the life of the Buddha. Other details such as the way they left their families, the horses they rode, the activities of their assistants and the four guardians lifting the hooves of their horses in order to help them leave silently are also very similar. Parts of these stories can also be found in other accounts of the Buddha's life, such as the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN: 26) in the Pāli canon, although it is not clear how the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* would have had access to the

version of the narratives in this particular Pāli text: in any case, no Tibetan translations of the text are known to us today and a direct textual transmission therefore seems unlikely. Other details which derive from the legend of the Buddha include: Shenrab meeting a monk who inspired and ordained him, cutting his hair in front of a self-emerged stūpa, celestial beings offering him sacred clothes and singing auspicious prayers, the austere practices that he carried out for three years after he became a monk, and a girl offering a bowl of milk to Shenrab after he ended his austerities.

As the Buddha defeated all of Māra's challenges, Shenrab also defeated Māra Khyapa, who tried to distract him from his meditation. When Khyapa created magic mountains, rivers and fire, Shenrab transformed all of these into flowers, and when Māra's daughters tried to seduce Shenrab, he transformed them into six old ladies. When Māra Khyapa tried to attack Shenrab with a billion soldiers, he was unsuccessful and became anxious and concerned about his future. Aspects of Shenrab's later life are also taken directly from the legend of the Buddha, such as Khyapa's sceptical questioning of his 'enlightenment', the earth goddess appearing as Shenrab's witness, Khyapa appealing to Shenrab to leave the world early and Shenrab's rejection of this request. Another similarity is also evident from the episode of the five tigers in a Jātaka story of the Buddha from the *Jātakamālā* and from the sūtra *mDzangs blun*.

It is evident that these similarities are not coincidental, but that the legend of the life of the Buddha, which demonstrably existed before the *mDo 'dus*, influenced the legend of the life of Shenrab Miwo. Tibetan Bonpos seem to have taken the story of the life of the Buddha to be an account of the life of their founder Shenrab Miwo, and accordingly included it in the *mDo 'dus*.

SECOND GROUP OF SOURCES

The discussion in chapter five has shown that the writing of the *mDo 'dus* was not only based on the legend of the Buddha, but also on fragments extracted from

various other Tibetan sources. These sources have mainly fed into subsidiary narrative elements, such as the family life of Shenrab and his relationship with the four kings, who not only became his fathers-in-law, but also became his patrons. The author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* also uses motifs and data also known from various other sources, such as old Tibetan documents, old Tibetan inscriptions and Tibetan literature or narrations containing popular story motifs. However, one cannot expect to trace the whole story line in its entirety from these sources. Only fragments, in some cases just names or a few short narratives, were woven together to build a larger narrative. Looking carefully at its structure, many stories relevant to this part seem to come from oral narratives. This part of the *mDo 'dus* clearly shows the process of incorporating foreign elements into Bon accounts. The major purpose for incorporating these stories obviously does not seem to be to present an accurate or even more credible account of the life of Shenrab, but to expand the scope and 'territory' of Bon teachings, activities and doctrinal views. In the process of incorporating foreign elements, the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* weaved the stories together in a way that seemed compatible with the life of Shenrab.

The author(s) linked the stories in a logical order and carefully considered the consequences of each story in advance. For instance, on one occasion, the King of *hos* requested Shenrab to be his official royal priest, but Shenrab sent his student Yikyi Khyeuchung to take the position in his place. Although it may be normal to ask one's student to take one's place, this replacement seems to be included mainly to avoid certain consequences. The author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* may have considered Shenrab unsuitable to become the victim of the accusations (see the section of the King of *hos*). Already at the time of writing the *mDo 'dus*, Shenrab was regarded by Bonpos as an 'enlightened' being, who knew everything in advance. So, Shenrab would not have allowed any immoral incidents to happen, and moreover, he would not have been able to resolve the problem of the Queen of *hos* skilfully, if he himself had been implicated in the problem, and he would not have had the opportunity to marry the Princess of *hos*, had he not solved the Queen's problem.

A very similar motif can be found in a story from the *bTsun mo bka' thang*. In this story the Queen of Tibet Tsepongza accused the monk Vairocana of sexual assault and as a consequence she became afflicted by a terrible disease. King Trisong Deutsen invited Padmasambhava to solve the problem. The similarity with the Bon narrative on Yikyi Khyeuchung extends to their literary composition and some common names also appear in both texts. This suggests that they both derive from another source, most likely in Tibetan, which in turn was influenced by the motif similar to that in the story of 'Joseph and Potiphar's Wife'. Bonpos also found a suitable way to connect this story to the King of *hos* and to Shenrab. This connection allowed the possibility of marriage with the *hos* princess and consequently the inclusion of two crucial figures: Tobu Bumsang and Chebu Trishay. The link to these two figures brought two important subjects, *gto* ritual and *dpyad* medical diagnosis, into the domain of Bon religious practice. Probably without being aware of its origins, early Bonpos seem to have taken this story as if it were a historical account of Shenrab's activities.

Through the meeting of Shenrab with the King of *dpo*, Bonpos could include and further appropriate the principal Buddhist concept of karma, or 'cause and effect.' This part of the story seems to have been fabricated intentionally, as it has no actual connection with the story of the *dpo* King. By doing so, the author(s) defended Bon as an organized system of belief and separated it from sacrificial ritual practice, and also demonstrated adherence to the Buddhist theories of karma and the existence of a life after death. Shenrab instructed the *dpo* King to confess in order to remove his negative karma. In return, he offered the *dpo* Princess to Shenrab, who bore him two sons, named Lungdren and Gyudren. The names of the two sons were probably conveniently invented, as they are considered to have become experts in Sūtra and Tantra. Through these two sons, Bonpos were able to import important classifications relating to the Buddhist canon, sūtra and tantra, into the domain of Shenrab's teachings.

The supposed relationship between Shenrab and the Chinese master

Kongtse (cf. Kǒng zǐ) facilitated the incorporation of Chinese astrology (Tib. *gtsug lag rtsis*) into the ‘territory’ of Bon. Bonpos attribute their astrology to Kongtse, and to his grand-son Trulbu Chung. Kongtse even became a patron and disciple of Shenrab, and is said to have built a holy castle. When his construction project was interfered with, he met a little boy who helped him to rebuild the castle. The latter part of the story reflects the influence of the Confucian story preserved in Pelliot tibétain 992 and Pelliot tibétain 1284. The way in which Shenrab met Kongtse and became his son-in-law is similar to the way he met the other two Kings. Kongtse invited Shenrab to consecrate the castle that he had built and to give his teachings, and in return Kongtse offered his daughter to Shenrab. This marriage resulted in the birth of a son, who is said to have become an expert on astrology, which in turn legitimized the inclusion of astrology into the repertoire of Bon teachings.

The King of Kongpo who is mentioned in the *mDo ’dus* is none other than the Kongje Karpo, mentioned in Dunhuang Tibetan documents and in the Kongpo inscription. Therefore, the accounts of this King were most likely based on early historical traditions and reinterpreted in a way that fitted Shenrab’s account. The meeting of this King with Shenrab was simply an accident. According to the *mDo ’dus*, Shenrab chased the son of Māra to Kongpo because the Māra’s son stole Shenrab’s horses. Like in the other stories, the meeting of Shenrab and the King of Kongpo resulted in a new family relationship. Shenrab married the Princess of Kongpo and had a son from this union. Although this son has not been specifically linked to any teaching or practice of Bon, he is considered to be the genealogical ancestor of the present-day *gshen* family, one of the most important Bonpo families living today. This narrative of the King of Kongpo serves to add legitimacy to Shenrab’s life story by tying it to a known historical figure and a specific place in Tibet.

In addition, these marriage stories of Shenrab also resemble the marriage stories of the early Tibetan kings of Yarlung dynasty, both with respect to the number of wives and their countries of origin, which were mostly outside of Tibet.

As the major purpose of the Tibetan kings when marrying women from other countries was to secure and extend their political ties with the neighbouring principalities, Shenrab's marriages also seem to have been a convenient means to secure and extend the boundaries of his influence. In other words, these marriage stories allowed early Bonpo authors to claim that Buddhist literature and disciplines like medicine and astrology actually originated from Bon and were taught by Shenrab Miwo. As stated above, the extension of Bon's sphere of knowledge may have been justified through marriage and the birth of special children. It is evident that the author(s) borrowed many different stories and motifs from older Tibetan sources and even possibly from the non-Tibetan literature to write the account of Shenrab Miwo.

POSSIBLE ORIGINS OF THE NAMES

There are many names in the *mDo 'dus*. Some are identified as Shenrab's family members and ancestors, without these the hagiographical account would not be complete. Possible sources that the author(s) might have used for these names have been identified (see chapter six). The father's name is *mi bon lha bon* Gyalbön Thökar and he is said to be a descendant of the *dmu* and the *phyä*, two important clans, according to old Tibetan sources.

The names are found in documents (e.g. Pelliot tibétain 1134) preserved in Dunhuang and in some other documents and traditions that survived otherwise. Some names have also been modified, such as the name *rgya bon brim tang*, which appears in Pelliot tibétain 1134 and which has become *rgyal/rgya bon thod dkar* in the account of Shenrab. Borrowing names from old Tibetan documents can also be seen elsewhere in the *mDo 'dus*. It is also clear that separate names were sometimes conjoined to form one name, and a single names split up to form several names. For example, we find the name *chi med gshen gyi rmu rgyal tsha* and his father's name *mi bon lha bon* in the late 13th-century history by Khépa Dewu. The former name corresponds with the names of Chime Tsukphu and

Shenrab Miwo mentioned in the *mDo 'dus*, while the latter to the father of Shenrab, *mi bon lha bon* Gyalbön Thökar. Furthermore, both their family names also match, as they are both said to descend from the *dmu* family.

In terms of these names, Khepa Dewu's 13th-century history is closely linked to Pelliot tibétain 1134. Despite the fact that Khepa Dewu's text was written about two centuries after the closure of the Dunhuang cave in which Pelliot tibétain 1134 was enclosed, there still is a clear resonance of information in these two texts. This suggests that there may have been another intermediate source, linked to both these sources. This anonymous record may also have been older than the *mDo 'dus* and so possibly informed the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* as well, regarding the name of Shenrab's father.

Like the father's name, the name of the mother *mi phyi lha phyi yo phyi* Gyalzhema, was also construed by repeating a phrase three times. The first two parts of the mother's name *mi phyi* and *lha phyi* follow a pattern similar to the first two parts of the father's name *mi bon* and *lha bon*.

The *mDo 'dus* features only two names from Shenrab's paternal lineage. In other Bon sources, this list was extended. This demonstrates the way in which the life account of Shenrab continued to develop. In the earlier sources, the lists are not consistent and probably are based on different sources. In the history of Bon by Shardza (Karmay 1985), these inconsistent lists were combined to create one list of ancestors. Furthermore, only the *mDo 'dus* claims that there were nine brothers in Shenrab's family and Shenrab was the youngest one. As this list of nine brothers overlaps with the list of the nine doctrinal teachings called 'the Nine Ways of Bon', the names of the nine brothers are certainly taken from these nine doctrinal teachings.

EPILOGUE

To conclude, in this dissertation I do not try to prove whether Shenrab did or did not exist, or whether he actually founded the Bon religion. What I am trying to

understand is how the narrative accounts of the life of Shenrab Miwo that appear in the *mDo 'dus* emerged and were compiled from various sources. As I have demonstrated, most of these accounts originally did in fact not pertain to Shenrab Miwo, but rather were imported from elsewhere and then attributed to Shenrab. In other words, we can conclude that the *mDo 'dus* is a compilation of stories from various earlier written and probably also oral sources.

Even though I have managed to identify important sources that I argue have been used to write the first ever account of Shenrab Miwo, this research is still far from conclusive. Through my investigations, I am now more convinced than ever that more comparative study is required in order to fully understand the origins of the hagiography of Shenrab and the emergence of that complex tradition known to us today as Bon. I am aware that for this thesis I could only deal with a part of the full body of evidence that would be relevant to this wider scope of research. This wider scope required a careful and detailed comparative study of Bon accounts with Tibetan translations of the Buddhist canon, and also with other early Buddhist texts that have been preserved in various Asian languages but have not as yet been translated, or have only been translated into Tibetan incompletely.

Twenty years ago, in another part of the world and in different context, a prediction was made by a senior colleague (Martin 1991, dissertation). However, this important prediction seems to have been forgotten or in any case overlooked. To conclude, I should like to quote this 'call from afar' (Tib. *rgyangs 'bod*).

It began over fifteen years ago, reached a particular turning point only recently, and will, if I may be allowed a fallible prediction, only find its realization in concrete results for scholarship (Buddhology in particular) during the next twenty years. My assumption is that some Bon scriptures or parts of the same which were excavated by the early Bonpo *gter-stons* might actually represent, even if only in part, survivals of earlier translations of Buddhist scriptures done in the imperial and post-imperial times. Even though our understandings of the lines of textual transmission

are not especially clear at present, still some shadowy outlines are beginning to emerge; I have become confident that these will gain substance with more careful and detailed studies (Martin 1991, p. 83).

Since this prediction was made, our knowledge certainly has matured further and I also hope that in some ways I have been able to revive and strengthen Dan Martin's call. It is important not only to understand how and why Bonpos and Buddhists diverged and developed separate identities, but also to establish in convincing detail which Buddhist texts were actually translated into Tibetan during the early centuries of the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. I expect that this type of comparative study will also reveal other aspects of Buddhist theory that may also have influenced the Bon doctrines and philosophy that appears in the *mDo 'dus*. I have not yet been able to study this wider scope of sources and their interactions, as this research, for obvious reasons, has had to be limited to the life account of Shenrab Miwo and its main early sources.

