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Special Issue
Indigenous Elements in Tibetan Religions

Edited by Daniel Berounský

Editors-in-chief: Jaroslav Vacek and Alena Oberfalzerová

Institute of South and Central Asia, Seminar of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies
Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague
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Preface

Outsiders often tend to see Tibetans as strongly religious. The religious ideas of Tibetans are further generally considered to be dependent on Mahāyāna Buddhism combined with Tantric elements (so-called Vajrayāna) stemming from India.

Tibetans used to be mostly represented by the Buddhist clergy in the world outside Tibet and it holds true that for many centuries this highest stratum of Tibetan society saw Indian Buddhism as a primary source of their religion. India became the subject of veneration and was worshipped as a "holy land" (Tib. *'phags yul*). Buddhist clergy also enjoyed almost an exclusive position in the production of written texts.

Yet, such a general picture might be problematic. A number of scholars who are well acquainted with the daily life of Tibetans have pointed out that their seemingly strong religiosity can often be seen only on the surface. No doubt, the Mahāyāna and Tantra are present, indeed. But they often cover the rich inner processes characterized by the very eclectic and pragmatic attitudes of Tibetans.[1] In addition to the Indians, the Tibetans were not immune to influences from the other neighbouring countries of Central Asia and China. There are also elements of their religiosity which could be seen as autochthonous. Though one can make suppositions, such constituents of Tibetan religiosity are extremely difficult to analyze as such.

Some non-Indian traits are still present in Tibetan society on a variety of levels. This might concern some features even of the various disciplines falling under the label of Buddhism. Many non-Indian elements can be also discerned among the rather silent religious ideas of commoners.

Of particular interest is the Bon religion of Tibet. The most general problem connected with Bon is the diversity of the traditions covered under such a blanket term. On the one hand, there is an extensive ritual and doctrinal literature concerning the monastic tradition of Bon (the so-called "Eternal

1) For an in-depth study of a village community from the Himalayan region, which serves an excellent example see Ramble 2008.

Bon”, Tib. *g.yung drung bon*) which in its meaning evidently follows the originally Indo-Buddhist ones. So far, the textual evidence indicates that such a monastic tradition of Bon, which represents the majority of the Bon religion nowadays, became organized and started to view itself as a distinctive religious system probably only from the 11th century onward. Its possible pre-11th century development remains hazy. This monastic tradition can be seen as an unorthodox sect of Tibetan Buddhism, but at the same time as distinct from other sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

On the other hand, even such a monastic tradition retains some elements and traits which are non-Indian and non-Buddhist. And even more, there are still some of the traditions called Bon in the bordering areas of ethnographical Tibet, which are carried often by village priests and which seem to have very little in common with monastic Bon. The pre-11th century non-Buddhist religion is also sometimes referred to as Bon and from the surviving documents from Dunhuang it is apparent enough that such a tradition is again fundamentally different from the current monastic Bon. There are also discrepancies in the various forms of self-understanding of the followers of Bon and in what Tibetans outside the tradition of Bon refer to when speaking about Bon.[2]

Leaving the Bon tradition aside, the clarity of the situation in Tibet is further complicated by the fact that none of the Buddhist sects in Tibet was totally immune to originally non-Buddhist practices, despite their frequent claim that they are followers and guardians of the pure Buddhist tradition of India. Some of the examples of originally non-Buddhist practices or their elements are dealt with in the present volume. In general, the situation is not very far from that of the monastic tradition of Bon.

In the light of such a confusing reality, even the terms Bon and Buddhism themselves prove to be misleading. Buddhism in Tibet (in Tibetan *chos*, a translation of the Indian word *dharma*) cannot be found in some pure form devoid of non-Indian elements. Bon (being a native term understood also as an alternative translation of the Indian word *dharma*) cannot be seen as non-Buddhist. Bon cannot be juxtaposed with Buddhism, having as it does in its present tradition so much in common with it. The intricacy of such terminological inconsistency has led even recently some scholars to retrieve the once condemned term Lamaism as a neutral designation for

2) For an older, but in many respects still relevant overview introducing Bon and its studies, see Kværne 2000. For a newer overview of what Bon might mean, see Samuel 2013.

Tibetan forms of Buddhism-inspired religions, but blended with other elements in general.[3]

Such a complicated and complex situation, further obscured by vague terminology, raises many questions. Tibetan Studies were partly evolving alongside Buddhology in the past. The claim of some Tibetan "Buddhist" masters that they were preserving Indic Buddhist tradition found some advocates among Indologically oriented Tibetologists. The search for indigenous elements in Tibetan religions deliberately questions such an approach. The search is carried out in the hope of obtaining a future fuller picture of Tibetan religiosity.

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The present special issue *Indigenous Elements in Tibetan Religions* offers the interested reader five texts on the given topic. The contributions do not give simple answers to the question of what is indigenous to Tibet. I am grateful to the authors for their illuminating research articles. The contributors are experienced and leading scholars, whose existing research qualifies them to deal with such a topic. No less gratitude should be expressed to the CHINET project based in Palacky University (Olomouc, Czech Republic) for funding of the workshop organised under the same title in February 2014, which has enabled some of us to discuss the topic within the tranquil beauty of the city of Olomouc.

With the first contribution by Charles Ramble one enters the bizarre world of *chimeras* – creatures composite of diverse parts. All the cases presented in the article through translations of extracts of the Tibetan texts; i.e. bat, camel, Three-Headed Black Man and a vampire Little Tiger-Bee, are mostly new and are revealing examples of a possibly indigenous imagination, which differs substantially from that associated with often composite Tantric deities.

Rob Mayer then brings an overview of his existing research done jointly with Cathy Cantwell and attempts to place it into the wider context. He traces back the rather intricate historical process of implementing indigenous elements into the Tantric teachings and the changes in attitudes towards Tantras during the post-Imperial period. He gives also vivid examples of the early process of indigenization of the Tantric teachings, such as the inclusion of

3) Although this term had once been discarded as anti-Tibetan (for the *locus classicus* see Lopez 1998), it has perhaps surprisingly found a new user in the form of outstanding Tibetan scholar S.G. Karmay (for example Karmay 2002, p. 65). It must be noted that in this case it has been done without any pejorative connotations. This is now followed for example by J.V. Bellezza (2013, p. 5, note 1).

Tibetan deities into them, incorporation of the narratives (*smrang* / *rabs*) known from the early non-Buddhist rituals in Tibet, etc.

My humble contribution deals with narratives concerning the origin of *g.yang* and *phya*, two concepts of “well-being” and “good fortune”. A ritual of their summoning permeates the Tibetan societies both of monks and laymen. Through the example of similar ritual among Mongols it is pointed out that some background to the ritual might be shared with other Central Asian peoples. If Rob Mayer focuses on indigenization of originally Indian Tantras, in this paper examples of Buddhicization of the ritual are given.

Dan Martin deals with another ritual of Gold Drink (*gser bskyems*) which is a good candidate for indigenousness. His point of departure is an extract from some 900-year-old text dealing with the master Pa dam pa Sangs rgyas and containing a description of what should be indigenous ritual. Carefully examining the circumstances of the Gold Drink in Tibet from various angles, Dan Martin continues the search outside Tibet. An oath-swearing habit of drinking liquid mingled with gold among Mongols seems to be a promising direction for its further exploration and a sign of its larger Central Asian background.

Robi Vitali focuses on the Tibetan sources dealing with the original Tibetan tribes, namely the *rus mdzod* literature. His article points out their diverse background. More importantly, in the light of such diversity it reveals that to classify something as “indigenous” might be problematic from the very outset and the core of the process of the formation of Tibetan civilization.

What becomes apparent from this volume are the problems faced when searching for “indigenousness” in the case of Tibet. When dealing with such a notion in general, a good basic differentiation of its meanings is offered by Charles Ramble at the conclusion of his article in the present volume. It could be understood in its “strong” and “weak” sense. While the first option would mean that something is exclusively of home origin (and thus perhaps closer to what might be meant by *autochthonous*), the “weak” form of it would accept the combination of home-grown and imported. Most of the examples introduced in the present volume attest to such a “weak” form. This, however, does not make Tibetans the exception among most human societies. The general problems faced when searching for indigenousness specifically in Tibet are well introduced in the opening parts of Dan Martin’s essay. Instead of repeating his words, I will restrict myself to a shortcut borrowed from the title of his article, which seems to me to characterize well all the contributions of this volume: “…indigenous, but not *simply* indigenous.”

Daniel Berounský, editor

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