**Zhang-Zhung, Bön, and the Mountain**

**Introduction**

Just as modern Buddhism and Hinduism claim Tise/Kailas as a sacred centre so too do the Bönpo, who identify themselves as followers of a religion that predates Buddhism in Tibet. Modern Bönpo believe that their religion pre-dominated in the Zhang-zhung kingdom before it was conquered by Yarlung dynasty Tibet, and they identify Tise as the ‘soul-mountain’ of Zhang-zhung.

As we have seen, Zhang-zhung was a historical state whose territory included Tise and Mapham. But in discussing a Bön Tise history we are confronted by the fact that Bön is not a “rationalised” system in Weberian terms, one that is “where people seek a consistency and encompassing logic to their world view.” Bön is a system that is “mythologised,” with conceptions of history and world views that are meaningful only in contexts fundamentally incompatible with those of scientific modernity or critical historical approaches. While there is a Bön canon, the faith has no central authority, fixed religious centre, or single agreed pantheon, and Bön texts are not necessarily systemised, internally cohesive, or intended to be compatible with other accounts. Thus in analysing Bön sources, as with the Puranas, no single text can be considered foundational, entirely representative, or pre-eminent in authority. And while we may detect a lineal tendency to move from the singular to the embellished, we cannot conclude that any one reference reveals a truth otherwise concealed. What we are dealing with is a compilation of bodies of knowledge taken from individuals, families, clans, lineages, regions, and schools of thought. Thus there is no sin-

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1. Mapang for Mapham is common, particularly in Bön texts. While apparently synonymous, see Haarh (1969: 371) who cites a Dunhuang text where Mapang may mean “mother[s] blood... flowing at a child’s birth.”
2. Holmberg (2011: 186–187); the quotation is in regard to the Tamang system.
3. ‘Bön modernism’ is currently a contradiction in terms, with authority remaining vested in elements outside of time and space; see for example, Norbu (2009). This is an entirely ahistorical work that cites non-Tibetan sources only in the translator’s introduction. Such ‘Nativist’ works are usually the product of political circumstances, here the construction by a refugee community of an imagined Golden Age in compensation for the psychological assault of displacement and exile. And in this case to an extent it is also a response to demands—Western and otherwise—for exotic images of ‘Lost Kingdoms’, ‘Concealed Wisdom’, etc.
gle Bön Tise to define in such timeless constructions as the ‘soul mountain of Zhang-zhung’.

Indeed there is no single Bön religion. The meaning of the term shifts over time and space, and escapes easy definition. The modern World-religion of Bön claims continuities with the spiritual world of the Tibetan plateau in millenniums long passed, but the veracity of the claim is highly debatable. Indeed, there is an intense and on-going debate over Bön origins and the processes shaping its modern identity. While we are not concerned here to reconcile those issues, an awareness of this context is essential in shaping our conclusions, which are necessarily tentative. But as Sherry Ortner put it; “[i]t seems to me that a tentative reconstruction, which might be modified by later evidence, is more useful than none at all.”

Thus, after briefly outlining the relevant historiography of Bön, we consider the evidence for a sacred Tise centre in its claimed heartland of Zhang-zhung and discuss the evolution of modern understandings of a Bön Tise as their historical centre.

**Situating Bön**

Popular understandings of Bön and of a Bön Tise are still shaped by the ‘animist, shamanist, pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet’ model which defined Western understandings of the faith until the late 20th century. But in recent decades there have been considerable advances both in the study of Bön and in its self-projection. Bön in its modern form is actually a distinct and sophisticated belief system that shares many conceptual and structural elements with Buddhism. These elements are shared to the extent that in certain contexts Bön is accepted as a form of Buddhism, albeit looking to a different historical founder, Shenrab (gShen rab), who Bönpo consider long predates the historical Buddha. They understand Shenrab as having brought Bön teachings to Zhang-zhung from the land of ‘Tazig’ (sTag gzig), his homeland to the west (and thus do not regard Bön as indigenous to Tibet). According to Bön self-projections Shenrab’s teach-

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5 Essential to an overall understanding of the process by which we have come to understand Bön are: Kværne (2000); Martin (1997: 263–305); and Bjerken (1998: 92–107) (Bjerken’s classification of Samten Karmay as a “nativist” cannot however, be supported given that their defining characteristic is a refusal to engage in critical enquiry or comparative textual analysis, both of which are features of Karmay’s work.) On Bön, see in particular however, Blezer (esp., 2011; and forthcoming 3 vols.).