INTRODUCTION

1. A brief history of the Bon tradition in Tibet

1-1. Buddhist, modern and traditional views on Bon

The Bon religion is generally considered to be the oldest spiritual tradition of Tibet but what should be properly understood as Bon differs quite widely according to individuals. If one follows the opinion of most Buddhist masters, Bon was a religion centered around sacrifices and sanguinary rituals and was banned by Tibetan Buddhist kings in the last part of the 8th century. With the exception of very few masters in the religious history of Tibet, this opinion shared by many Buddhist hierarchs on Bon is not based on actual knowledge either of Bon history or its literature but on poorly documented polemical works filled with partisan opinions. With such a defective approach, critical views on Bon are usually mechanically repeated without studies of any Bon text at all and, most dramatically, simply without the curiosity to do so. This may not be the case only for Bon, since the blind sectarian behavior of many Buddhists in Tibet has often created tensions between monasteries and patrons of rival sects, based on a quasi-hysterical approach to “orthodoxy”. However, such a reductionist attitude is counterbalanced by largely ecumenical individuals who have either discovered or received Bon teachings proper and who can therefore discuss Bon in their own rights. To this group of people belong some of the most interesting minds in the religious history of Tibet, including the actual 14th Dalai Lama who installed Bon as the fifth religious tradition of Tibet and who officially received some of its most important teachings.

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1 I don’t think that Buddhists reject the possibility that Bon was an organized religion prior to the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet and that Bon pos had monasteries, etc. Tibetologists often doubt the existence of such a structured system. See however Karmay, “Un témoignage sur le Bon face au Bouddhisme à l’époque des rois tibétains”, pp. 89-106.

2 Such as Khu tsha zla’od, rDo rje gling pa, bsTan gnyis gling pa, several important masters of the ris med movement such as ‘Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse’i dbang po, ‘Jam mgon Kong sprul, mChog gyur gling pa, or Chos rgyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and the actual 14th Dalai Lama.

3 This clearly appears so in the Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long by Thu’u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma.
teachings, including the complete transmission of the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*.⁴

Therefore, since the traditional Tibetan Buddhist views on Bon are mostly based on polemical works and treatises dealing with philosophical positions (*grub mtha*),⁵ one should certainly question the validity and pertinence of the criticisms that are made. It seems that despite a few interesting points, most of these views give an impression of practically missing the point in exposing Bon theories, practices, etc., and in the first place in basing their opinion on any specific Bon po texts.⁶ According to these Tibetan Buddhist views, there has been three kinds of Bon: 1. *brDol bon* or Outburst Bon which is centered on the propitiation of gods and demons; 2. *‘Khyar bon*, Deviant or Mixed Bon which refers to some Bon teachings mixed with heretical conceptions; and 3. *bsGyur Bon* which may be either rendered as Transformed Bon or Translated Bon, in both cases the meaning being that of transformation of Buddhist ideas, etc., into Bon po ones and translating Buddhist texts into Bon po ones.⁷ It is important to note here that such a classification is not recognized by the Bon tradition and that, as far as I understand it, it certainly does not correspond to any historical evolution of Bon.

According to most modern western Tibetologists, two distinct traditions can be styled as Bon. The first one was the ancient Bon that was active (probably prior to and) during the imperial period (7th-8th centuries) when it was declared wrong and suppressed, being actually replaced by Buddhism. This form of ancient Bon is known to us through some funeral rituals which seem to have had an important role in the royal religion.⁸ It would be daring to identify it with *brDol Bon* since the latter is not attested anywhere else than in polemical

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⁴ On the Dalai Lama’s visit to Menri Monastery in Dolanji, see ‘Go pa bsTan ‘dzin ‘brug grags, “sPyi nor gong sa skyabs mgon rin po che mchog gi bon gzhis thob rgyal gsar pa’i bsti gnas su zhabs sor ‘khor pa’i gnas tshul snying bsdus”, *Bon sgo*, no. 2, 1988, pp. 5-10.
⁵ See the highly inspiring study of this problem in Dan Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures*, passim.
⁶ See various comments on the nature of polemics and their foundation in Dan Martin, “Beyond Acceptance and Rejection?”, pp. 263, *passim*; *id.*, *Unearthing Bon Treasures*, pp. 103 et seq.
⁷ For the detail of these Buddhist views of Bon, see Martin, *ibid.*, pp. 41-42, pp. 187-197. See also Zeff Bjerken, “Exorcizing the Illusion of Bon ‘Shamans’”, pp. 11 et seq.
⁸ See Lalou, “Rituel Bon-po des funérailles royales”, *passim*, and Stein “Un document ancien relatif aux rites funéraires des bon-po tibétains”, *passim*. 