I. Theories

1. The ancient religion

As we know, the entire lamaist tradition since the middle of the 12th century presents the bon pos as the priests of the indigenous religion, partly from foreign origins, which reigned prior to the introduction of Buddhism. All Tibetologists have followed this tradition in stating that Bon was the pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet. Although this tradition is only attested in a later era—and no ancient (7th–9th centuries) text proves it—it was natural and inevitable that it should be adopted for want of anything better. The properly bon po tradition, from an equally late date, has only been studied lately and partially. Certain scholars have adopted it. They will be spoken of below.

However, a problem poses itself from the moment we take note of the Dunhuang manuscripts, notably in the work of F.W. Thomas and of Marcel Lalou. Among these manuscripts figure many clearly non-Buddhist texts. Taking account of the later lamaist tradition, these...
authors have qualified these texts as *bon po* and as “pre-Buddhist.” It would be better to avoid this last expression and speak only of “non-Buddhist” texts. In fact, we are ignorant of the exact date of different Dunhuang manuscripts. They are certainly ancient, dating in the majority from the 9th and 10th centuries, but in that era Buddhism had already taken root in Tibet. In order to be able to speak of “pre-Buddhist” texts, we must admit that at least the non-Buddhist manuscripts date from the previous centuries (7th–8th). Yet nothing proves this. All that we can state is that the contents of a manuscript may be anterior to it. However, this will never be anything other than a hypothesis.

In a rather great number of non-Buddhist texts, but not in all, above all in the funerary rituals and in the divinatory texts, an essential and constant role is enjoyed by the priests named *bon po*¹ (or *bon* of different sorts) and *gshen*, words well known in the later tradition. Also, certain authors (Lalou 1953)² and Stein (1970 and 1971, 479) have themselves qualified these texts as “bon po.” In his magisterial work, Snellgrove (1987, 403, n. 47) expressly criticized me for this use of the word. He underscores that we must distinguish between the *bon po* of the Dunhuang manuscripts, simple priestly functionaries, and the Bon po faithful of the sect or school of that name (a “Buddhist heresy” as Snellgrove states, 451, 503) such as we understand them later.³ The problem of knowing if there is a relation between the two sorts of bon po will be revisited. Suffice it to say here that the distinction has not evidently escaped anyone.

In writing the critiqued phrase (1971, 479), I have simply thought about the presence of *bon po* priests in that text and about analogies of structure and of content between the accounts of the Dunhuang manuscripts that I had analyzed and the *Klu 'bum* of the late Bon pos. As to the text PT 0239 (Stein 1970), the term *bon po* that I used for the funerary ritual is expressly justified by the text itself. There, a Buddhist attacks the customs of *Bon* or the *bon pos* considered as bad and opposed to those of Buddhism (*lha chos*, 162–3). Samten

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¹ In order to avoid confusion, I am writing from now on the words *bon* and *bon po* in italics when it concerns the Dunhuang manuscripts and in Roman (*Bon* and *bon po*) for the religious system and its adherents of the later era.


³ He did this before, twenty years earlier in *The Nine Ways of Bon*, 21. Cf. here, n. 8.