

RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI
NUOVA SERIE

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STUDIES IN HONOUR
OF LUCIANO PETECH.
A COMMEMORATION VOLUME
1914-2014

A CURA DI
ELENA DE ROSSI FILIBECK, MICHELA CLEMENTE,
GIORGIO MILANETTI, OSCAR NALESINI, FEDERICA VENTURI

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THE MYTH OF RUDRA'S SUBJUGATION ACCORDING TO THE *BSGRAGS PA GLING GRAGS*. SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE BEGINNING OF A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

GIACOMELLA OROFINO

Among the Bon historiographical traditions, the *bsGrags pa gling grags* deserves greater attention. In several later Bon texts, where it is referred to as *bsGrags byang*, or *Gling grags*, it is consistently quoted as the most authoritative and ancient Bon historical source and it has been quite influential in framing the later Bon historical literature.¹ In 1972 Samten Karmay identified it with the often quoted *bsGrags byang*, known also as '*Phrul ngag bon gyi bsgrags byang* or as *g.Yung drung bon gyi bsgrags byang*.'² In 1990, Anne Marie Blondeau convincingly demonstrated that rather than a text, the *bsGrags pa gling grags* is a historiographical *gter ma* tradition which developed from the 12th cent., or even before, among the rMa ston lineage.³ Blondeau also recognized a valid historical link between the *bsGrags pa gling grags* and the *Grags pa bon lugs*, the history according to the Bon system, one of the three established Tibetan historiographic traditions on the etiological myth of the Yarlung dynasty: the *gSang ba chos lugs*, the *Grags pa bon lugs*, and the *Yang bsang the'u rang lugs* (system of the *the'u rang*, the chthonic demons of Tibet).⁴

The *bsGrags pa gling grags* provides the first systematic representation of Tibetan history from a Bon perspective. It is attributed to the famous «ecumenical» or «eclectic»⁵ Tibetan sage Dran pa Nam mkha', who is said to have been a Bonpo master who converted to Buddhism at the time of Khri srong lde brtsan, when the Bonpos had to choose between fleeing to exile or converting to Buddhism. The legacy of teachings attributed to him, where in Bon and Buddhist doctrines merge, represents a key issue in the later development of Bon literature.⁶

We know of several works with the title (*bs*)*Grags pa gling grags*:⁷

1) A printed version, preserved in a rare texts collection found in Dolpo in the bSam gling monastery and edited and published by Lopon Tenzin Namdak in *Sources for a History of Bon*. Its title is *g.Yun drung bon gyi rgyud 'bum* but in the colophon we find: *sGrags pa rin chen gling grags bya ba bon gyi bka' 'bum dang*

¹ See Blondeau 1990: 49. For a recent discussion on the *Gling grags* sources see also Blezer 2013: 134.

² See Karmay 1972: 17 n. 2.

³ See Blondeau 1985 and 1990. On the insecure dating of these sources see also Blezer 2010: 21, n. 49.

⁴ Among the numerous quotations by western scholars see Haarh 1969: 17, and 171-230.

⁵ For a discussion on early Bon tendencies to syncretism see Blezer 2010: 128 ff. Same considerations to be found in Blezer 2013: 1-17.

⁶ On the relationship between Dran pa Nam mkha' and Vairocana and connected problems, according to Bon traditional historiography, see Achard 2013: 79 ff. See also Blezer 2013: 134 for the hypothesis that Dran pa Nam mkha' is a fictive figure, indicative of an eclectic type of ambivalence which appears clearly calqued on the tantric Padmasambhava type.

⁷ Kvaerne 1974: 18-56 and 96-144. In this catalogue these 3 versions are classified as T222, under the title: *bsGrags pa gling grags skor gsum*.

po, «The first collection of Bon works, called *sGrags pa rin chen gling grags*.» It consists of 24 fols. and is complete.

2) A different and shorter printed work in 12 fols., preserved in the same collection found in Dolpo, is also contained in Lopon Tenzin Namdak's *Sources for a History of Bon* with the title *sGrags pa rin chen gling grags*.

3) A much longer version, extant in several witnesses. As far as I am aware, there exist the following versions:

a) A manuscript copy kept in the Oslo Library. Its title is *Bon chos dar nub gi lo rgyus rgyas pa rin chen gling grags*. It is a complete copy in 95 fols., made in Sikkim in 1919 by a Tibetan scribe for the British official Major W. L. Campbell.⁸

b) A version consisting of 95 fols, with the title *g.Yung drung bon gyi sgra bsgrags pa rin po che'i gling grags*, collected by Sog-sde bsTan pa'i Nyi ma and preserved in vol. 72 of the Bon po *brTen 'gyur*, published in Lhasa in 1998.⁹

c) A manuscript copy, collected by Nor bKra from the Nag chu central province of Tibet. The first three folios of this manuscript are missing, but in the colophon mention is made of the title: *bsGrags pa rin po che'i gling grags*.¹⁰ In 2010 Don grub Lha rgyal and gZhon nu Nor bzang published it in a compilation of Bon historical sources.¹¹ In their introduction the Tibetan scholars stated that they had compared it with the Oslo manuscript and the *brTen 'gyur* version.¹²

d) The Dolanji manuscript.¹³

e) The sNyan rong manuscript.¹⁴

These texts transmit various versions of the history of the rise and decline of the Bon religion during the Tibetan empire, from its mythic progenitor, gNya khri btsan po to the historical king Khri srong bde btsan. At the very beginning of the narration we find the myth of Rudra's subjugation, which is underlined as the catalyst for the diffusion of the Bon religion in Tibet. I would like to focus on this Bon version of Rudra's subjugation myth, which, as is well known, is also very popular in Buddhist Indian and Chinese literature from at least the fourth century.¹⁵ Later on, it spread in Buddhist tantras, and became the classical etiological tale of the Buddhist esoteric revelation in India and later in Tibet.

In the Buddhist esoteric literature it is stated, in fact, that Rudra's subjugation myth represents the original cause of the secret mantra system (*gsang sngags 'byung ba'i rgyu*) and in particular it justifies the wrathful practises of compassionate violence as skilful methods of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Various versions of this narration appear in several Sanskrit Buddhist tantric texts. We find it in the seventh century *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, in the later *Candraguhyatilakamahātāntrarāja*, in the *Guhyagarbhatattvaviniścaya*, in the

⁸ A transcription of it was published in Dolanji in the late 1990s in the form of a *dpe cha* and is available with the *Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center*, W1KG3814 (<http://www.tbrc.org>). Personal communication by Per Kvaerne (18 March 2016).

⁹ Karmay, Nagano (2001): 627.

¹⁰ This ms is also available with the *Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center*, W1CZ2330.

¹¹ *g.Yung drung bon gyi sgra bsgrags pa rin chen gling grags*, in gZhon nu Nor bzang (2010).

¹² Cf. Don grub Lha rgyal and gZhon nu Nor bzang, "gLeng gzhi", in gZhon nu Nor bzang 2010: 6-8.

¹³ Cf. Blezer 2013a: 135. Per Kvaerne (personal communication of 18th March 2016) has informed me that recent efforts to locate this manuscript have not been successful. It seems that the only witness of this ms consists in a photograph made in Dolanji in the 1980s.

¹⁴ Quoted in Bellezza 2008: 751.

¹⁵ Cf. Dalton 2002: 70-71.

Cakrasaṃvaratantra, and in the ninth century Tibetan *dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*, which contains the longest, most detailed and most interesting account of this myth. They have been analysed over time by several scholars.¹⁶

The myth, in its basic scheme which is common to all the various versions, follows this pattern: at the beginning there is a description of the powerful obscure forces of Maheśvara/Rudra and his entourage, which entice numerous beings into demonic practices, and pose a serious threat to the survival of the Buddhist religion. This great danger induces the Buddhas of the three times and ten directions to decide that in this exceptional case they must resort to violent, wrathful means in order to tame and convert the evil forces. So the Buddhas themselves take on the forms of ferocious Herukas and fight them. Having succeeded in killing Maheśvara and his retinue, the Buddhas resuscitate and consecrate them as Buddhist deities, giving them new Buddhist names and allowing them to sit in the great *maṇḍala* of Victory over the Threefold World, for the benefit of all sentient beings.

This myth represents the way medieval Buddhism included and assimilated the Hindu gods. Subsequently, the Tibetan civilisation adopted this model of assimilation of exogenous elements as a paradigmatic system of inclusion through the subjugation and conversion of extraneous cultural forces. It is found extensively in later Tibetan literature, in the already mentioned *dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*, the 9th century fundamental text of the Anuyoga class of Tantra of the rNying ma pa school, and in other later *gter ma* texts; as, for example, in the 14th cent. *Padma bKa' thang* by O rgyan gling pa.

It is interesting, at this point, to analyse the Bon rewriting of this myth as it appears in the *bsGrags pa gling grags* traditions.¹⁷ I will summarize.¹⁸

The narration of the myth itself is introduced by the previous reincarnations of the demon to subjugate, whose name is *Nga min chos po*, the practitioner of the dharma «without I». ¹⁹ He is an emanation of Mun pa zer ldan, the Lord of Darkness in all Bon cosmogonies and theogonies who, in this account, is represented as the last son of Sangs po 'bum khri, the Lord of Existence.

This first element is anomalous, since in the other Bon narrations Mun pa zer ldan, the Lord of Darkness, and Sangs po 'bum khri, the Lord of Existence, are born respectively from the cosmic egg of light and from the cosmic egg of darkness in an antithetical way. Here, the point of view is different. The Lord of Darkness is portrayed as the last son of the Lord of Existence, with the meaning that the darkness derives from the light, according to the «non dualistic» mode that connotes the entire *bsGrags pa gling grags* perspective.

The description of the demon is quite interesting: he wears a mantle made of human skin and waves a *vajra* with a scratched point and a bell with a split clapper. He repeats: «I am a (Buddhist) *dharma* practitioner. The g.Yung drung Bon is false. The so-called Awakened Beings (*sangs rgyas*) of the Bon religion are impostors. All

¹⁶ Stein 1995: 121-160; Iyanaga 1985; Snellgrove 1987: 136-141; MacDonald 1990: 197-208; Davidson 1991: 197-235; Kapstein 1992: 51-82; Mayer 1998: 271-311; Dalton 2011.

¹⁷ As noted by Per Kvaerne, this myth appears also in the *Sems lung ston pa'i sgron ma*, a *gter ma* revealed in 1108 and transmitted in the rMa lineage. It occurs as well in the *Nyi zer sgron ma*, a 13th century *gter ma*, and is repeated in the 15th century *Bon gyi rGyal rabs* by Khyung po blo gros rgyal mtshan. Cf. Kvaerne 1989: 35.

¹⁸ *g.Yung drung bon gyi sgra bsgrags pa rin chen gling grags*, in gZhon nu Nor bzang 2010: 142-147.

¹⁹ On the meaning of this epithet see Kvaerne 1989: 36.

living beings need the Buddhist teaching (*dharma*, *chos*). I know the method for becoming a Buddha in nine days».

Then, when he succeeds in attracting disciples, he invites them into his black meditation room, where he proceeds to devour them and throws their skins and bones into a hiding spot, saying that they have become Buddhas without leaving their bodies. At this point sTon pa gShen rab, feeling great compassion for those sentient beings, decides to tame the evil demon by taking the form of a terrible thunder, of a vajra rock, of a burning fire and of iced water, but he does not succeed in taming the evil spirit, who is extremely powerful. sTon pa gShen rab understands that only a being who is not born from the womb can overcome that mighty demon, and he goes to the Paradise of the 33 deities where he meets the deity Dam pa Tog dkar, whom he begs to come down from heaven and defeat the dangerous demon. Dam pa Tog dkar accepts the task and takes on the appearance of a son of the king of the Śākya lineage.

Then, the young king and sTon pa gShen rab form an alliance and set off to subdue the demon. Wearing a mantle of yellow antelope skin, the young Śākya king goes to Nga min chos po, pretending he wants to become his disciple and learn his doctrines. The demon gives the young prince a poisonous potion, which, rather than poisoning the prince, tastes to him like a nectar.

The demon tries in vain to wound him with his sword, whereupon the prince gives the demon the following advice: «Heed me well, Rudra, black fury, son of demons, you say you are a dharma practitioner, but in fact you perform evil actions, you eat human flesh, and commit heresies and vile practises. Now you must act according to the real *dharma* or I will perform the liberation (*sgrol ba*) rite of ritual killing». Whereupon the demon, in a fit of rage and shame, replies: «Take heed, you son of the Śākya lineage, I will never obey you». And saying so, he swallows the young prince, who, inside the demon's stomach, takes on the appearance of dBal gyi Khro bo, with the horns of a *garuḍa* surmounted with a horse's head. From there, he utters a terrifying eagle cry and the neighing of a battle steed, and after having smashed the demon's body into four parts, issues from his head, once again in the form of the prince of the Śākya lineage. The demon, now tamed, says: «O noble prince of the Śākya dynasty, now I will obey and follow you». The tamed demon is given the name of *dge snyen* (*upāsaka*) Thar pa zhon nu, and the victorious prince is awarded the title of Śākyamuni Buddha.

Subsequently, Dam pa Tog dkar/Śākyamuni Buddha, transforms the name of *g.Yung drung Bon* into that of the excellent (Buddhist) *Dharma*, and transforms a large number of categories of teachings: the forty-two categories of *sūtras*, the six *vinaya* treatises, the four classes of *abhidharma*, and the four classes of tantras from *kriyā* to *anuttara* tantras. These doctrines, thus transformed, were disseminated everywhere.

In the final part of the story we find the following very interesting, emblematic statement:

In the future, at least once, some would say that the *g.Yung drung Bon* was erroneous and others would maintain that the Buddhist *dharma* was wrong. Bon and Dharma are not different, and their ultimate meaning is that they are one.²⁰

²⁰ «Dus phyi ma lan cig tsam na / gang zag la la zhig gis na re / g.yung drung bon gyi bstan pa ni mi bden te log pa'o zer ba dang / yang la la zhig gis na re dam pa'i chos 'di mi bden te log pa'o zhes zer ba byung

I find this ending worthy of note. The myth disintegrates and, as when a curtain rises after a performance, the actors appear without their masks, showing the hidden, assimilative strategy of this narrative: the Buddhist doctrines are a «transformation» of the ancient g.Yung drung Bon teachings. Śākyamuni Buddha himself is a «transformation» of a Bon deity, Dam pa Tog dkar. Buddhist doctrines are nothing but Bon doctrines in disguise and, *vice versa*, Bon doctrines are nothing but Buddhist doctrines, since «Bon and Buddhism are one».²¹

As we have already seen, the *bsGrags gling pa grags* is one of the most ancient Bon historiographic traditions, and in all probability was compiled by a member of the rMa family into the early centuries of the *phyi dar*. The distinct polarization between Bon and Buddhism had not yet taken on the clear outlines of the Yüan era and later periods, when all the Tibetan schools had to assume and construct well-defined identities linked to the economic and social policies that led to the formation of the monastic institutions that characterized the later history of Tibet.

The modeling of an ancient pre-Buddhist religion, the so-called g.Yung drung Bon, uncontaminated by Buddhism, devoid of any syncretistic element, whose place of origin was set in the western regions of Zhang zhung, with its own language and even its own ancient writing, does not appear in the earliest Bon sources like the *mDo 'dus*, the short hagiography of gShen rab Mi bo, or in the *Klu'bum*.

As has been remarked very recently by Sam van Schaik, in one of the early rare Tibetan sources among the Dun Huang documents that makes explicit reference to Tibetan non Buddhist practices, the word *bon* does not appear. During the imperial period, non Buddhist doctrines were defined either as 'the bad religion' (*chos ngan pa*) or 'the little religion' (*chos chu ngu*) while Buddhism was defined the Buddha's religion, or *buddhadharma* (*chos 'b'u dha*), the good religion (*chos bzang po / chos legs pa*), the correct religion (*chos yang thag pa*), the great religion (*chos chen po*) and also the eternal/*svāstika* religion (*g.yung drung gyi chos*).²²

Likewise, the oldest imperial-period Buddhist record, the full text version of the bSam yas inscription, transmitted in the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, does not contain the word *bon*, whereas mention is made of the folk religion (*myi chos*) preceding the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet.²³ There is a growing consensus among contemporary academic researchers that there was no organized religion going by the name of *bon* in Tibetan imperial times. In the oldest sources the term *bon* is found with reference to the practice of specific funerary, apotropaic or ransom rituals while the terms *bon po*, *lha bon po*, or *sku gshen* were used to indicate the officiants of those ceremonies.

As we have seen in the etiological myth of the *bsGrags pa gling grags* discussed here, in the early centuries of the second millennium there are clear traces of a tradition that could be considered proto *Bon gsar*, at least among certain members of

/ *bon chos so so ma yin don la gcig //*» in *g.Yung drung bon gyi sgra bsgrags pa rin chen gling grags*, in *gZhon nu Nor bzang* 2010: 146.

²¹ Later on, with the rise in importance of monastic institutions and their canonical *corpora* from the mid 14th century onwards, this syncretistic mode was further developed in the *Bon gsar* tradition, in opposition to the g.Yung drung Bon. See Achard 2013 and Blezer 2013b.

²² Cf. van Schaik 2013: 236.

²³ Cf. Beckwith 2003.

the rMa family, according to whom the Bon-Buddhism relationship was far from having taken the dichotomous, polarized forms that evolved in later times.²⁴

The representation of a native, «pure», g.Yung drung Bon religion seems to have taken shape only later, around the 14th century, corresponding to a clear political agenda and a strong reaction to the gSar ma pa hegemony. The question of the origins and history of the Bon tradition is a highly complex one, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine it in depth. It fundamentally involves the construction of religious and political identity, and even today the significance of this process has not diminished, especially since it has been reformulated and renegotiated by several prominent Tibetan intellectuals, both secular and religious, to connote and forge their ethnic identity, at a moment in which Tibetan people are struggling for the survival of their own culture.

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²⁴ On the proto-history of the «new Bon» phenomenon, see Achard 2013: 78 ff.

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