



Travel of Bonpo Gods from the Eurasian Borderlands to the Tibetan Culture Area and the Borderlands of North-east India

M.N. Rajesh²

Abstract

Popular writing has brought about an image of Hindu deities that are seen as a part of Hinduism only and Hinduism is also seen as a religion of the Indian subcontinent. While this may be largely true in many cases, it forces us to look at Hinduism in very Semitic terms as a closed religion. On the contrary we see that there was a considerable travel of gods and goddesses from other religions into Hinduism and vice versa. And thus negates the idea of Hinduism as a closed system. This therefore brings us to the problem of defining Hinduism which is by no means an easy task as there is no agreement on any singular definition. Pre-modern India had more contacts with her neighbours and thus central Asia and south East Asia emerge as some of the main regions where Indian influence is seen in many aspects of life. Even to a casual observer of both central Asia and South East Asia we see that there striking Indian influences in culture, religion and other aspects of life. All of them are not part of the textual literature that has become very nationalistic in the recent past and this tends to also dismiss the earlier writings as western Eurocentric. It is true that there is a great element of eurocentricism in the earlier writings but one point that needs to be highlighted is that these earlier writings also faithfully portrayed many aspects like iconography etc. in a very descriptive manner that focused on the measurements, likeness, colour and other associated characteristics of the statues. Such trends are clearly visible in the writings of Jas Burgess, E.B Havell etc. who were influenced by the dominant paradigm in contemporary Europe of the 1850's where the duty of the historian was to just record. Such an approach was informed by the writings of the German philosopher Leopold Von Ranke. Though there are certain value judgments at the end of the chapter, the main narrative is a

dry as dust and it is easy to decipher the characteristics or reconstruct the iconographic programme in any shrine and by extension the religious practices. In the modern period, where the dominant forms of anti-colonial struggles led to a writing of nationalist history succeeded by Marxist influenced social histories in many parts of Asia, the identification of the national boundaries and national cultures also extended to religions and many aspects were either muted or totally obliterated in history writing to present a homogenous picture. Thus, we have a picture of Hinduism and Buddhism that fits in with the national narratives. Such a collapse of categories is there in the borderland of India where the cultural boundaries are not clearly marked as also h religious boundaries. One single example that illustrates this assertion is the portrayal of Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist region with the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka marked off as separate entity and both being largely exclusive. In the Buddhist temples of Sri Lanka, one finds firstly the statue of Ganesha and later the images of Karthikeya and also the god Shani or Saturn. This image of a Buddhist monastery sharply contrasts with the highly buddhistic space of a Sinhala Buddhist temple where non-Buddhist elements are not found.

Keywords: Bonpo Gods, Tibetam Culture, Eurasian Borderlands, Hindu.

Popular writing has brought about an image of Hindu deities that are seen as a part of Hinduism only and Hinduism is also seen as a religion of the Indian subcontinent. While this may be largely true in many cases, it forces us to look at Hinduism in very Semitic terms as a closed religion. On the contrary we see that there was a considerable travel of gods and goddesses from other religions into Hinduism and vice versa. And thus negates the idea of Hinduism as a closed system. This therefore brings us to the problem of defining Hinduism which is by no means an easy task as there is no agreement on any singular definition. Pre-modern India had more contacts with her neighbours and thus central Asia and south EastAsia emerge as some of the main regions where Indian influence is seen in many aspects of life. Even to a casual observer of both central Asia and South East Asia we see that there striking Indian influences in culture, religion and other aspects of life. All of them are not part of the textual literature that has become very nationalistic in the recent past and this tends to also dismiss the earlier writings as western Eurocentric³. It is true that there is a great element of eurocentricism in the earlier writings but one point that needs to be highlighted is that these earlier writings also faithfully portrayed many aspects like iconography etc. in a very descriptive

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As we proceed towards central Asia, it become more and more clearer that there is a travel of gods to Central Asia and how they have been internalized by the religions there namely Tibetan Buddhism. Central Asia is defined in many ways by different scholars and there are broadly two pictures emerging, one with all the ex-soviet republics and Mongolia and the other a more inclusive approach that has traditionally defined central Asia as a region that includes Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang and the ex-Soviet Central Asian republics. While the ex-soviet central Asian republics and Xinxiang are Islamic, the region of Tibet and Mongolia are Buddhist and this is the prime area of focus of this essay.

A definition of the Tibetan culture area and a brief history of Tibet with emphasis on the early interaction with India would help us to understand the context.

The Tibetan culture area included present-day Tibet which is the core, Ladakh, Lahaul, Spiti and Kinnaur in the Western Himalayas of

India, Sikkim and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern Himalayas of India. In addition the adjoining regions of Bhutan and the northern regions of Nepal like Lo, Mustang, Manang and Dolpo constituted the Tibetan culture area⁵. The bordering regions of Tibet Autonomous region in China like Gansu and Sichuan also have Tibetan minorities and Tibetanized people and this was part of Tibet prior to 1959. In Russia the three regions of Tuva, Buryatiya and Kalmykia are the traditional Tibetan culture regions of Russia. The commonality in all these regions is the Tibetan Buddhism is the dominant religion and they were part of a wider world whose leader the Dalai Lama is venerated throughout the Tibetan Culture Area as the supreme symbol of Tibetan Buddhists. The literary elite in all these regions are the lama's who are well versed in classical Tibetan which is the language of instruction in the monasteries and also the language in which the Scriptures of Tibetan Buddhism are written. In addition to religious texts there were many other subjects like medicine that were of great interest to the lama's and continue to this day. For higher studies most lamas used to go to the great monasteries situated in Tibet and after graduating from their local monasteries and returned to their native regions after studying there. Thus we had separate hostels called *Khamtsens* for monks from different regions in the great monasteries of Lhasa prior to 1959⁶. The decline of Lhasa and the demise of the Lamaist State shifted the focus of Tibetan Buddhism from Tibet⁷.

India is as a sovereign secular Socialist Republic with no support to any religion and therefore Tibetan Buddhists could not find a great hold here or a state as a patron. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was an atheist state and therefore could not patronize the lama's. Moreover, the Buddhists had suffered enormously under the rule of Joseph Stalin which even led to the deportation of the entire population of Kalmykia to Siberia⁸. Nepal was a Hindu country and therefore did not show much interest in patronizing Buddhism. In these circumstances it was only the King of Bhutan who supported Tibetan Buddhism. Thus there developed great relations between the Tibetan Government in Exile and the kingdom of Bhutan⁹. Tibetan Buddhists all over the world now looked towards the Dalai Lama and the Government In Exile as sources of cultural inspiration. Since 1959 there have been a steady influx of Tibetan refugees to India and many of the great monasteries that were thriving before 1959 have been rebuilt in India reviving the traditions. Tibetan Buddhism also has become famous in the west as many of the monks have built networks all over the west¹⁰. These developments are important as they have laid the ground for the transfer of scholarship to western audiences in the west.

Borderlands of Central Asia and the Travel of Gods

The travel of gods and ideas is most clearly seen in the borderlands and we see that the idea of borderlands as a theme of research has been gaining currency in recent years and is now an accepted and established concept that tries to problematize liminal zones or zones of transition. In the case of the Tibetan culture area a clear identification of the Tibetan region with Buddhism has been a dominant historical narrative. However, in addition to Buddhism there are also other religions in Tibet like Bon, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and Islam practiced by a small community in Lhasa¹¹. In the borderlands of Asia, more particularly in the Central and eastern regions we see the prevalence of many microscopic religions like Bon, Yazdism, Mandaeanism, Druze etc¹². a predominant focus on the world religions in the study of the history of religions has marginalized these religions and has therefore precluded us from understanding the contribution of the minor religions in the making of the great religions and therefore giving us a distorted view. Two examples suffice to establish this point and also by extension also establish the relevance of not equating the Tibetan Culture solely with Buddhism.

We see that the residual traditions of the earlier religions in Iran like Zoroastrianism, Yazdisim and Mandaeanism are visible in different forms in Shia Islam¹³ and also in Iranian folklore was pointed out by R C Zahener very early in the 1930's¹⁴. The festival of *nauroz* and the fire rituals associated with it survive even today in Iran¹⁵. among the other scholars to notice such a development and take it seriously was Mircea Eliade whose monumental 16 volume Encyclopedia of Religions devotes considerable space to all the major and minor religious traditions in their varied forms including the influence of Zoroastrianism on Islam in Iran¹⁶. There are many other examples in the Iranian case and it points to the fact that the early religious traditions are always present in some form or the other either as residual traditions, coopted tradition or in some for that is not directly recognizable. In the Tibetan case we see that the Bon religion was the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and the spread of Buddhism in Tibet illustrates this very clearly.

According to Tibetan tradition and history, Buddhism was established in Tibet around the 7th C A D due to the efforts of the Indian monk Santaraksita who was invited by the Tibetan Emperor, Trisong Detsen. Due to his efforts, the first Buddhist temple was built and then what was being built in the day was undone at night. Santaraksita accepted his defeat and suggested the name of the famed Padmasambhava from the

Vikramashila monastery. After the arrival of Padmasambhava, he subdues the ferocious spirits and then incorporated them into Buddhism as part of the Tibetan pantheon in the form of guardian deities. This act is seen as a conflict with the indigenous Bon deities and later a resolution of the conflict by accommodation under the leadership of Padmasambhava. Thus, Tibetan Buddhism is very different from Theravada Buddhism of south East Asia or the East Asian Buddhism of China, Korea and Japan. What makes Tibetan Buddhism unique is the survival of the pre-Buddhist Bonpo religious practices that have given it a distinct identity in a geographic zone. In the case of Shia Islam in Iran also we see similar parallels.

The second commonality is the role of these minor religious traditions in the making of the world religions that has not been recognized and this become clearer when we see that the regional traditions of each religion are not much focused upon. African Islam is vastly different from Asian Islam¹⁷ and we have seen the case of Buddhism. In Christianity also this feature is too obvious and in the case of Hinduism one notices that there is an almost complete absence of any reference to Balinese Hinduism and present studies on Hinduism are not informed by the developments in Balinese Hinduism. In the case of Balinese Hinduism too we notice that there is a clear borrowing from the local practices on which Hinduism was superimposed¹⁸.

In the case of Iran also we see that the ethnic particularities are reflected in the cultural practices and traditions and the Indian influences can be discerned in the culture of the gypsies known as the Domari and according to historical records that quote the celebrated Firdausi, they originated from India¹⁹. While such developments are obscured in mainstream historiography and as such they negate the influence of Indian cultural transactions in West Asia, though one can discern many influences painstakingly.

Returning to the second assertion, we thus see that there is a continuation of the earlier traditions leading us to believe that traditions cannot be easily destroyed and therefore can survive and adapt showing a high degree of resilience. Even in the modern period this fact becomes clearer when we see that neither modernization nor revolution, both of which were rapid developments in 'traditional' societies could not displace tradition²⁰. It thus become necessary to study the role of tradition and religion very seriously and it is here the role of the minor religions come into picture.

In the case of Iran, the main area of focus that this paper tries to attempt is the flow of gods from through Central Asia. It would be prudent

to first visit the Bon religion to get a clear route map of this process. Per Kvaerne in a celebrated article titled, "Who are the bonpos?"²¹, gives lucid picture of the development of this religion in the borderlands of Asia. The emphasis on the borderland is deliberate and would become clear when we locate the sacred geography of the Bonpos. According to tradition Bon originated in the kingdom of Zhangzhung west of Tibet in the land of Olmo Lungring. Olmo Lungring has not been identified yet though scholars are tempted to equate it with modern Tajikistan as the name Olmo Tazig is also used. The point is that they may not be far off and the precise location of such a place is also not important for it is a practice of modern cartography.

To begin with we see that Bon originated in the land of Olmo Lungring and the depiction of Olmo Lungring is given in the form of a map with the centre as a palace called Barpo Sogye. It was in this palace of Barpo Sogye that the founder of the bon religion Tonpa Shenrab Miwo was born. In past ages there were three brothers, Dagpa, Salba, and Shepa, who studied the Bön doctrines in the heaven named Sridpa Yesang, under the Bon Sage Bumtri. When their studies were completed, they visited the God of Compassion Shenlha Odkar and asked him how they could help the living beings submerged in the misery and sorrow of suffering. He advised them to act as guides to mankind in three successive ages of the world. To follow his advice the eldest brother, Dagpa completed his work in the past world age. The second brother, Salba took the name Shenrab and became the teacher and guide of the present world age. The youngest brother, Shepa will come to teach in the next world-age²². A study of the life of Shenrab Miwo shows strong parallels with the life of the Buddha. Like the Buddha, Shenrab Miwo was also born as a prince, married and begot children and was finally led to the practice of renunciation. The following extract would give a clear picture of the bon geography

“According to the Bon tradition, Bon originated in the land of Olmo Lungring, a part of a larger country called Tazig. Ol, symbolizes the unborn; Mo, the undiminishing; Lung, the prophetic words of Tonpa Shenrab the founder of Bon; and Ring, his everlasting compassion. Olmo Lungring is said to constitute one third of the existing world and is situated to the west of Tibet. It is described as an eight-petalled lotus under a sky which appears like an eight-spoked wheel. In the centre rises Mount Yungdrung Gutseg, 'Pyramid of Nine Svastikas'. The svastika is the symbol of permanence and indestructibility. The nine swastikas piled up represent the Nine ways of Bon. At the base of Mount Yungdrung spring four rivers, flowing towards the four

cardinal directions. The mountain is surrounded by temples, cities and parks. To the south is the palace Barpo Sogye where Tonpa Shenrab was born. To the west and north are the palaces in which lived the wives and children of Tonpa Shenrab. A temple named Shampo Lhatse is to the east. The complex of palaces, rivers and parks with Mount Yungdrung in the centre constitutes the inner region of Olmo Lungring. The intermediate region consists of twelve cities, four of which are towards the cardinal directions. The third region includes the outer land. These three regions are encircled by an ocean and again by a range of snowy mountains. The access to Olmo Lungring is gained by the so-called 'arrow way'. Before his visit to Tibet, Tonpa Shenrab shot an arrow, thus creating a passage through the mountain range.

This sophisticated description of Olmo Lungring has been tentatively related by some scholars to different geographical locations. Some see it as a description of Mount Kailash and the four great rivers that spring from its base; China being the land to the east, India to the south, Orgyen to the west and Khotan to the north. To other scholars, the description seems to resemble the geography of the Middle East and Persia in the time of Cyrus the Great. To a Bonpo, the question of the geographic identification of Olmo Lungring is less important than its symbology which is clearly made use of to indicate the supramundane origin of the tradition. Symbolic descriptions which combine history, geography and mythology are well known phenomena in ancient texts. The Buddhist description of the universe with Mount Meru supporting the sky, the four Chief Continents to the four cardinal points and this earth as the southern continent is another similar example²³.

It is clear that the Persian culture area is one of the regions mentioned in this description. This point becomes more substantiated when we look at Tajikistan and what sets Tajikistan apart from its neighbours like Uzbekistan, Kazhakastan, Turkmenistan and Krgyzstan is the fact that Tajikistan is a Persian region with Persian language and culture and forms part of the Persian Culture area whereas the other countries are part of the Turkic Culture area²⁴. There are also large parts of Afghanistan a contiguous region of India, Iran, Tibet and Tajikistan that are parts of the Persian culture area²⁵ and it is these borderlands that are the scene of action where we witness the travel of gods from Iran to the borders of Tibet.

Another point that has emerged from the above description is that the Bonpo is not concerned about the exact physical location of the Olmo Lungring, similarly the concept of Shambala that constantly resonates in Tibetan discourses cannot also be clearly identified and is also placed and there many narratives about the exact location. One narrative says that the

location depends on the karma of the person and after a lengthy discussion in which clear *sanskritic* terms of measurement like *yojanas* are used to describe the earth which is 10000 *yojanas* in diameter. At the centre is Mount Meru²⁶. The location of Shambhala is also said to be in the western region of Tibet that places it in the borderlands of the area under discussion²⁷. Shambhala is almost everywhere described in mystical terms and is therefore not able to be pegged exactly. However there is a broad consensus that emerges from all the descriptions which place Shambhala somewhere west of the Himalayas in western Tibet and beyond²⁸.

Thus the Pamirs as a region that witnessed the travel and confluence of many ideas, cultures and religions is well established and there is ample historical material to prove this. In the case of the Bon religion, we see that according to the biography of Shenrab Miwo, we get clear indications that he lived during the early part of the 6th century BC in Persia and the biography is also rich in historical details when it mentions how the Media kingdom was defeated by Elam²⁹. The biography was written in Pung (sPungs) letter (Aramean letters) and was later translated from Iranian (Middle Persian) to Zhangzhung language and later into Tibetan³⁰.

Since Iran is of prime importance as the biography of Shenrab Miwo (Dmora or Mathora), a canonical text was compiled there the travel of deities along with the religious ideas can also be seen here. The great deity of the bon pantheon Bumtri is said to have originated from the Iranian Ahura Mazda and Kuzentsov attempts to prove this using linguistic similarities and the religious forms and this contention has not been seriously challenged³¹. Like Bumtri, the famous Iranian god of daylight Mithras is also translated as Odkar or the emanation of white light. In the absence of any iconographic portrayal of Mithras and the association of the term god white light with the term god-priest it is concluded that Shenrab is an incarnation of this deity. This is the second of the three chief deities of the Bon pantheon³².

The third deity is Astarte-Anhaita is the goddess Satrig Ersan (Satrig Er-sangs). We see that throughout the middle east the chief mother goddess was Ishtar or Astrate and in Iran was worshipped under the name Anhaita. In addition to the etymological roots, in terms of attributes and nature there are large scale similarities and it is this factor that allows us to identify Astarte-Anhaita with the goddess Satrig Ersan of the Bonpo pantheon³³. The above example clearly demonstrates how the deity from Iran could be easily transmitted through the entire breadth of the Tibetan culture area from the borders of Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh and Nepal. What is significant is the residual practices of the communities like

the Tamangs who were originally from Tibet but have been hinduised over the centuries reveal these practices thus pointing to the travel of these deities.

Today the bon religion is practiced in Tibet and in India among the Tibetan exiles with the main monasteries of Tibet being rebuilt as daughter monasteries in India. In addition to the newly built monasteries, we see that bon is also practiced in the traditional Tibetan culture areas of India in the western Himalayas and also in the eastern Himalayas³⁴. In the eastern Himalayas we see the prevalence of Bon among the Monpas³⁵. While we see that the religion of the Tamangs and related ethnic groups of Nepal is identified with Hinduism and Buddhism, there is a clear element of bon residual practice among them and it is surmised that this was because of the residual elements³⁶. There are also other gods of the Indian pantheon in Tibet like Shiva, Ganesha, Parvati known as Mgonpo or Lha Wanchug, Lhamo Umadeva and Tsogdag Langnachen respectively³⁷. However it is very tough for the average Tibetan to clearly identify these as imports from Hinduism as they have merged into everyday practice and worship so neatly that they have become an integral part of the Tibetan religion. We thus see that like the Indian deities, the bon deities also make up a great part of the Tibetan religion and the role of Iran needs to be looked afresh in these developments and the residual traces of these deities in regions as far as Nepal and the borderlands of Russia.

Endnotes:

² The lecturer of Departement of History, University of Hyderabad - Central University. Gachibowli, Hyderabad - 500 046 India. Email: mnraja@gmail.com Phone (O): 91-040-23133160 Fax: 91-040-23133159

² Monica Juneja, *Architecture in medieval India: forms, contexts, histories* (New Delhi :Permanent Black, 2001),p. 29.

³Rohan Bastin, *The domain of constant excess: plural worship at the Munnesvaram temples in Sri Lanka* (Oxford:Berghahn Books, 2002),p.85.

⁴Ibid.,p.85.

⁵Warren W Smith, "The Nationalities Policy of The Chinese Communist Party and the Socialist Transformation of Tibet" in , *Resistance and Reform in Tibet* edited by Shirin Akiner and Robert Barnett (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1994), pp. 61-65.

⁶M.N Rajesh, *Gompas in Traditional Tibetan Society* (New Delhi: Decent Books, 2002), p. 82.

⁷Tsering Shakya, "Whither the Tsampa Eaters?" *Himal* 6, No. 5(1993), pp: 8-12.

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- ⁹Shakya, "Whither the Tsampa Eaters?", pp: 8-12.
- ¹⁰Alex Butler, *Feminism, Nationalism, and Exiled Tibetan Women* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2003),p.1.
- ¹¹Raphael Israeli, *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major*, (Richmond, U.K.:Curzon Press,1982),p.83,100,288.
- ¹²<http://looklex.com/e.o/>
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- ²¹Per Kvaerne,, 1985. *Iconography of religions: East and Central Asia. Tibet Bon religion : a death ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos*, (Leiden: BRILL),pp 3-5.
- ²²http://www.chammaling.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=59&Itemid=58
- ²³<http://www.manjushri.com/teachings/t-Bon.htm>
- ²⁴Svat Soucek, *A history of Inner Asia*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press,2000),,pp3-13.
- ²⁵Ibid p13.
- ²⁶Gar-je k'am trul Rinpoche translated from Tibetan by Sherpa tulku and alexander berzin "A Physical description of the universe" " A geography and history of Shambala" , *Tibet Journal* ,3,no 3(1978),pp 3-10.
- ²⁷Nicholas Roerich, *Heart of Asia*, (Vermont: Inner Traditions,1990), p 117.
- ²⁸Ibid.p.117.
- ²⁹"Dus-pa rin-poche', "irgyud gzer-mig" in B.I Kuznetsov "Influence of the pamirs on Tibetan Culture", *Tibet Journal*,3,no 3(1978), pp 35-36.
- ³⁰Ibid.,pp.35-36.
- ³¹B.I. Kuznetsov, "The Highest Deities of the Bon Religion" translated from the Russian by Stanley Frye, *Tibet Journal*, 6, no. 2 (Summer 1981), pp 48-52.
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