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Bon in Bhutan. What is in the name?

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This paper does not intend to give an interpretation of *Bon* in Bhutan with a textual or philosophical approach but rather try to present what the term means in Bhutan and to which practices and beliefs it is related.¹

No established Everlasting *Bon* (*G.yun drung bon*) monastery exists today in Bhutan although there are some monks who come from Tibetan families and study at the Menri monastery in Dolanji (India) or at Triten Norbutse in the Kathmandu valley.

However *Bon po gter ston* such as Khu tsha Zla 'od, Bon po Brag tshal, Khyungpo dpal dge and Ra shag chos 'bar seem to have made discoveries in Bhutan in the first cycle (1027-1086).²

Moreover, Rdo rje gling pa (1346- 1405) who, besides being one of the five great *gter ston* of the *Rnying ma* was also a *Bon Rdzogs chen* master known as G.yung drung gling pa, came to Bhutan and discovered important Bon texts such as the Gold Needle (*Ser thur*) in Paro sTag tshang in 1370.³ He gave this teaching in a place called Kubum (sKu 'bum) in the Phobjikha valley which the 69th *Rje Mkhan po* Dge 'dun rin chen (1926-1997) acknowledges for its *bon po* origin.

Karmay mentioned that “Gedün Rinchen, better known as Geshe Dragphupa, the 69th Je Khenpo, i.e. the head of the Drukpa Kagyu, has, in passing, devoted a short passage to Kubum in his *Lho'i chos 'byung gsar pa*. It is written in the traditional style of the *chos 'byung* type of work and was completed in 1972. It is a

¹ This paper was delivered in Kathmandu in December 2012 at the occasion of the Bon Seminar organized for the Silver Jubilee of the Triten Norbutse (Khri rten Nor butse) monastery. I would like to thank the organisers Khenpo Tenpa Yundrung and Charles Ramble for giving me this opportunity.

² Aris, M., *Bhutan: The early history of a Himalayan kingdom*, Warminster: Aris & Philips. 1979, pp. 150-151.

³ On this topic see Karmay, S.G., “Dorje Lingpa and his rediscovery of the 'Gold Needle' in Bhutan”, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, vol.2, n°2, 2000, pp.1-34.

truly monumental work on the historical development of Buddhist institutions in Bhutan. Here is a translation of his passage on Kubum: 'As the Bon religion was established in Tibet before Buddhism flourished there, so it was also established in Bhutan during the period of the later diffusion of the Doctrine. From the seat of Yungdrungling (monastery) ⁴ in Ra lag where was upheld the religious system of Shenrab (Gshen rab), the Master of *Bon* from Zhang chung, the Zhabdrung Tsenden Dewa (*Zhabs drung Tshan ldan bde ba*) came to this country. He gradually established his seats by founding Kubum monastery in Shar and (another seat) in Sewagang, etc. and so the religion spread (in this country). To this day, performing of the atonement rite according to the Bon tradition and the propitiation rite to Srid rgyal mo have continued (at these establishments)."⁵

Fieldtrips to both Kubum and Sewagang (Rtsi ba sgang) in the Wangdiphodrang (Shar) district confirmed that in both the *mgon khang* of these temples, Srid pa'i rgyal mo was still worshipped. In fact, while Kubum (3000m) was the summer residence, Sewagang at 1700m only was the winter residence, and the deity migrated with the people who had land in both areas, a practice which still continues.



Sewagang (Rtsi ba gang) temple in the Shar region © Pommaret

⁴ G.yung drung gling monastery located in Ru lag, Gtsang, Central Tibet, does not seem to be the right monastery as it was founded in 1834, much after Tshan ldan bde ba (13th century).

⁵ Karmay 2000: p. 12.

For reasons which are not yet clear, the *G.yung drung Bon* did not flourish in Bhutan and these two interlinked monasteries of the same region were taken over by the powerful '*Brug pa bka' brgyud pa* school which was the most important in Western Bhutan.

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So what do the Bhutanese understand by the term *Bon*?

Usually, unless they are very educated, they do not use the word *Bon* but tend to use the component *Bon chos* which might seem at first an antinomic component until we look at the word *chos* as dharma, faith, and not Buddhism. Rdo rje gling pa already used the component to formulate the "oneness of Bon and Buddhism" (*bon chos dbyer med*).⁶

The term *bon chos* was also recently used in a *dkar chag* of texts found in the Potala.⁷

However *Bon chos* as a term employed today in Bhutan, refers to a set of beliefs and rituals which are considered non-Buddhist and revolve around the fertility and prosperity (*G.yang*) of a community and the worship of local deities which create the identity of the community.⁸ Here, therefore, we take *chos* as meaning 'religion' and not Buddhism.

Until the 2000s, although these practices existed everywhere in rural areas, they were not much talked about as they were seen as not appropriate in the Buddhist context of the country. With the development of communications, the official emphasis on the preservation of culture and traditions as well as the nostalgia for the rural traditions from an urban elite confronted with changes, it has become much easier to study this important part of Bhutanese culture.

The term *Bon chos* used in Bhutan to mean the set of practices and beliefs which are not Buddhist is in fact found in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Van Schaik's groundbreaking publication unearthed a fragment on funerals in the Stein Collection Or.8210 (S.12243 Text 84). "The text is a criticism of the funeral rituals of the '*Bon* religion' (*Bon-chos*). [...] It contains a revealing use of the terms *bon* and *bon po*. [...] In a very interesting statement, the author of this text writes that, 'In the past Tibetan internment was practised according to the *Bon* religion (*Bon chos*)'".⁹ However, in an important recent article based on different types of Imperial records,¹⁰ van Schaik concludes that "It is Buddhism, an imported

⁶ Karmay 2000: p. 34.

⁷ Karmay <http://theyungdrungbon.com/?p=4329#more-4329>

⁸ Karmay, S.G., "Mountain cults and National Identity in Tibet", R. Barnett and Sh. Akiner eds. *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, London: Hurst and Company, 1994, pp. 112-20.

⁹ Iwao, K., van Schaik, S., Takeuchi, T., *Old Tibetan Texts in the Stein Collection Or.8210*, Studies in Old Tibetan Texts from Central Asia, vol. 1, Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 2012, pp.122-122 and xii.

¹⁰ van Schaik S., "The naming of Tibetan religion Bon and Chos in the Tibetan Imperial Period". JF Marc Des Jardins ed., *Proceedings of the Shang shung Conference, Journal of the International association of Bon Research*, vol.1, 2013, pp. 227-258.

metanarrative, that brings together this variety of Tibetan rituals and beliefs as an entity that can be identified, named and discussed.” We speculate that this assertion might be again reviewed in the light of further textual as well as field research.

This finding and the discussion that it provokes could contribute the long standing discussion about the name of the pre-Buddhist religion although this is better left to textual specialists.

However, if we look at the material from Bhutan today, we do find the same term, *Bon chos*, as in the Dunhuang fragment.

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Besides *Bon chos*, some Bhutanese also make a distinction between *Bon dkar* and *Bon nag* which is not defined in the same way by all. *Bon dkar* is acceptable and regroups all the local non-Buddhist practices while *Bon nag* include magic, poison and negative deeds to others. However Tashi choden writes “Bon practitioners are of two types: The Bon kar and Bon nag. Kar means white, and they are those who do not engage in animal sacrifices. Nag means black, and refers to those engaged in activities such as black magic sorceries and animal sacrifices. In Bhutan, *Bon nag* was replaced by the introduction of Buddhism.”¹¹ This would imply that the *Bon dkar* has been integrated in Buddhist practices. These two terms reflect in fact Buddhist terminology and the *Bon po* never used them.

Leaving these local categories aside, we will now concentrate on the set of beliefs and practices called *Bon chos* in Bhutan and try to define their most salient features.

- An authorisation has been given by Guru Rinpoche to practise *Bon chos* for some days in the year. Buddhist ordained monks cannot participate but can watch.
- They have different names according to the regions and that's why I called them in English for the time being 'Community rituals': *lha bon*, *kar phud*, *roop*, *goleng*, *phyva* (*Ha*)
- They last two to three days, sometimes more and are composed of a particular series of events that have to be performed in a fixed order but that varies from place to place.
- Their common purpose is to ward off evil influences as well as bring prosperity to a spatially well-defined community by pleasing the local deities. Therefore the dates of these festivals in the Bhutanese calendar often fall at plantation time or just after the harvest.
- People of a defined community bound by local circumstances— geography, history, language and common deities—assemble once a year at a fixed date to perform a ritual which will bring prosperity to the community. It is to be

¹¹ Choden.T, “Ha: the Bon festival of Gortshom village”, *Wayo wayo*, Thimphu: CBS, 2004, n.1, p.1.

noted that people from other villages, even sometimes geographically close, do not participate nor come as spectators. The term ‘community’ also includes people originally from the place but who work and live in town. They usually make a point to come back to the village for this occasion, but tend not to bring their spouse with them if the spouse is from another region. If they cannot go back to the village, their relatives try to send them offerings blessed that day.

This point has already been noted regarding A mdo by Karmay¹²: “A member of one community cannot participate in the propitiation of another community’s propitiatory ceremony to local deities.”

- The ritual is economically sponsored by the community as a whole or some individual members. The modalities differ slightly according to the region. There can be main sponsors to the rituals, households called ‘hosts’ (*gnas po*) who take turns yearly in providing the bulk of the offerings, it can be a general contribution in kind shared by the whole community, or a combination of both, but the main point here is that the ritual cannot be sponsored by an outsider.
- The offerings are made in kind and therefore tend to reflect the ecological and economic set-up of a particular area. The only item which comes from outside is meat as it is often now bought from the town butchers after the animal sacrifices became frowned upon in the 1980s. Traditionally, while the highlands areas would use barley or wheat to prepare the offering cakes (*gtor ma* and *tshogs*), the lowlands with their rich subtropical flora would use rice, millet or corn (maize) as well as forest products such as banana leaves, stems and wild tubers. Locally brewed alcohol, cheese, butter and whey are always presented, irrespective of the area.
- These rituals are always performed in an open space, and not in a temple. A makeshift altar, sometimes called *lha/bla brang* or *lha khyim*, is erected for the occasion at a place which is a common ground (a forest clearing, meadow, pasture, or rocky mountain), or which has a natural feature considered as the soul (*bla*) of the deity such as a stone, a rock, or a lake.

During these rituals one main deity is invoked, but also all the deities who live in the landscape on the territory of the community as well as household deities such as *thab lha*, *sgo lha*, *gdung lha* (god of the beam/household).

¹² Karmay, S.G., *The arrow and the Spindle*, Kathmandu: Mandala Bookpoint, vol.2, 2005, p. 33.



Bonpo celebrating a ritual in Shingkar, Upper Kheng © Jooris

The main deity is generally the *yul lha*, or *pho lha*, also called *gnas po/gnas* in Bhutan.¹³

In its multi-faceted role, on this occasion the deity is propitiated more particularly as the *nor lha*, which is the god of the cattle (*nor*) in Bhutan. Cattle is still a symbol of wealth in rural Bhutan and its prosperity is very much linked to the community prosperity. Cattle and other animals are on this occasion dedicated to the deity. The *gtor ma* often represent animals.

Among all the deities, one which is important for the Bumthang and Kheng regions is worth mentioning here. His name is Ode Gungjel/Waden gungden and he comes from Bsam yas in Central Tibet. This deity is probably the Tibetan god 'O de gung rgyal and its cult in Central and South-central Bhutan may reveal a population migration during the Imperial period. A study of the place that 'O de gung rgyal occupies in Bhutanese myths and rituals still remains to be done but will probably give us clues about the ancient history of Bhutan.

¹³ On the deities terminology issue, see Pommaret F., "On local and mountain deities in Bhutan", A.M. Blondeau & E. Steinkellner eds. *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the history and social meaning of the mountain cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*, Wien: ÖAW, pp.39-56; "Yul and Yul lha: the territory and its deity in Bhutan", *Bulletin of Tibetology*, Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, vol 40 (1), 2004, pp. 39-67; and Ura, K., *Deities, Archers and Planners in the era of decentralization*, Thimphu: Karma Ura, 2004.

During the *khar phud*, the festival of Wamling in Upper Kheng (Zhemgang district), the *bon po* who is the officiant travels through a mental journey all the way to Central Tibet on the Kheng-Tibet path and then to heaven to invite Odegonjan to the festival and escorts him to the community.¹⁴

During the festival called the *yak lha* of Ura, a high altitude valley of Bumthang, the priest called *lha dpon* wearing a white cotton cloth around his head propitiates the deity Ode gung gyen so that the village yak herd is protected. The *yak lha* festival in Ura is a three-day festival in the 7th Bhutanese month when members of households pin fried round pancakes of wheat flour on the horns of the yaks, and adorn them with *pamzar*, a bunch of yak fur dyed in different shades. It is normally the strongest among the yaks that would be selected for *pamzar*, and he would then be automatically chosen for *rten gso*, as an offering made to the god of yak to ride on. While the yak ascends the mountain, people believe the yak god would be mounted atop it and will dismount at its abode high up in the mountain.¹⁵

In the Ha (Phyva) festivals of Lhuntse, the deity comes down to earth through a dMu ladder.¹⁶

- The officiant often wears a white turban which is associated with the the *bon po* all over the Himalayan world.
- These rituals are a grand occasion for the community to socialise and rejoice together a purpose: their merry-making will please the deities who in turn will bring prosperity on to them. Everybody shares home-made food and alcohol, dances, and plays games, especially tug-of-war and archery, which is well-known to be connected with local deities. There is no gender bias in the celebrations, except for archery which is a male domain; at archery games, women act as cheer-leaders, shouting abuses and praises to the archers.
- One of the characteristics of these rituals that still reinforces their community base is that each of them, in one form or another, involves a procession or a visit to each household by the officiant usually accompanied by other villagers. Songs and dances to please the house deities and to bring prosperity are performed in each house and the family offers the visitors snacks and alcohol.
- There appears to be usually no ritual texts, besides the *gsol kha* or *gser skyems* and the transmission of the songs and invocations is done orally.

¹⁴ Penjore, D., "Wamling Kharpu. A vibrant ancien festival", *Wayo, Wayo*, Thimphu: CBS, 2004, pp. 49-71.

¹⁵ Samten Yeshe, "Yak lha, a fast fading herders' fest", *Kuensel*, 18 september 2012.

¹⁶ Pommaret, F., "Les fêtes aux divinités-montagnes *Phyva* au Bhoutan de l'Est", P. Kvaerne ed., *Tibetan studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International association for Tibetan Studies Fagernes 1992*, Oslo: The Institute for comparative research in human culture, vol. 2, 1994, pp. 660-669.

Recently, Bhutanese researchers have been trying to note down some of these songs and more elaborate texts may soon be coming to light.¹⁷

- The officiants have different names according to the regions: *bon po*, *pha jo*, *phra min*, *lha mi*, *lha dpon* and perform the liturgical part, *gsol kha* or *gser skyems*, for the deities but also oversee and direct the whole chain of events which compose the ritual. Their function can be hereditary through family lineages, or have been imposed on them after a sickness or a trance, or else they have been chosen by the community. However, during these local community rituals, no trance is involved and therefore I am not using the much-debated 'shaman' term.
- As mentioned earlier, the practitioners have a double religious identity. They perform the so called *Bon chos* local rituals as a service to the villagers. By doing so, it does not contradict their belief in Buddhism as they have Guru Rinpoche's permission and the purpose of the rituals are different.
- The rituals are also the occasion for divination (*mo* or *dpyad*, often pronounced *phya*) for the community annual welfare. While divination for the individual villagers is usually done by a *rtsis pa*, in this case it is performed by the practitioner and has different procedures according to the place: reading the cracks of the shoulder blade of a sheep, throwing banana leaves in the air, using threads, or pouring alcohol from a common cauldron.¹⁸
- Many of these rituals also have a sexual component, which for the Bhutanese has several functions: avoiding malicious gossip (*mi kha*) in order to keep harmonious relationships in the community, atoning one's misdeeds, and wishing fertility, especially to childless women.

This component is materialised by ritual cakes and wooden sticks in the shape of phalluses sometimes called by the honorific term of *sPo [Pho?] chen rgyal ba blo gros* as well as the exchange of obscene words and songs. Sometimes such as in the Khar phud of Tsamang the deity's tree is decorated with wooden phalluses.¹⁹ Conversation taboos between family

¹⁷ See Wayo, Wayo Thimphu: CBS, 2004; Penjore D., "Scriptural analysis of propitiating Lha 'Od de Gong jan in Wamling", J. Ardussi & S. Tobgay eds. *Written Treasures of Bhutan. Mirror of the past and bridge to the future*. Proceedings of the First international Conference on the rich scriptural heritage of Bhutan. Thimphu: National Library of Bhutan, vol.1, 2008, pp. 271-284; Dorji, T., "The lha 'bod: an invocation ritual in Sbe nag (Western Bhutan)", K. Buffetrille & H. Diemberger (eds.), *Territory and Identity in Tibet and the Himalayas, Tibetan Studies in honour of Anne-Marie Blondeau*, Proceedings of the 9th IATS, Leiden 2000, Brill Tibetan Studies Library, Leiden: Brill, 2002, pp. 179-194; "The spider, the piglet and the vital principle: A popular ritual for restoring the srog", K. Ura & S. Kinga eds. *The Spider and the Piglet*. Proceedings of the First International Seminar on Bhutan Studies, Thimphu: CBS, 2004, pp. 598-607; & Toni Huber, oral communication 2013.

¹⁸ On divination and oracles see Karmay S.G., *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in history, Myths, rituals and beliefs in Tibet*, vol 1. Kathmandu: Mandala Bookpoint, 1998, pp. 246-247.

¹⁹ Pelgen, U., "Khar phud: a non-Buddhist Lha Sol festival of Eastern Bhutan", Wayo, Wayo, Thimphu: CBS, 2004, p.135.

members is also broken during some rituals, and it is believed to remove all the 'shame' (Dzongkha: Ngo tshao) of the year.

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What is called *Bon chos* rituals and their practitioners in Bhutan are really linked to the prosperity of the community and its identity around the same deities. In most villages of Bhutan, it is believed that *Bon chos* deals with mundane matters and daily life in a nature full of forces which can become nefast, while Buddhism is for the after life and has an eschatological dimension. The two coexisted as they dealt with two dimensions of the human life.

In fact, *Bon chos* as understood and practised in Bhutan, is close to what Stein called the "nameless religion" and that which Kvaerne defined as "a vast and amorphous body of popular beliefs including divination, the cult of local deities and conception of the soul."²⁰ It was articulated as such by Kapstein regarding Tibet: "In actual practice, the nameless religion, centering on the cults of local divinities and spirits, the harmony or conflicts between humans and the invisible forces which they must interact, is the concern of persons belonging to all strata of Tibetan society."²¹ And to my knowledge, the most adequate questions come from a recent article by Geoffrey Samuel: "More specifically, there remains a range of local, village-based religious practices among contemporary culturally Tibetan populations which are referred to as Bon but which have no obvious connection with the sophisticated scholarly tradition of G.yung drung Bon lamas, monks and lay practitioners. At the same time, these kinds of Bon recall some of the older stereotypes of Bon practice, of black and white Bon, of ongoing rivalries between Buddhism and Bon, and the like. These kinds of village Bon practice have received little systematic scholarly attention, but a variety of studies in the Himalayan borderlands, ranging from Central Nepal through Sikkim to Bhutan, and on into Arunachal Pradesh and Southern Kham, have described practices that have at any rate a clear family resemblance to each other. This leaves us with a number of questions, which provoked the present paper: What are these practices, and do they belong together in some sense? Why are they called Bon, and what relationship, if any, do they have to the sophisticated scholarly tradition of G.yung drung Bon? What kind of historical sense might we make of this situation?"²²

One aspect which is nonetheless missing in these remarks, is the identity component linked to the local deity and the territory. It is very preeminent in Bhutan or in A mdo as described by Karmay.

²⁰ Kvaerne, P., *The Bon religion of Tibet: the iconography of a living tradition*, London: Serindia, 1995, p.10.

²¹ Kapstein M.T., *The Tibetans*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 205.

²² Samuel G. "Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity: Bon Priests and Ritual Practitioners in the Himalayas", JF Marc Des Jardins (ed.) *Journal of the International association of Bon Research*, vol.1., 2013, pp. 80-81.

The identity, or the search for a common stratum, is what is at the heart of Toni Huber's 2013 article.²³ Covering an area from central Bhutan to Arunachal Pradesh, Huber proposes the term *srid pa'i lha bon*, "as a distinct self-identified form of 'priestly Bon' developed out of a combination of deep roots in ancient narratives and rites, some sharing of material with certain earlier states in the development of *G.yung drung Bon*, and features in common with trans-Himalayan priestly culture."²⁴

While taking into account these recent works, if we focus on Bhutan today, the so-called "nameless religion" has a name which is *Bon chos*. It can be argued that fieldwork done in 20th and 21st century Bhutan cannot be a sufficient proof to attribute a name to the set of beliefs and rituals which took place in Imperial Tibet. This argument is valid and ample textual confirmation might be needed but the recent discovery of the term *Bon chos* in a Dunhuang manuscript might be a pointer.

Kapstein also elaborated that "The nameless tradition, moreover, is seldom present as an anonymous substratum, but is found as an integral dimension of both Buddhism and Bön".²⁵ This might need to be moderated as, in Bhutan, *Bon chos* is considered a distinct set of beliefs and rituals from Buddhism as well as from *gYung drung Bon*. However, even in the *G.yung drung bon*, the first two ways (*theg pa*) of the Nine Ways regroup what Stein called "the nameless religion". There are the Way of the *gshen* of Prediction (*phyva gshen theg pa*) which codifies ritual (*gto*), diagnosis (*dp Yad*), sortilege (*mo*) and astrology (*rtsis*) and the way of *gshen* of the visual world (*snang gshen theg pa*) which includes all kinds of exorcisms, as well as spirits, local deities and ransoms.²⁶

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In fact, in Bhutan as in Tibet, many recognised specificities of *Bon* practices are incorporated into Buddhist practices and are no longer identified as *Bon* as such. This is a common feature all over the Himalayas: *bsang*, *mdos*, *glud*, ritual for expulsion and against malicious gossip (*mi kha*)²⁷ - although in this particular case a *Bon chos* ritual called Kharam is also practised in eastern Bhutan.²⁸

²³ Huber, T. "The iconography of *gShen* Priests in the ethnographic context of the extended Eastern Himalayas, and reflections on the development of Bon religion", Franz-Karl Ehrard & Petra Maura eds. *Nepalica-Tibetica. Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers*, Andiast: IITBS, 2013, pp. 263-94.

²⁴ Huber 2013: p. 288.

²⁵ Kapstein 2006: p. 205.

²⁶ Snellgrove D. *The Nine Ways of Bon*. London: OUP, 1967, pp. 9-10.

²⁷ Kapstein 2006: p. 211-212.

²⁸ Pelgen, U., "Karamshing: An antidote against evil", S. G. Karmay & Y. Nagano eds. *New Horizons in Bon Studies*, Bon studies 2, Senri ethnological Reports 15, Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000, pp. 671-683.



Kharamshing ritual, Eastern Bhutan © Jooris.

Rituals involving a stag effigy and called *Sha ru btsan mdos* in *Bon po* texts²⁹ are performed as well as the important and one week long ritual called the *Rgya nag spyi mdos* or *Srid pa'i mdos*. This ritual which takes place in the 1st Bhutanese month is organized by the 'Brug pa monks of the School of Astrology near Thimphu for the welfare of the King, the Royal Family and the country as well as the power to shield all sentient beings from unforeseeable misfortunes. Large effigies of the King, Queen and *Rje mkhan po* are erected as well as huge thread crosses (*mdos*). The ritual is said to have been brought from China by Manjusri but it contains preeminent features of pre-Buddhist/*Bon* rituals.

Kapstein's remarks concerning Tibet therefore apply to Bhutan: "Throughout the country, however, monks or lay priests associated with village temples had to be proficient in at least some of these practices in order to minister to the common troubles, fears, and complaints of the populace. Because this grassroots priesthood frequently adhered, at least nominally, to the Nyingmapa order, or sometimes to Bön, a veneer of conformity with the normative teachings of these traditions was often given to exorcistic rituals intended for popular use."³⁰

In some instances in Bhutan, if there is no individual to take the mantle of Bon po, a nyingmapa lay-priest will perform for the Bon chos ritual, which shows the overlapping of the rituals in the villages.

²⁹ Oral communication Samten G. Karmay 2012.

³⁰ Kapstein 2006: p. 211.



rgya nag spyi mdos © Jooris

In summary, in Bhutan, as in many other parts of the Himalayas and Tibet, a number of practices which are non-Buddhist/*Bon* and have been incorporated into Buddhism are no more recognised as separate.

However, what makes Bhutan outstanding is its whole corpus of rituals and beliefs clearly separated from Buddhism and called *Bon chos*, which seems to be rooted in the pre-Buddhist period beliefs, identified with specific territories and serving the present life of the people. Bhutan's corpus may be included in a large geo-religious zone, south of the Himalayas, including Sikkim and parts of Arunachal Pradesh and this would help towards a reassessment of the still elusive *Bon*.

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