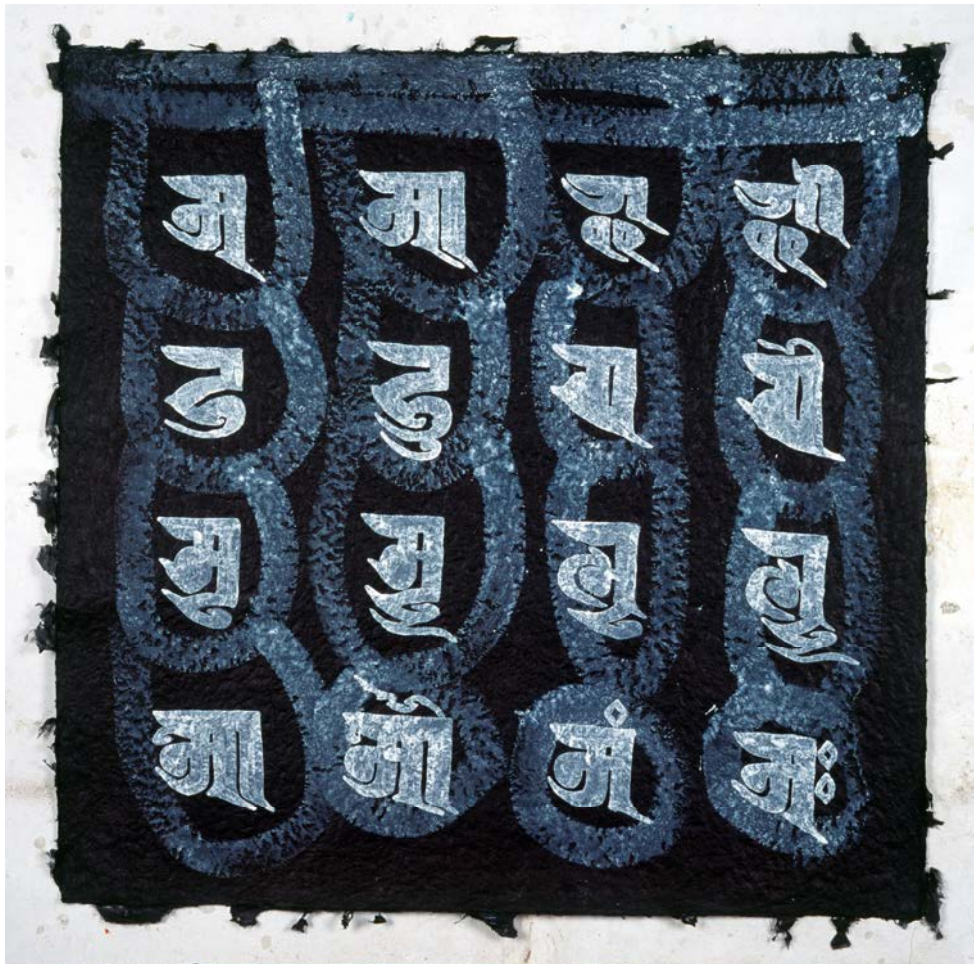


Franz-Karl Ehrhard & Petra Maurer (Hrsg.)

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# THE ICONOGRAPHY OF *GSHEN* PRIESTS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THE EXTENDED EASTERN HIMALAYAS, AND REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BON RELIGION\*

Toni Huber

For Christoph, a gift that crosses the Himalayas,  
And in memory of our adventurous crossing of the Southern Alps,  
When I first came to appreciate you as a fine person,  
Some decades ago...

## Introduction

A corpus of ancient myths tell of sagacious divine beings called Phywa or Srid-pa'i lha who dwell in a sky world of thirteen levels, and who descend to earth using magical cords of light and precious substances in order to benefit human beings. From the Tibetan imperial era up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, these myths circulated and became influential among various communities upon the high plateau. Scholars of early history and myth have devoted much attention to the surviving traces of this corpus because it is held to represent a unique, indigenous “Bon” theory of the origins of divine kingship in Tibet. Recent ethnographic research has now revealed that these same ancient sky gods and their stories also inspired a religious system among peoples in a specific region of the eastern Himalayas. This living tradition of ritual exchange with the Phywa or Srid-pa'i lha continues unabated until today in the valleys of eastern Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor (fig. 3). There it is simply called “Bon” by its practitioners. In fact, three distinct types of religious activity are all locally identified as Bon within this same region, so to avoid confusion I employ the specific term Srid-pa'i lha Bon to clearly distinguish the unique system of Phywa or Srid-pa'i lha worship from fundamentally different phenomena.<sup>1</sup> The present contribution constitutes an extract from my forthcoming monograph summarizing five years of research on the contemporary and historical dimensions of Srid-pa'i lha Bon.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon is virtually unreported to date, thus I must necessarily begin with a summary of its features, here highly abbreviated for reasons of space. I will then describe how my present topic—namely, mythological *gshen* priests, their iconography and its relationship to various cultures of living priests—is to be understood in the context of Srid-pa'i lha Bon.

## Srid-pa'i lha Bon

The narrative and ritual components of Phywa and Srid-pa'i lha worship in the eastern Himalayas are determined by the highly stratified, vertically-oriented cosmology reflected in the old origin myths of the divine king's descent from the sky. There are a range of deities involved who all dwell ‘atop the thirteenth level of the sky world’ (*gnam rim pa bcu gsum steng na*),<sup>3</sup> most

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<sup>1</sup> Other locally identified “Bon” phenomena in the region include diverse manifestations of the cults of territorial deities and spirits of the local environment, and one site historically associated with soteriologically oriented g.Yung-drung Bon.

<sup>2</sup> *Source of Life. Bon Religion in East Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor*. Forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> This exact phrase, so pervasive in Srid-pa'i lha Bon *rabs* and rites, first occurs in PT 1038 in Old Tibetan narratives of the origins of divine kingship. I treat *nam/gnam* and *gung/dgung* as fully synonymous since this is how they appear in local oral and written usage, and I translate ‘sky’ for both. I consciously use ‘sky world’ for the cosmographic term *gnam/dgung rim pa* describing the complex, multi-leveled (thirteen or

commonly 'O-de gung-rgyal, his emanation/son Gu-se lang-ling or Gur-zhi, Tshangs-pa, plus other less well-known gods often classified as Phywa.<sup>4</sup> They are regarded as procreator beings intimately related to life and its maintenance, including human descent. Many of these deities have a mythical status as the apical ancestors of historically older patrilineages (*rus*, *rigs*, *mi-tshan*, *pha-rgyud* in our sources, viz. the “clans” of the literature) established throughout the region. The deities must be invited down to earth from the zenith of the cosmos at the top level of the sky, then worshipped at the specific terrestrial sites of ritual (the altar, forest grove, etc.), and finally dispatched upward once more when worship is complete. The cosmic setting is somewhat ‘two-dimensional’ in that the idea of an underworld has little importance, nor is the system territorialized in any of the ways commonly encountered in other Tibetan and Himalayan religions. This is so precisely because the deities never dwell upon the earth, and in my experience it is a unique feature of Srid-pa'i lha Bon.

The chief ritual exponent within all Srid-pa'i lha Bon worship communities is a priest whose position and role is (ideally) hereditarily transmitted. Priests are usually designated *bon-po* or *lha-mi* or with a range of cognate local equivalents (*bon*, *lha-bon* ‘hami’ [= *lha-mi*], ‘chami’ [= *phywa-mi*], ‘plami’ [= *bla-mi*], etc.), and must observe certain dietary and behavioural taboos. These community priests are also ancestral custodians of an interrelated set of ritual antecedent narratives termed *rabs*,<sup>5</sup> mostly preserved in manuscript form. Ritual practice consists of the accurate and systematic chanting of the *rabs* together with the actions of rites often specified in the *rabs*, all aimed at bringing the deities down from the sky into a highly purified environment, hosting them, gaining powers from them, and dispatching them upwards once more. This process can often involve an elaborate verbal ritual journey undertaken by the priest up to the thirteenth level of the sky and back, in order to invite and escort the deities. The main aspirations of participants/sponsors during ritual is to gain various life powers directly from the sky deities while they are temporarily on earth. These powers all relate to the fecundity and inherent productive potential of humans, livestock and crops. Without a competent priest who can chant an intact oral or written set of *rabs* at a site, Srid-pa'i lha Bon does not exist. In this respect, it is best understood as a form of ‘priestly’ Bon religion, since neither unqualified lay persons nor institutionalized specialists such as monks and lamas can perform the required ritual labour.

To round off this summary, a final point of significance is that the vast majority of all known worship communities of Srid-pa'i lha Bon are speakers of closely related and geographically contiguous East Bodish languages/dialects (i.e., Dakpa and the Dzala/Khomakha dialect complex, Kurtöp, Bumthap, and Kheng), or their lineal descendants. Since the religious system has been primarily transmitted via patrilineal descent groups, this provides interesting indications about its origins and historical distribution. In my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life*, I will advance the hypothesis that some form of Srid-pa'i lha Bon was very likely the ancestral religion of the Shar Dung populations in southern lHo-brag, prior to their mid-14<sup>th</sup> century southward dispersal into the same Himalayan valley systems where the religion exists today<sup>6</sup>

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more) sky abodes of the deities. In doing so, I adopt an expression already employed in the regional anthropology of south-eastern Tibeto-Burman highlanders with parallel cosmologies (e.g., Ao and Lhota Naga, Akha and Kachin), but also avoid using ‘heaven’ due to its strongly Judeo-Christian connotations in English—particularly as the realm of an omnipotent creator deity and the eschatological scenario—since Srid-pa'i lha Bon is manifestly non-soteriological. This problem is obvious in other European languages, due to the ambivalence of singular terms like German ‘Himmel’ or French ‘ciel.’ For instance, concerning the very concept we are dealing with here, one of R.A. Stein’s translators rendered *ciel* exclusively as “sky” (in *Tibetan Civilisation*, 1972) while the other used the capitalized “Heaven” (in *The World in Miniature*, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Although gods such as 'O-de gung-rgyal or Tshangs-pa named here may appear familiar from other contexts, their character within Srid-pa'i lha Bon entirely follows that of the sky-dwelling Phywa progenitor deities featuring in early myths. For example, they have *no* associations with mountains, as Pommaret 1994 mistakenly claimed on the basis of inadequate research.

<sup>5</sup> The meaningful ‘antecedent’ gloss for *rabs* narratives was introduced by Dotson 2008.

<sup>6</sup> On the Shar Dung dispersal and its historical attestation, see Ardussi 2004.

Readers with wide-ranging knowledge of the ethnography of highland Tibeto-Burman-speaking populations living across the extended eastern Himalayas<sup>7</sup> (from Nepal to Yunnan) will immediately see parallels here between aspects of Srid-pa'i lha Bon and other local ritual and narrative systems, namely those featuring ancestral sky beings, vertically oriented cosmologies/rites, downward flows of life powers and fertility, and so on.<sup>8</sup> This east-west axis is certainly one along which we must comparatively 'read' Srid-pa'i lha Bon to appreciate its relationship to regional cultural patterns, those with which it undoubtedly shares some common and ancient past. Several scholars have already begun exploring such comparisons between one end of this long Himalayan axis and the other.<sup>9</sup> Yet, certain aspects of Srid-pa'i lha Bon that superficially invoke such comparative recognition are also fundamentally different in type when observed more closely. One example is that of the verbal ritual journeys undertaken by the *bon-po*; as self-reported and carefully observed, these are never performed in what have been described elsewhere in Himalayan ethnographies as the local priest/shaman's state of 'trance', 'ecstasy' or 'altered consciousness', nor is any explicit reference made to the notion of 'soul travel'. A verbal ritual journey is indeed undertaken, but we are dealing with states more akin to conscious visualization supported by a chanted liturgy as one might find in formal Tibetan Buddhist or g.Yung-drung Bon ritual and meditative praxis. This and other differences alert us to the fact that Srid-pa'i lha Bon must also be comparatively 'read' along a north-south axis, and as having strong Tibetan Plateau roots as well. In fact, in my research data the degree of explicit connections with "Bon"-identified<sup>10</sup> Tibetan Plateau materials and phenomena is very high. While scattered traces of, and fleeting references to, forms of local 'priestly Bon' performed for this worldly benefits (as opposed to organized, soteriological g.Yung-drung Bon) have been found in some zones of the extended eastern Himalayas, it is clear from its content that Srid-pa'i lha Bon has carefully preserved a great deal more earlier Tibetan "Bon"-identified material than any other known local worship systems in the wider region. Another example of preservation of such "Bon"-identified material along the Tibetan Plateau periphery can be found in the indigenous *dtô-mbà* (or *dongba*) religion of the Naxi,<sup>11</sup> which nevertheless only comes in a very distant second place in this respect compared with Srid-pa'i lha Bon.

One of many aspects of this demonstrably very old "Bon"-identified cultural strata still current in Srid-pa'i lha Bon worship is the central significance given to the *gshen* priest. Here *gshen* are mythological figures who populate local *rabs* narratives, in which they appear not only as the initiators of most ritual practices, but also as models or kinds of ritual ancestors with whom the contemporary priest is identified in a variety of way, most notably in the rhetorics of the *rabs* themselves. In the sections to follow, I will outline the place of *gshen* within the overall local corpus of *rabs*, highlight the two most important *gshen* figures, and draw a range of comparisons which consider their iconographies within a regional ethnographic context. My final 'Reflections' then briefly articulate what we know of the characteristics of Srid-pa'i lha Bon as reflected in the study of *gshen* priests with fundamental questions about the development of those religious systems we know of as "Bon".

<sup>7</sup> The concept of 'extended eastern Himalayas' was coined by Stuart Blackburn and developed together with myself; see most recently the Introduction to Huber and Blackburn 2012. We intend it as a meaningful heuristic for explorative comparison rather than referring to any highly articulate or bounded 'culture area'.

<sup>8</sup> Here one can profitably compare the *meüsòq-wà* rites of the *nàm-sà* shaman among the Drung in Yunnan recorded by Gros 2012: 372-386 and the worship of Sarangdew by the 'tribal priest' and his special *bhägimi* assistant among the Mewahang Rai of east Nepal in Gaenszle 2007: 268-305.

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see Oppitz 1998: 338-341, Oppitz 2013 and de Sales 1994.

<sup>10</sup> I use this expression throughout my work to confront the well-known and increasingly intractable problem of very diverse phenomena and materials being labelled Bon or *bon* across time and space. The expression "Bon"-identified draws attention to the acts and contexts of identification of anything being "Bon", since these deserve critical focus together with the content of what is being so-labelled.

<sup>11</sup> Published ideas about the relationship between "Bon"-identified materials and Naxi *dtô-mbà* culture remain superficial and inadequate to date, and require systematic reappraisal.

### Initiator Figures in *Rabs*

Throughout the distribution region of Srid-pa'i lha Bon worship (fig. 3), there are several figures who invariably feature as central or decisive characters in *rabs* narratives. In this context, they are portrayed as the mythical initiators of the particular rite or ritual complex represented in the *rabs*. Such figures are highly significant because Srid-pa'i lha Bon sources contain no historical claims as such. *Rabs* narratives work primarily with a mythical perspective on time, compared with the familiar chronological perspective of history. Thus, identifying such figures conventionally as 'founders' makes little sense with neither a specified point of reference for that which they are said to have been instrumental in starting, nor any further temporal framing throughout chronological time. Since we are dealing with a form of mythical time, I prefer to identify these key figures as 'initiators'. The myths of these initiators all share the same general plot: something is wrong in the human world; a solution must be found; a knowledgeable expert or competent agent is engaged; they either instruct how to proceed with a ritual solution, often using divination as their source of knowledge, and/or actually perform the rites which effect the desired result. This plot, which Henk Blezer calls the "crisis and crisis management" paradigm, is of course very familiar from many Old Tibetan narratives in which various *gshen* and *bon* priests appear in just such a role.<sup>12</sup>

In Srid-pa'i lha bon, we find three major initiator figures presented in the *rabs*:

1. A clever bat named sGam-chen Pha-wang who is a 'trickster'-type figure, and who acts as the first messenger between humans on earth and the Srid-pa'i lha deities in the sky world in order to invite the latter to descend. He features in *rabs* which are generally designated as *Lha zhu rabs* (*Narrative of Inviting the Deity [to Descend]*) and *Me rabs* (*Narrative of [the Origins of] Fire*);
2. A *gshen* priest named A'o ("elder brother") Ya-ngal Gyim-kong and his two younger brothers identified respectively as the Tshan-bon and the Thab-bon but known under a variety of related individual names in the *rabs*.<sup>13</sup> Together, these fraternal *gshen* are the first to eliminate obstructions and cleanse impurities on the path which the Srid-pa'i lha deities must transit between the sky and the site of worship in the human environment on the earth. They feature in a complex of *Sel rabs* (*Narrative of Elimination Rites*) which together introduce the origins of and define a related sequence of *sel* "elimination"<sup>14</sup> rites;
3. *Pha* (and/or) *sTon-pa gShen-rab mi-bo* acting as a skilled *gshen* priest and advisor, who sets in motion the initial performances of major systems of worship in Srid-pa'i lha Bon, as well as specific rites at particular sites. He features in a wide variety of different *rabs*, including those cited in 1 and 2 above.

It must be recognized that all of these 'initiator' figures in Srid-pa'i lha Bon *rabs* are associated either directly or indirectly with early Tibetan myths. This is indeed the backdrop against which we can best understand their symbolic significance, not to mention their possible derivation sometime during the distant past. The features of *gShen-rab mi-bo* in early myths are already so well known we need not rehearse them again here. However, the backgrounds of the other figures remain virtually unknown. The bat named sGam-chen Pha-wang is an extremely complex character, encompassing both the archaic mythical 'trickster' and 'messenger/go-between' figures found in so many different traditions of ancient and contemporary mythology. While I

<sup>12</sup> See Blezer 2008: 423 and the types of sources he refers to therein.

<sup>13</sup> Various names: Tshan-bon Thod-dkar-lcog, Tshan-bon Thor-cog or mTshan-bon mTho-spyod and Thab-bon Me-bran or mGal-bon Kha-nag in the *rabs*. At one level, these changing names are all part of a play of endless substitutions and the generation of variations characteristic of the nature of *rabs* as story types serving a multitude of local instances; Stein 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars of Bon and their translators gloss *sel* with "exorcism" (e.g. Snellgrove 1967, Namkhai Norbu 1995), which in English usage strongly invokes the idea of "spirits" that need to be expelled. This does not fit the ethnographic context of Srid-pa'i lha Bon, where various forms of defilement generated by inappropriate action are the primary object of *sel*. This is also made clear in the *gZi brjid* where *sel* and its objects are defined; see Snellgrove 1967: 46-49.



devote a chapter to this bat figure in my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life*, a few background details must be repeated here since they invoke a particular regional context within which to understand the *gshen* we will focus upon.

The oldest recorded narrative of the bat as a clever messenger between sky gods and beings on earth has been preserved in the second volume of the 14<sup>th</sup> century *gZi brjid* compendium of g.Yung-drung Bon. It is inserted within a lengthy tale about “thirteen messenger birds of Bon” (*bya bon phrin pa bcu gsum*), among whom the bat is classified as a type of “bird”.<sup>15</sup> A version is also found in the unique “Bon”-identified manuscript entitled *Mi’u rigs bzhi lha sel* (*Elimination Rites for Gods of the Four Clans of the Little Man*), which, more than any other old manuscripts of its type that have so far become available, is most closely related to the ritual system found in Srid-pa’i lha bon. Before one is tempted to seek any single origin for this bat figure in g.Yung-drung Bon textual sources such as the *gZi brjid*, it must be understood that the same clever messenger bat narrative is found distributed in a variety of cognate forms as both a ritual antecedent narrative and a folk tale throughout the entire extended eastern Himalayas from Nepal to Yunnan (fig. 1), although notably *not* upon the Tibetan Plateau. What this distribution illustrates to me, at least, is that we are dealing here with a very old regional cultural pattern specific to Tibeto-Burman-speaking Himalayan highland societies, and not something that should be labelled as “Bon” simply because of the identity of any written texts in which its oldest, currently known version happens to have been set down.

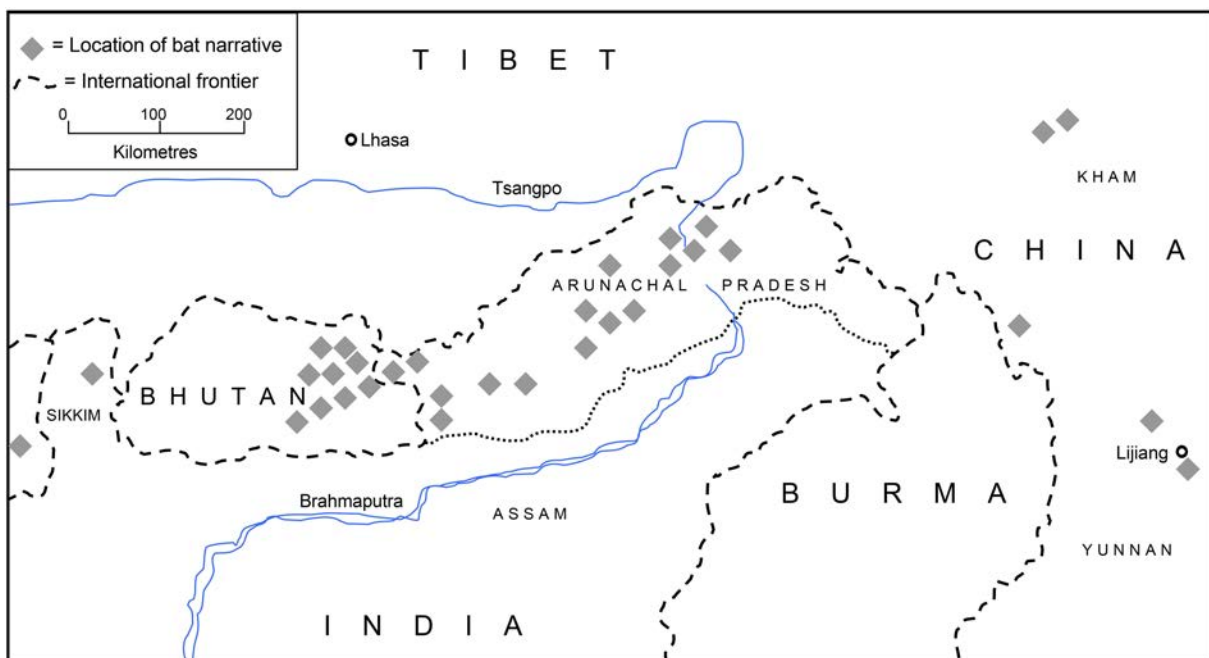


Figure 1. Locations for bat narratives along the extended eastern Himalayas.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *gZi brjid*, 2: 81-120; the text is replete with spelling errors.

<sup>16</sup> The sources in figure 1 for narrative locations beyond the distribution range of my own data on Srid-pa’i lha Bon are, from west to east, as follows (the main type of the narrative indicated by M = messenger and T = trickster): a Dumi Rai “T” version narrated by Chatur Bhakta Rai from Baksila in Khotang District (Nepal) was collected and translated on my behalf by Marion Wettstein during 2012; de Beauvoir Stocks 1925: 371-372 (Lepcha, Sikkim: T); Elwin 1958: 231-232 (Sherdukpen, Kameng: T), 348-349 (Sherdukpen, Kameng: T); a Bangni/Nyishi “T” version from Donigaon near Seppa (Arunachal Pradesh) was collected and translated on my behalf by Rebecca Gnüchtel and Rungni Beyong during 2012; Bora 1995: 5-7 (Nyishi, Lower Subansiri: M); Chutia 2003: 198 (Hill Miri, Subansiri: T); Elwin 1958: 55-57 (Tagin, Subansiri: M & T), 80-81 (Tagin, Subansiri: M), 254-255 (Tagin, Subansiri: T), 390-392 (Tagin, Subansiri: T); Elwin 1958: 162-163 (Galo, Siang: T), 196-197 (Pangi, Siang: M); Dunbar 1915: 64 & 65 (Minyong, Siang: M); a Minyong “M” & “T” version narrated by Shri Tapang Tamut, Jomo, Along District of West Siang (Arunachal Pradesh) was collected and translated on my behalf by Kaling Tamut



While the three *gshen* brothers headed by the elder Ya-ngal will be treated below, they and the bat named sGam-chen Pha-wang all function as mythical analogues of a set of three maternal cousins featuring in different versions of the origin myth of the first king, gNya'-khri btsan-po. These parallels are illustrated in figure 2. sGam-chen Pha-wang actually substitutes for the role of the one who successfully invites gNya'-khri btsan-po down to earth. In several earlier myths, this role is played by gNya'-khri btsan-po's maternal cousin rKar-ma yol-lde, the rTsib-kyi lha ('God of Ribs'), and aspects of his narrative are identical in the *rabs* featuring sGam-chen Pha-wang. The *gshen* Ya-ngal features directly in early myths as one of three *gshen* priests who serve and protect gNya'-khri-btsan-po specifically during his descent to earth from the sky world, the other two being mTshe-mi [*gshen gyi dmu-rgyal-tsha*] and gCo'u [*gshen gyi phyag-mkhar*], or more simply mTshe-mi and gCo-mi in the various redactions. These latter two appear as brothers who are also maternal cousins of gNya'-khri-btsan-po in some versions of the latter's origin myth. In the *rabs* of Srid-pa'i lha bon, Ya-ngal's role remains identical to that given to him in the origin myth of the first king, albeit greatly elaborated in our sources. Ya-ngal and his two younger *gshen* brothers function as the local analogues of ancient mythical trios of priests, namely mTshe-mi, gCo-mi and rKar-ma yol-lde or Ya-ngal, mTshe-mi and gCo-mi, depending upon which redactions one consults.

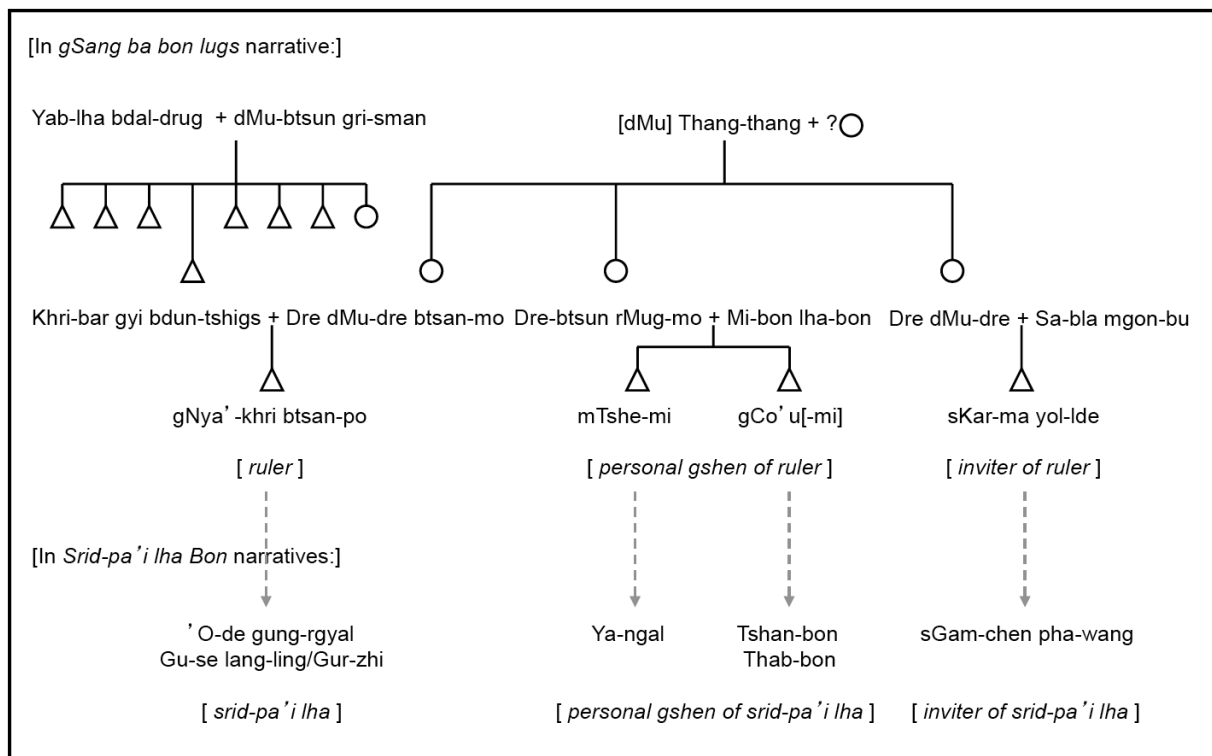


Figure 2. Genealogy of gNya'-khri btsan-po and his maternal cousins according to the *gSang ba bon lugs*<sup>17</sup> narrative and their mythical parallels in *Srid-pa'i lha Bon*.

and Rebecca Gnüchtel during 2013; Bhattacharya 1965:51 (Shimong, Siang: T); Stéphane Gros, *pers. comm.*, 26 July 2012, cf. Gros 2012: 380 (Drung = Dung/Rawang/Nung: T); Shelton 1925: 17-20 (Khampa, Batang: T); Ringu Tulku 1998: 109-112 (Khampa: T); Rock 1936 & Rock 1952, 2: 658 (Naxi, Lijiang: M & T); McKhann 2012: 278 (Naxi, Lijiang: M); Curiously, in an extensive review of Bhutanese folktales, neither the bat nor the trickster-type figure are mentioned among the animals and themes; Dorji Penjore 2011: 400-404.

<sup>17</sup> Spellings in figure 2 follow the readings in Karmay's edition; see Karmay and Nagano 2003: 151-157, cf. *Mkhas pa lDe'u*: 227-238.

### Ya-ngal and his gShen Brothers

Above, we briefly introduced the divine *gshen* Ya-ngal known from early myths. He is one of three priests from the sky world who serve and protect the first king gNya'-khri btsan-po during his descent to earth. Ya-ngal shares this task with mTshe-mi and gCo-mi, two other priests referred to as either *bon-po* or *gshen* in the early sources.<sup>18</sup> While Ya-ngal does not accompany these two in the Old Tibetan outline of the myth in PT 1038, he appears grouped with them already in the ca. 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century *dBa' bzhed*.<sup>19</sup> The three appear in a 13<sup>th</sup> century redaction of the gNya'-khri btsan-po origin myth, where Ya-ngal's specific role in this context is clearly outlined:

The king of heaven will descend to earth,  
As the land of men is impure and polluted,  
You, Ya-ngal, go before him...  
You, Ya-ngal, perform the *sel* and *bsang* in front (to purify his path).<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, four short myths in the series of *rNel dri rabs* recorded in the possibly 11<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts from dGa'-thang 'Bum-pa-che also feature Ya-ngal as a priest. They provide another old confirmation of his profile. In this context, he is one of various priests who are invited mostly to deal with crises precipitated by accidental deaths and the post-natal illness and death of women. Each narrative is set in a different, ancient Tibetan principality, and Ya-ngal's ritual activity is described as follows in the version set in the land of sKyid:

Elder brother Ya-ngal was commissioned.  
For three days he purified [with fumigation] (*bsang*).  
For three nights he chanted (*dgyer*).  
For three mornings he used ablutions (*bshal*).  
He purified the *lha* upwards.  
He suppressed the *dri* downwards.  
He opened the way for the coming of the *lha*.  
He shone a bright light for the lord.<sup>21</sup>

In another of these stories set in the land of lHo-ga Lang-drug, where Ya-ngal appears as one of a number of priests, some of the rites performed involve the “nine father trees of the sunny slopes,

<sup>18</sup> The term *sku-gshen* used in relation to them, and referring to their service as priests caring for the ritual welfare of the person of the ruler, appears to occur only in later sources; see the references in Pasang Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 95, n.371-372, 97 n.386.

<sup>19</sup> See “mTshe, Cog, Ya-ngal” in Pasang Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 95, n.372, and f.26, l.5-6 of the facsimile, appearing together in a group of 'Phan-yul priests attending a royal funeral in the *Zad gtad* final ‘addendum’ to the document. Compare the later sources, in which Ya-ngal is absent: the Cog-la Bon and Tshe-mi Bon are among priests who attend the descent of the first divine king in the redaction of the myth in the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, 1: 159-160; early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bon histories use two of these priest names/clan titles (e.g., [l]Cog-la g.Yu-skyid and mTshe-mi [or 'Tshe-mi] Shag-'bar from Nyang-stod) in relation to the early scripture revealer gShen Klu-dga' (active 11<sup>th</sup> century); Karmay 1972: 131/294, Martin 2001: 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Karmay 1998: 385-386 n.17, quoting the Oslo *bsGrags byang* ms. On the dating of the *bsGrags byang* texts, see Blondeau 1990.

<sup>21</sup> It is unclear here whether the *dri* represent spirits or a type of pollution (cf. Dotson 2008: 62 n.64), but probably both, see Pa-tshab Pa-sangs dbang-'dus and Glang-ru Nor-bu tshe-ring 2007: 49, 159 f.29, l.7-9, and for other occurrences in the same text, see: p.46, 154 f.23, l.10 for Ya-ngal Gyim-kong in the lHo-ga Lang-drug story; p.51, 163 f.33, l.8 for *pha* Ya-ngal Gyim-kyong in the dBye-mo story; p.52, 166 f.36, l.7 *pha* Ya-ngal Gyim-kyong in the Glan story. It may be significant that, of the various principality or country names given for these stories, those featuring Ya-ngal may all be located in areas due north (lHo-ga lang-drug immediately) of the upper boundaries of our research area (see Hazod 2009, esp. map 3 and its Notes; Glan is not yet identified), perhaps defining a zone of circulation for Ya-ngal's appearance in narratives?

and the nine mother trees of the shady slopes.”<sup>22</sup> Ya-ngal is mentioned in phrases with identical wording to this in all the *Sel rabs* of Srid-pa’i lha bon. Thus, Ya-ngal’s specialty is the so-called *sel* “elimination” rite. According to g.Yung-drung Bon sources, there are many variations of *sel* and its application. In contrast, our data from the eastern Himalayas preserves only a very specific sequence of *sel* rites with a single purpose. There, the performance of *sel* involves a complex of different purificatory practices used in a sequence, including fumigation with fragrant smoke (*bsang* or *dud sel*), lustration with scented waters (*tshan*), ablution with pure waters (*khrus* or *bshal*), and the elimination of negative hindrances from the path (*lam sel*). Accordingly, the *sel* related to Ya-ngal in our local *rabs* is only that performed in advance of the deity descending from the sky world, the same specificity as in the early myths of the origins of the divine king. This defines exactly the scope of the role Ya-ngal takes as one of the central initiator figures in Srid-pa’i lha bon. After the *Lha zhu* rite has been initiated by the bat sGam-chen Pha-wang, in order to first invite the Phywa or Srid-pa’i lha to descend, Ya-ngal enters the sequence when he is called upon to solve the problem of obstacles and pollution for the descending deities, by creating a clear and secure pathway down to the site of worship.

Briefly for comparison, we can note the fate bestowed upon Ya-ngal by the redactors of orthodox g.Yung-drung Bon canonical texts when drawing upon earlier materials. This important *gshen* gets recycled from his illustrious role as personal priest to the divine king, and is demoted from the sky down to earth and even below ground. The *gZer mig* and some canonical texts contain lists of thirty-three *bon* ritual experts who are able to control thirty-three malevolent *g.yen* spirits dwelling within a three-tiered cosmos (*g.yen-khams*). The earth level of this cosmos has eleven spheres, endowed with the corresponding number of *bon* and matching *sa-g.yen* whom they subdue. The *sri-bon* Ya-ngal Gyim-kong holds sway in the sixth sphere called *sri-khams*, now in charge of the *sri* demons of the underworld.<sup>23</sup>

### Title and Name

The accounts of Ya-ngal in the *rNel dri rabs* from dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che offer important clues for considering the possible origins of the *rabs* material circulating in present-day Srid-pa’i lha bon. For one thing, the site of discovery of these early manuscripts is only some 60 km up a continuous, major river valley system and premodern route for socio-cultural and economic intercourse, due north of the location where our local *Sel rabs* are still in use today.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the high concentration of sites where the *Sel rabs* are found in Srid-pa’i lha Bon manuscripts are mainly those in closest proximity to dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che (fig. 3), perhaps indicating the earlier origins and spread of this particular *rabs* cycle. Furthermore, the full name attributed to Ya-ngal, as well as other details, are the same in both sets of documents and, to the best of my present knowledge, are also unique to both.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, *Shawa 1: [bdag >] gdags shing pha dgu dang // srib shing ma dgu dang //*, cf. Pa-tshab Pa-sangs dbang-’dus and Glang-ru Nor-bu tshe-ring 2007: 46, 159 f.23, 1.10-11, and the comments on this phrase by Blezer 2008: 430 n.19.

<sup>23</sup> See *gZer myig* ed. Francke 1924: 281 (*sri bon yang > ya ngal*), 293 (*srin bon ya [ngal]*), Francke 1926: 324 (*srin bon ya nga > ngal*), cf. *gZer mig*: 36 (*sri bon ye > ya ngal*), 48 (*sri bon ya ngal gyim gong*), 61 (*sri bon ya ngal*). See also Karmay 2007: 151-153, 163 n. i, who cites a g.Yung-drung Bon canonical source. The *gZi brjid* section explaining the *sel*, lists the *sri gto* rite as one of its techniques. Like so many elements in the names of deities and persons occurring in the older manuscripts, Gyim is also found recycled into a place name in the g.Yung-drung Bon *gZer myig*, as the Gyim-shang nag-po river in ’Ol-mo lung-ring; Francke 1930: 301, Francke 1949-1950: 164.

<sup>24</sup> At present, beyond the few details and initial speculations offered by those who published the manuscripts and their initial evaluations (Pa-tshab Pa-sangs dbang-’dus and Glang-ru Nor-bu tshe-ring 2007, Samten Karmay 2009), little can be said about the site of dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che and the manuscripts themselves. According to Bhutanese perspectives on regional history, the gTam-shul area surrounding the site, together with adjacent areas of lHo-brag, have long served as an early source of Tibetan rNying-ma-pa Buddhist traditions found throughout the Srid-pa’i lha Bon distribution zone to the south.

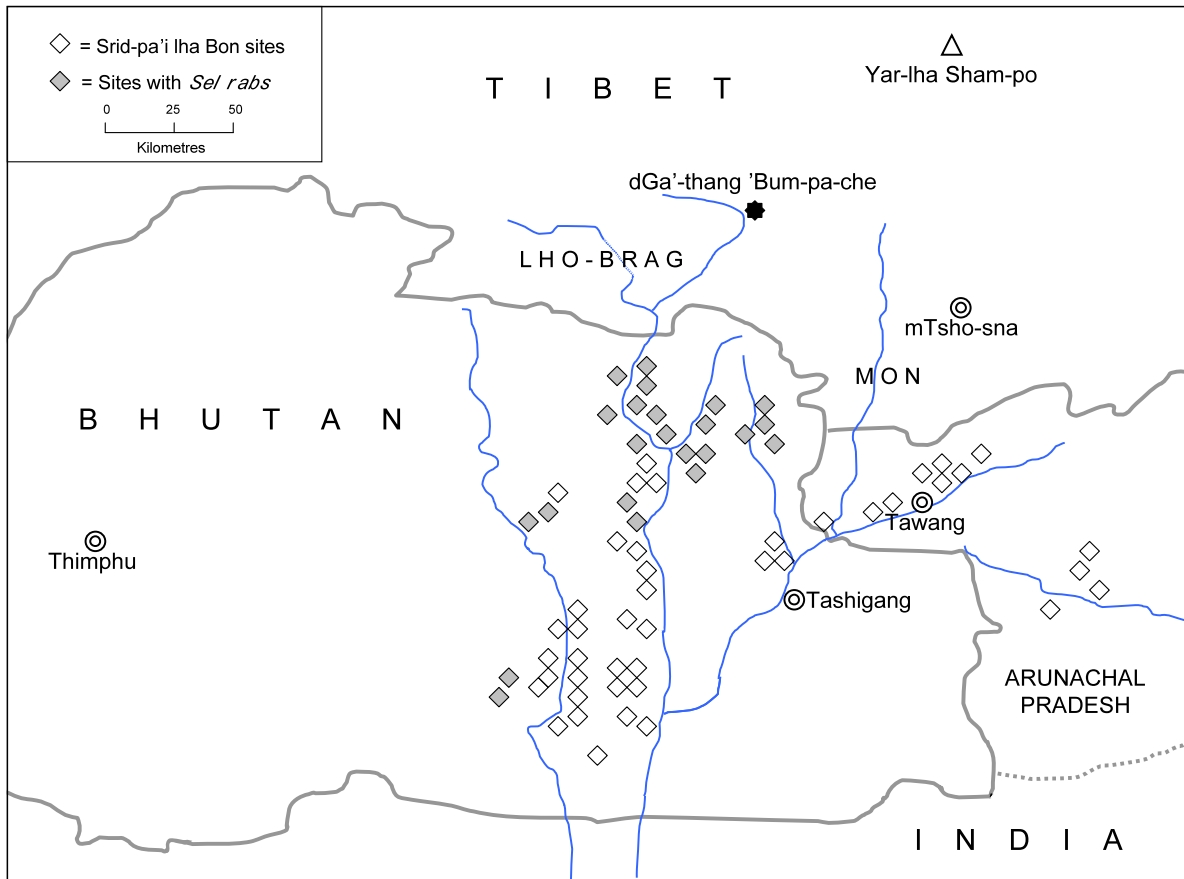


Figure 3. Srid-pa'i lha Bon sites and those with the *Sel rabs*.

While in some *rabs* passages Ya-ngal has the title *pha* or “father”, which is rather common in many other references to *gshen*, the more interesting title in both sets of sources, which appears unique to them, is *A-bo/A'o* Ya-ngal. *A-bo* or *A'o* means “elder brother” and as a word with the same meaning is pronounced “*awu*” or “*au/ao*” in some Tibetan and Tibetan-influenced dialects within our research area. Since the worship communities of Srid-pa'i lha Bon are speakers of East Bodish languages, this particular kinship marker indicates rather a Tibetan Plateau Bodic origin transmitted in written form.<sup>25</sup> In the Srid-pa'i lha Bon *rabs*, Ya-ngal is indeed presented as the “elder brother” (*phu-bo*, *pho-bo*) of three, and this trio of male priestly siblings appearing in our local manuscripts (see below) form a clear mythical analogue for the earlier set of priests, mTshe-mi, gCo-mi and Ya-ngal, who work in concert to serve and protect the king during his descent from the sky world in the origin myths of gNya'-khri-btsan-po.

While Ya-ngal appears to function only as a personal name—as opposed to a priestly title or category term—in all the sources we are using, elsewhere it occurs as a clan or lineage name specific to a few remote g.Yung-drung Bon communities. It seems that holders of this name (later often written Yang) originally came from gTsang, and eventually migrated westwards to Glo (Mustang) and then Dol-po in present-day northern Nepal.<sup>26</sup> Yet this appears to be a separate

<sup>25</sup> Tibetan *A-bo* is also a respectful term of address for older male relatives. In Brokpa of far east Bhutan and adjacent Tawang and West Kameng, and in Dirang Tshangla which is influenced by Brokpa due to migration, “*au*” means “elder brother”. East Bodish Ego-referenced forms for “elder brother” range from *aach* (Dakpa and Dzala) to *'acilachi* (Kurtöp/Khomakha) to *acholajo* (Bumthap/Kheng).

<sup>26</sup> The seventh holder of the Ni-gu-ma *Chos drug* lineage, Sangs-rgyas ston-pa (a 13<sup>th</sup> century contemporary of Yang-dgon-pa), came from the family of Bon-po Ya-ngal dkar-po at Sil-ma[-la-kha] in gTsang; Roerich 1979: 743. Charles Ramble, writing in Karmay and Nagano 2003: 672, mentions another earlier historical Ya-gnal clan descendent, Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan (b. 1077), from sTag-rtse byi-ri in gTsang-stod, but he is fully described as a lama of g.Yung-drung Bon rather than a “Bon”-identified

development, albeit drawing upon the same older mythological background of the name and priestly identity, including the role of being a mTshe-mi priest for the descent of the first king from the sky. There is no evidence that Ya-ngal is intended to signify a clan or lineage name in any of the myths we are studying here, and among the scores of old and recent clan names we know of from the research area, Ya-ngal or anything close to it never occurs. The Ya-ngal clan in the west must be regarded as a separate development. The question of whether all such old names first occur as priest names/titles or clan names remains an open one, and no unequivocal example of the direction of derivation is available in any extant Tibetan language sources to my knowledge. In the present context, one interesting theme in the origin myth of the Ya-ngal as a human clan is the role attributed to the flight of a “divine bird” (*lha bya*),<sup>27</sup> which is a completely ubiquitous image occurring in Srid-pa’i lha Bon narratives, rites and priestly culture (see below).

The second unique reference common to both Srid-pa’i lha Bon *rabs* and the *rNel dri rabs* from dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che, occurs in the full form of the name Ya-ngal Gyim-kong (also written Gyim-khong, Gyim-kyong, Gyim-dgon, etc.). In contrast to the later clan name Ya-ngal, we find that Gyim and Gyim-po do indicate an ancient clan or lineage name occurring in a range of Old Tibetan sources.<sup>28</sup> In one Old Tibetan narrative, featuring a protagonist named Gyim-po Nyag-cig, we again encounter the theme of bird flight, as occurs in the Ya-ngal clan legend.<sup>29</sup> The versions of the *Sel rabs* used in Srid-pa’i lha Bon provide an account of the Gyim origins of *A-bo/A’o* Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, together with an etymology of each element in his title and name. The full myth of Ya-ngal embedded in our local *Sel rabs* has a lengthy preamble which I briefly summarize here. Human beings appear in the world as the Four Clans of the Little Man who dwell inside the stronghold called sMra-mkhar ldem-pa, in the land of sMra-yul Thag-brgyad. Some of them act in a barbaric manner and pollute the world, and in so doing drive their patrilineage deities and protective gods away up into the sky. Chaos and disease then reign upon the earth, and due to this the gods cannot descend from the sky to re-establish a balance. Messengers are sent up to the sky for help, at which point Ya-ngal and his younger brothers, who in this version are named Tshan-bon Thor-cog and mGal-bon Kha-nag, are invited to descend. At this point in the *Sel rabs*, Ya-ngal himself is introduced as the crisis resolving *gshen* priest in the following manner:

There was no man who was skilled in performing the *gto* rites.  
 For the benefit of sentient being,  
 Two servants, those of the *lha* and the *gsas*, were dispatched [to the sky].  
 In the country [14a] up above the sky,  
 High atop the sky,  
 They came into the presence of the earth diviner, lDing-nga lding-cung,

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lineage priest. On the Ya-ngal or Yang-ston clan settled in Dol-po and Mustang, see Snellgrove 1967: 4, n.4, Ramble 2000: 291-292, 309, Charles Ramble and Marieta Kind writing in Karmay and Nagano 2003: 672-675, 695, 697, Kind 2012: 180-194, and Pasang Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 95, n.372, 107, all of whom cite the *rGyal gshen ya ngal gdung rabs*, the lineage section of which is summarized in Karmay and Nagano 2003: 743-751. I thank Guntram Hazod for supplying me with a copy of the *gdung rabs* manuscript for reference.

<sup>27</sup> Noted by Pasang Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 95, n.372.

<sup>28</sup> See especially the Gyim name references and discussion in Richardson 1998 [1969]: 28-31 where he considers possible connections with eastern Tibet, also Richardson 1985: 62-63, and see also PT 1286, PT 1287 and PT 1288 accessed at *OTDO*. This Gyim is not to be confused with certain Tibetan renderings of the Jin and Kim elements in Chinese names found in some older documents. The Gyim element also occurs in a number of names recorded in g.Yung-drung Bon sources, see gCo Gyim-bu lan-tsha and Gyim-sham-bza’ in Karmay 1972: 42, 59, 62, 63, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas 1957: 16-19, 28-32, the index entries at p.194 for IOL Tib J 731 and IOL Tib J 732, accessed at *OTDO*; cf. also Aris 1979: 135-137.

And the [sky] diviner sGong-nga sgong-cung.<sup>30</sup>  
 Having studied the divination (*mo*) and prognosis (*phy*) for them,  
 The goddess sGong-nga sgong-cung said,  
 “Here [among the gods] there is no error at all,  
 The error is with the Four Clans of the Little Man themselves.  
 Through the actions of their mouths, they engage in anger and slander.  
 Through the actions of their hands, they commit fratricide and malpractice.  
 Through the actions of their bodies, they produce defilements and filth.  
 Here there is nothing we can do to help.  
 Invite A’o Ya-ngal,  
 And tell him, ‘Establish a great elimination (*sel chen*) [rite]!’  
 Invite Tshan-bon Thor-cog,  
 And tell him, ‘Use lustrations (*tshan*) and ablutions with water (*khrus chu*)!’  
 [14b] Invite mGal-bon Kha-nag,  
 And tell him, ‘Cast the whole lot<sup>31</sup> down onto the earth!’  
 The two servants, those of the *lha* and the *gsas*,  
 Went to search for A’o Ya-ngal.  
 In the land of Gyim-yul Gyim-stod,  
 There was the father sTon-pa gShen-rab, and  
 The mother Gyim-bza’ ’o-lo, both.  
 The pair procreated, and so produced  
 A’o Ya-ngal, who declared,  
 “I am the elder brother A’o Ya-ngal.  
 After me is Tshan-bon thor-cog.  
 The youngest of us is mGal-bon Kha-nag.  
 First, there is the part of the man called **A**.  
 As for **A**, it is the body of non-arising Bon.  
 Then, there is the part of the man called **O**.  
 All the portals of Bon are chanted by way of **O**.  
 Then, [15a] there is the part of the man called **Ya**.  
 That **Ya** rides upon the horse of the wind.  
 Then, there is the part of the man called **Gyim**.  
 The maternal uncle (*zhang-po*) is the nephew (*tsha-bo*) of **Gyim**.  
 Then, there is the part of the man called **Kong**.  
 Since the *gto* rites have not been taught [to men], they will come to be known from **Kong**.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> On these female names, a *rabs* in *Lhau* 2: 133 lists Ong-ma ong-cung as the sky diviner (*nam ku mo ma*), Ding-nga ding-cung as the earth diviner (*sa ku mo ma*), and Kha-ce rung-rung as the diviner of the intermediate space (*bar ku mo ma*), which parallel to some degree the Old Tibetan names gNam Mug-mug, Sa Ding-ding and So Tham-tham, the three divine consorts of the three sky-returning *btsan-po* succeeding gNya’-khri btsan-po; see PT 1286, 1.44-46 consulted at *OTDO*, but cf. also Smra’i-dang Ding-dings kyi rje and Gun-gun ma-btsun in PT1285; Dotson 2008: 48.

<sup>31</sup> Here I understand *yug chen* like *yug gcog*; cf. Goldstein 2001: 1002.

<sup>32</sup> [13b, 6...] [lto >] *gto mkhan byed pa’i mi ma mchis //khol po lha khol [sras >] gsas khol gnyis // ’gro ba sems can don la btang // yul gcig [14a] gnam gyi yab lha ru // gung gi yar stengs su // sa’i mo ma lding nga lding cung dang // mo ma sgong nga sgong cung spyang sngar byon // de la mo dang phywa slab pas // mo ma sgong nga sgong cung zhal na re // ’di la ci yang ma lan te // mi’i rigs bzhi rang gi lan // kha’i las su khon gyod byas // lag gi las su rme khram byas // lus kyi lus su [snol >] mnol btsog byas // ’di la cis kyang ma phan te // A’o [yang >] ya ngal spyang drangs la // sel chen [rnam >] rnam du thob cig zer // [mtshan >] tshan bon thor cog spyang drangs la // [mtshan >] tshan dang khrus chu bgyi cig zer // [’gal>] mgal [14b] bon kha nag spyang drangs la // [yugs >] yug chen sa la phud cig zer // khol po lha khol [sras >] gsas khol gnyis // A’o [yang >] ya ngal ’tshol du phyin // yul cig [gying >] gyim yul gyim stod na // pha cig ston pa gshen rab dang // ma cig gyim bza’ ’o lo gnyis // de gnyis srid cing sprul pa las // A’o [yang >] ya ngal zhal na re // pho bo A’o ya ngal yin // de ’og [mtshan >] tshan bon thor cog yin // tha chung [’gal>] mgal bon kha nag yin // dang po A zhes mi gyi ru // A ni skye med bon gyi sku // de nas ’o zhes zhes mi gyi ru //*

Immediately following this passage, there is a short iconography of Ya-ngal, which I will present and analyse separately in a section below. In passing, there are two points of interest in this origin narrative. The style of syllabic etymology of names here also occurs in the eighth chapter of the *gZer myig*, where the titles and names of sTon-pa gShen-rab myi-bo, his parents and one of his escorts are meaningfully deconstructed in the same manner.<sup>33</sup> Also, the maternal name Gyim-bza' 'o-lo for Ya-ngal's mother recalls that of another legendary Gyim female mentioned at the beginning of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.<sup>34</sup>

For reasons of space, except for a few words we cannot deal here with Ya-ngal's two younger *gshen* brothers. The middle brother, Tshan-bon Thor-cog in the *rabs* above, is, as his name informs us, the *bon* priest of lustration rites using scented waters (*tshan*). The *tshan* technique is an essential aspect of the ritual ensemble that constitutes the *sel*. Ya-ngal's youngest brother, named Thab-bon Me-bran or mGal-bon Kha-nag in different *rabs*, specializes in purifying *thab-gzhob* or pollution occurring in the form of noxious fumes from burnt and singed matter in the domestic hearth (*thab*), as his name elements all inform us.<sup>35</sup> This is always noted in the context of Tibetan religions as a type of pollution which grievously upsets deities dwelling in the sky. The important point here is the hearth itself, and its extreme sanctity, as the site of the *thab-lha*. This ancient deity (or deities) and its physical location are closely linked to, or are actually conceived of as being, the ancestral gods of the family among many populations speaking Tibeto-Burman languages throughout the extended eastern Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau, just as the hearth itself is the centre of family life within the domestic space and the site of social ranking reflected in seating, etc. Both the use of *tshan* and the cleansing of the hearth with incense are essential to all Srid-pa'i lha Bon worship, and each of the younger brothers have their own *rabs*.

#### Priests with the Animal Skin Headdress

In the narratives of various Bon myths recorded in Tibetan texts, we occasionally find reference to divine and human priests, and other human agents involved in the stories who are clad in wild animal skin garments, and sometimes animal fur hats.<sup>36</sup> On first encounter, the descriptions of such fur- or pelt-clad figures may seem somewhat exotic and perhaps evoke a 'primordial' image. Tibetan Plateau peoples have long worn wild furs and pelts, but mainly those from a very narrow range of particular animal species, and which are only used in certain ways. Key distinctions here are whether the fur or hair is worn facing to the outside or inside of the garment, and whether an entire skin or only a specific part is being used. We need only be concerned here with examples of fur worn to the outside of garments, and the use of entire skins. The favoured furs and pelts of the Plateau peoples are primarily those of various larger wild cats, and of otter. Yet, these are always used as strips of decorative trim added to specific parts of the basic, conventional woven woollen or sheep-skin garments; they do not form garments themselves, not even remotely. Tibetans have also worn sewn cloth hats trimmed on the outside with fox fur, which only occasionally can include the animal's bushy tail (and this primarily in remote pastoral areas in my experience), but never including any other appendages such as the head and legs. When used as an item of material culture, a whole wild animal skin, complete with the head, legs and tail still attached, is specifically referred to as *g.yang-gzhi* in the literary language, while a cloak or coat made from a whole skin(s) or large parts thereof is called *thul*.

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*bon* [ 'go > ] *sgo tham cad 'o nas gyer // de nas* [15a] *ya zhes mi gyi ru // ya de rlung gi rta la bzhon // de nas gyim zhes mi gyi ru // zhang po gyim gi tsha bo yin // de nas kong zhes mi gyi ru // [lto > ] gto nas ma slabs kong nas shes //; Shawa 1 text iii.: Lha rab[s] dang bdud rtsi bcas pa bzhugs so, ff.13b, 6, 2-15a, 2, supplemented by readings from Gortshom 1 text Kha: Lha'i bsangs rabs [xxx] po gcig bzhugs so //, 4a, 5-4b.*

<sup>33</sup> See *gZer myig* in Francke 1949-1950: 173-174, 182-183; cf. the *gZer mig*: 182-184.

<sup>34</sup> See Dags-za'i Gyim-pang-ma' in PT 1286 (accessed at OTDO); Richardson 1998 [1969]: 28-31.

<sup>35</sup> *Me-bran* "fire servant", *mgal* "firebrand", *kha-nag* literally the "black mouth", an obvious reference to the hearth itself.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Namkhai Norbu 1995: 118; Karmay 1998: 178; Karmay 1972: 97, 264; Vitali 2008: 389 n.10.



Upon the Tibetan Plateau proper, *g.yang-gzhi* are explicitly used as mats for sitting upon, in both tantric Buddhist and popular village ritual contexts, as well as in the secular culture of the social elite.<sup>37</sup> By the same token, wearing of entire wild animal skins, either covering the torso or the head, is neither ethnographically nor historically attested for the Tibetan Plateau proper. The one exception I am aware of is among peoples of the deep valley (*rong*) regions in the very far south and southeast margins of the Plateau. Throughout the extended eastern Himalayas, specifically in the East Bodish-speaking areas of north-eastern Bhutan and adjacent Mon-yul Corridor, and also in southern Kong-po, Padma-bkod and sPo-bo further east, and still further east all the way across to the Yangtze River loop area north of Lijiang, there are specific populations who wear a type of sleeveless tunic made from complete wild animal skins with the fur facing outside, skins the Tibetans call *g.yang-gzhi*. The skins used for these tunics are most commonly of the wild goat called goral, especially that of the red goral (*Naemorhedus baileyi*), and also occasionally of other locally abundant wild goat species (e.g. takin, *Budorcas taxicolor*), but only much more rarely of monkey and bear (figs. 4-6).<sup>38</sup>



Figure 4. Mon-yul Corridor man wearing a goral skin *pagtsa* tunic, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, India, December 2009 (photo: Toni Huber).

<sup>37</sup> These traditions are largely exogenous. The *g.yang-gzhi* mats used by tantric practitioners, and commonly found in Tibetan Buddhist iconography, derive from the symbolic and ritual importance of the antelope in earlier Indian ascetic culture. Premodern use of whole tiger and leopard skin mats in Tibetan contexts, particularly by the social elite, was derived from the court cultures of the kingdoms of the Indian plains and adjacent Himalayan valleys, the same regions which also provided the animal skins via trade.

<sup>38</sup> On the *pagtsa* in the Dakpa-speaking area of Mon-yul Corridor, see Tsewang Norbu 2008: 35, plate opp. 124 (cf. also Bailey 1957: 245 on sPang-chen). On the same tunic worn in Kong-po, see Karmay 1998: 217, Ward, Cox, *et al.* 2001: 199, and Ramble 1997: 145 who mentions its local name there as *gushu*, while Zhongguo Zangzu Fushi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 2002: 41 has *guxiu* for tunics of monkey and bear skin. On the tunic in Padma-bkod, see Ward, Cox, *et al.* 2001: 268, 270, 272, and for sPo-bo see Clarke 1997: 52 plate 50. On the tunic among the Naxi north of Lijiang, see Rock 1963: plate XXII and caption. The ethnic specificity of this costume should be carefully noted: outside of these areas just cited, this particular wild animal skin tunic is never found worn among the neighbouring Himalayan highland populations whom Tibetan, East Bodish- and neighbouring Tshangla-speaking peoples call “Lopa” (Klo-pa) or “Gidu”, including the various Bangru/Bengni, Tani and Mishmi language/dialect speakers of the frontier region, viz. it is *not* a “Lopa” attribute according to the traditional clichés and pejorative representations.



Figures 5-6. sPo-bo man wearing a wild goat or monkey skin tunic (l.);  
Naxi men of the Yangtse loop region wearing goat skin tunics (r.).<sup>39</sup>

The first point I want to make here is that references in Bon narratives to gods and people wearing entire wild animal skins or *g.yang-gzhi* only find their ethnographic parallels in the extended eastern Himalayas and valley systems of the far south-eastern Plateau margins. The wearing of such skins in various ways is precisely what is described as a central part of the costumes for certain mythical *gshen* priests associated with the class of *gto* rites, and Ya-ngal Gyim-kong is one of them. His invocation in our local *Sel rabs* manuscripts is as follows:

Without study [you] mastered the *gto* rites.  
On account of that, you Ya-ngal Gyim-kong,  
Elder brother Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, come forth!  
With body clad in a cloak (*thul*) of peacock,  
With head covered by the whole skin (*g.yang-gzhi*) of a badger,  
With a victory banner of wild boar [hide] raised upon the shoulder,  
Holding a stalk of *Ephedra* with a long root in the left hand,  
And beating a tanned-leather<sup>40</sup> drum, *cham chom*, in the right.  
Elder brother Ya-ngal Gyim-kong,  
Although we cannot come to visit you,  
We invite you for the sake of living beings!  
We invite you down below to sMra-yul!  
We invite you down below to Thag-brgyad!<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Image sources: figure 5, Clarke 1997: 52 plate 50; figure 6, Rock 1963: plate XXII.

<sup>40</sup> *Bse*. While we might wish for another Himalayan wild animal reference here, both meanings of *bse* [*ru*] (i.e., as “rhinoseros”, or “antelope” to which the term is also applied due to the wide-spread myth of its single horn) seem inappropriate for both drum technology and the ecological zone. *Bse* can also refer to a type of semi-precious stone.

<sup>41</sup> // [lto >] *gto ni mi slabs khong du* [tshud >] *chud // de phyir ya ngal gyim* [gong >] *kong khyod // A 'o ya ngal gyim* [gong >] *kong byung // sku la rma bya'i thul pa gsol // dbu la grum pa'i g.yang* [bzhi >] *gzhi gsol // phrag la phag rgod rgyal mtshan phyar // phyag g.yas* [rtse >] *mtshe shing rtsa* [rings >] *ring* [rnams >] *bsnams // g.yon na* [bsx >] *bse rnga cham chom rdungs // A 'o ya ngal gyim* [gong >] *kong khyod // sku la gshags* [gzhu >] *bzhud mi mnga' yang // 'gro ba'i don du spyen 'dren no* // [smrang >] *smra yul ma* [gir >] *gyi spyen 'dren no // thag brgyad ma* [gyir >] *gyi spyen 'dren no //; Gortshom 1 text Kha: Lha'i bsangs*

In fact, this image of Ya-ngal Gyim-kong is rather typical of the manner in which the class of *gshen* priests are portrayed in Srid-pa'i lha Bon *rabs* narratives. For example, a very similar portrait of the *gshen* gShen-rab mi-bo's costume and accoutrements is often present in the local *rabs* that are used to invoke him, for example:

That gShen-rab mi-bo,  
 With his body adorned by *lha* and *gsas*,  
 With his speech adorned by *bon* and *smrang*,  
 And with his mind adorned by *gto* and *dpyad*.  
 He wears a cloak (*thul*) of lynx and otter pelts upon his body.  
 He wears a striped tiger's tail upon his head.<sup>42</sup>  
 He wears short-shafted,<sup>43</sup> leopard[-skin] boots upon his feet.  
 They are affixed with cords<sup>44</sup> of stag's gut.  
 [A girdle] of golden lizard is set around his waist.<sup>45</sup>  
 He carries a very broad, loud drum upon his back.<sup>46</sup>  
 A large, white bronze flat-bell is hung over his shoulder.<sup>47</sup>

As for Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, of particular interest here are the major elements of his *gshen*'s costume. His headgear is an entire skin including feet, tail and head (*g.yang-gzhi*) of the badger (*grum*). If *grum* here indeed refers to the large Mustelid known as the Asian badger or sand badger (*Meles leucurus*), which is the only badger species known in the proximity of the Tibetan Plateau system, then the occurrence of real animals of this type is largely confined to valley systems of the extended eastern Himalayas in southern Khams and eastern Kong-po. In the *gZi brjid*, this animal is required as a component for *sel* rites, the specialty of Ya-ngal, where it is gathered together with the monkey (see below) and the flying squirrel,<sup>48</sup> both of which also only occur in the same geographical and ecological zone.

The word defining Ya-ngal's cloak of peacock here is *thul-pa*, which implies the garment is made of the whole skin(s) of birds, and the image is thus of the garment being covered with feathers.

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*rabs [xxx] po gcig bzhugs so //*, 4a, 5-4b, supplemented by readings from *Shawa 1* text iii.: *Lha rab[s] dang bdud rtsi bcas pa bzhugs so*, 15a, 2-15b, 1.

<sup>42</sup> For references in the *Grags pa gling grags* (which may date to the 13<sup>th</sup> century; see Blondeau 1990) to these type of pelts used by *gshen* and *bon-po*, see Vitali 2008: 389 n.10.

<sup>43</sup> *Lham yu thung*; "long-shafted shoes", cf. *lham yu ring*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ju thig*, which also refers to a divination cord (*mo skud*) used by *gshen* and *bon* priests/diviners.

<sup>45</sup> *Skyed > sked* "belt, sash, girdle".

<sup>46</sup> Qiang priests also carry their large, single-sided drums upon the backs as a form of defense for attack from behind; see Oppitz 2013, II: 1147 plates 922, 923.

<sup>47</sup> *Gortsham 1*, Text Ga. *Gnam sa cho 'phrul bzhugs so //*, f.7a, 6-7b, 3, with readings from *Da 1*, Text 2 *Lha gzhung chen mo bzhugso*, f.17a, 3-17b, 2: *gshen [rabs >] rab mi bo de // sku ni lha dang [sras >] gsas kyis brgyan // gsung ni bon dang [7b] smrang gyis brgyan // thugs ni [sto >] gto dang spyad kyis brgyan // sku la [zhi >] g.yi thul sram thul gsol // dbu la stag gzhu [gu] khra bo gsol // zhabs la gzigs lham yu thung gsol // ju thig [shar >] sha ba blo la btags // gser gyi rmig pa [skyed >] sked la btsugs // rnga [gra >] grag mo gzhung chen rgyab na khur // gshang ['khor >] 'khar mo dril chen phrag la kal //*

<sup>48</sup> Snellgrove 1967: 48-49 (= f.199a, l.25), where he makes the common mistake of reading *bya ma byel* as "bat" (see also *bya ma byil bu*, *bya ma byel bu* in other Bon texts, and *bya ma byi'u/bye'u* of the lexicons; Jäschke 1881: 373, *BGT*: 1864). While *bya ma byi* can be a synonym for *pha wang*, here and elsewhere in the *gZi brjid* (2: 93-95, 103), as well as other sources, both *pha wang* and *bya ma byil bu* and its synonyms occur side by side for the names of two different animals, one the bat (Sub-orders *Microchiroptera* and *Megachiroptera*, Family *Pteropodidae*) and the other the flying squirrel (Order *Rodentia*, Family *Sciuridae*). Unlike bats, flying squirrels do not actually fly; they do glide short distances on their *patagium*, parachute-like membranes running between their front and rear limbs. Perhaps due to this feature, they are sometimes also explicitly called *lpags byi'u* in Tibetan. Large flying squirrels of the genus *Petaurista* are found throughout the eastern Himalayas, from Bhutan to Yunnan, and are thus also coincident with local species of both the Microbats and Megabats.

This is in fact an image which constantly resurfaces in local myths from, or associated with, the distribution zone of Srid-pa'i lha Bon, being recorded in Tibetan sources dating at least as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, concerning the stalk of the *Ephedra* (*mtshe*) shrub with a long root held in Ya-ngal's left hand, we must point out that the classical Tibetan *materia medica* always stress the resemblance of the generally leafless *Ephedra* stalks to bamboo canes with nodes.<sup>50</sup> *Ephedra*'s main medical efficaciousness in Tibetan sources is always defined with the verbs *sel* ("to eliminate") and *gcod* ("to cut off"), which also describe Ya-ngal's ritual activities in the local *rabs*. The specific reference to the stalk of *mtshe* here is important in various ways, and has to be understood as symbolically linking Ya-ngal to the *gshen* priest called mTshe-mi, literally "*Ephedra* man", who is his mythical parallel in the narrative of gNya'-khri btsan-po's descent to earth. In these myths, immediately prior to their descent from the sky world, mTshe-mi "plants" (*btsugs*) a stalk of *Ephedra* on top of the divine king's head in order to protect his vitality principle (*bla*), viz. stop it from departing his body since the transition from the pure sky world to a potentially polluted earth world may render him vulnerable.<sup>51</sup> The "planting" or "placing" of the *mtshe* stalk refers to a specific genre of older ritual technologies for working with the 'vitality principle' (*pla*, *phla* and *cha* in our local sources, Tibetan *bla*, often rendered "soul") used by speakers of Tibetan-Burman languages. Among the East Bodish Dakpa-speaking worship communities of Srid-pa'i lha Bon living between the Kuri Chu and Tawang Chu rivers, the planting of *bya ru* or "bird horns" in the form of feathers on the crown of the head to protect the vitality principle (*pla*) is the most common example occurring in our ethnographic data, and of which the rite of "planting the

<sup>49</sup> It first occurs in the *gSang ba bon lugs* redaction of *Mkhas pa lDe'u*: 237, when, during the narrative of gNya'-khri btsan-po's transit through twenty-seven stations (*gshegs rabs nyi shu bdun*) immediately following his initial descent, he reaches the area of Bra la sgo-drug, and at a locality called Bud kyi Bram-sna encounters three smut-covered (? *khre khre can*) boys whose persons are adorned with bird feathers, and who are regarded as a bad sign sent by the Mon, and these three are seized and lead along although their Mon language is unintelligible: *De'i tshe bud kyi bram snar byis pa khre khre can lus la bya'i spus brgyan pa gsum dang phrad do / byis pa de gsum mon gyis ltas ngan du btong ba yin te / de gsum bzung ste khrid pas / mon skad ma go nas /*. The text later has one of the boys escape and travel through the ravine of Lo-ro, which locates the action in the narrative immediately adjacent to the Dakpa-speaking Tawang region. The entire passage is no doubt highly significant for considering the mythical origins of early clans, since these three Mon boys go on to become the clan ancestors (*mes-po*) of the IHO, sNyags and Myang. Note also the name Bya-thul dkar-po ("White Bird Cloak"), as the mythical progenitor of the sMyos/gNyos clan according to a Bhutanese source; Aris 1988: 19.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, De'u-dmar bsTan-'dzin phun-tshogs 1986: 300, *smyug ma 'dra la tshigs yod pa'o // lo ma med pa*. The same text cites *phug-ron smyug-ma* and *gu-dur smyug-ma* as being alternative names. *mTshe* is a standard synonym for the general classification *mtshe-ldum* used in the Tibetan *materia medica*, which describe four different types (*brag-mtshe*, *lug-mtshe*, *ra-mtshe* and *chu-mtshe*). The plant is simply referred to as *mtshe* in Srid-pa'i lha Bon contexts and in other types of ritual and mythical texts.

<sup>51</sup> *Mkhas pa lDe'u*: 235, *mtshe mis mtshe btsugs /*; *lDe'u Jo sras*: 101, *mtshe mi gshen gyi rmu rgyal tshas ni dbu la mtshe btsugs*. For the use of *Ephedra/mtshe* in various narrative and ritual contexts in earlier sources, see: PT 1134, 1.46, in a narrative concerning a death, where it is of "no use to plant the *mtshe* [on top of the head of the patient]" (*ma rung mtshe gzugs*); on the narrative of *rje His-rten chen-po* and *mtshe His-po his-bdag* in IOL Tib J 0734 see Stein 1971: 507-508, n.77 for *mtshe* as a support of the *bla*; see *mtshe gzugs* in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* in the context of a birth in Dotson 2013: 332-333; and see Karmay 1998: 326 (and notes) for a myth where mTshe and gCo, the priests of gNya'-khri btsan-po, retrieve and restore his lost soul (*sku phywa* cf. *sku bla*); see also Snellgrove 1967: 36 for *mtshe* as a *yas-stags* used in a *go* rite of ransom (*glud*) for bringing a patient back from the brink of death and extending the life, as outlined in the *gZi brjid*. The plant is generally regarded as a "power substance" (*thun rdzas*) in Tibetan popular ritual, and like the more commonly used mustard seed (*yung thun*, *yungs zor*), it can also be deployed against negative spirits as a type of ritual weapon (*zor*); see *mtshe zor* in BGT: 2317 (cf. also 2473), *mtshe'i rdzas la brten pa'i zor*. In Srid pa'i lha Bon rites, *mtshe* and parched barley grains are cast towards the sky as a messenger to invite the deities; see *Lawa 2*, Text 10 *Lha bzhung chen mo bzhugs sho*. In the recent scholarship of Indo-Iranian Studies, *Ephedra* has now emerged as the strongest candidate for the original botanical identity of the ancient *soma/haoma* stimulant; see Falk 1989, Houben 2003.

[grass] stalk” (*'jag btsugs ma*) on the crown of the head during certain forms of the consciousness transfer (*'pho ba*) procedure is clearly a later Tibetan Buddhist adaptation of such older rites.<sup>52</sup> Although the planting of *bya ru* remains an important aspect of ritual within Srid-pa'i lha Bon, little has been written about the possible meanings of *bya ru*. Dan Martin and Roberto Vitali have both investigated the g.Yung-drung Bon context and concluded that there it refers to a type of finial ornament or symbol atop a *mchod-rten* shrine, and/or a crown ornament for rulers, which is in part cognate with the first symbol.<sup>53</sup> Be that as it may, the term *bya ru* in the context of Srid-pa'i lha Bon always only refers to bird's feathers “planted” (*btsugs*, the invariable verb here) directly upon the top of the head as a form of ritual protection for the vitality principle. This specific ritual meaning is clearly older than the architectural and costume references found in g.Yung-drung Bon sources. In Old Tibetan manuscripts we find the term consistently indicates bird feathers “planted” (*btsugs*) directly upon the heads of persons or animals who are actors in the context of funeral rites.<sup>54</sup> In our research area, the *bya ru* is functionally identical to the *mtshe* stalk.

Furthermore, like Ya-ngal (and the ancient mTshe-mi) the other prominent *gshen* featuring in our local *rabs*, gShen-rab mi-bo, is closely identified at some sites with the use and symbolism of *mtshe* or *Ephedra*, as a model of the priestly protector concerned for ritual protection of both the vitality principle and the ‘life force’ (*srog*). In one of the very few painted images found surviving in any contemporary Srid-pa'i lha Bon community, *sTon-pa* gShen-rab [mi-bo] is depicted holding a long stalk of *mtshe* adorned with a left-turning *swastika* in his right hand, and an arrow in his left hand (fig. 7). In the local ritual conception, both symbols are directly connected with rites for preservation of aspects of the life force or vitality principle. The arrow represents the *srog-mkhar* or “stronghold of [patrilineal] life force”, and is decorated with the white scarf of *g.yang*, which our ethnographic context determines we must define here as the “quintessential re/productive potency” embodied by women and cattle. The *mtshe* stalk is for maintaining the presence of the vitality principle within the body, but here it also appears to double as an insignia which is equivalent to the *phyag-shing* (sometimes *lcags-shing*) sceptre found in certain older—and virtually identical—icons of g.Yung-drung Bon specifically depicting gShen-rab mi-bo's manifestation as a *gshen* priest (fig. 8).<sup>55</sup> An interesting feature of the *phyag-shing* is that it is of “wood” (*shing*) which contrasts with common references to metal or stone sceptres such as the Buddhist *rdo-rje*. One could speculate that the long *mtshe* stalk, which is sometimes referred to as *shing* in our local Srid-pa'i lha Bon sources, was an older ritual device essential for the function of the the *gshen* and out of which the later *phyag-shing* developed under the selective hand of g.Yung-drung Bon redactors. In his commentary upon the meaning of *mtshe* and its association with *bla* as these terms occur together in an Old Tibetan narrative, Rolf Stein pointed out that some Tibetan lexicons gloss *bla-tshe* as *srog-gi bla-tshe* “life, long life”, but that “it is probably an interpretation of *mtshe*. It yields “evergreen” (the bon

<sup>52</sup> Also written *'jag 'dzugs/gzugs/zug/tshugs*, and sometimes with *'ja* “rainbow” for *'jag* in various sources. This appears particular to the 'Bri-gung-pa school, and involves planting a stalk of grass (*'jag ma*) upon the crown of the head to test whether the fontanelle has been opened by the *'pho ba* practice, such that at the time of death the consciousness principle may smoothly exit the body; see Kapstein 1998: 98-100, 180 nn.23-28 and the further references noted therein. Perhaps significantly, the origins of the practice are claimed for a 14th century rNying-ma-pa context in Dwags-po, not far from the northern Mon-yul Corridor; see Cuevas 2003: 91-92.

<sup>53</sup> Martin 1991: 118-137, Martin 2001: 63 n.31, 88 n.18, Vitali 2008: 388-392.

<sup>54</sup> For example, PT 1136, 28 has *dbul bya ru khyung ru ni btsugs* for a horse as the subject; cf. also PT 1134, 118: *glad la ru btags sna bya ru 'ong 'ong*; PT 1194, 45: *cha yang gas kyi glad la bya ru khyung ru 'ong 'ong*, all cited from versions at OTDO. This meaning does crop up in the context of g.Yung-drung Bon, for example *bya ru* used as a head-piece of a priest in the *Rgyal rabs bon gyi 'byung gnas*; see Martin 1991: 125, Martin 2001: 195, and Vitali 2008: 388-392. See *Zhangzhung*: 164, *bya ru = bya khyung gi rwa*.

<sup>55</sup> For commentary upon the image in figure 8, see Kvaerne 1995: 71.



symbol of permanence).”<sup>56</sup> This interpretation also fits with the description of the actual *Ephedra* shrub, which is a green-stemmed perennial.



Figure 7. *sTon-pa* gShen-rab [mi-bo] holding a *mtshe* stalk in his right hand and *srog-mkhar* arrow in his left, from a Srid-pa'i lha Bon priest's ritual manual, northeast Bhutan.



Figure 8. gShen-rab mi-bo (inscription: *gshen rab sprul sku*) holding a *phyag-shing* sceptre in his right hand, from fol.43b of the *gZer myig* ms. Waddell 1, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz zu Berlin.

### Regional Ethnographic Parallels

We will move away from mythical *gshen* now, and explore the fact of some poignant regional ethnographic parallels for all these features of the ancient *sel* priest's costume and accoutrements. An almost exact parallel is found in the eastern Himalayan highlands today, not too far from our research region.

Among the small, mono-clan, Tani-speaking populations living in the upper Subansiri River valley, such as the Mra whom I have studied extensively<sup>57</sup> and who dwell immediately adjacent to the Tibetan region of Tsa-ri, the costume of their *nyibu* priests matches that of the mythical *sel* priest Ya-ngal Gyim-kong. Moreover, the type of *Pöba rigu* and *Rialo* rites these *nyibu* perform for the community when wearing this particular costume specifically involve elimination of obstacles and the clearing of spaces and routes of negative hindrances, and the holding of the vitality principle within the body—exactly the same functions as described for the Tibetan *sel* rites and for the use of *Ephedra*. When performing major rituals such as the *Rialo* ‘feast of merit’ and the *Nyida* marriage ceremony, the Mra *nyibus* and those from neighbouring areas wear a special headpiece known as *chaybo* which is the entire skin of the *sirch* or yellow-throated marten (*Martes flavigula*). This skin is not too dissimilar in most respects from that of its Mustelid cousin the Asian or sand badger, albeit usually with a longer tail and somewhat brighter colouration

<sup>56</sup> Stein 1971: 507-508, n.77, referring to IOL Tib J 0734.

<sup>57</sup> On the Mra people, see to date Huber 2010, Huber 2011, Huber 2011a and Huber 2012. My own monograph on Mra society, *Children of the Sky*, is forthcoming.

tending to yellows and reds (fig. 9). As it hangs down from the priest's head, covering his back like a cape, the whole *chaybo* is decorated with a covering of white cock feathers (*rokun*). The *chaybo*-wearing *nyibu* holds a ritual staff called *tabiyou* made from long, thin canes of bamboo (fig. 10).<sup>58</sup> This cane staff is used specifically at one point during the *Rialo* festival honouring ancestors. Immediately—literally the initial seconds—after a *mithun* bull is sacrificed, the *nyibu* plants the end of the staff directly at the entrance of the mouth of the freshly fallen animal (fig. 11), in order to prevent its vitality principle (*aram*) from departing the body via the main head orifice before the first blood, fat and viscera can be harvested from inside the carcass.



Figure 9. A Mra *nyibu* wearing *chaybo* headgear, with *kyokam mayab* feather wand across his right shoulder, Orak, upper Subansiri River, Arunachal Pradesh, India, January 2007 (photo: Toni Huber).



Figure 10. A Mra *nyibu* wearing *chaybo* headgear with *tabiyou* ritual staff, Orak, upper Subansiri River, Arunachal Pradesh, India, January 2007 (photo: Toni Huber).

<sup>58</sup> The same *nyibu* costume is found downstream on the Subansiri River at least as far south as Sippi, although porcupine quills are also attached to the skin headress in downstream areas; see Riddi: 2006: 207-208, 225 n.67-68. Michael Oppitz informs me that Magar shamans in Nepal also wear the skin of a flying squirrel upon their backs, as well as that of red panda, as a protection against attack.





Figure 11. A Mra *nyibu* placing his *tabiyou* ritual staff at the mouth of a freshly sacrificed *mithun* bull, Orak, upper Subansiri River, Arunachal Pradesh, India, January 2007 (photo: Toni Huber).

There is a further point of comparison between the two types of priests suggested by the feathers that cover the *nyibu*'s headdress-cum-cape and Ya-ngal's peacock cloak. Like the *bon-po* at many sites of Srid-pa'i lha Bon, *nyibus* are strongly identified with birds.<sup>59</sup> They also embark upon visionary flying journeys across the landscape to eventually arrive in parallel worlds, and in so doing, they ritually mimic the bird just as the *bon-po* does (recalling that the mythical messenger bat is a classificatory 'bird' in the latter case). The *nyibu* also has a tutelary-cum-mount who is a bird, the spirit of the eagle, whose wing feathers and claws called *kyokam mayab* they always carry as a vital accoutrement, and which must always be hanging over their shoulder (usually the right side) and down the back during actual performances of ritual chanting, as if it provided rear wings for them (one can be seen hanging down the back from the *nyibu*'s right shoulder in fig. 9). This strongly parallels and suggests the mythical role of the messenger bat sGam-chen Pha-wang, whom the *bon-po* must emulate on his verbal ritual journey to the sky world, even to the point of acting as the mount for the descending deities who hold on to the priest's turban (*thod-dkar*) during flight, and whose fluted bat wings, claws and decorated body appear as designs upon the back of the old style of cape preserved and worn still by some *bon-po* of Srid-pa'i lha Bon (fig.

<sup>59</sup> Concerning the death of a *nyibu* in the Subansiri region, Riddi 2006: 206 reports: "Thus, while disposing of the dead body of the Nyibu, [a] special burial structure is made and the Linyi-Pekis [or nest for Linyi, are] made to be placed on the structure. Linyi is a kind of bird with more than one long arrow type pointed tail feathers, and is believed to be the incarnation of a Nyibu. Linyi leads the flock of different kinds of birds while flying from one place to another. Linyi symbolizing the Nyibu and the birds following him represent the common people. If Linyi comes within 7<sup>th</sup> night and sits for a while in the Pekis, or burial structure it [is] believe that the deceased Nyibu has agreed for any one of his clan or family members to success [*sic*] him as a Nyibu."



12). Such bird symbolism in myths, costumes and accoutrements, and ritual practices associated with priests are found in local Tibeto-Burman-speaking highland communities throughout the extended eastern Himalayas.



Figure 12. Turbaned *bon-po* priests wearing the cape-like *pla-pé* or *pla-kar* jacket with triangular “wing” gussets, embroidered “feet”, and appliqué “body” representing the messenger bat, Lawa, Lhuntse Dzongkhag, Bhutan, December 2012 (photo: Toni Huber).

While mythical priests and real priests are certainly different propositions, in this case both phenomena share common ancestral roots in the past, whatever those may have been. The idea is by no means far fetched. As realities in situ, the two phenomena, as I recorded them, are currently located only some 200 km distant from one another along the extended eastern Himalayas, both around known points for north-south transit and cultural contact between Plateau and hills, where major river valleys cut through the mountain chain. The territory of the Mra and their immediate neighbours in the upper reaches of the Subansiri River is located in the highland watershed of a long Tibetan Plateau river valley system (the Bya Chu and Lo-ro Chu) via which one can easily walk all the way to Mon mTsho-sna, and the Srid-pa'i lha Bon region, as we know frequently occurred in the past. The Mra and their neighbours also live immediately south of a set of ancient Tibetan fiefdoms (dBye, mChims, Dags and Nyag) which, regardless of any historical realities, certainly had their names and so-named characters recycled over and again into old myths, including those directly featuring Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, as we demonstrated above.<sup>60</sup>

It is perhaps noteworthy that the mythical land down to which Ya-ngal Gyim-kong is finally invited to descend is that of sMra-yul, and the specific site is Thag-brgyad. There are two ways to interpret these names. As the name of a people or persons, sMra is a well-known “proto-clan” name commonly occurring in Old Tibetan sources, with sMra-yul as that clan’s purported

<sup>60</sup> See also the map in Dotson 2008: 54 for the cluster of territories mentioned in Old Tibetan liturgies.

homeland.<sup>61</sup> The Old Tibetan place name sMra-yul Thag[s]-[b]rgyad also occurs.<sup>62</sup> In various Dunhuang manuscripts, such as PT 1136 concerning the sacrifice of animals during funeral rites, a priest called the sMra-bon is frequently mentioned.<sup>63</sup> With the sMra spelling, this ancient Tibetan name is not found beyond the bounds of earlier myths to my present knowledge, and one would want to be extremely cautious about relating it to contemporary references.<sup>64</sup> Yet, we can point out that the name in this form, when pronounced in certain dialects, is at very least completely homophonic with Mra, the clan name of the highland Tani-speaking population with the *chaybo*-wearing *nyibu* priests who fly through the sky, and who inhabit the southern flanks of the Tibetan sacred mountain of Dag-pa Shel-ri at Tsa-ri.<sup>65</sup> The Mra's own origin myth claims that the clan's apical ancestor is a sky being, and that they landed in this part of southern Tibet after descending from the sky together with a 'brother' Tibetan ancestor and a horse. This is of course identical with the basic plot line for clan origin myths found among Srid-pa'i lha Bon worshippers in our research area, and for the *rabs* narrative of the descent of Srid-pa'i lha deities such as 'O-de gung-rgyal and his emanation/son Gur-zhi (i.e. Gu-se lang-ling). The other way to understand sMra-yul and Thag-brgyad is far more sobering. As Brandon Dotson recently reminded us, such names "may not refer to an actual place" since *smra* is a synonym for *myi/mi* or "man", while *thag-brgyad* literally means "eight cords", this latter compound appearing as an archaic technical term referring to a particular tent-like structure used in early funeral rites.<sup>66</sup>

Alternative literal meanings of old names are surely important, nevertheless the idea of sMra-yul as an ancient land of origins for Tibetan and Himalayan peoples is repeatedly expressed in their myths. Nor is this merely a 'dead letter' of the ancient texts. sMra-yul is invoked today as the ancestral land of local human communities whenever certain *rabs* are chanted during Srid-pa'i lha Bon festivals in my research region, as it has been elsewhere in the adjacent Himalayas.<sup>67</sup> What else might sMra-yul as the origin "land of men" refer to in relation to these peoples and their ancestors in the wider region? If one subscribes to the prevailing theory explaining the dispersal of western Tibeto-Burman languages, which entails ancient east to west migrations by early ancestral speakers of these languages from out of southwest China, and their subsequent dispersal onto the Tibetan Plateau and throughout the eastern Himalayan chain, we would be tracing routes back to the Yunnan and Sichuan regions of southwest China.<sup>68</sup> It is precisely in those regions that another complex of evidence concerning ancestral priests from the ancient Tibeto-Burman heartlands is found, and will be briefly considered here.

The same unique type of headgear fashioned from an entire wild animal skin as we have been discussing among mythical and real priests of the eastern Himalayas is also found used by priests of the Qiang (Ch'iang) peoples in the Min Shan and Qionglai ranges along the eastern Tibetan Plateau margins in western Sichuan. Qiang priests or 'shamans', who are designated *shüpi* or by a variety of other terms, include in their essential ritual costume and equipment an animal skin hat-cum-headaddress called *jar tä*, a hand drum of one type or other,<sup>69</sup> a "sacred cane" or stick which they "plant" (like the *Ephedra* stalk and the *bya-ru* feathers) into the ground during certain ceremonies, and the flat-bell identical to the *gshang* of the *bon-po*. These are the same fundamental items, or their functional and symbolic equivalents at least, listed for the various

<sup>61</sup> See, in particular, Stein 1961: 50-54, who lists and analyzes other apparently related forms of the name.

<sup>62</sup> See PT 1285, r016, IOL Tib J 731, r97, r120 and IOL Tib J 739, 14r 01 consulted at *OTDO*.

<sup>63</sup> PT 1136 consulted at *OTDO*. See also Stein 1961: 54 n.152.

<sup>64</sup> On sMra, sMra-yul, Thag-brgyad and the related complex of names in various earlier sources, see now the interesting work by Blezer 2011; cf. also Stein 1971: 488-489 n.26.

<sup>65</sup> On Tsa-ri and Dag-pa Shel-ri, see Huber 1999 and 1997.

<sup>66</sup> Dotson 2008: 53, who refers to Stein 1981: 494, n.44 on *thag-brgyad*.

<sup>67</sup> On the ancestral realm and beings of Mayel in Lepcha myth and ritual, see Gorer 1998 [1938]: 235-239ff.

<sup>68</sup> See van Driem 2001, I: 411-417, 426-433, map 20 and map 22.

<sup>69</sup> The single-sided hand drum was in use among *bon-po* priests of Srid-pa'i lha Bon until recent times in the northern range of my research area; see my data on this now published in Oppitz 2013, I: 421-423.

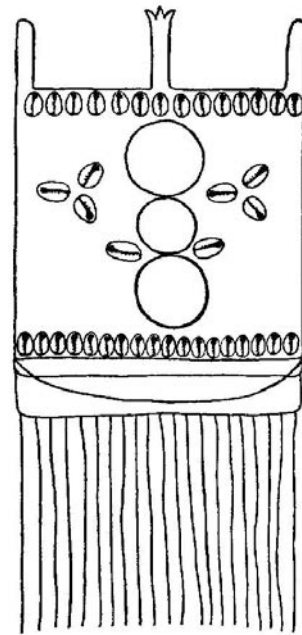
*gshen* priests in the *rabs* of Srid-pa'i lha bon. Our surviving versions of the *gshen* Ya-ngal iconography cited above omit the flat-bell and substitute a long *Ephedra* stalk for the cane, while the iconographies expressed in painted images and in the *rabs* invoking the *gshen* gShen-rab mi-bo have alternatively all of these features as well. The Qiang priest's *jar tä* headgear is part hat or crown fitted upon the head, and part headdress which hangs down behind over the wearer's shoulders and back (figs. 13-15). It is made from the entire skin with tail of the golden snub-nose monkey (*Rhinopithecus sp.*, also "golden-haired monkey" in some ethnographic sources on the region), including its head with eyes and ears.<sup>70</sup> The Qiang priest's monkey skin headgear is also bedecked with white objects, albeit towards the front, specifically cowrie shells and bone discs (fig. 16), recalling the white feathers attached to the *chaybo* headdress of the *nyibu* in the upper Subansiri region who is also the carrier of a sacred cane.<sup>71</sup>



Figures 13-14. Monkey skin *jar tä* hat-cum-headdress of the Qiang *shüpi* shaman, Qiangfeng, Min River basin, Sichuan, China, December 1998 (photos: Michael Oppitz).

<sup>70</sup> A mythological mention for this monkey skin headgear apparently features in the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Pad ma bka' yi thang yig*, "Where a rock demon of eastern Tibet appears as an old man wearing a monkey hat.": Stein 1957: 7.

<sup>71</sup> For details on Qiang priests, their equipment and costumes, see Graham 1958: 55-58, plates 14, 16, Oppitz 2004, Oppitz 2013, I: 489-495, 509-514 and Oppitz 2013, II: 1133-1165 plates 891-955.



Figures 15-16: Rear of *jar tä* monkey skin hat-cum-headdress of the Qiang *shüpi* shaman (l.), Qiangfeng, Min River basin, Sichuan, China, December 1998 (photo: Michael Oppitz); D.C. Graham's sketch of white ornamentation on the headdress at Mu-shang-chai (r.), Min River basin, Sichuan, China, ca. early 1940s.<sup>72</sup>

Different species of golden-haired monkey (*Rhinopithecus sp.* in the east, and the *Trahythecus sp.*, or “golden langur” in the west) are, like the bat, badger and yellow-throated marten associated with the various priests we described above, animals of the *rong* country or forested hill and valley systems of the far southern and eastern Tibetan Plateau margins. The golden-haired monkey in the Qiang inhabited regions is also the priest's tutelary and protector. It is called *abba mula*, with the title *abba* here meaning “father”, which is also applied to the male sky god who is the principle deity in Qiang religion.<sup>73</sup> This parallels the *yab* and *pha* “father” titles always applied to *gshen* names and to the primary male Srid-pa'i lha and Phywa progenitor deities from the sky in our research region, as well as in early Tibetan myths. In some Qiang communities, the same monkey is viewed as the ancestral father of all humanity,<sup>74</sup> just as the monkey features as a male “father” ancestor of human beings in the well-known Tibetan *gter-ma* origin narrative of the monkey and the rock demoness, which dates back in written form to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century at least.<sup>75</sup> The *abba mula* of the Qiang *shüpi* shaman is formed into an effigy made from the actual skull and other dried body parts of a golden-haired monkey, all wrapped around by a bundle of papers such that the skull is completely visible at the top end.<sup>76</sup> Such monkey protectors for priests are also found among the Dakpa-speaking peoples in our research area, as well as among the Mra and their neighbours in the upper Subansiri valley. On the lintel of the main house door specifically in ancestral homes of *bon-po* lineage priests of Srid-pa'i lha Bon who dwell in the Dakpa-speaking region and adjacent areas historically connected via migration, the skull of the golden langur monkey can often be found prominently mounted as a protective tutelary (figs. 17-18) for male off-spring of the patrilineage. In upper Subansiri, during

<sup>72</sup> After Graham 1958: 56 figure 5.

<sup>73</sup> See Graham 1958: 45-46, 51-52, 53, 58, Oppitz 2013, I: 510-513 and Stein 1957: 6-9.

<sup>74</sup> See Oppitz 2013, I: 512, cf. Stein 1957: 6-9.

<sup>75</sup> See Sørensen 1994: 127 n.329, who points out the links made by Buddhist *gter-ma* compilers to monkey heroes in Indian epic literature, but ignores the mythologies of Tibeto-Burman-speaking highland peoples as an alternative source.

<sup>76</sup> See Graham 1958: plate 16 and Oppitz 2013, II: 1135 plate 905, 1164-1165 plates 954, 955.



the burial of a deceased male, particularly a priest, certain wild animals are hunted and their body parts placed or hung directly at the grave site, including the skull and hands of a monkey. The souls of these animals are dedicated to serve the deceased in the land of the dead.<sup>77</sup>



Figures 17-18. Monkey skulls upon the main door lintels of households of hereditary Srid-pa'i lha Bon priests in the Mon-yul Corridor, Arunachal Pradesh, India, January-February 2010 (photo: Toni Huber).

### Reflections

I am well aware that my present contribution raises many points of speculation ranging across time and space, yet I feel this is legitimate. The work attempts to be well-informed, and is done in the exploratory and boundary-pushing spirit of science. If it stimulates debate, whether critical or inspired, then all the better. It is intended as a modest example of what Michael Oppitz once advocated as a “trans-Himalayan ethnography”,<sup>78</sup> one which we can gradually permit ourselves as the ‘critical mass’ of reliable data on the whole region expands. So, beyond the details themselves, what might we be able to point to with the exercise?

<sup>77</sup> See Huber 2011: 91, and Riddi 2006: 201, 206.

<sup>78</sup> Oppitz 1998: 338-341.

With my comparative analysis of the iconography of *gshen* priests I hope to have demonstrated that such priestly figures preserved in Srid-pa'i lha Bon are, on the one hand, not merely local phenomena, nor, on the other hand, are they strictly derived from the common and better known Tibetan Plateau stock of cultural patterns which are represented in g.Yung-drung Bon or “Bon”-identified materials recorded in Tibetan language. Rather, they also fully participate in trans-Himalayan cultural patterns of narrative, symbolism and social practice, as well as systematically reflecting ecological realities of the same region. We now have to seriously consider that these and other such priestly figures who sometimes populate “Bon” myths are not merely derived from wild imaginings, or represent some unlikely attempts at exotic description on the part of authors and redactors of ancient narratives. They actually reflect, and are based upon, real regional traditions of ritual specialists and their practices that exist or once existed on the ground in the extended eastern Himalayas.

Secondly, it is clear that the ancient *gshen* Ya-ngal became extracted from the south-eastern Tibetan landscape that is so intimately associated with the myths of origin and descent of the first king, and went on to meet with three separate destinies in various Tibetan and Himalayan narratives. One set of interested parties had him migrate far to the west. There he was claimed as the apical ancestor of a human patrilineage which became a fledging hereditary lineage of g.Yung-drung Bon followers. Thus, the old regional pattern of claiming ancestral descent from the sky was preserved, yet the *gshen* ancestor himself was relegated to one end of an obscure origin myth long forgotten by all but a few. The redactors of g.Yung-drung Bon scriptures bestowed a different fate upon Ya-ngal, one that represented in all respects a major demotion in favour of another powerful *gshen*, gShen-rab mi-bo, whom they chose to elevate to the heights of a Buddha-like, universal saviour instead.<sup>79</sup> In those Bon scriptures, *gshen* Ya-ngal becomes divorced from geography altogether, effectively pushed underground in an otherwise abstract and anchorless cosmology. Interestingly, while *gshen* gShen-rab mi-bo is certainly a more commanding figure than Ya-ngal in Srid-pa'i lha Bon, ultimately he too remains a working *gshen* with a strong ‘crisis management’ profile, but little else besides. In Ya-ngal’s third destiny, which we have demonstrated herein, he became—and continues to be—one of the central initiator figures appearing in the ritual antecedent narratives of Srid-pa'i lha Bon. In this role, the *gshen* has remained in closest proximity to the original landscape of the descent of the progenitor king. Moreover, his mythical glory and importance as personal priest to the powerful Phywa who descends from the sky to benefit human beings has retained its full integrity. The materials considered here point to the additional fact that the literary image of Ya-ngal as a *gshen* priest has enjoyed a millennium-long circulation in the direct proximity of my research region. I would venture that the other Srid-pa'i lha Bon initiator figures briefly considered here, the clever messenger bat and the *gshen* gShen-rab mi-bo, also both enjoy a very long history in the same region.

While the material presented herein is merely a sampling of similar but far more extensive data on Srid-pa'i lha Bon to appear in my *Source of Life* monograph, it certainly points to something different from the received wisdom about the processes and trajectories involved in the formation of Bon during the past. We can demonstrate the obvious integrity of 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 stages in the development of g.Yung-drung Bon, and features in common with trans-Himalayan priestly cultures. This now forces us to abandon the standard assumption that g.Yung-drung Bon was the single “Bon” lineal descendent and inheritor of pre-11<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan materials. Additionally,

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<sup>79</sup> In this context, mentions in the various *sBa/rBa bzhed* accounts of Bon are interesting: while most forms of Bon were stopped, only the Zhang-zhung and mTshe-mi forms were permitted to continue “on account of their eliminating obstacles for the person of the lord” (*zhang zhung dang tshe mis rje'i sku'i bar chad sel ba'i phyir /*; see Stein 1961a: 28 cf. *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*: 332-333). The Buddhist sources appear to take the *sku-gshen* tradition to which Ya-ngal belonged more seriously due to its links with the progenitor king.



the orthodox notion that Srid-pa'i lha Bon merely represents some sort of 'hybrid' or less 'pure' local manifestation of Bon is entirely untenable; one only need recall that, as another heir to pre-11<sup>th</sup> century "Bon"-identified cultural materials, g.Yung-drung Bon itself came to share a great deal in common with Tibetan-style Buddhism—a development which enabled a certain ability to transcend local beginnings and regional horizons—as well as absorbing folk cultural elements from the extended eastern Himalaya, as we have given examples of here. A second rethinking will now also be necessary in terms of the geography of Bon origins. The dominant and barely questioned normative g.Yung-drung Bon narrative pronounces these origins to be firmly in the far west of the Plateau system. We must now also seriously consider the southeast, but not as being *the* place of Bon origins. Rather, the southeast should more productively be regarded as one of several possible developmental zones, from out of which more than one form of so-called "Bon" religion developed, probably concurrently to some extent, by way of complex and as yet little understood social and cultural processes.

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Note: spellings are as they appear in the originals.

*Da 1* = Title pages:

Text 1: title (1a) illegible, 1a-15b.

Text 2: *Lha gzhung chen mo bzhugso //*, 1a-101b [incomplete].

Text 3: title missing; first line: *Swo'o ston pa gshen rab zhal nas 'di gsung //*, 17 fols. r/v [incomplete].

Text 4: title missing; first line (f.2): *Dong stan ske rte ma sku nang su las //*, 5 fols. r/v [incomplete].

Text 5: *Swo bon thugs dam bskang ba bzhugs sho //*, 1a-4a.

Text 6: *Dgra lha spangs stod bzhugs so //*, 1a-10a.

6 part collection, handwritten loose *dpe-cha* folios, 152 numbered folios (r/v), 5 lines/side, various pages missing or damaged. The *Dgra lha spangs stod* text is a Bon version in which five *dgra-lha* hatch from five eggs of different substances.

Private collection, Da, Bumdeling, Tashi Yangtse Dzongkhag.

Photographed December 2012.

*Gortshom 1* = Title pages:

Ka. *Bshen rabs bon gyis skyabs 'gro sems bskyed bzhugs so //*, 1a-5b.

Kha. *Lha'i bsangs rabs xxx po gcig bzhugs so //*, 1a-20a.

Ga. *Gnam sa cho 'phrul bzhugs so //*, 1a-16b.

Nga. *Lha rabs mched bzhi bzhugs so //*, 1a-9a.

Cha. *Lha'i rgyud bshad bzhugs so //*, 1a-3a.

Ja. *Shugs pa'i smon lam bzhugs so //*, 1a-5a.

Ta. *Mtha' g.yag gyis bstod pa bzhugs so //*, 1a-3a.

Tha. *Lha la 'dus bzhi btang ba bzhugs so //*, 1a-5a.

Da. *Bon gyi bkras sprin phung char 'bebs bzhugso //*, 1a-3a.

9 part collection (each part alphabetically marked, part *Ca* missing), handwritten loose *dpe-cha* folios, 69 numbered folios (r/v), 6 lines/side.

Private collection, Gortshom, Lhuntse Dzongkhag.

Photographed March 2012.

*Lawa 2* = Title pages:

Text 1: *Bon 'di ni bsbyi bsri 'khor mo bcug gsums bzhugsho*, 14 (r/v).

Text 2: Title page (1a-b) missing, 6 (r/v).

Text 3: *Lha rabs rgam chen pha 'ong bzhugshyo*, 1a-7b.

Text 4: *Bon gyis bkra shis bzhugs sho*, 1a-5a.

Text 5: *De nas yar lha sham po'i bskang gso*, 1a-2b.

Text 6: *Lha'i phul bzhugs so*, 1a-2b.

Text 7: *Bon gyis bkra shis bzhugs sho*, 1a-4b.

Text 8: *Bon po gshen bdur gi 'byung khungs bzhugs so*, 6 (r/v).

Text 9: *Bkra shis dpe bzhugs so*, 4 (r/v).

Text 10: *Lha bzhung chen mo bzhugs sho*, 54 (r/v).

Text 11: *Bon gi bsang rab bzhugs so*, 3 (r/v).

Text 12: *Tshe phog dpal phog bzhugs sho*, 12 (r/v).

Text 13: *Lha'i nam la dus bzhi'i bzhugs sho*, 7 (r/v).

Text 14: *Sngon stod bzhugs sho*, 1a-4a.

Text 15: *Bisan rta kha bzhi'i gsol mchod bzhugso*, 1a-7a.

15 part collection, handwritten loose *dpe-cha* folios, 137 numbered and unnumbered (r/v), 4-7 lines/side.

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Photographed December 2012.

*Lhau 2* = Title page (= 1a): *Na gzhung gyi dbu' bzhug sho*.

Handwritten booklet bound on top margin, 102 partially numbered pages (r/v), 6-7 lines/side.

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*Shawa 1* = Title pages:

Text 1: *Lha rabs rgam chen pha wang bzhugs so*, 1a-11a.

Text 2: *Rgam chung dang spos rab bzhugs so*, 12a-19b.

Text 3: *Lha rab dang bdud rtsi bcas pa bzhugs so*, 21a-40b.

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