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DESCENT, TUTELARIES AND ANCESTORS. TRANSMISSION AMONG AUTONOMOUS, *BON* RITUAL SPECIALISTS IN EASTERN BHUTAN AND THE MON-YUL CORRIDOR[1]

TONI HUBER

INTRODUCTION

Concerning the study of all things labelled *bon*/Bon (and there are many), in recent decades knowledge of the organized, soteriological religion calling itself g.Yung-drung Bon has greatly increased, while insightful contributions on narrative materials featuring the word *bon* in Old Tibetan and other early manuscripts continue to appear. The main desideratum in current scholarship is clearly an ethnographic one. We lack a deeper understanding of the many autonomous ritual specialists throughout parts of Tibet and the high Himalayas who, along with their rites and knowledge systems, are in some way or other identified as being *bon* within their own local communities.

A few preliminary comments on terminology will not be amiss here. When referring to the type of ritual specialist I will focus upon here as "autonomous", I have two points in mind: they do not belong to or participate in any organized groups, movements or formal religious identities and institutions; and any individual specialist of this type is usually community specific, that is, they are not simply interchangeable with the position of another specialist found within a different community. However, this is certainly not to imply that many such *bon*-identified specialists within a designated area or region do not share a set of common characteristics, for they often do, to the extent of having highly cognate roles and practices in some cases. Moreover, while the word *bon* and its oral and written derivatives (*bon-po*, '*lhaven*', *lha-bon* '*bombo*', and so on) used to identify autonomous ritual specialists

[1] My gratitude goes to Dasho Karmay Ura, Dorji Gyaltsen and The Centre for Bhutan Studies (Thimphu) for supporting my ongoing research in eastern Bhutan, and to the Hon. Chowna Mein and the state government of Arunachal Pradesh, Sangye Tsering, Pasang Tsering Sharchokpa and Yangkee Lhamo who all generously enabled my field research in the Mon-yul Corridor.

has often served as the trigger of interest and a focal point for scholars to attempt generalizations and comparisons, this is also somewhat superficial and misleading. Other contemporary specialists reported from Tibet and the Himalayas whose designations lack any *bon* referent (e.g., *A-ya, sku-gshen, lha-mi, 'drung'*, to name but a few) have roles and practices closely related to *bon*-identified specialists elsewhere. The only sure resource here are thoroughgoing ethnographic accounts of local contexts, including precise discussions of what *bon* might mean within them.

Geoffrey Samuel, who recently reviewed quite a number of published scholarly accounts of the "(*lha*) *bon* complex" or "village *bon* in the Tibetan borderlands", was only able to conclude that the practices of these specialists across the whole region have "a clear family resemblance to each other", but little else.[2] Questions and speculations about possible connections between contemporary *bon* ritual specialists and the *bon* and *gshen* figures and rites represented in Old Tibetan documents, or with the g.Yung-drung Bon religion, have been frequently posed by scholars, yet all remain essentially unresolved.[3] Moreover, and as Samuel discovered, we are not even able to make strong synchronic comparisons between contemporary specialists throughout the wider region. Part of the impasse here is inherent in the existing data. We are invariably informed about what *bon* ritual specialists do, that is, their rites and procedures, the deities they address and the cosmological frameworks invoked. By comparison, comprehensive information on the fundamental social character of such specialists—what type of persons they represent in their own local worlds, how and why their roles are transmitted over time, the basis for community recognition of their authority, and so on—is mostly rather thin on the ground.

In light of the above remarks, the present contribution in honor of my dear friend and esteemed colleague, Per Kværne, presents a more in-depth investigation into transmission of the role of *bon* ritual specialists, and particularly the importance of descent in that process. Throughout my study region of eastern Bhutan and the adjacent Mon-yul Corridor, the oral terms '*bon*' and '*bonpo*' are used in a somewhat blanket

[2] Samuel 2013: 80–81.

[3] To cite but a few among many examples, see Snellgrove 1967: 20, Mumford 1989: 30–32, Diemberger 1992: 424, Diemberger 2008: 337, 348–49, Bhovar Palje and Yarjung Kromchhe Tamu in Pignède 1993: 479–84, J.F. Rock's ideas summarized by Mathieu and Ho 2011: 72, and Jackson 1979.

fashion to designate a wide range of non-Buddhist ritual specialists and their practices. We can begin to distinguish them all according to general cosmological and ritual orientations. One group specialize in rites of affliction, and mainly address deities of territory and the local environment along the relative, horizontal axis. The other type are vertically oriented for exclusive worship of ancestral sky deities locally classed as Srid-pa'i lha, and who dwell in a multi-tiered sky world in the uppermost zone of the cosmos. The ritual goal in relation to them is replenishing fertility and life-powers related to increase. This distinctive, latter role of the Srid-pa'i lha worship specialist, whose incumbents are exclusively male, is the sole focus of my study.

According to my recent research, Srid-pa'i lha worship is a significant regional phenomenon known from over 60 sites across a Himalayan zone of eastern Bhutan and far western Arunachal Pradesh (India), c. 180 km from west to east, and c. 100 km from north to south. Elsewhere, I have sketched its basic features and will not repeat that material here.[4] However, I will briefly note the range of meanings the word *bon* can have within the specific ethnographic context of Srid-pa'i lha worship and the communities who practice it. In all the oral and written texts used in worship rituals, *bon* occurs as a substantive, meaning "a rite"; it refers to a procedure or sequence of actions. As a name or term referring to a type of being in the same sources, *bon* signifies one type of primordial ritual specialists and tutelaries (the line between them is often blurred). If the word is used to address actual human ritual specialists, then '*bon*' is rarely used, with '*bonpo*' more common.[5] In colloquial speech, '*bon*' can generally refer to Srid-pa'i lha worship in the same blanket manner as it designates any form of non-Buddhist ritual in the region. Yet, it must be carefully understood that this latter usage is most often directed towards outsiders and their expectations; within individual Srid-pa'i lha worship communities local names frequently exist for their rituals and specialists, and they thus have no use for such a general term among themselves. Finally, at a few sites in the far north of the known distribution zone of Srid-pa'i lha worship, that is, sites

[4] See Huber 2013, Huber 2014 and Huber In Press.

[5] Throughout the research region, we also find Srid-pa'i lha ritual specialists orally designated as '*lhabon*, '*lhami*', '*hami*', '*chami*', '*pchami*', '*plami*', '*tshemi*' with a range of written equivalents in ritual manuscripts, while terms such as *bon-po gsas-po*, *gshen*, *gshen-po* and *A-ya* also occur in the written texts to refer to them although not (or no longer) in colloquial speech.

closest to the Tibetan Plateau, we find *bon* (or perhaps better Bon) used in several manuscripts to refer to a particular and unorthodox interpretation of the Tibetan g.Yung-drung Bon religion. In those rare cases, the usage is certainly an artifact of some form of direct or indirect past contact with texts and/or specialists of this latter organized religion, although we currently lack any historical records of such contacts.

Case Studies

In Srid-pa'i lha worship communities, we find no written sources or formal oral traditions explaining transmission of the role and status of *bon* ritual specialists. To illustrate the ideals involved and their articulation with actual social practice, I used observation, interviews and genealogical sources to investigate a series of case studies of transmission, two of which are offered here in summarized form. The first is from the Dzala-speaking Khoma Valley in northeast Bhutan (recorded 2011–12), and the second from Tshangla-speaking Dirang further to the east within the central Mon-yul Corridor in far western Arunachal Pradesh, India (recorded 2009–10). Both cases are rather typical of the dynamics of, and conditions attendant upon, transmission of Srid-pa'i lha worship specialists throughout much of my research region. Since certain informants have reservations about aspects of their biographies or family histories being published, I employ pseudonyms in *italics* for all personal names, replace revealing titles of ritual specialists with the generic word *specialist*, and supress names of specific localities.

Case 1: Somewhere in Khoma Valley

At a village in the Khoma Valley, *specialists* for Srid-pa'i lha worship are reckoned to have been associated with a single house for at least a century and a half. The building is known as the "*specialist's* house". Five generations ago, the *specialist* was *Pema*. He had no sons and only one surviving daughter, *Drolma*. When *Pema* stepped down permanently as the *specialist*, the role was transmitted to his younger brother *Sönam*. *Sönam* himself had no children. Due to local, normative preference for uxorilocal *makpa* marriage and daughter inheritance, *Drolma* assumed control of the "*specialist's* house" and its land. She was expected to transact a *makpa* marriage to bring in a husband. However, she remained single and childless. When her paternal uncle *Sönam* gave

up the role of *specialist*, *Drolma* voluntarily stepped back as household head of the "*specialist's* house" and passed control over to her male cousin *Tsering* on condition that the role of *specialist* be transmitted to him as successor to *Sönam*. This took place. *Drolma* then built a house for herself that abutted directly onto the old "*specialist's* house". *Tsering* was actually *Drolma*'s maternal cousin, but at the time he was the only suitable choice for the role still within her family circle, and moreover *Tsering*'s own family had once had Srid-pa'i lha *specialists* within it. *Tsering* fathered a son, *Dorji*, who was trained by his father and eventually the role of *specialist* was transmitted to him. Since *Dorji* had no sons at the time he stepped down as *specialist*, his nephew *Samten*, the son of his younger sister, was chosen and trained from a young age so that the role of *specialist* could be transmitted to him. *Samten* is the current *specialist* serving in the village. He transacted a *makpa* marriage with a woman from another village, and moved into her natal household further up the Khoma Valley, although he faithfully fulfils his duties as *specialist* back in his own village. The couple recently divorced, not amicably, and their young and only son now lives in the household of *Samten*'s ex-wife, where *Samten*'s ability to hold future influence over the boy remains doubtful. Thus, *Samten* began actively recruiting the next ideal candidate to become his successor from among his junior agnates back in his natal village. His choice is his nephew, the son of his sister who still lives in the old "*specialist's* house". This young boy has already been drawn into the minor role of the ritual assistant whose task it is to cut and gather fragrant shrubs for the rites of purification using fumigation. During annual festivals, he must place incense plants on the fire to ensure a steady supply of smoke. He is thus always on hand during Srid-pa'i lha worship, and can gain full exposure to all the rites being performed by his uncle.

Case 2: Somewhere in Dirang District

Along one of the local river valleys in the Dirang District of far western Arunachal Pradesh, a group of small villages and their even smaller permanently inhabited satellite settlements in more distant areas of cultivation are all served by a single Srid-pa'i lha worship *specialist*. The position has been maintained within the same family line as far back as can be remembered. The former *specialist*, *Ata Drakpa*, who must have had the role transmitted to him approximately a century ago, is recalled in the community as having been a great *specialist* with a very

long period of service. Upon his retirement due to old age, the role of *specialist* was transmitted to his son *Karma* who had been thoroughly trained by his father. *Karma* served as *specialist* for a full 50 years, and passed away during the mid-1980s. The *specialist* role was then transmitted to *Karma*'s eldest son, one of several brothers, all of whom had been prepared for the role to varying degree by their father. When the eldest son who was the *specialist* passed away only a few years before my fieldwork began, no candidate for his replacement willingly came forward from among his surviving kin. Therefore, a large group of local families held a community meeting to discuss the question of transmission, insistent that it be to a man within *Karma*'s patriline. When approached, the youngest of *Karma*'s three sons refused to consider the *specialist* role since he was working as a village *lama*, and argued that it would have conflicted with his existing Buddhist-related activities. The community then approached the middle brother, *Dawa*, who was already aged around 60 at the time, and in many respects a less than ideal candidate for the role of *specialist*. The father of nine children, *Dawa* had left off subsistence farming nearly two decades earlier to seek a steady salary as a paramilitary soldier, and spent 15 years serving at postings mainly far from his home area. Upon retiring, he returned to farming and took up part-time paid employment working in the district township. During the nearly two decades of his working outside of the community, *Dawa* had more or less completely lost contact with the local Srid-pa'i lha worship traditions which are celebrated annually in the form of a short festival. Furthermore, he had never personally experienced the strict dietary taboos essential for the role of *specialist* (no onions, garlic, chicken, pork and goat meat, and no food from hearths where these are cooked), and which must be observed life-long following transmission of the role. *Dawa* admitted he was highly ambivalent about having the role of *specialist* transmitted to him, due to his total lack of experience. He did eventually agree, accepting public pressure to maintain the *specialist* patriline intact. *Dawa* has three adult sons, all of whom have a school education, with one living outside of the valley enlisted in a branch of active service like his father before him. The son whom I personally met, a local farmer, appeared disinterested in the tradition of the *specialist* and knew no details about the annual festival he conducted. However, the son reported that the ancestral deity who is worshipped during the festival appeared to his father in a dream,

and gave him some ritual instructions. This only occurred once, but it helped *Dawa* to overcome his own ambivalence about the transmission.

Discussion

The case studies demonstrate that descent is always the vector serving the process of transmission of the role of Srid-pa'i lha worship specialists. The strong tendency is for transmission to occur intergenerationally among proximate agnates, with an ideal preference for the direct patriline, but also from grandfathers to grandsons, as well as uncles to nephews. Thus, transmission can sometimes skip generations. Instances of intragenerational transmission between brothers can occur, but are less common. Additionally, when all such ideal male descendants are unavailable during crucial periods over one or two generations, transmission can pass via uterine descent as well. This also means that the role of ritual specialist is not only limited to one clan, but can move to another clan via marriage. And where clans still survive in the research region, we indeed find occurrence of this.

Furthermore, the case studies reveal transmission of ritual specialists to be a pragmatic concern of social agency. In some instances, incumbent specialists proactively prefer and begin to recruit potential successors from among their junior agnates. Where this is not the case, an incumbent specialist's immediate family members can participate in managing a transmission, and in certain circumstances it can also become a matter of wider community concern transcending specific kin groups and households. In contrast to this social agency, informants did not describe transmission in terms of choice or intervention by the specialist's tutelary ancestors or the Srid-pa'i lha deities themselves, nor as a "calling" which a new incumbent might receive from such beings (any form of possession or "initiatory illness are never evident). Only very rarely is there mention of a dream or an omen that justified or confirmed the process in some manner.[6] However, other materials strongly imply that the ancestral tutelaries associated with a specialist lineage are indeed considered to be involved in a certain manner, and accordingly I return to this issue below.

[6] In all these respects, and despite certain parallels, Srid-pa'i lha specialists cannot be compared with other non-Buddhist ritual specialists in the region who report and employ both controlled and involuntary possession by deities; compare Balikci 2008.

Although not explicitly detailed in the case studies above, there is a careful avoidance of overlap between old and new incumbents of the same ritual specialist role. Generally, an incumbent *bon* specialist performs his ritual function until old age or infirmity force him to completely give up practicing, or he passes away. New incumbents never assume the role while their living predecessors are still engaged in any form of ritual activity related to Srid-pa'i lha worship. Death of an incumbent is the ideal guarantor that avoidance of overlap is maintained. This is perhaps why many Srid-pa'i lha specialists practice well into their very old age, and are often encouraged by worship communities to continue despite their own wishes to retire from service. While not obviously related to descent upon first view, this avoidance principle is in fact bound up with descent when ideas about a ritual specialist's tutelaries who are ancestral beings are taken account of. I will now discuss this.

Tutelaries, Ancestors and Genealogy

The set of features just described above, including descent as the primary social vector of intergenerational transmission, the ideal case of father to son, transmission via both agnatic and uterine descent, and strict avoidance of overlap between old and new incumbents are all mainstream features of transmission systems for roughly cognate types of ritual specialists in other parts of the wider region, and moreover for those who scholars commonly designate as "shamans", and belonging to a "shamanic tradition-complex" or representing the "shamanic". There are quite a few examples to choose from here. For instance, it is the case in eastern Nepal for the *bombo* among the Tamang, and for those specialists falling within the *ngopa* and *makpa* categories among the Mewahang Rai (and approximated in other closely related Rai groups), while further afield exactly the same features are also true for the *bö* among the Buryat of southern Siberia.[7] Ethnographers of all these shamanic specialists were able to point to a common and named transmission mechanism or quality passed between generations (e.g., Rai *sankhau*, Tamang *àyo*, and Buryat *utkha[taj]/utxa*). In the two cited

[7] See especially Gaenszle 2007 on Mewahang Rai, Höfer 1994 on Tamang, and Krader 1978 and Abykova 2014 on Buryat. Hamayon 1990: 646–47 described Buryat *böögej udxa*, the inherited principle in transmission, as the "essence chamanique".

Himalayan examples, Martin Gaenszle glossed this quality as "inherited priestly competence" and András Höfer as "charisma". This quality is perceived as latent in all those with the right ancestral disposition, and expresses itself under certain circumstances related to the need for transmission to occur, triggered often by a ritual specialist's death or incapacity to practice. It determines the possibility of a relationship forming between a potential incumbent and the ancestral tutelaries of a lineage of ritual specialists transmitted along a descent vector. While the presence of such an inherited quality is strongly implied by the whole set of features associated with transmission of Srid-pa'i lha worship specialists, especially when viewed in a comparative context, other evidence is necessary to fully reveal it.

Srid-pa'i lha worship specialists often invoke tutelaries during their rites. These beings are variously termed *bon/-po*, *gshen/-po*, *mtshe-mi*, *gsas/-po* and so on in local ritual texts, while the same terms are all specific designations for archetypal ritual specialists appearing in a range of early Tibetan manuscripts recording *rabs* narratives and/or rites. In Srid-pa'i lha worship, tutelaries assist the ritual specialist by being dispatched to undertake tasks, or by surrounding his body like a protective cloak to shield him from harm. They are often most closely associated with the specialist's headgear, and can be symbolically referenced in aspects of his costume. These tutelaries are commonly invoked as sets (of four, five or nine) indexed to the cardinal directions, or as collectives indexed to the external surfaces of the specialist's body at which they are defensively stationed (they never enter into the body, and possession experiences by any definition are never reported by Srid-pa'i lha specialists). Names apart, most of these same features are widely reported for ritual specialists elsewhere who are described as "shamans" or as being "shamanic".

The tutelaries are sometimes explicitly referred to as "ancestors" (*mes/-po*), and frequently allotted male kin terms. One particular practice related to them is the use of "genealogies" (*mes rabs*) during ritual performance. Such genealogical texts are preserved in written manuscripts, from which they are orally chanted by the specialist as part of his rites. Here I will cite an example of one such text listing the descent line of a local specialist, and then comment upon it.

The example text comes from the Dakpa-speaking Hoongla village cluster in the Dagpanang area of Tawang District, located in the northern Mon-yul Corridor. The text, simply entitled "*Genealogy*" (*Mes*

rabs) and recorded in a manuscript, is still chanted annually during Srid-pa'i lha worship at Hoongla. It is essentially a list of titles and names set within a short, repeating formula describing transmission. For convenience, I have extracted the ancestral designations and proper names and indexed them to generational numbering:

[1] *[m]tshe-mi* bsDo(-bzhi)
[2] *[m]tshe-mi* lDa'u(-bzhi)[8]
[3] *snga-pho* rGyal-po'u
[4] *mes* bKrugs-po
[5] *mes* bsKro'u
[6] *mes* Gor-'dar
[7] *mes* bsKra'u-gdon
[8] *mes* Ri
[9] *mes* bSang
[10] (*yang*) bSrang
[11] *mes* dPan
[12] *mes* sPan-ma-'dar
[13] *mes* Nir
[14] *mes* rGyal-po
[15] *mes* rGyal-'dar
[16] *mes* Gyings
[17] *mes* 'Dar
[18] *mes* 'Dar-gyis
[19] *mes* Rin
[20] *mes* Rin-gyi'
[21] *mes* Nor-bu Seng-ge
[22] *mes* Nor-bu Rin-chen
[23] *mes* Gom-bu
[24] *mes* Ri-sha
[25] *mes* Bla-ma Nor-bu
[26] *mes* sNgags-bcangs
[27] *mes* rDo-rje Tshe-ring
[28] *mes* Khams-pa
[29] *mes* 'Da'u-la
[30] *mes* Si-dar
[31] *mes* Byu-'di'u
[32] *mes* bsTan-'dzin
[33] *mes* Padma sDu-ru
[34] *mes* Ngang-'dzin [= Nga-dbang bsTan-'dzin]

[8] The meaning of *bsdo bzhi* and *lda'u bzhi* remains uncertain, with clarification unavailable from oral sources. They could be proper names following the *[m]tshe-mi* title, or refer to a set of "four" (*bzhi*) *[m]tshe-mi*. This latter possibility is plausible since ancestral tutelaries and archetypal specialists such as these are often cited in sets of four; see n. 15 below.

[35] *mes* Padma dBang-phyug
[36] *mes A-pa* Bla-ma Hri-'dar.[9]

At least within living memory, it is known that the text records the names of real persons. The last named "father" (*A-pa*) Bla-ma Hri-'dar here, who is also indicated as the scribe at the end of the *Mes rabs* text, passed away within the preceding decades and is still well-remembered as the former *bon* ritual specialist serving the Hoongla community.[10] His role was transmitted to his son, who was the incumbent specialist during the period of my field research.

Compared with the known, contingent ethnographic realities in the case studies, the Hoongla *Mes rabs* appears at first sight to represent the ideal of transmission via a descent vector: an unbroken, intergenerational patriline, extending through great generational depth right back to an ancestral apex. Thus, it is rather typical of genealogy as a social practice, where representing unbroken continuity is the rhetorical necessity. Be that as it may, here we are not only dealing with a name list of dead human incumbents who, at least by colloquial report, are held to be related in terms of biological or normative social descent (even if the exact type and degree of filiation is no longer transparent). Each generation also represents the "ancestor" (*mes*) from and through whom the following generation received the transmission. Thus, marked as ancestors, the names represent both the individual incumbents and the total ancestral collective through whom transmission passed.

Moreover, ancestors listed in such genealogies are not just a claim about the past; they assume a tutelary role by being invoked for support during rites in the here and now. Such invocation is in fact the primary ritual purpose of chanting these texts. The list first identifies a primor-

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[9] See *Hoongla* 2: 5a, 6–6b, 1, here transcribed in original, unedited form (note: the *x* characters appear in the original in red ink): *dang po tshe mi bsdo bzhi las ÷* [5b] *tshe mi lda'u bzhi srid su ya'a ÷ x snga pho rgyal po'u xxx mee bkrugs po tshe las xxx mee bskro'u ku tshe las xx mee gor 'dar tshe las xx mee bskra'u gdon ku tshe las xx mee ri ku tshe las xx mee bsang ku tshe las xx yang bsrang ku tshe las xx med dpan ku tshe las xx span ma 'dar ku tshe las xx mee nir ku tshe las xx mee rgyal po tshe las xx* [6a] *mee rgyal 'dar ku tshe las xx mee gyings ku tshe las xx mee 'dar ku tshe las xx mes 'dar gyis ku tshe las xx mee rin ku tshe las xx mee rin gyi'a ku tshe xx mee nor bu seng ge tshe las xx mee nor bu rin bcen tshe las xx mee gom bu xxx mee ri sha ku tshe las xx mee bla ma nor bu ku tshe las xx mee sngags bcangs tshe las xx mee 'dor tshing tshe las xx mee khams pa ku tshe las xx mee 'da'u la ku tshe las xx mee sidar ku tshe las xxx mee byu 'di'u xx mee bsten zin ku tshe las xx mee padma sdu ru ku tshe las xxxx mee ngang 'dzin tshe las xx mee padma dbang phyug tshe las xxx* [6b] *mes A pa bla ma hri 'dar gyis su'i ti /.*

[10] A brief portrait of Bla-ma Hri-'dar was given by Nanda 1982: 115–16.

dial or archetypal ritual specialist as apical ancestor for the entire transmission. The Hoongla *Mes rabs* claims a *mtshe-mi* (sometimes locally written *tshe-mi*) at its apex. While mTshe-mi has often been construed as a proper name by scholars when interpreting older Tibetan myths, in Srid-pa'i lha Bon texts *mtshe-mi* is a descriptive title for a particular type of specialist (lit. the "*Ephedra* man") who employs the *Ephedra* plant (*mtshe*) to conduct rites, and the citation and use of this plant is indeed a part of Srid-pa'i lha worship in some areas. Ancestral descent from a *mtshe-mi* claimed in the genealogy is a clear statement that the original qualities and efficacy of the primordial *mtshe-mi* are transmitted to each generation of incumbents. And crucially, since the whole list is always invoked, the entire ancestral collective named therein is thus enlisted for tutelary support. This, too, is also found in cognate Himalayan shamanic traditions.[11]

Following the apical ancestor, the names of each successive ancestor are framed by a repeating formula written in Dakpa inflected Tibetan: *mee X ku tshe las srid du ya'a*,[12] literally "[the *(m)tshe-mi*] was extended through the *tshe* of ancestor X". What this refers to is the inherited carrier or ancestral disposition that qualifies an incumbent as a ritual specialist associated with the line of tutelary ancestors, viz. the "inherited priestly competence" or "charisma" described for the aforementioned shamans in east Nepal and elsewhere. The word *tshe* here must not be misunderstood; it has no semantic sense of temporality as is commonly the case in Tibetan Buddhist cultural discourse related to ritual, astrology, divination and medicine.[13] In all Srid-pa'i lha ritual contexts, *tshe* generally means "life" as in the fact of "being alive", but as a ritual concept it specifically refers to the procreative power of males. Acquisition of *tshe* from the Srid-pa'i lha ancestral deities in the multi-tiered sky world at the top of the cosmos is one of the prime ritual goals for the entire worship system, and the local *bon* ritual specialist is considered the only intermediary qualified to achieve this on behalf of ritual sponsors. *Tshe* flowing downwards from sky ancestors into a man's body keeps him alive and offers him fertility for creation of new

[11] Compare invocation of all the *gyúppa mème* and *gyúppa phamo* by Tamang *bombo*; Höfer 1994: *passim*.

[12] *Mee* < Tib. *mes*; *ku* is a written form of the oral Dakpa and Dzala genitive; *ya*, *ya'a*, *yagu* are written forms of the oral Dakpa verb (and auxiliary) "to do/was done/took place".

[13] See the discussions of *tshe* throughout Gerke 2012.

life. Exactly the same concept of inherited carrier or ancestral disposition necessary for transmission via a descent vector exists in the ritual culture of the Tamang *bombo*. The Tamang term for this is *àyo*, which Höfer correctly identified with the Zhang-zhung word *A-yu* equivalent to *tshe* or "life" in Tibetan.[14] This is just one of a number of closely cognate features in the ritual systems of both *bombo* and Srid-pa'i lha worship specialists.[15] In the present context, an intriguing aspect of the formulation here is the semantic ambivalence surrounding the local variant *tshe-mi* and the formal Tibetan *mtshe-mi*. While account must be taken of highly irregular spellings in these local manuscripts, an older correlation between *tshe* and *mtshe* as fundamental "life" concepts may be suggested here.[16]

We can conclude that the transmission system for Srid-pa'i lha specialists represents a strong genealogical claim since human descent is invariably the vector. The system as such permits no room for the specialist to be any kind of "spiritual descendent" by association outside of or beyond descent.[17] Although this form of transmission incorporates modes of flexibility, some commentators might characterize it as being further towards the "mechanical" or "automatic" end of a spectrum than comparable systems appear to be elsewhere in the region.[18] Moreover, the agency involved can best be described as essentially "a family affair", in the sense that it implicates both living kin and deceased kin who are ancestors.

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[14] See Höfer 1994: 21–23, 198 n. 659, *Zhangzhung*: 294, Haarh 1968: 13, 43, Martin 2010: 245.

[15] For example, the ultimate source of a *bombo*'s *àyo* are apical ancestors among four primordial *bombo* (or *bon syì* in Old Tamang ritual language, cf. Tib. *bon bzhi*) who inhabit the four directions of the cosmos, and whose names are Naru Bon, Jyangsonam Bon, Nup Bálding Bon and Dol Bon (an alternative list has Jyangsonam Bon, Nup Bálding Bon, Loyurung Bon, Syaryurung Bon and Naru Bon); Höfer 1994: 21–22 n. 16, 24, 30, 42 *et passim*. A parallel scheme of tutelaries invoked by specialists and fairly widespread in Srid-pa'i lha worship is known as the *g.yung-drung bon bzhi*. Their assigned cardinal directions and names are *shar bon* Bar-ba Gling-bzhi, *lho bon* Ma-'ong bZang-chen, *nub bon* sPyan-mig bZang-chen, *byang bon* Khri-mrtsi Na-mrtsi (an alternative list has *shar* Bar-ra Gling-bzhi, *lho* 'De-bo gZungs-chen, *nub* mKhri-mangs rGyal-ba and *byang* mKhri-chen rNams-lde'u).

[16] See the interpretation by Stein 1971: 507–508, n.77, referring to IOL Tib J 0734, and noting that *Ephedra* is now the strongest candidate for the original botanical identity of the ancient Indo-Iranian *soma/haoma* stimulant; see Falk 1989, Houben 2003. *Ephedra* has also been found deposited in early tombs around the margins of the Tibetan Plateau.

[17] Compare Balikci 2008: 148–49.

[18] See Gaenszle 2002: 72, Höfer 1994: 23.

In closing my presentation, a final piece of "negative evidence" is worth mentioning. There are areas and individual sites within the distribution zone of Srid-pa'i lha worship where transmission of ritual specialist roles based upon descent has been completely replaced by community appointment to the same roles. This is especially pronounced throughout the Kheng-speaking zones in Bhutan, primarily in modern Zhemgang Dzongkhag. This shift appears to be a historical development in response to periodic social upheavals or stresses specific to certain areas and sites, and which cause *bon* specialist lineages to be permanently interrupted.[19] Accordingly, nowadays wherever community appointment has become well established at a site, we neither find use of tutelary deities nor the special rites in which they are invoked. Thus, at such sites Srid-pa'i lha worship must be considered as having become fundamentally different in character.

Summary Comments

One purpose herein has been to demonstrate the value of richer and broader ethnographic data about autonomous, *bon*-identified ritual specialists in the Himalayas and Tibet. The present study not only contributes documentation and understanding of Srid-pa'i lha worship as a significant phenomenon, but also reveals very specific parallels between the culture of its specialists and those found elsewhere in the Himalayas and beyond. The social and ritual character of Srid-pa'i lha worship specialists can also be viewed in relation to critiques and questions on the validity of applying the terms shaman and shamanic (and "shamanism") to *bon*-identified phenomena.[20] Such critiques of "*bon* shamans" have their merits in terms of history and the study of religions, yet their applicability is limited in relation to ethnography. Anthropologists have already described a wide variety of Himalayan ritual specialists as shamans when defining their terms of inquiry together with adequate com-

[19] On pre-modern migrations related to tax avoidance and conflict, political upheavals, Kheng-speaking diaspora populations, and modern out-migration from Kheng, see Dorji Penjore 2009 and Sharma 1961: 8. As an example of an individual site elsewhere, I can mention Ney (Na'i) in Kurtö where a former system of transmission by descent was replaced with community appointment when the hereditary *chami* specialist and his household migrated out of the region in the premodern period to avoid heavy taxation.

[20] See, for instance, Bjerken 2004, Kværne 2009.

parative data. Based upon my findings, shaman and shamanic are appropriate analytical descriptions for contemporary *bon* specialists who worship Srid-pa'i lha.

I will conclude by proposing a backward-looking speculation related to transmission of ritual specialist roles via descent vectors, and the centrality of ancestors as tutelaries and archetypal figures in such systems. As has often been noted, *gshen* and *bon* specialists appearing in Old Tibetan documents and other early manuscripts (e.g., those from dGa'-thang 'Bum-pa-che) are designated by male kin terms meaning "father" (*pa/pha, pha-bo*, *yab* and *pha dang yab*) and "elder brother" (*A-bo*, *A'o*).[21] Perhaps wisely, most observers have avoided explaining this feature, with attempts to account for it being unsupported and unconvincing.[22] In a distinct corpus of early post-11th century genealogical and origin narratives and ritual texts composed in Classical Tibetan—but certainly inspired by or derived from the language and concepts of the older Tibetan royal cult—the same male kin terms also designate sky deities classed as *lha, phywa* and *srid-pa'i lha* who represent apical progenitor figures (e.g., *yab* sTag-cha Yal-yol, Yab-lha brDal-drug, *pha dang yab* 'Od-de Gung-rgyal, and so on), and who are thus sources of life.[23] This same feature is particularly pronounced in *rabs* manuscripts used for contemporary Srid-pa'i lha worship, where "father" (*pha/pha-bo*, *yab, pha dang yab* and *pha-jo*) and "elder brother" (*jo-bo, jo-jo, phu-bo*, *pho-bo*, *A-bo*, *A'o, achi*, *A-ya*) terms apply to both progenitor deities—most of whom are the same as those appearing in the early post-11th century sources just cited above—and their ritual specialists. Moreover, identical use of male kin terms features among ritual specialists and their traditions at points right along the extended eastern Himalayas.[24]

I would propose that, in the aforementioned contexts, these kin terms are best understood as expressions of a particular form of *genealogical*

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[21] First pointed out by Ariane Macdonald, see Stein 2010: 245, 256–58, 264.

[22] See, for example, Bellezza 2013: 135 n.188, 164 discussing *pha-bo* in the dGa'-thang Bum-pa-che manuscripts (e.g., applied to *gshen* Ya-ngal on p.164): "This quaintly constructed O.T. [Old Tibetan] term may be read as an honorific expressing venerability or a storied quality." In fact, this uncommon form also recalls "elder brother" terms, such as *phu-bo* and *pho-bo*.

[23] See, respectively, *mKhas pa lDe'u*: 229 = f.129r, and *Mi'u rigs*: 1 = f.3r. The spelling Yab-lha brdal-drug is a later "father" interpretation of earlier *ya bla* "on high", albeit reflecting older notions of the sky *lha* as paternal, ancestor-protectors.

[24] See Ramble 2007: 714 for historical and ethnographic evidence of *A-ya* as both a title for ritual specialists and a kin term referring to some forms of "elder brother" (note:

thinking, one that can also be described as *religious* in character. The terms themselves reference perceived descent links between ritual specialists and the tutelaries who are also their ancestors, and ultimately, as well, a genealogical connection back to the ancestral realm of apical progenitor deities from whom the source of life can be traced, and with whom the designated specialist stands in a relation as intermediary. In fundamental respects, the older Tibetan royal cult encapsulates the same genealogical thinking and may even be closely related to its occurrence in the realm of ritual specialists.[25] We are looking at a cultural pattern—or by now, the fragments of one—among highland speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages, evident across space and time in the extended eastern Himalayas and over parts of the Tibetan Plateau. It is a pattern indicative of what Maurice Bloch usefully referred to as the "transcendental social" when formulating alternative ways of thinking about "religion" beyond artificial category separations.[26] If my proposal here has any merit, it might enable us to consider anew questions and speculations already posed on possible connections between contemporary, autonomous *bon* ritual specialists and a body of much older *bon*-identified materials represented in earlier Tibetan manuscripts.

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aya is also a kin term meaning "eldest son" in Gurung/Tamu-kwi, cf. *a'i* for "eldest brother"; Strickland 1982: 319). On cognate *paju/pucu/pa-chyu/poju/pha-jo* terms for ritual specialists, see Pignède 1993 [1966]: 307–11 *et passim*, Mumford 1989: 32, 119–25, 143–49, 169–75, Strickland 1982: chapter 1, esp. pp. 49, 56–59, *et passim* for the western Gurung/Tamu, and Aris 1979: 151 and Sonam Kinga 2004: 112–13 for Bhutan, while Tib. *pha-jo* is a colloquial lHo-brag term for 'father'. Both priests and progenitor figures in the oral traditions of many populations speaking Tani languages/dialects in central Arunachal Pradesh are termed "father" (*Aba, Abo, Ab*) and "grandfather" (*Ato*); see Blackburn 2010: 166–69 for Apatani examples. For *abba* "father" terms applied to both tutelaries of ritual specialists and apical progenitor sky deities among the Qiang of western Sichuan, see Graham 1958: 45–46, 51–52, 53, 58.

[25] For discussions of Old Tibetan *mgon-tsun* (and variants), *yab, yab-myes* and *lha*, see Beckwith 2011, Stein 2010 and Walter 2009.

[26] Bloch 2008: 2057–58, cf. Hazod 2014.

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