

# Buddhism in Central Asia III

*Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences, Doctrines*

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# Non-Buddhist Superhuman Beings in Early Tibetan Religious Literature

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## Abstract

This contribution discusses non-Buddhist religious practices and pantheons evident in documents from the Tibetan imperial period (ca. 600–850) and shortly afterwards that influenced the growing Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and which were later incorporated into the established Bön (Tib. *bon*) religion that did not exist as such at the imperial court. While problematising our evidence for indigenous Tibetan religious traditions existing before the advent of Buddhism in Tibet, let alone a single pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet, this contribution identifies some rituals, beliefs and narratives that influenced later Buddhist practice, ideology and historiography. It reveals that non-Buddhist elements were positively incorporated into some Buddhist literature and ritual, as well as elsewhere forming a negative ‘other’ to which Tibetan Buddhist identity was opposed.

## 1 Introduction

If we define ‘religion’ along with Melford Spiro as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings,”<sup>1</sup> then we immediately face a problem in discussing early, indigenous, non-Buddhist religious influence on Tibetan Buddhism. We can identify what appear to be superhuman beings (‘radically other than’, though not necessarily ‘better than’, humans), and in this chapter I refer to them as deities, gods, spirits and so forth (making no major distinctions between such terms).<sup>2</sup> Yet,

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1 Melford Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 196. Here, I am not advocating for Spiro’s definition, or for any one definition as satisfactory. Instead, I wish to use this definition as a useful oversimplification of more complex realities; in this case, a heuristic device to discuss the ‘religious’ within the Tibetan linguistic zone (an area of shared language and attendant ‘cultural’ patterns and postulations).

2 Useful discussions of superhuman, ‘meta-human’ or ‘metapersons’ in the context of early Tibetan religion and society are found in Guntram Hazod, Christian Jahoda, and Mathias

it is the ‘institution’ in Spiro’s definition that scholars have struggled to locate or failed to convincingly reconstruct even in the Tibetan imperial period (ca. 600–850)—when Buddhism first entered the Tibetan Plateau and was spread especially by the later emperors and their court apparatus in the central Tibetan heartland of the empire—let alone in the earlier, pre-historical period.

The non-Buddhist religion named Bön (Tib. *bon*) was not an institution before the fall of the empire and instead gradually took shape as Buddhism took root among local populations during the early post-imperial period (see below). Thus, the established Bön religion should not be assumed to represent the pre-Buddhist or indigenous religion of Tibet. These identifiers (along with shamanic) of Bön are among the most in need of scare quotes in Tibetan studies. Such a statement is not intended to diminish Bön, sublimating or demoting it beneath Buddhism by denying its myths or path to liberation through enlightenment as some form of plagiarism. The rich history of influences and adaptations in both directions throughout later Tibetan history shows Bön to be a strong tradition in its own right that can be studied in a number of ways that bear rich fruit. However, it is important not to let anachronisms obscure a better understanding of how influences from outside Tibetan Buddhism played formative roles in its gestation and maturation. Similar creative processes affected the contemporaneous birth of Bön too, though this topic falls outside this chapter’s purview.

Returning to Spiro, the lack of an identifiable religious institution that influenced Tibetan Buddhism is also not such a problem for this volume, since ‘non-Buddhist influences’ do not need to come from an already established religious institution to make an impact. In this contribution though, I shall use the adjective ‘religious’ to refer to institutional and non-institutional interaction with superhuman beings but reserve the noun ‘(a) religion’ for Buddhism and Bön.

A second problem concerns our data. No ‘pre-Buddhist’ literature and very little datable pre-Buddhist art (excluding ‘animal-style’ rock art) is extant that we can unproblematically draw upon to distinguish the ‘non-Buddhist’

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Fermer, “Foreword,” in *The Social and the Religious in the Making of Tibetan Societies: New Perspectives on Imperial Tibet*, ed. Guntram Hazod, Christian Jahoda, and Mathias Fermer (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2022), 2–3, and Guntram Hazod, “The ‘Stranger-King’ and the Temple: The Tibetan Ruler Image Retained in Post-Imperial Environments—the Example of the *lha* of Khra ’brug,” in *The Social and the Religious in the Making of Tibetan Societies: New Perspectives on Imperial Tibet*, ed. Guntram Hazod, Christian Jahoda, and Mathias Fermer (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2022), esp. 61–63.

element that influenced Tibetan Buddhism from Buddhism itself. As Geoffrey Samuel has observed:

Tibetan archaeology is in a much more basic state [than elsewhere], so the archaeological record cannot so easily be used as a background into which the cultural fragments [of Tibetan religion] might be fitted. However, there is enough to suggest, at least, various ideas around which early Tibetan concepts of place and spirit seem to cohere.<sup>3</sup>

Early speculations concerning imperial-period non-Buddhist Tibetan (religious) concepts have been partially corroborated by Old Tibetan literary documents and recent scholarship based on them, as well as by non-documentary evidence, as archaeology returns in a limited way to the Tibetan Plateau. These investigations shed light on not only prehistoric ritual practices but also the important tumulus burial tradition of aristocratic elites and rulers contemporaneous with the imperial period, whose coffin paintings depict royal hunts, feasts and animal sacrifices and the important aspects of imperial life.<sup>4</sup> However, the Tibetan script was only created in the early-to-middle seventh century. Thus, any literature containing what we could define as religious was obviously not ‘pre-Buddhist’ when it was written down and cannot unproblematically be said to be unaffected by Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> Some literature appears to

3 Geoffrey Samuel, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 188.

4 See especially Marc Aldenderfer, “Bringing Down the Mountain: Standing Stones on the Northern and Central Tibetan Plateau, 500 BCE–CE 500,” in *Cult in Context: Reconsidering Ritual in Archaeology*, ed. David A. Barraclough and Caroline Malone (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 242–248; Amy Heller, “Observations on Painted Coffin Panels of the Tibetan Empire,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 45 (2016): 147–202.

5 Scholars have long known that some of our information on non-Buddhist ritual practices from the Tibetan imperial period comes from Buddhists seeking to refute their logic and/or efficacy; see the discussion and sources referenced in Sam van Schaik, “The Naming of the Tibetan Religion: *Bon* and *Chos* in the Tibetan Imperial Period,” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1 (2013): 227–240. Joanna Bialek has recently argued that certain other texts dating from close to this period were recorded not by the practitioners themselves but by outsiders, including non-Tibetans and Buddhists; see Joanna Bialek, “‘Tibetan’—All-Inclusive? Rethinking the ‘Tibetan-ity’ of the ‘Tibetan Empire,’” in *The Social and the Religious in the Making of Tibetan Societies: New Perspectives on Imperial Tibet*, ed. Guntram Hazod, Christian Jahoda, and Mathias Fermer (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2022), 42; Joanna Bialek, “Filtered Through Multiple Lenses: What We Think Buddhists Thought Ritual Specialists Did. Preliminary Remarks on the Character of Old Tibetan Funerary Texts Exemplified with 10L Tib J 489 and 10L Tib J 562,” in *Guruparamparā: Studies on Buddhism, India, Tibet and More in Honour of Professor Marek Mejer*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak et al. (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022), 75–76.

be relatively unaffected and will be described below, but the contemporaneity of our earliest evidence for both Buddhism and non-Buddhist practices should be borne in mind when surveying these sources.

One final caveat is necessary at the outset. Previous studies of early Tibetan religion and Buddhism have tended to apply their descriptions to all Tibetan speakers throughout the Tibetan Plateau or even, implicitly, non-Tibetan speakers. In contrast, here large geographic variation in what was considered important to Tibetan-speaking people (even narrowly conceived) must be assumed. Yet, the level of that variation is at present very much an unknown quantity and thus should be considered a vital hidden factor in our analysis. People across the Tibetan Plateau spoke numerous languages before the imperial introduction/imposition of spoken and written Tibetan during the seventh to ninth centuries, while many present-day minority languages and their attendant cultures and religious traditions still exist within the former borders of the Tibetan Empire (ca. 7th c. to 842, Tib. Bod chen po).<sup>6</sup> Even two people speaking some form of Tibetan today, but one brought up in Sichuan (四川) and the other in western Nepal, say, may be fed by completely different streams of mythic thought and ritual practice, and not only as a result of the hegemony of discourses of nation, state and province in current media. Since religious landscapes shift non-uniformly over time, some mythic or ritual motifs can exert major influence on Tibetans in some places and be unknown a few valleys away. Furthermore, the sources privileged for investigating historical external influence on Tibetan Buddhism is overwhelmingly literary data, rather than anthropological data from today. This is understandable given current constraints on travel in Tibetan regions, but not keeping this fact in mind may bias our analysis in favour of the elite discourses of literate male Buddhist masters with positions of power and large followings in history. Nevertheless, this contribution will identify some examples of external influence on Tibetan Buddhism as the latter came into being from the Tibetan imperial period (ca. 600–850) onwards.

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6 For a useful introductory account of these processes and their relations to power and prestige, see Birgit Kellner, "Vernacular Literacy in Tibet: Present Debates and Historical Beginnings," in *Anfangsgeschichten / Origin Stories: Der Beginn volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit in komparatistischer Perspektive / The Rise of Vernacular Literacy in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Norbert Kössinger et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 381–402.

## 2 Non-Buddhist Traditions in the Tibetan Linguistic Zone

A number of ethnographers have recently described evidence of certain non-Buddhist religious practices, ideas and narratives within Tibetan-speaking communities in the eastern Himalayas today—or existing only in a minor way on the margins of these communities' Buddhism (or Hinduism, etc.). The object of this research has been recently summarised by Samuel under the term *bön*, but he stresses that this is not to be confused with Bön.<sup>7</sup> The Bön religion describes a certain pantheon of deities that form a hierarchy reaching up to the most ethereal enlightened beings. In this respect, Bön resembles Buddhism by distinguishing between mundane (Skt. *laukika*, Tib. *'jig rten pa*) and supra-mundane (Skt. *lokottara*, Tib. *'jig rten las 'das pa*) deities, as well as in the similar value that both religions place on following a path to liberation by enlightenment. In contrast, among the Khumbo, the heavenly deity ritualist that the anthropological literature refers to as *lhaven* (Tib. *lHa bon*) pronounces “invocations [that] name more than a hundred local spirits in relation to various places in the Khumbo territory.”<sup>8</sup> The heavenly deity ritualists of the Te community, having different functions from in Khumbo and known in the literature as *lhawen*, “still carry out animal sacrifices to the local deities or *yul lha*” today.<sup>9</sup> The Tamang heavenly deity ritualist, different again and known as *lambu* (perhaps also related to Tib. *lHa bon*) “like the Khumbo and Te *lha-bon*,

7 Geoffrey Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity: Bon Priests and Ritual Practitioners in the Himalayas,” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1 (2013): 77–97. Echoing my point above, Samuel (*ibid.*, 92) concludes that “if Western scholars from the beginning had been less caught up in the idea of a ‘Bon religion’ separate from ‘Buddhism’, and more able to figure both *chos* (‘Buddhism’) and *bon* as complex, situationally-variable signifiers used in a variety of historically-specific contexts, we might have found the whole question of what Bon means less paradoxical and contradictory.” In a similar vein, Charles Ramble has used the term ‘pagan’ to refer to a similar object of investigation and also warned against identifying it either with “high religion” like Buddhism or Bön, or with “some organised creed called ‘Paganism’”; see Charles Ramble, *The Navel of the Demoness: Tibetan Buddhism and Civil Religion in Highland Nepal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially page 369, n. 1.

8 *Ibid.*, 82; see also Hildegard Diemberger, “Die beseelte Landschaft: Natur, Kosmologie und Gesellschaft im tibetischen Kulturraum am Beispiel der Khumbo Ostnepals,” in *Metamorphosen der Natur*, ed. Andre Gingrich and Elke Mader (Vienna: Bohlau, 2002), 103–125.

9 Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity,” 83; see also Ramble, *The Navel of the Demoness*.



has a fixed repertoire of chants referring to the various local deities.”<sup>10</sup> Similar non-Buddhist ritual interactions with superhuman beings are found elsewhere in Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and perhaps also Yunnan (雲南). Samuel also notes that:

[W]hile there is a shamanic component to *bön* in some of the Nepalese and Sikkimese material, the key role, the one most specifically labelled as *bönben*, *lhaven*, *lambu* etc., is not about possession, but about the making of invocations and offerings to local gods. These invocations and the ritual procedures that go with them, including the offering of *torma*, the sacrificial offering-cakes of butter and barley-flour widely used also in the ritual of the lamas, are the key ritual knowledge for these specialists.<sup>11</sup>

However, as part of his argument that *bön* does not mean any single thing applicable to all the phenomena across Tibet and the Himalayas called *Bön*, *bon*, *bön* and variants, Samuel distances these practitioners’ rituals from the religious practices of the Tibetan imperial period. He states:

The role of *bon* and *gshen* in non-Buddhist religious documents from Dunhuang [... and] the use of [the term] *bon* in such texts seems to have little relationship to the other senses of *Bon* listed above.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, is this true with respect to their pantheon or their distinctions between mundane and supra-mundane in regard?

There is a dearth of sources for the oldest religious strata current among the everyday subjects of the Tibetan Empire. Undoubtedly, as Samuel elsewhere observes:

Tibetan society also had a vast body of informal knowledge, some of it explicit in stories, proverbs, craft lore and the like, much of it implicit. This was certainly true of the Tibetans before the coming of Buddhism. Matters such as the knowledge of proverbs, oratorical ability, knowledge of wedding songs and speeches, folk stories and narrations, invocations

10 Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity,” 85; see also David Holmberg, “Ritual Paradoxes in Nepal: Comparative Perspectives on Tamang Religion,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 43.4 (1984): 697–722.

11 Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity,” 87.

12 *Ibid.*, 89.

to local deities, and the like were of great importance among both agricultural and pastoral populations.<sup>13</sup>

The earliest such extant ritual-myth literature contains many varied ‘antecedent’ liturgical narratives (and collections of the same) to guide the successful performance of a certain ritual by recounting how it was performed in the distant past.<sup>14</sup> These ritual tales are sometimes called ritual narrations (Tib. *smrang*, derived from *smra ba* ‘to speak’, much like the etymologies of *myth* or *saga* suggest shared roots with the words ‘mouth’ and ‘say’ respectively),<sup>15</sup> and the texts themselves contain the terms ‘account’ (Tib. *rabs*, perhaps of a succession of events or a lineage) or ‘history’ (Tib. *lo rgyus*, lit. a ‘collection of tidings/reports’)—but these terms are not exclusive to such ritual texts.<sup>16</sup> These narratives can be collected together in short or long ‘catalogues’ of ritual performances said to have first taken place in different geographical or chronological settings. Catalogues cover a spectrum from brief shorthand lists to series of extended retellings and perhaps reflect ritual practice, while also being found as myth in Tibetan historiography.<sup>17</sup>

Recent research suggests that ritual-myths related to longevity (Tib. *tshe*), a ‘good death’ (that does not disturb the spirit of the deceased or the community), rejuvenation of well-being (Tib. *g.yang*) and good fortune (Tib. *phya*), which ethnographers also describe in the present, have continued to survive in some sense from an early period.<sup>18</sup> They are found in important genres of

13 Samuel, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*, 102–103.

14 Brandon Dotson, “Complementarity and Opposition in Early Tibetan Ritual,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 128.1 (2008): 41–67; Brandon Dotson, “The Dead and Their Stories: Preliminary Remarks on the Place of Narrative in Tibetan Religion,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 45 (2016): 77–89.

15 I owe this comparative insight to Charles Ramble.

16 Bialek, “Filtered Through Multiple Lenses,” 74, n. 23; Dotson, “The Dead and Their Stories,” 79–80; Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, “Enduring Ritual: *smrang*, *rabs* and Ritual in the Dunhuang Texts on Padmasambhava,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* 15 (2008): 289–312.

17 Marcelle Lalou, “Catalogues des principautés du Tibet ancien,” *Journal Asiatique* 253 (1965): 189–215; Dotson, “The Dead and Their Stories,” 84–89; see also Daniel Berounský’s chapter in this volume.

18 See most recently Toni Huber, *Source of Life: Revitalisation Rites and Bon Shamans in Bhutan and the Eastern Himalayas*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2020). The ethnographic secondary literature on these practices is summarised in *ibid.*, vol. 1, 1–10 before the rest of this monumental work proceeds to argue along these lines. On well-being and good fortune, see also John V. Bellezza, *Spirit-Mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet: Calling Down the Gods* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Charles Ramble, “The Deer as a Structuring Principle in Certain Bonpo Rituals: A Comparison of Three Texts for the Acquisition of

Tibetan literature from Dunhuang that appear indigenous and non-Buddhist (perhaps with roots in *some parts* of pre-Buddhist Tibet).<sup>19</sup> Some works are also found in the slightly later collection from the Gatang (Tib. dGa' thang) *stūpa* discovered along with Buddhist texts in southeast Tibet,<sup>20</sup> and continue to be transmitted and performed in the Bönpo (Tib. *bon po*) literature of the tenth century onwards and among certain groups of Tibetan-speaking groups in the eastern Himalayas and across the eastern side of the Tibetan Plateau up to today.<sup>21</sup> A few examples of such ritual-myths will give a flavour of these narratives, show the continuity and re-use of key terms and themes, but also indicate the temporal and geographic variety rather than the homogeneity of non-Buddhist Tibetan sources. These three examples will then be shown to have exerted different levels or types of influence on Tibetan Buddhism over the centuries.

First, Charles Ramble has compared versions of a community-ritual and wide-spread set of tales still around today but, significantly, sharing terminology with Dunhuang ritual texts.<sup>22</sup> Their central myth sets out a cosmogony before relating that, at a later time, people were deprived of a 'base of good fortune' (Tib. *phyā gzhi*) and cattle deprived of the 'base of well-being' (Tib. *g.yang gzhi*) that both of them formerly possessed.<sup>23</sup> In order to rectify this a certain prince, whose father is the divine Odé Gunggyel (Tib. 'O lde gung rgyal, see also 'O lde spu rgyal below), travels to the north and tries to persuade a

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Good Fortune (*g.yang*)," in *Cultural Flows across the Western Himalaya*, ed. Patrick McAlister, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, and Helmut Krasser (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 509–540; and references to Daniel Berounský below.

19 Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Matthew T. Kapstein, and Gray Tuttle, ed., *Sources of Tibetan Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 127–136; see also Rolf A. Stein, "Du récit au rituel dans les manuscrits de Touen-houang," in *Études Tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, ed. Ariane Macdonald (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1971), 479–547.

20 Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus and Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring, ed., *gTam shul dga' thang 'bum pa che nas gсар du rnyed pa'i bon gyi gna' dpe bdams bsgrigs* [Collection of the Ancient Bönpo Manuscripts Newly Discovered in Tamshül Gatang Bumpaché Stūpa] (Lhasa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 2007).

21 Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 1, 25–41.

22 Ramble, "The Deer as a Structuring Principle."

23 For a wider discussion of good fortune and well-being rituals, see Daniel Berounský, "Tibetan Myths on 'Good Fortune' (*phyā*) and 'Well-Being' (*g.yang*)," *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia '14 Linguistics, Ethnolinguistics, Religion and Culture* 7.2 (2014): 55–77, which records this narrative on *ibid.*, 59 and on which I have based my précis and my translations of these two main terms. Ramble, "The Deer as a Structuring Principle," 509–510 instead translates *g.yang* as 'good fortune' and *phyā* as 'vital force' or 'life', though noting their close associations and need for future research and then leaving them untranslated throughout the rest of the chapter.

miraculous white deer with crystal antlers he meets there to help him obtain good fortune and well-being for the people and spirits. The deer is reluctant and tries to escape, but the prince catches him with his miraculous lasso and will use certain of its body parts as ritual items—setting the precedent for all such future rituals to summon good fortune and well-being.

A second series of rites likewise lack any concrete references to organised Buddhist—or Bönpo—religion and have a similar antiquity. They ensure positive post-mortem states for miscarried foetuses (and sometimes their deceased mothers) and purify and fortify the well-being of the communities to which they belong—thus complementing other rituals calling new life into the world and protecting it once it has arrived.<sup>24</sup> They belong to a common manuscript culture centred around southeast Tibetan areas, including northern Bhutan, expressed both in a perhaps 11th-century document known as the *rNel dri 'dul ba* [Taming the Spirit of Polluting Untimely Death], recovered from the Gatang *stūpa*,<sup>25</sup> and in the living traditions of the cult of the primal progenitor and life-giving heavenly spirits (Tib. *srid pa'i lha*) that Toni Huber recently analysed in depth.<sup>26</sup> Before his work and those of others mentioned above, such non-Buddhist traditions were often ignored in discussions of Tibetan ritual-myth. The 'antecedent tales' provided for these rites bespeak both a vertical cosmology connecting people and heavenly spirits and a cycle of human existence ensured by those deities. In one,<sup>27</sup> a blood-thirsty spirit (Tib. *srin*) demon penetrates the womb of a lord's daughter named 'South Clan Lady, Bell Ringing Alpine Spirit' (Tib. lHo za Dril bu sil sil sman). It causes the socially problematic death of the unnamed female infant within, whose vitality principle (or 'soul') is dragged off to wander as a spirit of untimely death (Tib. *dri*). However, she is successfully ransomed by an alpine spirit ritual(ist) (Tib. *sman bon*) and returns to the heavenly spirits and alpine spirits; and "the benefit [of the rite] was like that in times past." In the process, the girl gains the new name 'Heavenly Spirit Lady, Bell Tinkling Alpine Spirit' (Tib. lHa za Dril bu sil bu sman). This moniker is based on her mother's name, suggesting communal

24 Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 2, 39.

25 Pa tshab Pa Sangs dbang 'dus and Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring, *gtam shul dga' thang 'bum pa che*, 33–59 and 131–178; Dotson, "Complementarity and Opposition," 61–64; Samten G. Karmay, "A New Discovery of Ancient Bon Manuscripts from a Buddhist Stupa in Southern Tibet," *East and West* 59.1–4 (2009): 55–84; John V. Bellezza, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 117–211; Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 2, 39–49.

26 Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 1, esp. 16–18, 21–22 and 45–102.

27 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 47.

continuity in remembering the dead. However, it also marks the conversion of her divisible/multiple and mobile vitality principle from belonging to a distraught human family (and wandering as a post-death spirit of untimely death) to a new positive state: as daughter of the ancestral heavenly spirits who were/are the ultimate source of that vitality principle.<sup>28</sup> This pantheon appears to inhabit a vertical axis above the ground-dwelling humans. The heavenly spirits (Tib. *lha*) reside at the top level of the heavens and what I have loosely called the alpine spirits (Tib. *smān*), generally female, live on the mountainous and lake-filled terrestrial regions where wild animals graze. There is no subterranean element, unlike other cosmologies in Tibet that were favoured by Buddhism and Bön,<sup>29</sup> though the latest ethnographic findings point to a great deal of difference geographically in these practices.<sup>30</sup>

The third set of ritual-myths is found in the Dunhuang document P. T. 1134 and describes the precedents for performing certain funerary rites with a number of variants in its telling.<sup>31</sup> Its narrative is set at the top of the heavens before the 'age of calamities' had fallen long ago,<sup>32</sup> and recounts how a son of the lord of demonic spirits (Tib. *bdud*) provokes other such spirits by instigating competitions of courage with his maternal uncles. They come from the sky and arise from the earth and harm the boy, who 'chases the yak' (i.e., dies) causing the 'breaking of the turquoise' (i.e., social problems due to his inauspicious death). His father is distraught but cannot revive him, nor can he aid his son by means of priests. Yet eventually a priest named Bönshin Shendak (Tib. Bon gshin gshen drag), son of gods and of blood-thirsty spirits, is found in heaven. His first rites are insufficient, but then the funerary constructions are built and the ritual performed in earnest (this is described in copious details that are still largely opaque). A 'favourite paired/peerless horse' is chosen as

28 See also Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 1, 553.

29 On the place of the heavenly spirits and the 'high alpine' spirits in the vertical axis, see Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 2, 47; on the connection of the latter, female spirits not only with mountains but also with lakes and the wild animals that inhabit these spaces, see Brandon Dotson, "Hunting for Fortune: Wild Animals, Goddesses and the Play of Perspectives in Early Tibetan Dice Divination," *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [online] 50 (2019), last modified March 4, 2019, last accessed January 16, 2023. 10.4000/emscat.3747.

30 Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 1, 18–21.

31 The following description is based on Rolf A. Stein, "Du récit au rituel dans les manuscrits de Touen-houang," 491–496; see also Bellezza, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet*, 221–236; Dotson, "The Dead and their Stories," 80–83.

32 Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 127–130; Nathan W. Hill, "'Come as Lord of the Black-Headed'—an Old Tibetan Mythic Formula," *Zentralasiatische Studien* 45 (2016): 213.

the psychopomp for the child, with the sheep as guide, the priests chant, the animals are praised and encouraged, and the son finally reaches a good (but obscure) post-death state.

Berounský, in his chapter in this volume, suggests that the sorts of ritual covered above were practised around the edges of the Tibetan Empire but were perhaps collected together and integrated in some way into court ritual towards the end of the imperial period.<sup>33</sup> I also note below the structural similarities between this third example of ritual-myths and that of the first emperor who died due to hubris, whose funeral marks one ending of the narrative in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* and whose tale has found a place in Buddhist historiography from the 11th century on. We will also see that the heavenly spirits and alpine spirits above were mentioned in imperial-period dispatch texts written on wooden slips and that textual evidence suggests the continuation of belief in this pantheon, and its incorporation into Buddhist rituals, up until the very recent past.

This adaptation is one of the effects of interaction between religions that Volkhard Krech discusses in the articles referenced by this volume's editors in their Introduction. He describes the cognitive side of adjusting to the existence of another religious tradition in one's midst as a form of transcendence—a re-appraisal of one's own religion and the 'other' religion according to a new system that transcends one's previous worldview and helps one to cope with the new reality of religious co-existence (or various other options ranging from rejection, through appropriation or integration, to destruction of the other religion or one's own).<sup>34</sup> In this chapter, I shall begin to unpack the relations between this type of transcendence and the more common definition of transcendence as crossing the line between mundane and supra-mundane states especially with respect to the Tibetan pantheon.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Other arguments for the connections between these rituals and the imperial heartland are found in Dotson, "Complementarity and Opposition," 64–66 with relation to geographical references, and in Bialek, "'Tibetan'—All-Inclusive?," 36–38 and 42–44, especially by paying attention to the sacrificed animals found in the textual and archaeological sources (some of which presumably were meant to act as psychopomp animals).

34 Volkhard Krech, "Religious Contacts in Past and Present Times: Aspects of a Research Programme," *Religion* 42.2 (2012): 195–196.

35 This is also included in the definition of processes of transcendence outlined by Volkhard Krech, "From Religious Contact to Scientific Comparison and Back: Some Methodological Considerations on Comparative Perspectives in the Science of Religion," in *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion*, ed. Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli (Cham: Springer, 2015), 47–49. The move from more 'immanentist' to a more 'transcendentalist' worldviews with the advent of Buddhism among Tibetans is discussed in Guntram Hazod, Christian Jahoda, and Mathias Fermer, "Foreword," 1–3 and acts as a

It will be seen that, in early Tibetan Buddhist attempts to explain the relationship between the non-Buddhist pantheon and the Buddhist cosmos newly introduced onto the Plateau, some sought to incorporate Buddhist deities into non-Buddhist rituals, others did the opposite and accommodated non-Buddhist gods into the Buddhist universe, while yet others rejected aspects of non-Buddhist tradition—all while demoting indigenous deities to a lower, mundane realm though retaining their superhuman qualities and status (and thus a belief in their existence, efficacy and value to some extent). In the process, the Tibetan emperors became worshipped more as bodhisattvas/buddhas than as semi-divine rulers, so not just superhuman but also supra-mundane, within an increasingly popular *Heilsgeschichte* that privileges liberation by enlightenment and that has proved formative for Bön just as it has been for Buddhism. This process has also pushed the non-Buddhist and non-Bönpo religious traditions to the margins both of the Tibetan cultural area geographically and also of a shared Tibetan worldview conceptually—leading to their neglect and conflation with Bön by earlier scholars writing on Tibetan religion(s).

### 3 Imperial-Period Religious Ideas

During the imperial period, the Tibetan emperor was taken as *the* measure of time and space.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the emperors relied on alliances with other clans from the start of their empire-building and so symbolised both the pinnacles of society and *primus inter pares* rulers.<sup>37</sup> This created a tension that is evident in their myths. On the one hand, late imperial-period Tibetan inscriptions (8th–9th century) describe the emperors as possessing characteristics of divine power and wisdom corresponding to their pre-eminent status,<sup>38</sup> and

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framework for the chapters that follow it in that volume. I would like to thank the organisers of the workshop (of which that volume is the proceedings) for inviting me to present there and engage in fruitful discussions helping to crystalise some of the arguments made in this present chapter.

36 Brandon Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet's First History, With an Annotated Cartographical Documentation by Guntram Hazod* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 11.

37 Charles Ramble, "Sacral Kings and Divine Sovereigns: Principles of Tibetan Monarchy in Theory and Practice," in *States of Mind: Power, Place and the Subject in Inner Asia, Studies on East Asia*, ed. David Sneath (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, 2006), 129–133.

38 Michael L. Walter, *Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 18–30; Lewis Doney, "Emperor, Dharmaraja, Bodhisattva?"

some roughly contemporaneous documents relate how the first rulers came down from heaven to rule over their 'black-headed' subjects.<sup>39</sup> One inscription states: "The emperor, son of the gods, 'O lde spu rgyal came down from the gods of heaven as lord of men."<sup>40</sup>

In other early documents, the first ruler is instead named Nyatri Tsenpo (Tib. *Nya gri/Nyag khri btsan po*),<sup>41</sup> with both his and Odé Pugyel's (Tib. 'O lde spu rgyal) name containing royal titles within them, and their power of rulership extends not just to 'black-headed' (Tib. *mgo nag po*) people but also to animals vital to a pastoral livelihood on the Tibetan Plateau. Nathan Hill has concluded that the myth "can be paraphrased 'men had no ruler, yaks no owner, N. [(the superhuman being with various names)] came from the gods of heaven to the narrow earth to be the ruler of men and the owner of yaks'" and that 'black-headed' approximates to "a poetic term for mankind as a totality, created by the gods and kept in safe pastures by the kings."<sup>42</sup> Such myths ground society in the past and a stable world, yet also legitimise the superhuman emperor as the rightful head of that society and indeed the wider world.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, the less exclusive, *primus inter pares* rulership is mythologised in the slightly later ninth-century record, the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.<sup>44</sup> This

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Inscriptions from the Reign of Khri Srong lde brtsan," *Journal of Research Institute, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies* 51 (2013): 72–76.

39 Hill, "Come as Lord of the Black-Headed," 203–216.

40 Li Fang-Kuei and W. South Coblin, *A Study of the Old Tibetan Inscriptions* (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1987), 246. The inscription is from the tomb of Tri Désongtsen (r. ca. 802–815, Tib. Khri lDe srong brtsan) and according to *ibid.*, 241, ll. 1–2, reads: (1) // *btsan po lha sras / 'o lde spu rgyal // gnam gyi* (2) *lha las myl'i rjer gshegs pa //*.

41 Hill, "Come as Lord of the Black-Headed," 203–207.

42 *Ibid.*, 214.

43 For more recent, political discussions of the connections between the emperors, the heavenly spirits and the heavens, see Bialek, "Tibetan'—All-Inclusive?," 14–16; and Hazod, "The 'Stranger-King' and the Temple," 55–65. Bialek, "Tibetan'—All-Inclusive?," 45 concludes that their inter-relatedness indicates that "the spheres of 'the religious' and 'the political' were not separated, or maybe rather they were deliberately interwoven" in authoritative narratives identifying the emperors with superhuman beings. Hazod, "The 'Stranger-King' and the Temple," 62, further suggests that such identification played a role in "the spontaneous acceptance of the ruling structures which, as it were, were realised within a long-known world of dependency on metahuman (*lha-*) beings." Hazod goes on to identify the continuing influence of such concepts in Tibetan Buddhism (*ibid.*, 65–75), for example in rites surrounding a mundane heavenly spirit guardian of one of Tibetan Buddhism's oldest temples (both of which maintain strong connections with imperial support for the religion) and where the religious continues to be part of the social.

44 Jacques Bacot, Frederick W. Thomas, and Charles Toussaint, *Documents de Touen-houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1940), 89–171;



work is a compilation of various imperial-period genealogical lists, historical narratives, clan songs and funerary eulogies that dates to the end of the imperial period or just after.<sup>45</sup> It was discovered among the famous treasure-trove of manuscripts in many languages sealed into Mogao Cave 17 near Dunhuang in Eastern Central Asia, which was ruled over by the Tibetan Empire between the late eighth and mid ninth century.<sup>46</sup> Manuscripts and art found there date up to the early 11th century;<sup>47</sup> they will be referred to as Dunhuang documents in this contribution.

The *Old Tibetan Chronicle* begins by situating the Tibetan ‘ancient relatives of the four directions’ (Tib. *gna’ gnyen mtha’ bzhi*) and the past minor kings and their councillors in their territories. As above, it describes Nyatri Tsenpo’s descent to bring fertility to the idealised earth and to begin the genealogy of its rulers who married wives of different Tibetan clans down the generations.<sup>48</sup> It then relates the story of the mythical emperor, Drigum Tsenpo (r. ca. 200 BCE, Tib. *Dri gum btsan po*, lit. ‘the emperor who dies with violence’), who out of hubris vied with one of his ministers, Longam (Tib. *Lo ngam*) the horse-groom/equerry, and was the first to die *without* returning to the heavens.

Drigum Tsenpo’s sons eventually regain his corpse from downstream (the direction of death)<sup>49</sup> on the Brahmaputra River (Tib. *rTsang chu*) through a series of journeys, interactions and finally bargaining with superhuman beings (reminiscent of the prince’s actions in Berounský’s narrative above); the younger son buries his father in the first Tibetan royal tomb and the elder son avenges his father’s death and says that in life he was named Pudé gunggyel (Tib. *sPu de gung rgyal*), lord of the black-headed men and owner of maned animals (recalling the first emperor model and Berounský again).<sup>50</sup>

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Brandon Dotson “The Victory Banquet: The Old Tibetan Chronicle and the Rise of Tibetan Historical Narrative” (Habilitationsschrift, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2013).

45 Hugh E. Richardson, *High Peaks Pure Earth*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 124–134; Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, ed., *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 36–46.

46 Jacob P. Dalton, and Sam van Schaik, *Tibetan Tantric Manuscripts from Dunhuang: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Stein Collection at the British Library* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), xi–xxi.

47 See Yoshiro Imaeda, “The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents,” *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 66 (2008): 98; see also Sam van Schaik and Mélodie Doumy’s chapter in this volume.

48 Bacot, Thomas and Toussaint, *Documents de Touen-houang*, 81 and 86; Dotson, “The Victory Banquet,” 261–263.

49 Dotson, “Complementarity and Opposition in Early Tibetan Ritual,” 57, figure 2.

50 Bacot, Thomas and Toussaint, *Documents de Touen-houang*, 97–100 and 123–128; Dotson, “The Victory Banquet,” 266–270.

Regarding other superhuman beings of the imperial period, evidence of the earliest Tibetan pantheon is slight. One indication comes from Tibetan dispatch texts written in ink on wooden slips found at an outpost on the northern edge of the empire, along the southern Silk Road at what was Miran fort.<sup>51</sup> Two of these sticks (IOI Tib N 255 and 873) record a ritual directed towards local deities designated as ‘heavenly and lord spirits of the region’ (Tib. *yul lha yul bdag*, lit. ‘land-god land-owner’), as well as to ‘alpine spirits’ (Tib. *sman*, a name perhaps related to healing but for spirits who are probably the owners of wild animals); this ritual is presided over by officiants named after their roles as perhaps ‘interlocutors/addressors’ (Tib. *zhal ta pa*), heavenly spirit ritualists (Tib. *lha bon po*) and officiating priest (Tib. *sku gshen*).<sup>52</sup> The latter two titles contain terms that are central in the ‘other’ Tibetan religion, Bön, and the name of its Buddha-like founder, respectively (see below) and this shows a certain continuity between this imperial-period ritual and that later religion. However, such evidence is not strong enough to prove that an organised religion called ‘Bön’ pre-existed—or even existed contemporaneously with—the entry of Buddhism into Tibetan regions (a claim unfortunately still repeated in many less scholarly accounts of Tibet). Other Dunhuang ritual documents, both Buddhist and seemingly non-Buddhist, contain similar references to these deities and ritual officiants.<sup>53</sup> Yet, their manuscripts post-date the Tibetan empire’s collapse and their contents are not so easy to date at all. Thus, they should be approached with caution, to guard against anachronism, and will not be covered in detail here.

#### 4 The Beginnings of Tibetan Buddhism

The Chinese historiographical tradition has retained some remarks about imperial-period ‘Tibetan’ (Chin. *tufan* or *tubo* 吐蕃) cultural history, beliefs, rituals, laws and relations with neighbouring powers (especially the Tang 唐, 618–907). However, this information privileges the eastern Tibetan area and the Tibetan court in its coverage, and so cannot do justice to all societies across the Tibetan Plateau. The Chinese sources are removed by distance and time, and tend to view imperial ‘Tibet’ as a wild, pastoral and raiding community in contrast to civilised Tang China. Nonetheless, scholars of Tibetan studies have made some use out of their information—relying primarily on the *Jiu Tangshu*

51 Sam van Schaik, “The Naming of the Tibetan Religion,” 241–249.

52 Ibid., 246–247.

53 Ibid., 227–257.

舊唐書 [Old Book of the Tang Dynasty] compiled in 945 and the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 [New Book of the Tang Dynasty] of 1060, which is a sort of extended commentary on the former.<sup>54</sup>

The *Old Book of the Tang Dynasty* and the *New Book of the Tang Dynasty* cover some Tibetan beliefs concerning *inter alia* the greatness of their emperors, people's values of bravery and fealty and relations with their gods, seasons and guests. It also mentions some seemingly exotic practices surrounding oathing, divination and harsh corporal punishment that are expressive of deeper cultural realities (at least as these Chinese historians viewed them).<sup>55</sup> One telling passage and its later commentary show the inclusion of Buddhist faith and monasticism among changing Tibetan values. The *Old Book of the Tang Dynasty* states: "They worship the *yuandi* [(羴羴)] god,<sup>56</sup> and believe in witches and seers," to which the *New Book of the Tang Dynasty* adds: "They are very fond of the doctrine of the Buddha, and no important states of affairs are settled without consulting the Buddhist monks."<sup>57</sup>

Evidence of the incorporation of a Buddhist pantheon into an existing non-Buddhist context comes from references in edicts proclaimed on behalf of *dharma* by Emperor Tri Songdétseten (r. 755–ca. 800, Tib. Khri Srong lde brtsan). Buddhism existed at court before this ruler—along with some short-lived influence of other foreign religions like Manichaeism, Islam and Eastern Christianity,<sup>58</sup> and was probably fed from Indic and Sinitic regions and powers

54 Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 6–24; for other, overlooked sources see also Emanuela Garatti, "When Powers Meet: A Study of the Representation of Official Encounters in Sino-Tibetan Diplomacy between 7th and 9th Centuries" (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2020).

55 Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 8–10.

56 Based on the translation and notes of Stephen W. Bushell, "The Early History of Tibet: From Chinese Sources," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12 (1880): 442 and 527, n. 7, Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 10 identify *yuandi* as "a large kind of sheep" and tentatively relate it to the psychopomp sheep of the third set of ritual-myths discussed above. Henrik H. Sørensen (personal communication 16th January 2023) acknowledges that *yuandi* literally means 'yak-sheep' but points out the phonological similarity to the original/first emperor (Chin. Yuandi 元帝) and suggests a more general meaning as 'god/spirit of many things' akin to Mongol concepts of an animistic 'universal spirit', and I would like to thank him for this suggestion. If we take it seriously, we could connect this to the idea of the first emperor as a superhuman ruler of yaks (and sheep?) quoted above from Hill, "Come as Lord of the Black-Headed," 214.

57 Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 10, n. 9.

58 Rolf A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*, trans. J. E. Stapleton Driver (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 60; Shen Chen 沈琛, "Zai lun Tubo yu jing jiao, moni jiao de lianxi 再论吐蕃与景教, 摩尼教的联系 [Reappraisal of the Connection between Imperial Tibet, the Church of the East, and Manichaeism]," *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 [Dunhuang Research] 3 (2022): 139–147.

neighbouring the expanding Tibetan Empire as well as regions incorporated into it, such as Khotan on the southern Silk Road.<sup>59</sup> However, the *dharma* was not wide-spread at first and only this eighth-century emperor truly established Buddhism as a ‘state religion’ (though not the only one).<sup>60</sup> His proclamation to this effect still survives carved on a stele at Samyé (Tib. bSam yas) Monastery at the heart of the empire, and so is known today as the Samyé Inscription. In it, the emperor oaths that the requisite items for continuing *dharma* practice at Samyé and other Buddhist shrines will continue in perpetuity.

The Samyé Inscription states that, “in order that no violations of the oath shall be perpetrated or caused to come about, the supra-mundane and mundane heavenly spirits (Tib. *lha*; Skt. *deva*) and the non-human ghosts (Tib. *mi ma yin*; Skt. *amanuṣya-bhūta*) are all invoked as witnesses.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, as Cristina Scherrer-Schaub has observed, neither the tone here nor the deities invoked are so explicitly Buddhist as to risk causing offense to the non-Buddhist factions at court.<sup>62</sup> Contrary to later historiography, these factions were not Bönpo because the established religion and thus adjectival (self-)identity did not yet exist. Rather, oathing before autochthonous spirits and the semi-divine emperor appears to have been an established religio-legal and courtly practice before Buddhism arrived in Tibet, but the Buddhist gods are added as a separate class of supra-mundane witnesses to the oaths here in the late eighth century.<sup>63</sup> Thus, on top of the non-Buddhist category of superhuman beings arrayed along a vertical axis is added a class of *supernatural* beings above and beyond this group. This addition does not necessarily conflict with the

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- 59 Lewis Doney, “Tibet,” in *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2020), 209–213. See also Diego Loukota’s chapter in this volume.
- 60 See Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, “Tibet: An Archaeology of the Written,” in *Old Tibetan Studies Dedicated to the Memory of R.E. Emmerick: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS*, 2003, ed. Cristina Scherrer-Schaub (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 217–254; Doney, “Emperor, Dharmaraja,” 69–72.
- 61 The Samyé Inscription, ll. 12–18, reads: *de las* (13) *mna’ kha dbud pa dag gyang* / (14) *myi bgyi myi bsgyur bar* / *’jlg* (15) *rten las* / *’da’s pa’ dang* / (16) *’jlg rten gyi lha dang* / *myi ma yin* (17) *ba’ / thams cad gyang dphang du* / (18) *gsol te* /. Transliteration and translation following Doney, “Emperor, Dharmaraja,” 70.
- 62 Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, “A Perusal of Early Tibetan Inscriptions in Light of the Buddhist World of the 7th to 9th Centuries A.D.,” in *Epigraphic Evidence in the Pre-Modern Buddhist World. Proceedings of the Eponymous Conference Held in Vienna, 14–15 Oct. 2011*, ed. Kurt Tropper (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 2014), 151.
- 63 See Walter, *Buddhism and Empire*, 10–13; Michael L. Walter and Christopher I. Beckwith, “The Dating and Interpretation of the Old Tibetan Inscriptions,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 54.2 (2010): 295, n. 10, 300 and 303–304 (although caution should be taken with the other arguments in their article).

pre-existing pantheon, and could be seen from one perspective as merely widening the category of superhuman beings to include a new class of deity. Yet in another sense, the new transcendent class of deity also subordinates the indigenous beings in an unequal power dynamic, and this suggests a definite shift in value towards the new pantheon as a result of this inter-religious contact. The Samyé Inscription thus indicates a shift in the hierarchy of superhuman beings and the cosmology that received imperial authorisation—a major event affecting the religious landscape of Tibet. However, there is evidence that there were some groups at court that felt it unnecessary to add oaths to this additional pantheon, or even felt that it was against tradition, and so Scherrer-Schaub’s observation likely concerns the emperor’s wish not to ‘disenfranchise’ these courtiers.<sup>64</sup>

In a longer version of this emperor’s proclamation than that recorded in the Samyé Inscription, the deities in question are listed in greater detail and within a more obviously Buddhist conceptual and ritual context:

And invoking as witnesses to the oath thus made, in the ten directions: all the buddhas, all of the holy law, all monks who are *bodhisattvas*, all the self-perfected buddhas and disciples, whatever order of heavenly spirits there are in the celestial realm and on earth, the authoritative heavenly spirits (Tib. *sku lha*) of Tibet, all the nine heavenly spirits, and all the chthonic spirits (Tib. *klu*; Skt. *nāga*), harmful/tree spirits (Tib. *gnod sbyin*; Skt. *yakṣa*) and non-human ghosts, let it be made known that this edict is unalterable.<sup>65</sup>

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- 64 The evidence is centred around a particular passage in another proclamation, a royal/imperial discourse (Tib. *bka' mchid*) also attributed to Tri Songdétse. The translations of the passage by Richardson, *High Peaks Pure Earth*, 93 and van Schaik, “The Naming of the Tibetan Religion,” 238 differ, as do the others discussed by van Schaik, *ibid.*, n. 20; yet the passage nonetheless suggests that Tri Songdétse acknowledged that some tensions existed between older and newer religious traditions (or their proponents) at his court. Here, as in the other proclamation I discuss below, there is no mention of Bön or Bönpos.
- 65 Translation following Richardson, *High Peaks Pure Earth*, 92 with some editions. A mostly faithful 16th-century rendering of the proclamation found in dPa' bo gTsong lag phreng ba, *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* [The Feast for Scholars] (Varanasi: Vajra Vidya, 2002), 371.19–372.1 (with references to the mostly erroneous variants from Richardson, *High Peaks Pure Earth*, 96 in brackets) reads: 'di ltar yi dam bcas pa / phyogs bcu'i sangs rgyas thams cad dang / [no shad] dam pa'i chos thams cad dang / byang chub sems dpa'i dge 'dun thams cad dang / rang sangs rgyas dang nyan thos thams cad dang / gnam sa'i rim pa lha'o [lha'o] cog dang / bod yul gyi sku lha dang / lha dgu thams cad dang / klu dang / gnod sbyin [gnods byin] dang mi ma yin pa thams cad (372) dbang du gsol te [ste] / gtsigs 'di [di] las mi 'gyur bar mkhyen par bgyis so / .

Authoritative Tibetan spirits are included in this list, while other terms given here (e.g., *klu*) could be read as referring to either local (chthonic) or foreign (*nāga*) deities. Yet, a Buddhist ‘ten directions’ (Tib. *phyogs bcu*) cosmology of is referred to here instead of the ‘four borders’ (Tib. *mtha’ bzhi*) imagery of the imperial conquerors. As we shall see, this leads to the image of the semi-deified emperor at the centre of time and space being replaced to some extent with the image of the Dharma King (Skt. *dharmarāja*, Tib. *chos kyi rgyal po*), who is still important though with a more limited status in a now Buddhist cosmos and playing a more limited role in a newer, Buddhist historiography.<sup>66</sup>

## 5 10L Tib J 466.3

In the previous section, we saw evidence of the incorporation of a Buddhist pantheon into an existing non-Buddhist context, namely oath-taking. Evidence of the opposite but complementary dynamic, inclusion of Tibetan non-Buddhist deities in a Buddhist ritual, is seen in a mid to late ninth-century Dunhuang prayer text, 10L Tib J 466.3. It praises *inter alia* the Buddha, deities of generalised South Asian pantheons (including Hindu gods already absorbed into Buddhism), luminaries from Buddhist history and the Indic master, Śāntarakṣita (8th–9th century), who helped spread Buddhism in the land of snows.<sup>67</sup> This prayer is at once devotional, historical, cosmological and local. Its middle section, set to melody, begins by paying homage to the Buddha and his disciples. It goes on to worship the Buddhist deities, deified heroes of Buddhist historiography and the important human and non-human figures of renown among Buddhist communities. These stanzas describe whom they praise, offer one or two named examples or subgroups and end with a repeated praise formula (see the two examples below). They are written in Tibetan, yet there is nothing in this early part to suggest a Tibetan milieu (or a Chinese one for that matter). Thus, in this prayer—as in many documents from this period—the Indic Buddhist pantheon as a whole (including previously non-Buddhist, South Asian gods) is assimilated into Tibetan tradition.

However, the prayer then includes laudations of the indigenous deities surrounding Tibetan centres of worship such as Rasa (Tib. Ra sa) Monastery in Lhasa, veneration of the imperial preceptors of Tibet, and praise of Emperor

66 See Lewis Doney, “Early Bodhisattva-Kingship in Tibet: The Case of Tri Songdétsen,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 24 (2015): 29–47.

67 Lewis Doney, “Imperial Gods: A Ninth-Century Tridaṇḍaka Prayer (rGyud chags gsum) from Dunhuang,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 61.1 (2018): 71–101.

Tri Songdétsen himself (who is modelled after the great Indian Dharma Kings). In addition to Indic references and Buddhist ‘spells’ (Skt. *dhāraṇī*, Tib. *gzungs*) though, the text includes apparently older, ‘non-Buddhist’ Tibetan concepts in the description of the ‘Great King’ (Tib. *rgyal po chen po*). One stanza reads:

Praise to the Spiritual Advisor [(Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*)] of our own Tibet, the great Dharma Kings [(Skt. *dharmarāja*)] such as the great king, Tri Songdétsen. I offer prostration, reverence and praise to all those teachers who have gone to *nirvāṇa*, who propagated the teachings: Magical Lord Tri Songdétsen—who has mastered the royal methods of the royal ancestral spirits and [rules] the kingdom with the weapon of the celestial spirits and Dharmāsoka, Kaniṣkā, Śīlāditya [(Harṣa)] and so on.<sup>68</sup>

This prayer gives Tri Songdétsen the title ‘Magical Lord’ (Tib. *’phrul rje*), which is perhaps similar to the title or epithet ‘Magical Divine Emperor’ (Tib. *’phrul gyi lha btsan po*) used in inscriptions from his reign onwards.<sup>69</sup> In its unique descriptions of the emperor, this stanza also employs terms like ‘royal ancestral spirits’ (Tib. *phywa*, not to be confused with *phya*, ‘good fortune’, above) and depicts Tri Songdétsen holding the sword of the celestial spirits (Tib. *gnam gyi lde*), a reference perhaps to the early legends of the kings’ ancestral lineage of deities descended from the sky. The text thus singles out Tri Songdétsen as ruling both Tibet and its indigenous deities. Despite the overt attempt in the prayer to place Tri Songdétsen in the line of great Buddhist kings like Aśoka (r. ca. 268–232 BCE), elements of the imperial cult are still worthy of being included.

Such elements are found elsewhere in Old Tibetan literature, for instance in a philosophical critique of non-Buddhist religious traditions in IOL Tib J 1746. The latter contains an attack on non-Buddhist religion, as Sam van Schaik states:

68 IOL Tib J 466, column 11, ll. 1–4, reads: *bdag cag bod khams kyi dge ba’i bshes nyen // rgyal po chen po khri srong lde brtsan lastsogs pa // chos kyi rgyal po chen po rnam la mchod pa // phywa’I rgyal thabs mnga’ brnyes shing // chab srId gnam gyi lde mtshon can // ’phrul rje khrI srong lde brtsan dang // dar ma sho ka / ka ni sk’a / shI la ^a tI da tya lastsogs // ston pa mya ngan ’das {phyI na} [(read: phyIn)] // bstan pa rgyas mdzad thams cad la // phyag ’tshal bsnyen bkur mchod pa dbul //*. The transliteration system used for Old Tibetan orthography in this article may not be familiar to some, but it follows the policy of Old Tibetan Documents Online (see <https://otdo.aa-ken.jp/policy>, last modified 2006, last accessed May 6, 2023).

69 For a recent discussion of these Old Tibetan terms and their relations to the Tibetan emperors and/as superhuman beings—specifically heavenly spirits—in authoritative court documents and inscriptions, see Bialek, “‘Tibetan’—All-Inclusive?,” 8–16.

As an alternative to such rituals, 10L Tib J 1746 promotes the figure of the Buddha as a figure of compassion who treats everyone equally. [...] 10L Tib J 1746 is one of very few early sources that makes explicit reference to Tibetan non-Buddhist practices in general (rather than specific ritual techniques); these are consistently discussed as a form of *chos*: either as ‘the bad religion’ (*chos ngan pa*) or ‘the little religion’ (*chos chu ngu*). Buddhism, on the other hand, is the Buddha’s religion, or buddhadharma (*chos ’b'u dha*), the good religion (*chos bzang po* / *chos legs pa*), the correct religion (*chos yang thag pa*) or the great religion (*chos chen po*).<sup>70</sup>

This text hints at a native taxonomy held by some people at a time when Buddhism was gaining power in Tibet, sometimes at the expense of the older traditions’ claims to truth or efficacy. Here, both ‘religions’ are allowed to share the term ‘law’ (Tib. *chos*) that is also used to translate *dharma*, but distanced from each other and hierarchised in their adjectival qualifications. The ‘bad religion’ or ‘little religion’ is thus othered as a practice of ‘them’, not ‘us’. 10L Tib J 1746 seems to present the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religions as competing registers of discourse, reflecting the statuses of Buddhists and non-Buddhists with regard to truth and society. In contrast, the extant prayer just described from 10L Tib J 466.3 betrays no sense of inconsistency in using both types of language to describe the *dharma*-protecting emperor, Tri Songdét sen. He is *both* the deified emperor and also the enlightened and transcendent Buddhist teacher, both superhuman and supernatural.

One other noteworthy stanza in the prayer 10L Tib J 466.3 praises the ‘heavenly spirits of Tibet’ (Tib. *bod yul gyi lha*), a phrase resembling ‘heavenly spirit of the region’ (Tib. *yul lha*) from the wooden slips above.<sup>71</sup> and this stanza also includes ‘lord spirits of the region’ and alpine spirits as practising the ‘good law and celestial way’ (Tib. *chos bzang gnam lugs*), Buddhism. It reads:

Praise to the heavenly spirits of Tibet, such as King of the Gandharvas [and] ‘One with Five Top-Knots’, father and son.<sup>72</sup> To all the awesome

70 van Schaik, “The Naming of the Tibetan Religion,” 233.

71 See Doney, “Imperial Gods,” 89–91; van Schaik, “The Naming of the Tibetan Religion,” 245–248.

72 The *gandharvas* (Tib. *dri za*) are low-ranking flying musician spirits in Indic Buddhism, and their king may also be one of the four heavenly kings (Tib. *rgyal po bzhi*), namely Dhṛtarāṣṭra, perhaps further identified with Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (the ‘One with Five Top-Knots’). Yet, there are other indigenous deities that could be being referred to here; see the discussion in Doney, “Imperial Gods,” 90. This part of the text is confusing and, at present, perhaps it is best not to put too much conceptual weight on its consequences for



'lord spirits of the region' [(Tib. *yul bdag gnyan po*)], such as the powerful heavenly spirits and the alpine spirits who [cause to] arise the jewels of men and of treasure in the iron, silver, gold, crystal and snow mountains surrounding [Tibet] and practice the good law and celestial way, I grasp the method of venerating [with] respect, and offer substances of pure auspiciousness, such as good fragrance, incense [(or fragrant incense, Tib. *dri spos*)] and flowers.<sup>73</sup>

Unlike contemporaneous or later Dunhuang documents that disparage non-Buddhist ritual or seek to replace it with Buddhism,<sup>74</sup> this prayer here gives local spirits their proper place as superhuman beings in a newly expanded pantheon entering into the Tibetan linguistic zone at the end of the first millennium. However, it reserves an even more privileged place for the emperor within the more exclusive and superior category of transcendent supernatural beings, by noting that he has now gone to *nirvāṇa*.

## 6 The History of Food Provisioning

Some non-Buddhist religious practices thus apparently co-existed with Buddhism and were absorbed to some extent into it at the end of, or just after the Tibetan imperial period. At a slightly later point in time, similar practices were incorporated to a greater degree into the lower levels of Bönpo practice as the latter emerged as an established religion.<sup>75</sup> The communal well-being ritual-myths surveyed as the first and second examples in Section two of this contribution were apparently not seen as conflicting with those of the organised religions centred around *karma*-based reincarnation and *dharma*-focused liberation through enlightenment.<sup>76</sup>

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the relationship between non-Buddhist and Buddhist pantheons in this prayer and early Tibetan Buddhism at Dunhuang or more centrally.

73 IOL Tib J 466, column 11, ll. 4–8, reads: / *dri za'I rgyal po gtsug pud lnga pa {yab}* (SHAPE: y+b) *sras lastsogs pa / : / bod yul gyI lha rnam la mchod pa / / lcags rI dngul rI gser gyI ri / / shel rI gangs rI khyad kor na / / myI dang nor gyi dbyig 'byung zhIng / / chos bzang gnam lugs spyod pa yI / / mthu chen lha dang sman <ma> lastsogs / / yul bdag gnyan po thams cad la / / rje sa rI mo'i tshul bzung ste / dri spos men tog bzang lastsogs / / bkra shis gtsang ma'I rdzas rnam 'bul /*

74 These are surveyed in van Schaik, "The Naming of the Tibetan Religion," 227–257.

75 Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 12–16; Samuel, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*, 225–227.

76 Huber, *Source of Life*, vol. 1, 13–16; vol. 2, 31–37.

However, Buddhist polemical and historiographical literature was increasingly directed against the indigenous funeral rites of our third example—perhaps because funerary ritual more directly concerns the post-mortem state of a fully-grown adult and so was felt to encroach on ‘Buddhist’ territory. In this way, non-Buddhist religious traditions influenced Tibetan Buddhism ‘negatively’, being reified by some Buddhists into an ‘other’ against which they could define themselves (even if there was more cross-fertilisation in reality than was acknowledged in such rhetoric). Some Buddhists derided this funerary ritual under the Tibetan term ‘Bön’ or the adjective ‘Bönpo’, hence identifying themselves with the organised religious tradition that was growing up in dialogue and tension with the rapidly assimilated Buddhism in especially eastern Tibetan regions. Some of these polemic texts were actually produced quite early in the post-imperial period and even stored away among the Dunhuang documents.<sup>77</sup>

One slightly later 11th-century historiographical account is called *Zas gtad kyi lo rgyus* [History of Food Provisioning].<sup>78</sup> It narrates that, at the death of the famous Buddhist emperor, Tri Songdétsen, the Bönpos take advantage of his son’s inexperience to re-establish their religion over Buddhism by performing his father’s funerary rituals. However, the son then recounts a dream in which he saw Tri Songdétsen preaching with the Buddha Vairocana and bodhisattvas Vajrapāṇi and Mañjuśrī in the Buddhist Aḍakavatī heaven. He proclaims:

When this prophetic dream is connected with the funeral feast of my father the son of the gods [(Tib. *lha sras*; Skt. *devaputra*)], I find that it is unsuitable for it to be done in accord with Bön because it must be done in accord with the white *dharma* (of Buddhism) [(Tib. *dkar chos*)].<sup>79</sup>

Note here that the *dharma* is white (i.e., virtuous), seemingly implicitly opposed to a ‘black Bön’ (Tib. \**nag bon*) akin to the depiction identified by Sam van Schaik, above.

77 Jacob P. Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), 57–59; van Schaik, “The Naming of the Tibetan Religion,” 227–257.

78 Pasang Wangdu, and Hildegard Diemberger, *Dbā’ bzhed: The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of the Buddha’s Doctrine to Tibet* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 92–105; Tsering Gonkatsang and Michael Willis, “Text and Translation,” in *Bringing Buddhism to Tibet: History and Narrative in the Dbā’ bzhed Manuscript*, ed. Lewis Doney (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 148–157.

79 Tsering Gonkatsang and Willis, “Text and Translation,” 148–149.

Then the monk-minister, Pagor Vairocana (fl. eighth–ninth c., Tib. Pa gor Bai ro tsa na), makes an appearance from Tsawa(rong) Tsashö (Tib. Tsha ba [rong] tsha shod) with a man who is perhaps his disciple, Gyelmo Yudra Nyingpo (Tib. rGyal mo g.Yu sgra snying po).<sup>80</sup> Some of the key elements of his depiction, such as his attire (that resembles the ceremonial dress of non-Buddhist priests) and the content of his speech (that borrows terminology from their funerary rites) suggest that Vairocana is portrayed as mirroring and opposing, transcending, superceding and transforming the non-Buddhist (so-called Bönpo) ‘religion’ into a Buddhist tradition that saves the life-force of the emperor.<sup>81</sup> The *History of Food Provisioning* connects Vairocana with Tsawa Tsashö in East Tibet, attire worn by non-Buddhists in the eastern Himalayas and ritual-myths contained within ancient non-Buddhist narratives found in what was once the north-east and south-east of the Tibetan Empire. These links may point to this work’s provenance—despite its ostensive setting in the heartland of the imperial court—in an area where such rituals were slowly becoming seen (from the inside and/or outside of these traditions) as Bön.

Legends such as these apparently cemented the connection between the above rituals and Bön (something that it seems Bönpos were also doing at the time), but then denigrated both of them as wrong-headed. Early Buddhist polemics sought to replace Bönpo rites, such as those for elite funerals, with Buddhist ones in reality—although influences of the former may have impacted the latter and contributed to some of the ‘Tibetan’ aspects of Tibetan Buddhist ritual.<sup>82</sup> Then, in narrating this process by means of idealised historiography, Buddhists also created new ‘antecedent tales’ surrounding the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. This new, polemically-inspired, Tibetan Buddhist historiography increasingly portrayed the non-Buddhist practices and practitioners of the imperial period as part of a single ‘other’ religion called Bön—anachronistically identified as the enemy of Buddhism and Tibet’s flourishing in past times too.

80 Tsering Gonkatsang and Willis, “Text and Translation,” 150–151.

81 See Lewis Doney, “Master Vairocana’s Journeys in Early Tibetan Buddhist Narratives,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Tibetan Studies Unlimited*, ed. Diana Lange, Jarmila Ptackova, Marion Wettstein, and Mareike Wulff (Prague: Academia, 2021), 68–70.

82 See, most recently, Joanna Bialek, “Body Exposure and Embalming in the Tibetan Empire and Beyond: A Study of the *btol* Rite,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 74.4 (2021): 625–650. This article comprises a discussion of aspects of Old Tibetan funerary practices of embalming and exposing the body of the deceased to the people, followed by connections between these practices and those performed for Buddhist and Bönpo religious masters and some elite families right up to the modern period.

## 7 Taming Tibet

The second diffusion (Tib. *phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Central Tibet from the tenth century onwards comprised two main strands that began to interweave over time. The first was a continuation and deepening of the traditions that are found in the Dunhuang documents and look to older *tantras* as the basis of liberation, called the Nyingma (Tib. *nying ma*). The second was a new wave of Indic Buddhist traditions from South Asia, led by Tibetan pilgrims to what is now Nepal, Kashmir, Bengal and the Gangetic Plains of India and by the masters they sometimes invited across the Himalayas bringing cutting-edge *tantras* and creating several new schools, called Sarma (Tib. *gsar ma*). The Nyingma and Sarma lineages differed and so too did the masters and deities that they most revered. Yet, their traditions were also quite similar, sharing not only older and more general *strata* of mainstream and Mahāyāna Buddhism but also foundational tantric rituals with their own forms of ‘antecedent tales’.<sup>83</sup>

Both traditions created similar histories that favoured Buddhist cosmogonies and dharmic explanations for the appearance of the Tibetan people and their society, but they each gave some space to non-Buddhist descriptions of the first emperors (who were called ‘kings’ from this period on). As first recorded in one Sarma school’s 11th-century *bKa’ chems ka khol ma* [Pillar Testament] but then as incorporated into histories in other traditions too, Avalokiteśvara and deities of the lotus family play key roles in the origins of humanity, Tibetans in particular, and the necessary Buddhist rulership destined to guide them towards enlightenment that are evidently based in part on Indic Buddhist literature.<sup>84</sup> The *Pillar Testament* states that Tibetans’ wildness is the reason that they needed a king and goes on to describe the origin of the first Buddhist rulers, beginning in the formless aeon of Amitābha, moving on to describe the Avalokiteśvara-emanated king modelled on an ‘elected one’ (Skt. *mahāsammata*) type providing for and protecting all sentient beings.<sup>85</sup> Yet, it ends with the tale of Odé Pugyel/Nyatri Tsenpo covered above and applying to Tibet alone.<sup>86</sup> This ‘Russian doll’ type of nested narrative unwittingly reveals

83 Robert Mayer, “The Figure of Maheśvara/Rudra in the rÑiñ-ma-pa Tantric Tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21.2 (1998): 281–305.

84 Ronald M. Davidson, “The Kingly Cosmogonic Narrative and Tibetan Histories: Indian Origins, Tibetan Space, and the *bKa’ chems ka khol ma* Synthesis,” *Lungta* 16 (2004): 64–84.

85 For more on the popularity of this Indic Buddhist model of rulership in East Asia, see Dominic Steavu and Fabio Rambelli, “The Vicissitudes of the Mahāsammata in East Asia: The Buddhist Origin Myth of Kingship and Traces of a Republican Imagination,” *The Medieval History Journal* 17 (2014): 207–227.

86 Davidson, “The Kingly Cosmogonic Narrative,” 69–80.

the strata of changing literary traditions in Tibet but also implicitly restricts the applicability of the last account to a mundane sphere, which is contextualised within the broader supra-mundane perspective of Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara as the narrative focuses down from the cosmic to the local scale.

When it comes to the historical period and accounts of the imperial period, non-Buddhist elements are rarely even honoured by inclusion in the historiography (though it does happen) and, if so, are often conflated with Bön.<sup>87</sup> Later ritual-myth narratives, especially of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, increasingly look to the legendary eighth-century Indic tantric master and emanation of Avalokiteśvara, Padmasambhava, as the ‘arch-tamer’ who converted the Bönpo spirits of Tibet to Buddhism. Religious themes common from the earliest to the latest Tibetan sources on Padmasambhava are his role in pacifying local worldly deities, especially in the Himalayas, southern, and central Tibet, his preference for the higher *tantras* and his status as a culture hero of antinomian ritual. As an abiding part of the account of his journey to the court of Tri Songdétse, he tames Tibet by means of overpowering, suppressing and gaining allegiance from local ‘heavenly and troublesome spirits’ (Tib. *lha ’dre*), as part of a religious conversion narrative familiar from other lands both within and beyond Buddhist Asia. The deities thus converted to Buddhism include the by now familiar alpine spirits and heavenly spirits of the region, the spirits known as ‘lords of the earth’ or lords of positions related to astrological calculations (Tib. *sa bdag*, discussed in Berounský’s chapter in this volume)—who are distinct from the ‘lord spirits of the region’—and some important mountain deities who have the word ‘alpine spirit’ incorporated into their names.<sup>88</sup> Padmasambhava thus bridges both worlds, but often acts to channel non-Buddhist powers towards Buddhism and to transform them into protectors of Buddhism. Mainstream Tibetan historiography increasingly depicted Buddhism and Buddhists as protecting Tibet and Tibetans, rather than the spirits and emperors who protected them according to non-Buddhist documents dating from the imperial period.

The variations of Tibetan Buddhism increased exponentially in this highly bibliophile land and were only to a limited extent unified under key narratives with the rule of the Dalai Lamas from the seventeenth century onwards.

87 See, for example, the treatment of ‘Bön doctrines’ in the *Pillar Testament*, quoted in Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 216.

88 See Anne-Marie Blondeau, “Le lHa ’dre bka’ thañ,” in *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, ed. Ariane Macdonald (Adrien Maisonneuve: Paris, 1971), 29–126, especially pp. 69–71 and 109–110.

The mythology of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682, Tib. Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho), drew on his status as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara and reincarnation of Emperor Songtsen Gampo (d. 649, Tib. Srong btsan sgam po) to legitimise his rule. He also made connections with past tantric masters such as Padmasambhava, another emanation of Avalokiteśvara who also promoted the worship of this deity. However, among the previous incarnations of the Dalai Lamas was sometimes also the mythical first emperor, Nyatri Tsenpo.<sup>89</sup> This constitutes a more inclusive perspective on the non-Buddhist accounts than the above ‘Russian doll’ narrative of the *Pillar Testament*. Here, the early emperors share the supra-mundane perspective of transcendent Buddhist saviours to the extent that they are identified with Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and Buddha Amitābha. They thus play a part in the salvific *Heilsgeschichte* of Tibet, rather than representing an afterthought included more out of respect for older traditions. However, not much was made of this emanation as Nyatri Tsenpo, whereas the key accounts of Avalokiteśvara *qua* Songtsen Gampo grew in popularity along with the Dalai Lamas’ power over Central Tibet and then wider over the plateau. These Buddhist rulers, in addition to Padmasambhava, are remembered as converting the non-Buddhist elements of Tibet while the latter are far less often valorised in stories but are more often the ‘other’ to be tamed.

However, this is an incomplete taming. Samuel, describing the Himalayan regions in which the above types of non-Buddhist religion are practised, argues “these are areas that have made a certain choice not to be fully ‘tamed.’”<sup>90</sup> In that article, Samuel notes in particular the references among the practitioners themselves to the incomplete nature of Padmasambhava’s work.<sup>91</sup> Samuel suggests that, alternatively, this could be an incorporation of negative stereotypes from Tibetan Buddhist lamas as a local self-identification.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, he says of non-Buddhist practices at the village level:

89 Nancy Lin, “Recounting the Fifth Dalai Lama’s Rebirth Lineage,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* 38 (2017): 119–156.

90 Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity,” 90.

91 Ibid. See also Hildegard Diemberger, “Padmasambhava’s Unfinished Job: The Subjugation of Local Deities as Described in the *dBa’-bzhed* in Light of Contemporary Practices of Spirit Possession,” in *Pramāṇakīrtiḥ: Papers Dedicated to Ernst Steinkellner on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Birgit Kellner et al., 85–94 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 2007).

92 Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity,” 90.

[They] do not however indicate a preference for an alternative process of ‘taming’ [(say, by the legendary eighth-century Tibetan master Drenpa Namkha [Tib. Dran pa nam mkha’] of the established Bön religion)] but, rather, signal that these communities choose to remain in significant part untamed.<sup>93</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

Non-Buddhist religious traditions that are also not Bönpo have often been overlooked in previous scholarship, which tended to reify Tibetan Buddhism and Bön as the only alternatives, while offering examples from these traditions as demonstrations of negative traits in Buddhism or Bön. Yet, deities such as heavenly spirits of the region and alpine spirits are found in some of our oldest documents, while funerary rituals are evident from imperial-period tombs and later manuscripts from Dunhuang and the Gatang *stūpa*. The sources do not point to a single religious institution or even an ultimately Central Tibetan provenance, but they influenced Buddhism (and Bön) both positively and negatively over the centuries.

Positive influences include the incorporation of one pantheon into the other in the imperial-period proclamation and late-imperial/early post-imperial prayer from Dunhuang, offering these protecting spirits praise and propitiation and ascribing to them an important (if subservient) place within the later religions of liberation by enlightenment beyond the world of local deities and spirits. Other positive processes include the adaptation of tales of the first emperor and first royal funerary rites into later Buddhist historiography. Negative influence comprises the reification of the above practices into an ‘other’ religion seen in some Buddhist Dunhuang sources, the *History of Food Provisioning* and Padmasambhava narratives. Here, such practices should be tamed and transformed by Buddhism. In Bönpo historiography that lies outside this contribution, they can be viewed as an important but lower ‘vehicle’ (Tib. *theg pa*) of Bön that gives way to its higher, more salvific vehicles of enlightenment-focused mind training and *tantra*.<sup>94</sup> Bön has increasingly been categorised as a form of Tibetan Buddhism today, and this move risks silencing the unique elements of the Bön tradition or demoting it to a subaltern position. However, in the stance that both Bön and Tibetan Buddhism take to non-salvific elements within and without their own religions, there is

93 Samuel, “Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity.”

94 See Bellezza, *Spirit-Mediums*, 344ff.

some truth in their identification. They are in this sense closer to each other than they are to the even more silenced early religious traditions evidenced in *some parts* of the Tibetan Plateau during the imperial period. These were non-Buddhist and only to some extent absorbed into Tibetan imperial ritual and then Tibetan Buddhism at this time; and not yet incorporated into the Bön religion that did not come into existence until a little later.

Lastly, the *History of Food Provisioning* and *Pillar Testament* may constitute elite Buddhist discourses. However, their 'arguments' (or those in elite society that they reflected) appear to have trickled down to form general perceptions in influential quarters of Tibetan society: notions of a contrast, rhetorically at least, between Buddhist and Bönpo identity. These opposed categories influenced the conceptual lens through which modern non-Tibetan scholars viewed Tibetan religion. The ideology behind narratives recounting Padmasambhava's taming of 'Tibet' were even more influential beyond elite spheres and are now thoroughly entrenched in ritual and social practice across large parts (though not all) of the Tibetan Plateau and in the Tibetan diaspora. The legitimisation of the Dalai Lamas drew on many of the above aspects of Tibetan Buddhist ideology and thereby further cemented them in Tibetan 'national identity' discourses. Until recently, the non-Buddhist aspects adding to the variety of Tibetan religious experience have been marginalised, but may play more of a role in these debates in future. Yet, an easy identification of the practices current today with those of the Tibetan imperial period, and further identification of them with established Bön, should be resisted.