

Preface

by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

I am very happy to have participated in the conference held at SOAS in September 2011, 'Bon, Shangshung and Early Tibet'. This conference coincides with the 50th anniversary of the 1960 Rockefeller Foundation programme, which brought a number of Tibetan scholars to the West, and the founding of the London Shangshung Institute for Tibetan Studies. The Rockefeller Foundation programme enabled Lopön Tenzin Namdak, one of the most distinguished scholars of Bon and a keynote speaker at this conference, to come to London as a visiting scholar at SOAS 50 years ago. Professor Samten Karmay from Paris (Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale) the other keynote speaker, who also came to SOAS 50 years ago, has also made significant academic contributions to the understanding of Bon.

The remaining academics and scholars including Tsering Thar - Professor and Dean of Minzu University of China, College of Tibetan Studies of Central University for Nationalities, Beijing - have all made major significant academic research and developments in the area of Bon, Shangshung and Early Tibet.

To grasp the relationship between the ancient history and culture of Shangshung and Tibet, we must understand that Shangshung is the original source of Tibetan culture and history. This is related to the ancient pre-Buddhist tradition of Bon in Tibet. Tibetan history and culture has come to be presented from the perspective of the later Buddhist tradition, but that is not the ancient Tibetan view. Without an understanding of its Shangshung roots, one cannot understand the source of Tibetan history and culture. When I arrived in Italy in 1960 as part of the Rockefeller programme previously mentioned, I did not have this understanding, because I had only studied in a Buddhist college. Later when I studied more the value of Tibetan history and the source of Tibetan culture, I realised that it is very important to understand how Tibetan history and culture are explained in the ancient Bon tradition.

At present we do not have any way of assessing the origins of the ancient Shangshung generations other than relying upon traditional oral accounts that

progressively appeared since very early times, and that have been incorporated within the ancient Bonpo culture as well as in those narratives that have been put into writing in historical times, on the basis of which later scholars compiled their religious and dynastic histories.

The study of Shangshung and Bon religious tradition that was present in Tibet for many centuries before the spread of Buddhism, is an indispensable reference point for research into the birth and history of the civilisation of Tibet. In order to have an overall picture of the origin and evolution of the history of Shangshung and Tibet, we can broadly divide this into three historical periods: in the first – c. beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. - only the kingdom of Shangshung existed; in the second, Shangshung co-existed with the new kingdom of Tibet located in the fertile Yarlung valley; the third starts with the annexation of Shangshung by Tibet, and ends with the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the ninth century.

The centre of the kingdom of Shangshung lay in what is now the region of Guge in western Tibet, but its domination spread over practically all the territory subsequently encompassed in central and eastern Tibet. The government of Shangshung probably did not exercise direct control over those regions, limiting itself to levying annual taxes; its civilisation and culture, however, based on the Bon tradition, spread widely in all parts of Tibet. The beginning of this era probably coincides with the life of the master Shenrab Miwoche [Gshen-rab Mi-bo-che] and of his royal patron Triwer Sergyi Charuchen [Khri-wer La-rje Gser-gyi Bya-ru-can]. As regards the name 'Shangshung', probably the original name was simply 'Shung' and 'Shang', [zhang: maternal uncle] was added later as a sign of respect, as many Tibetan kings had married princesses from Shangshung. The word 'Shung' [zhung] corresponds to the Tibetan khyung, the garuḍa eagle that in this ancient civilisation symbolised the fire element in Bon. Still today in the vicinity of Mount Kailash there remains a place called Khyunglung, 'khyung valley', which was for a time capital of the kings of Shangshung.

Research into the origins of Shangshung strongly correlates with accounts that would see the Shangshung people as descending originally from the Four or Six Tribes of Tibet (rus chen bzhi'am drug).

Since a knowledge of historically-based Bon is essential to know how the first Shangshung generations appeared, it would seem first of all necessary to ascertain how ancient Bon originated; but in reality, there is basically no way to determine, from a historical perspective, the origin of the first Bon lineages in Shangshung.

The indispensable resources through which we can understand the origins of ancient Shangshung amounts simply to what is left of the history of Shangshung. We certainly have to keep in mind that the foundation of the history is never separate from the various ways in which it has been expounded according to the Bon tradition, and that it is therefore necessary to base our research firmly upon such a foundation. There exist all sorts and numbers of elegant accounts and historical collections, but when they break away from that original foundation, they are deprived of a concrete historical basis. Just like any high and magnificent palace built upon shaky foundations eventually runs the risk of collapsing, these accounts do not establish the conditions for bringing the ancient culture to light.

Most of the history concerning the way in which our first ancestors came into being, how they conducted their lives, and so on, starts from people who lived during the Stone Age. Some historical cycles represent the kind of history that was produced simply on the basis of an oral tradition transmitted from father to son, from son to nephew, and from nephew to grandson.

The second period saw the rise of the dynasty of the emperors of Yarlung, a small kingdom in central Tibet, which was to lay the foundation of the Tibetan empire of the succeeding centuries. But the culture of the kingdom was that of Shangshung, as was Bon its religion. Although historical texts report that for thirty-three generations of kings, from the time of Nya khri Btsan po to that of Srong btsan Sgam po (d. 649 C.E.), the state religion was Bon and the king was always accompanied by one or more royal priests called sku gshen. These priests served as the king's bodyguards and were essential for maintaining his prestige and well-being as well as ensuring the prosperity of the people and the nation. Nevertheless there were occasions when the kings attempted to rebel against the power of the priestly caste, which was directly tied to the interests of the kingdom of Shangshung that initially enjoyed a sort of supremacy over the new state: it is sufficient to observe that the names of the Tibetan kings were conferred by the Bon priests in the language of Shangshung. Dri-gum Btsan po (ca. 1st century C.E.), the eighth king, was the first to try to suppress Bon, exiling all the priests and enforcing a harsh repression of the clergy. He was concerned about the growing prestige of the priestly caste and feared that Shangshung could conquer Tibet, a kingdom quite young in relation to the other and which still lacked adequate political and military power to protect its independence. But Dri gum btsan po's persecution did not achieve its desired ends; the king was murdered and with the accession of his successor Spu lde gung rgyal, Bon was reinstated in its prestigious position. In the light of subsequent events Dri gum btsan po's failure can be explained by the lack of a

culture to serve as an alternative to Bon of Shangshung. The endeavour to disengage the political power from the influence of the clergy was not accomplished until the reign of the king Srong btsan Sgam po. This king availed himself of the Buddhist culture from India and China, and succeeded in laying the foundation of a new culture and religion capable of bearing compassion with the autochthonous religion.

With this king begins the third and last phase of ancient Tibetan history, corresponding to the annexation of the kingdom of Shangshung and the culmination of the Tibetan empire, which in a short time became one of the greatest powers in Asia. Forging diplomatic ties with the rulers of Nepal and China, Songtsen Gampo promoted the introduction of Buddhism. However, it was only in the reign of king Khri srong Lde btsan (r. 742-797, C.E.) in the following century that Buddhism came to be officially adopted as the state religion. Having laid the foundation for the diffusion of a new culture, Songtsen Gampo prepared an ambush for King Ligmigya [Lig-mi-rgya] of Shangshung and murdered him, thus consummating the annexation of Shangshung. This marked the beginning of the decline of ancient Bon. Despite this blow to Bon, throughout the period of the Tibetan monarchy, the Tibetan king continued to be flanked by a Bonpo priest whom he asked to perform the most important rites to propitiate fortune and glory, on the birth of a prince, at a royal matrimony and on other momentous occasions.

The distinction as to when the history of a given people actually began at a certain point in time is determined by the invention of a writing system, and by the gradual recording of such a history in written form. This is a universal phenomenon that is not only applicable to the history of ancient Shangshung, but also to the history and the development of civilisation of all of humankind; such natural phenomena cannot be ignored and should be considered as an indispensable starting point for our research, as also when we investigate the origin of the ancient Shangshung people.