

A MICROCOSM OF THE BON RELIGION

CHARLES RAMBLE



Fig. 1 Bon Deity Trowo Tsochok Khagying; Tibet; 15th century; distemper, ink, gold on cloth; 31 × 26 in. (78.7 × 66 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Carlton Rochell, in honor of John Guy, and in celebration of the Museum's 150th Anniversary, 2018; 2018.890; CC0 – Creative Common (CC0 1.0)

BON DEITY TROWO TSOCHOK KHAGYING

Tibet

15th century

SUMMARY

Anthropologist Charles Ramble introduces the indigenous Tibetan religion of Bon focusing on the image of this deity with the entourage of warlike and half-animal gods. Bon refers to the many pre- or non-Buddhist ritual practices of Tibet, as well as the organized monastic religion that developed in dialogue with Tibetan Buddhist traditions from the tenth century on. This thangka shows a Bon deity and his consort in a tantric embrace, at the center of a mandala with fierce local gods from Tibetan myths.

The central figure in this thangka (scroll painting) is one of the most important divinities of the Bon religion of Tibet: Trowo Tsochok Khagying, “The Wrathful One, the Supreme Lord Stretching across the Sky.” He is in union with his consort, Khala Dukmo, “Fierce Lady in the Sky,” surrounded by their entourage. While this arrangement suggests a typical tantric Buddhist configuration, a closer examination reveals that it is associated not with Buddhism but with the Bon religion. One immediate clue is the swastika on the chest of the figure in the center of the lowest row: the arms of the swastika point counterclockwise, which, in post-eleventh-century Tibetan iconography, is generally an indication that the image is associated with Bon. Before undertaking an examination of the thangka, however, a few words should be said by way of introduction to this religion.

WHAT IS BON?

As Per Kvaerne has pointed out, “Bon” denotes at least three different things: First, the religion that prevailed in Tibet before Buddhism became the official faith in the late eighth century; second, an organized system with a monastic component that emerged in the tenth to eleventh centuries, and generally referred to as Yungdrung (“Eternal”) Bon; and third, a plethora of cults consisting of mythic narratives and rituals for the protection and prosperity of local communities.¹ These cults, which exhibit significant continuities with the earliest form of Bon, are found throughout Tibet but persist especially in the Himalayan borderlands. Since there is no indigenous term for this

mosaic of local cults, we may call it “pagan” Bon, since each one is concerned with the well-being of a local territory (*pagus* in Latin, the origin of the term “pagan”).² The followers of Yungdrung Bon, known as Bonpos, consider themselves the heirs of the pre-Buddhist religion. They do not, however, recognize any kinship with pagan Bon, which sometimes involves animal sacrifice, a practice anathema to Yungdrung Bon. Confusingly, the term *bonpo* is often also applied to priests and shamans of pagan Bon.

Bonpos believe that everything in Yungdrung Bon derives from the teaching of the religion’s legendary founder, Shenrab Miwo, who is believed by followers of the religion to have lived sixteen thousand years ago, but for whom no historical sources are available. This name is understood to mean “the great man who is an excellent priest,” but may also, with a slightly different orthography, mean “the great man of the Shen clan,” a form that is found especially in older sources.

As different as these three types of Bon may be, they are not completely isolated from one another. Yungdrung Bon shares with Buddhism the techniques and principles that underpin their sutras, tantras, and philosophical systems. However, it has cosmological concepts and divinities that predate the arrival of Buddhism, and it shares with pagan Bon a range of non-Buddhist rituals. These rituals, as well as the animal divinities that they feature, are an enduring reminder of the close relationship between Bon and the natural world.

All the Buddhist schools look to India as the source of their fundamental tenets, and to Sanskrit as the main language from which their scriptures were translated. For the Bonpos, the land from which their teachings came was Zhangzhung, once an actual polity in the western part of the Tibetan Plateau and beyond, but accorded fantastic dimensions in Bon religious histories. The language from which the scriptures were translated is believed to have been not Sanskrit but the language of Zhangzhung.

Historically, then, the complex system that Bonpos attribute to a single founder figure may be the pooling of influences from several provenances: India, Central Asia, Tibet, and the Himalayan region, and also China, which was the source of certain divinatory traditions.

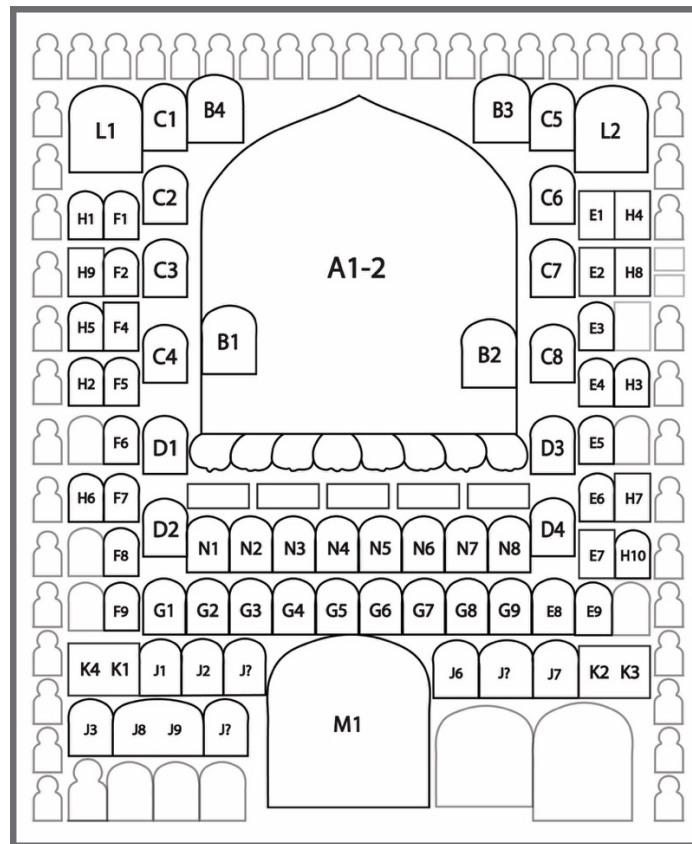


Fig. 2. Key to the thangka of Bon Deity Trowo Tsochok Khagying; Tibet; drawing by Olga Helman

THE COMPOSITION OF THE THANGKA

The texts relating to Tsochok Khagying are broadly in agreement about the main figures represented in this thangka (fig. 2), which may be summarized briefly.³ Tsochok himself (A1 in the key to the thangka) has three faces, six arms, and two legs, and his consort, Khala Dukmo, has two arms and two legs. The double triangle in her right hand is a golden thunderbolt, and with her left hand she feeds a heart to the lord. In the innermost circle (B) are four manifestations of the lord himself, the Four Wrathful Ones

who Avert Evil. Outside these, in two columns (C), are eight further manifestations called the Wrathful Ones of Awareness. Below each of these columns are two figures who form a group known as the Manifested Wrathful Ones (D), identifiable by the half-man half-bird creature called *shangshang* that supports the throne of each. These are framed on three sides by twenty-seven divinities known as the Fierce Ladies, comprising three categories: the Nine Zema in a column to our right (E), the Nine Female Champions to the left (F), and the Nine Jinte in a row below them (G).⁴ The names Zema and Jinte have no obvious translation. In two columns of five figures each outside these are the Ten Champions (H), who are paired with another set of female animal-headed divinities called the Ten Warlords (J), of whom seven are grouped to our left of the central figure at the base and three to the right, at the level of her head. The last group whose members belong to the entourage of Tsochok are four animal-headed figures in long robes, two to the far left and two to the far right of the row level with the head of the main figure at the base. These are the Four Steadfast Ones (K), who guard the cardinal directions. The other images in the thangka are not part of the Tsochok's retinue. In the Bon pantheon, Tsochok is one of a triad called Chipung, the "Universal Embodiment," the other two being Walse Ngampa (L1) and Lhago Tokpa (L2). The central figure below is Sipai Gyelmo, the "Queen of the Universe" (M1), in one of her numerous manifestations, here riding a red mule. Below the animals supporting the throne of Tsochok himself is a row of goddesses (N), each holding a sense offering (fig. 3).⁵ The perimeter of the thangka, and a few locations in the interior, are occupied by unidentified divinities, saints, and lamas.



Fig. 3 Bon Rituals, "Between the Lines: Exorcising the Old Year in a Himalaya Bonpo Village," *YouTube*, June 19, 2022, 1:20:17, https://youtube.com/watch?v=SqiN_0wRXls

A FUSION OF THE DIFFERENT STRANDS OF BON

This painting admirably represents the cluster of influences that constitute Yungdrung Bon. While the concept of a divinity with his consort and entourage is indebted to the Indian tantric tradition, there is much here that does not have such a straightforward attribution. Sipai Gyelmo was originally an ancestral Tibetan goddess, but over time her iconography and other attributes have converged with those of the Buddhist goddess Palden Lhamo. Most of the members of the entourage are unknown to Buddhism: although the three groups (E, F, and G) of the Twenty-Seven Fierce Ladies, whose chief is Sipai Gyelmo herself, have parallels in Buddhism, they are probably war gods of indigenous or Central Asian origin.⁶ Tsochok and his entourage are sometimes pictured in other media: during rituals in which he is the main divinity, often with his benign (*zhiwa*) counterpart, he is portrayed as a dough-and-butter effigy (*torma*) (fig. 4). Alternatively, he and his inner circle—including the Fierce Ladies—are depicted in an

abstract geometric form as a mandala, where he and his consort are denoted at the center by the interlaced letters A and MA.⁷ In another form of the mandala (fig. 5), Tsochok and his inner circle take the shape of ritual daggers and ritual claws, while the Zema, the Female Champions, and the Jinte are embodied respectively by hooks, arrows, and wooden plaques or tablets.



Fig. 4 A large *torma* (dough-and-butter sculpture) representing Tsochok Khagying and his consort, standing on an altar in front of a clay image of the same pair of divinities, Lubrak Village, Mustang District, Nepal; photograph by Charles Ramble, 2008



Fig. 5 Mandala of Trowo Tsochok Khagying; image after Tenzin Namdak, Yasuhiko Nagano, and Musashi Tachikawa, eds. 2000. *Mandalas of the Bon Religion*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 73

All the members of the entourage who fall outside the Fierce Ladies—the Champions, the Warlords, and the Steadfast Ones, as well as others who are not featured in this thangka—do not appear in the inner mandala at all but have their own separate residence, known as the “outer support arrangement” (*chitenko*)⁸ (figs. 6 and 7). This is an assemblage comprising a long vertical spear surrounded by sets of objects: eight smaller spears, with the horns, fangs, and claws of different animals as spearheads; arrows fletched with feathers of different colors; sacks of various substances (grains, minerals, and so forth), posts, cairns, and banners that are all connected to the central spear with cords festooned with the forelegs of animals and stuffed groups of birds, among other things. All these components are the supports of the divinities in the outer

reaches of Tsochok’s entourage. Constructions resembling this outer support, sometimes known as “bird perches” (*jadang*)⁹ (fig. 8), are described in older Bon texts and feature in increasingly rare rituals for the propitiation of war gods, independently of any tantric ritual context. Clearly, the cult of Tsochok is a fusion of tantra with the divinities and associated rituals of indigenous divinities who have nothing to do with Buddhism but have been integrated into the complex of Yungdrung Bon.

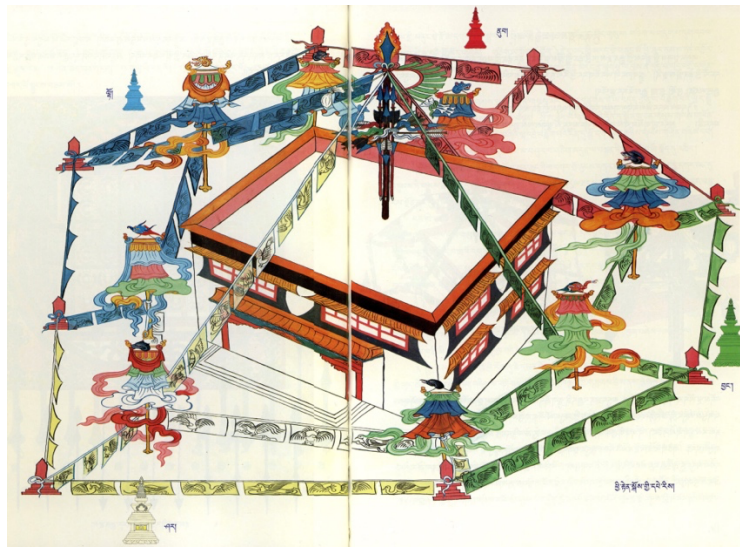


Fig. 6 Diagram of a *chitenko*, the support for the divinities in the outermost circles of Trowo Tsochok Khagying’s entourage; image after Tshangs pa bstan ’dzin et al. 2014, 16–17



Fig. 7 Part of a *chitenko*, Tritten Norbutse Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal; photograph by Anna Sehnalova, 2012



Fig. 8 A *jadang* constructed as part of a ritual for the propitiation of protective divinities in a house in Thewo, Sichuan, China; photograph by Ngawang Gyatso, 2014

FOOTNOTES

¹ Per Kvaerne, *The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition* (London: Serindia, 1995), 9–10.

² For a justification of the use of the term “pagan” in this context, see Charles Ramble, “The Classification of Territorial Divinities in Pagan and Buddhist Rituals in South Mustang,” in *Tibetan Mountain Deities: Their Cults and Representations*, ed. Anne-Marie Blondeau (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998), 124.

³ For two studies of the iconography of Tsochok Khagying based on a thangka and scriptural accounts, see Per Kvaerne, “A Preliminary Study of the Bonpo Divinity Khro Bo GTso Mchog Mkha’ ’gying,” in *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie*, ed. Lawrence Epstein Wylie and Richard F. Sherburne (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 117–25 and Per Kvaerne, *The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition* (London: Serindia, 1995). For a description of another thangka of this divinity, see Amy Heller, “Three Early Bonpo Thangka and Their Consecration Inscriptions,” in *Tibetan and Himalayan Healing: An Anthology for Anthony Aris*, ed. Charles Ramble and Ulrike Roesler (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2015), 225–32.

⁴ Note that the third of the Nine Zema, a “black female with the head of a chough, holding a claw,” who would have been identified in the thangka as F3, has been omitted by the artist.

⁵ Tsochok is the main divinity in certain elaborate Bonpo rituals in which both he and members of his entourage are represented by masked dancers. For a film of one such performance from Mustang, in Nepal, see https://youtu.be/SqjN_0wRXls.

⁶ Henk Blezer, “The ‘Bon’ dBal-Mo Nyer-Bdun (/Brgyad) and the Buddhist dBang-Phyug-Ma Nyer-Brgyad,” in *New Horizons in Bon Studies: Proceedings of a Conference Held in Osaka August 1999*, ed. Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000), 121.

⁷ For a reproduction of the mandala of Trowo Tsochok Khagying, see Tenzin Namdak, Yasuhiko Nagano, and Musashi Tachikawa, eds., *Mandalas of the Bon Religion*, Senri Ethnological Reports 12 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000), 43.

⁸ Diagrams and a description of this construction are given in Tshangs pa bstan ’dzin et al., *Bdud rtsi ’od zer ’khyil ba’i lag len skor* (Kathmandu: Triten Norbutse Monastery, 2014), 16–20.

⁹ A description of a *jadang* and associated rituals is given in Lcags mo mtsho, n.d.; I am grateful to Lcags mo mtsho, of the Northwest Minorities University, Lanzhou, for permitting me to consult and refer to this unpublished work.

FURTHER READING

Blezer, Henk. 2000. “The ‘Bon’ dBal-mo Nyer-bdun (/brgyad) and the Buddhist dBang-phyug-ma Nyer-brgyad.” In *New Horizons in Bon Studies: Proceedings of a Conference Held in Osaka, August 1999*, edited by Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano, 117–80. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

Kvaerne, Per. 1990. “A Preliminary Study of the Bonpo Divinity Khro bo gTso mchog mkha’ ’gying.” In *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie*, edited by Lawrence Epstein and Richard F. Sherburne, 117–25. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

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CITATION

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