

## A NOTE ON TIBETAN BON

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### I

In his "Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion"<sup>1</sup> Professor Helmut Hoffmann tentatively attaches the word *bon* in its meaning of "the Bon religion" to "the obsolete verb *bon-pa*". For *bon-pa* he quotes the entry in the well-known treatise *Li sihi gur khañ*, in which it is equated with *zlas-pa* (= *bzlas-pa*), this latter word meaning "to murmur, mutter". The gloss *bon-pa ni zlas-pa*, which is also included in the "*brDah gсар rnyit gi skor*"<sup>2</sup>, is, of course, the basis of the entry *bon-pa* in Chandra Das' "Tibetan English Dictionary".<sup>3</sup> The Tibetan-Mongolian edition<sup>4</sup> of the *Li sihi gur khañ*, to which Professor Hoffmann refers, translates the whole gloss into Mongolian, *uriqu inu ungsihu*, and furthermore adds *dza-pa* (*japa*) as the Sanscrit equivalent of *bon-pa*. The Tibetan-Mongolian *brDah gсар rnyit gi skor* has only one Mongolian equivalent to cover the two Tibetan words, viz., *urilyaci*.

In the absence of examples from actual texts the translation into Mongolian of the glosses of the *Li sihi gur khañ* is, of course, of vital importance for the determination of the meaning of *bon-pa*. Not only may we take it for granted that the Mongolian translators were in most cases acquainted from their own reading experience with the meanings of both constituents of the glosses, a study of their method of translation also clearly shows that they took special care to give the closest possible Mongolian translation of either constituent of a gloss. Professor Hoffmann has limited himself to adducing the latter half of the Mongolian translation of the gloss

<sup>1</sup> Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz, Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, Jg. 1950, No. 4, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> p. 15B<sup>1</sup>. This work constitutes the last part (Section XI) of the Tibetan-Mongolian *Dag yig mkhas pañi byun gnas* (*Merged yarqu-yin orun neretü toytayaysan dagyig*). Cp. W. Heissig, *Die Pekinger Lamaistischen Blockdrucke in mongolischer Sprache*, Wiesbaden, 1954, pp. 86, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Calcutta, 1902, p. 879.

<sup>4</sup> p. 14B<sup>2</sup>. About the work itself, see B. Vladimircov, *O tibetsko-mongol'skom slovoe Li-sihi gur khañ* in *Doklady Akademii Nauk* (Comptes-Rendus de l'Académie des Sciences), S.S.S.R., Series B, Leningrad, 1926, pp. 27-30, and Heissig, *loc. cit.*, pp. 88-9.

he quotes,<sup>1</sup> viz., *ungsiqu* which means "to read aloud, recite". But it is the first half of the gloss which is in fact the Mongolian key word for *bon-pa*, viz., *uriqu* meaning "to call, to invite". In fact, Kowalewski's Dictionary<sup>2</sup> gives *jap* "to mutter, esp. prayers" as the Sanscrit equivalent of *uriqu*, whereas Sanscrit *path* (= *path*) "to recite aloud" is adduced there under the entry *ungsiqu*.<sup>3</sup> The proximity of *uriqu* and *bon-pa* is further enhanced by the translation of the same Tibetan gloss in the *brDa gzar rnyiñ gi skor*, where the derivative *urilyaci*<sup>4</sup> is given as the one and only equivalent of both constituents of the gloss. Bearing in mind that "to invite" is the primary meaning of *uriqu*, it may be inferred that the Mongolian translators intended to assign the meaning of "to invoke (by muttering)" to *bon-pa* when used as a verb, and the meaning of "an invoker" when used as a noun. The very first example chosen by Kowalewski to illustrate the usage of *uriqu* shows in fact this verb in the meaning of "to invoke": *Idam burqan i uriqu*.

The meaning of "to invoke, an invoker" would seem to offer an alternative to Professor Hoffmann's suggestion of regarding the verb *bon-pa* as a derivative of a noun *bon* meaning "muttering, magic spell" ("Gemurmel, Zauberspruch"). *bon-pa* might instead be attached to *hbod-pa* "to call, to invite". Variants like *rtsen-pa* and *rtsed-pa* "to play", or *rgad-pa* and *rgan-pa* "old", or *sran-ma* and *srad-pa* "peas" can—but for the prefix *h*—be adduced in support of this latter suggestion.

This question, however, must remain open until we have succeeded in tracing the word *bon-pa* down to actual texts,<sup>5</sup> but it must in any case be borne in mind that in classical Tibetan a verb is in no way commonly derived from a noun by means of adding the suffix *ba* or *pa* to the latter. Though a few cases like *smad-pa* "to bend down, to blame" from *smad*

<sup>1</sup> "zlas (besser bzlas, mongolisch ungsihu) 'murmeln, murmelnd rezitieren'."

<sup>2</sup> *Dictionnaire Mongol-Russe-Français*, Kasan 1844, p. 440: S. djap (submissa voce loqui, praesertim preces murmurare).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 356: S. path, pathati (clara voce recitare).

<sup>4</sup> Kowalewski, *loc. cit.*, p. 443: *urilya*: "S. djapa (murmuratio); l'action de réciter une prière à voix basse, de manière à n'être pas entendu; murmure"; *urilyaci* accordingly corresponds to Sanscrit *jāpaka*. See also A. Mostaert, *Dictionnaire Ordos*, Vol. II, 1942, p. 740: *urilga* "action d'inviter, invitation" . . . (mo. *urilya*).

<sup>5</sup> This should be possible of a large number of the "ancient" words. To give an example, *bstar-ba* in the meaning of "to clean, polish" is explained as *byi-dor* both in the *Li-tiñi gur-khañ* (Tib. Mongol. Ed, p. 3B<sup>2</sup>) and in the *brDañ gzar rnyiñ gi skor* (p. 2B<sup>3</sup>). This gloss is apparently referred to by Jäschke, in the entry *star-ba* (Dict., p. 220, second meaning). The verb occurs in this meaning in the last of the stories included in Schiefner's *Tibetan Tales* (p. 363 of Ralston's translation). The first of the two competing artists takes six months to complete his picture, but the second takes the same amount of time "to polish the surface of the wall". (Narthang Kanjur hDul, Kha, p. 510 A<sup>3</sup>: *de la gcig gis zla ba drug gis ri moñi las zin to/cig los kyi[s] ni zla ba drug tu rtsig nos bstarto//*.) The Chinese version (Taishō Tripitaka, Vol. XXIV, p. 77b, ll. 23-4) has: 其一畫師 時經六月 乃畫一面 其第二者 但唯摩飾壁面. Schiefner's translation "covering the surface of his wall with mosaic work" must be corrected accordingly.

"lower part" or *gnas-pa* "to live" from *gnas* "place, spot" may be adduced in support of such a derivation, in the overwhelming majority of cases no distinction is made between noun and verb by means of *ba* or *pa* (cp., e.g., *bden-pa* "to be true, truth", *spyod-pa* "to act, action", *phan-pa* "to be useful, profit", *bdog-pa* "to be in possession, wealth", *dka-ba* "to be difficult, hardship", etc.)

## II

After I had written this, my friend Professor R. Stein called my attention to the occurrence, in texts relating to the Bon religion (including some of the extracts in Professor Hoffmann's book), of compounds which have *bon* as its second element. These compounds clearly denote persons to whom definite functions are assigned—Professor Stein called them "des techniciens" or "des spécialistes". The first element in these compounds often is the name of the country of origin, e.g., in *Zañ-Zuñ-bon*, in other cases it refers in some way to the sphere of activity of the "technician" or "specialist" concerned, as, e.g., in *rta-bon*, *dur-bun*, *hphrul-bon*, who then would obviously deal with horses, perform some ceremonies at the graves, or some kind of magic generally. I had noted myself such compounds with *bon* as their second component as *myi-bon*, *lha-bon*, *rgyal-bon*, which are transmitted in the *gZer-myig*<sup>1</sup> as part of the name of *gSen rabs*, the founder of the Bon-religion, "Myi-bon lha-bon yo-bon<sup>2</sup> thod kar", but their number is much greater, and, as communicated to me by Professor Stein, some of them clearly are parallels to a set of similar compounds with *gsen* as its last element: *dur gsen*, *hphrul-gsen*, etc.

The above compounds would seem to support strongly the meaning of "to invoke" and "invoker" for *bon-pa*, nor is there any difficulty on the side of word formation, as the suffix *pa* would, of course, be dropped in compounds.<sup>3</sup> The same consideration holds good for compounds, like *bon-chos*, in which *bon* occurs as the first element. The "Religion of Invocation" would seem to fit well into this context, emphasizing as it does the generally assumed shamanistic nature of the Bon religion. The two words *bon* and *bon-po*, as we meet them in actual texts, may thus be explained as shortenings for *bon-chos* on the one hand, and for *bon-pa-po* on the other.

## III

The suggested etymological relationship between *bon-pa* "to invoke, invoker" and *hbod-pa* "to call, invite" would seem to rule out any connexion between *bon-pa* and the element *bon* which occurs in the compound

<sup>1</sup> *gZer myig*, I 8a 5, ed. A. H. Francke, *Asia Major*, First Series, Vol. I, 1924, p. 314. Cp. also Hoffmann, *loc. cit.*, p. 234, n. 4.

<sup>2</sup> I am unable to explain the meaning of *yo* in *yo-bon*.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., A. Jäschke, *Tibetan Grammar*, 3rd ed., 1929, p. 18.

*sa-bon* "seed". The latter connexion has apparently been considered by A. Schiefner. This may be inferred from the remark "according to Schiefner<sup>1</sup> = बीज" which Jäschke added in parenthesis in his "Tibetan-English Dictionary" of 1881, and already ten years earlier in his "Handwörterbuch der tibetischen Sprache".<sup>2</sup> It would, in fact, seem likely that the addition of *sa* "earth" was used to distinguish two homonyms. (1) *bon* "to invoke, invoker" (related to *ḥbod*) and (2) *bon* "seed", perhaps to be connected with *ḥbo-ba* "to spill" as "the thing spilled" in the same way—but for the prefix *ḥ*—as we have *zan* "food" from *za-ba* "to eat", *skyin* "the thing borrowed" from *skyi-ba* "to borrow", *sun* "the bark, peel" from *su-ba* "to peel", and *gcin* "urine" from *gci-ba* "to pass water".

## IV

A possible etymological connexion between *bon* and *Bod* has recently been stressed by Professor M. Lalou<sup>4</sup> on the ground of alternations between the two words in Tun Huang manuscripts. This question would now seem to be further complicated by the fact that apparently we must reckon with two elements *bon*, of different origin.

<sup>1</sup> p. 377. I have been unable to trace the remark any further. Schiefner's attempt to connect *bod* with *phod* "können, vermögen" (*Mélanges Asiatiques*, Vol. I (1852), p. 332, note (see also p. 358)) hardly needs refutation. The fragment on the etymology of *bon* which W. Grube printed in his Preface to Schiefner's translation of the "*Bonpo Sutra Das weisse Nāga-Hunderttausend*" (*Mém. Acad. St. Pétersbourg*, VII Series, T. 28, No. 1, 1881) is limited to invalidating I. J. Schmidt's attempt to connect *bon* with *dpon-po* "master, lord". The remark in (Desgodins') *Dictionnaire Thibétain-Latin-Français* (Hong Kong, 1899, p. 674) that *bon* is abbreviated for *sa-bon*, may originate from the same source as does Schiefner's remark incorporated in Jäschke's Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> No reference to *vīja*, has, however, been made under *sa-bon*, which is given a separate entry in Jäschke's two dictionaries.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. perhaps also Lepcha *bón*, *bón-nā* "dropping, dribbling, trickling out" (Mainwaring-Grünwedel, *Dictionary of the Lepcha-Language*, Berlin, 1898, p. 264).

<sup>4</sup> *Tibétain ancien Bod/Bon*, *Journal Asiatique*, Vol. CCXLI (1953), pp. 275/6.