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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF GSHen PRIESTS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THE EXTENDED EASTERN HIMALAYAS, AND REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BON RELIGION"  

Toni Huber  

For Christoph, a gift that crosses the Himalayas,  
And in memory of our adventurous crossing of the Southern Alps,  
When I first came to appreciate you as a fine person,  
Some decades ago…  

Introduction  
A corpus of ancient myths tell of sagacious divine beings called Phywa or Srid-pa’i lha who dwell in a sky world of thirteen levels, and who descend to earth using magical cords of light and precious substances in order to benefit human beings. From the Tibetan imperial era up to the 15th century, these myths circulated and became influential among various communities upon the high plateau. Scholars of early history and myth have devoted much attention to the surviving traces of this corpus because it is held to represent a unique, indigenous “Bon” theory of the origins of divine kingship in Tibet. Recent ethnographic research has now revealed that these same ancient sky gods and their stories also inspired a religious system among peoples in a specific region of the eastern Himalayas. This living tradition of ritual exchange with the Phywa or Srid-pa’i lha continues unabated until today in the valleys of eastern Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor (fig. 3). There it is simply called “Bon” by its practitioners. In fact, three distinct types of religious activity are all locally identified as Bon within this same region, so to avoid confusion I employ the specific term Srid-pa’i lha Bon to clearly distinguish the unique system of Phywa or Srid-pa’i lha worship from fundamentally different phenomena.  

The present contribution constitutes an extract from my forthcoming monograph summarizing five years of research on the contemporary and historical dimensions of Srid-pa’i lha Bon. The phenomenon is virtually unreported to date, thus I must necessarily begin with a summary of its features, here highly abbreviated for reasons of space. I will then describe how my present topic—namely, mythological gsHen priests, their iconography and its relationship to various cultures of living priests—is to be understood in the context of Srid-pa’i lha Bon.  

Srid-pa’i lha Bon  
The narrative and ritual components of Phywa and Srid-pa’i lha worship in the eastern Himalayas are determined by the highly stratified, vertically-oriented cosmology reflected in the old origin myths of the divine king’s descent from the sky. There are a range of deities involved who all dwell ‘atop the thirteenth level of the sky world’ (gNam rim pa bcu gSUM steng na), most  

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† Other locally identified “Bon” phenomena in the region include diverse manifestations of the cults of territorial deities and spirits of the local environment, and one site historically associated with soteriologically oriented gYung-drung Bon.  


§ This exact phrase, so pervasive in Srid-pa’i lha Bon rabs and rites, first occurs in PT 1038 in Old Tibetan narratives of the origins of divine kingship. I treat nam/gnam and gung/dgung as fully synonymous since this is how they appear in local oral and written usage, and I translate ‘sky’ for both. I consciously use ‘sky world’ for the cosmographic term gNam/dgung rim pa describing the complex, multi-leveled (thirteen or...
commonly 'O-de gung-rgyal, his emanation/son Gu-se lang-ling or Gur-zhi, Tshangs-pa, plus other less well-known gods often classified as Phywa. They are regarded as procreator beings intimately related to life and its maintenance, including human descent. Many of these deities have a mythical status as the apical ancestors of historically older patrilineages *rugs, rigs, mitsihan, pha-rgyud* in our sources, viz. the ‘clans’ of the literature) established throughout the region. The deities must be invited down to earth from the zenith of the cosmos at the top level of the sky, then worshipped at the specific terrestrial sites of ritual (the altar, forest grove, etc.), and finally dispatched upward once more when worship is complete. The cosmic setting is somewhat ‘two-dimensional’ in that the idea of an underworld has little importance, nor is the system territorialized in any of the ways commonly encountered in other Tibetan and Himalayan religions. This is so precisely because the deities never dwell upon the earth, and in my experience it is a unique feature of Srid-pa’i lha Bon.

The chief ritual exponent within all Srid-pa’i lha Bon worship communities is a priest whose position and role is (ideally) hereditarily transmitted. Priests are usually designated *bon-po* or *lha-mi* or with a range of cognate local equivalents (*bon, lha-bon ‘hami* [= *lha-mi*, ‘chami’ [= *phywa-mi*, ‘plami’ [= *bla-mi*], etc.), and must observe certain dietary and behavioural taboos. These community priests are also ancestral custodians of an interrelated set of ritual antecedent narratives termed *rabs,* mostly preserved in manuscript form. Ritual practice consists of the accurate and systematic chanting of the *rabs* together with the actions of rites often specified in the *rabs,* all aimed at bringing the deities down from the sky into a highly purified environment, hosting them, gaining powers from them, and dispatching them upwards once more. This process can often involve an elaborate verbal ritual journey undertaken by the priest up to the thirteenth level of the sky and back, in order to invite and escort the deities. The main aspirations of participants/sponsors during ritual is to gain various life powers directly from the sky deities while they are temporarily on earth. These powers all relate to the fecundity and inherent productive potential of humans, livestock and crops. Without a competent priest who can chant an intact oral or written set of *rabs* at a site, Srid-pa’i lha Bon does not exist. In this respect, it is best understood as a form of ‘priestly’ Bon religion, since neither unqualified lay persons nor institutionalized specialists such as monks and lamas can perform the required ritual labour.

To round off this summary, a final point of significance is that the vast majority of all known worship communities of Srid-pa’i lha Bon are speakers of closely related and geographically contiguous East Bodish languages/dialects (i.e., Dakpa and the Dzalá/Khomakha dialect complex, Kurtöp, Bumthap, and Kheng), or their lineal descendants. Since the religious system has been primarily transmitted via patrilineal descent groups, this provides interesting indications about its origins and historical distribution. In my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life,* I will advance the hypothesis that some form of Srid-pa’i lha Bon was very likely the ancestral religion of the Shar Dung populations in southern IHo-brag, prior to their mid-14th century southward dispersal into the same Himalayan valley systems where the religion exists today.

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4 Although gods such as 'O-de gung-rgyal or Tshangs-pa named here may appear familiar from other contexts, their character within Srid-pa’i lha Bon entirely follows that of the sky-dwelling Phywa progenitor deities featuring in early myths. For example, they have no associations with mountains, as Pommaret 1994 mistakenly claimed on the basis of inadequate research.

5 The meaningful ‘antecedent’ gloss for *rabs* narratives was introduced by Dotson 2008.

6 On the Shar Dung dispersal and its historical attestation, see Ardussi 2004.
Readers with wide-ranging knowledge of the ethnography of highland Tibeto-Burman-speaking populations living across the extended eastern Himalayas (from Nepal to Yunnan) will immediately see parallels here between aspects of Srid-pa’i lha Bon and other local ritual and narrative systems, namely those featuring ancestral sky beings, vertically oriented cosmologies/rites, downward flows of life powers and fertility, and so on. This east-west axis is certainly one along which we must comparatively ‘read’ Srid-pa’i lha Bon to appreciate its relationship to regional cultural patterns, those with which it undoubtedly shares some common and ancient past. Several scholars have already begun exploring such comparisons between one end of this long Himalayan axis and the other. Yet, certain aspects of Srid-pa’i lha Bon that superficially invoke such comparative recognition are also fundamentally different in type when observed more closely. One example is that of the verbal ritual journeys undertaken by the bon-po; as self-reported and carefully observed, these are never performed in what have been described elsewhere in Himalayan ethnographies as the local priest/shaman’s state of ‘trance’, ‘ecstasy’ or ‘altered consciousness’, nor is any explicit reference made to the notion of ‘soul travel’. A verbal ritual journey is indeed undertaken, but we are dealing with states more akin to conscious visualization supported by a chanted liturgy as one might find in formal Tibetan Buddhist or g.Yung-drung Bon ritual and meditative praxis. This and other differences alert us to the fact that Srid-pa’i lha Bon must also be comparatively ‘read’ along a north-south axis, and as having strong Tibetan Plateau roots as well. In fact, in my research data the degree of explicit connections with “Bon”-identified Tibetan Plateau materials and phenomena is very high. While scattered traces of, and fleeting references to, forms of local ‘priestly Bon’ performed for this worldly benefits (as opposed to organized, soteriological g.Yung-drung Bon) have been found in some zones of the extended eastern Himalayas, it is clear from its content that Srid-pa’i lha Bon has carefully preserved a great deal more earlier Tibetan “Bon”-identified material than any other known local worship systems in the wider region. Another example of preservation of such “Bon”-identified material along the Tibetan Plateau periphery can be found in the indigenous dtô-mbà (or dongba) religion of the Naxi, which nevertheless only comes in a very distant second place in this respect compared with Srid-pa’i lha Bon.

One of many aspects of this demonstrably very old “Bon”-identified cultural strata still current in Srid-pa’i lha Bon worship is the central significance given to the gshen priest. Here gshen are mythological figures who populate local rabs narratives, in which they appear not only as the initiators of most ritual practices, but also as models or kinds of ritual ancestors with whom the contemporary priest is identified is a variety of way, most notably in the rhetorics of the rabs themselves. In the sections to follow, I will outline the place of gshen within the overall local corpus of rabs, highlight the two most important gshen figures, and draw a range of comparisons which consider their iconographies within a regional ethnographic context. My final ‘Reflections’ then briefly articulate what we know of the characteristics of Srid-pa’i lha Bon as reflected in the study of gshen priests with fundamental questions about the development of those religious systems we know of as “Bon”.

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7 The concept of ‘extended eastern Himalayas’ was coined by Stuart Blackburn and developed together with myself; see most recently the Introduction to Huber and Blackburn 2012. We intend it as a meaningful heuristic for explorative comparison rather than referring to any highly articulate or bounded ‘culture area’.
8 Here one can profitably compare the mei’sog-wà rites of the nâm-sù shaman among the Drung in Yunnan recorded by Gros 2012: 372-386 and the worship of Sarangdey by the ‘tribal priest’ and his special bhügimi assistant among the Mewahang Rai of east Nepal in Gaenszle 2007: 268-305.
10 I use this expression throughout my work to confront the well-known and increasingly intractable problem of very diverse phenomena and materials being labelled Bon or bon across time and space. The expression “Bon”-identified draws attention to the acts and contexts of identification of anything being “Bon”, since these deserve critical focus together with the content of what is being so-labelled.
11 Published ideas about the relationship between “Bon”-identified materials and Naxi dtô-mbà culture remain superficial and inadequate to date, and require systematic reappraisal.
Initiator Figures in Rabs

Throughout the distribution region of Srid-pa’i lha Bon worship (fig. 3), there are several figures who invariably feature as central or decisive characters in rabs narratives. In this context, they are portrayed as the mythical initiators of the particular rite or ritual complex represented in the rabs. Such figures are highly significant because Srid-pa’i lha Bon sources contain no historical claims as such. Rabs narratives work primarily with a mythical perspective on time, compared with the familiar chronological perspective of history. Thus, identifying such figures conventionally as ‘founders’ makes little sense with neither a specified point of reference for that which they are said to have been instrumental in starting, nor any further temporal framing throughout chronological time. Since we are dealing with a form of mythical time, I prefer to identify these key figures as ‘initiators’. The myths of these initiators all share the same general plot: something is wrong in the human world; a solution must be found; a knowledgeable expert or competent agent is engaged; they either instruct how to proceed with a ritual solution, often using divination as their source of knowledge, and/or actually perform the rites which effect the desired result. This plot, which Henk Blezer calls the “crisis and crisis management” paradigm, is of course very familiar from many Old Tibetan narratives in which various gshen and bon priests appear in just such a role.  

In Srid-pa’i lha bon, we find three major initiator figures presented in the rabs:

1. A clever bat named sGam-chen Pha-wang who is a ‘trickster’-type figure, and who acts as the first messenger between humans on earth and the Srid-pa’i lha deities in the sky world in order to invite the latter to descend. He features in rabs which are generally designated as Lha zhu rabs (Narrative of Inviting the Deity [to Descend]) and Me rabs (Narrative of [the Origins of] Fire);

2. A gshen priest named A’o (“elder brother”) Ya-ngal Gyim-kong and his two younger brothers identified respectively as the Tshan-bon and the Thab-bon but known under a variety of related individual names in the rabs. Together, these fraternal gshen are the first to eliminate obstructions and cleanse impurities on the path which the Srid-pa’i lha deities must transit between the sky and the site of worship in the human environment on the earth. They feature in a complex of Sel rabs (Narrative of Elimination Rites) which together introduce the origins of and define a related sequence of sel “elimination” rites;

3. Pha (and/or) sTon-pa gShen-rab mi-bo acting as a skilled gshen priest and advisor, who sets in motion the initial performances of major systems of worship in Srid-pa’i lha Bon, as well as specific rites at particular sites. He features in a wide variety of different rabs, including those cited in 1 and 2 above.

It must be recognized that all of these ‘initiator’ figures in Srid-pa’i lha Bon rabs are associated either directly or indirectly with early Tibetan myths. This is indeed the backdrop against which we can best understand their symbolic significance, not to mention their possible derivation sometime during the distant past. The features of gShen-rab mi-bo in early myths are already so well known we need not rehearse them again here. However, the backgrounds of the other figures remain virtually unknown. The bat named sGam-chen Pha-wang is an extremely complex character, encompassing both the archaic mythical ‘trickster’ and ‘messenger/go-between’ figures found in so many different traditions of ancient and contemporary mythology. While I

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12 See Blezer 2008: 423 and the types of sources he refers to therein.
13 Variously named Tshan-bon Thod-dkar-lcog, Tshan-bon Thor-cog or mTshan-bon mTho-spyod and Thab-bon Me-bran or mGal-bon Kha-nag in the rabs. At one level, these changing names are all part of a play of endless substitutions and the generation of variations characteristic of the nature of rabs as story types serving a multitude of local instances; Stein 1971.
14 Some scholars of Bon and their translators gloss sel with “exorcism” (e.g. Snellgrove 1967, Namkhai Norbu 1995), which in English usage strongly invokes the idea of “spirits” that need to be expelled. This does not fit the ethnographic context of Srid-pa’i lha Bon, where various forms of defilement generated by inappropriate action are the primary object of sel. This is also made clear in the gZi brjed where sel and its objects are defined; see Snellgrove 1967: 46-49.
devote a chapter to this bat figure in my forthcoming monograph Source of Life, a few background details must be repeated here since they invoke a particular regional context within which to understand the gṣhen we will focus upon.

The oldest recorded narrative of the bat as a clever messenger between sky gods and beings on earth has been preserved in the second volume of the 14th century gZi brjid compendium of g.Yung-drung Bon. It is inserted within a lengthy tale about “thirteen messenger birds of Bon” (bya bon phrin pa bcu gsum), among whom the bat is classified as a type of “bird”. A version is also found in the unique “Bon”-identified manuscript entitled Mi’u rigs bzhi lha sel (Elimination Rites for Gods of the Four Clans of the Little Man), which, more than any other old manuscripts of its type that have so far become available, is most closely related to the ritual system found in Srid-pa’i lha bon. Before one is tempted to seek any single origin for this bat figure in g.Yungdrung Bon textual sources such as the gZi brjid, it must be understood that the same clever messenger bat narrative is found distributed in a variety of cognate forms as both a ritual antecedent narrative and a folk tale throughout the entire extended eastern Himalayas from Nepal to Yunnan (fig. 1), although notably not upon the Tibetan Plateau. What this distribution illustrates to me, at least, is that we are dealing here with a very old regional cultural pattern specific to Tibeto-Burman-speaking Himalayan highland societies, and not something that should be labelled as “Bon” simply because of the identity of any written texts in which its oldest, currently known version happens to have been set down.

Figure 1. Locations for bat narratives along the extended eastern Himalayas.16

15 gZi brjid, 2: 81-120; the text is replete with spelling errors.
16 The sources in figure 1 for narrative locations beyond the distribution range of my own data on Srid-pa’i lha Bon are, from west to east, as follows (the main type of the narrative indicated by M = messenger and T = trickster): a Dumi Rai “T” version narrated by Chatur Bhakta Rai from Baksila in Khotang District (Nepal) was collected and translated on my behalf by Marion Wettstein during 2012; de Beauvoir Stocks 1925: 371-372 (Lepcha, Sikkim: T); Elwin 1958: 231-232 (Sherdukpen, Kameng: T), 348-349 (Sherdukpen, Kameng: T); a Bangni/Nyishi “T” version from Donigaon near Seppa (Arunachal Pradesh) was collected and translated on my behalf by Rebecca Gnüchtel and Rungni Beyong during 2012; Bora 1995: 5-7 (Nyishi, Lower Subansiri: M); Chutia 2003: 198 (Hill Miri, Subansiri: T); Elwin 1958: 55-57 (Tagin, Subansiri: M & T), 80-81 (Tagin, Subansiri: M), 254-255 (Tagin, Subansiri: T), 390-392 (Tagin, Subansiri: T); Elwin 1958: 162-163 (Galo, Siang: T), 196-197 (Pangi, Siang: M); Dunbar 1915: 64 & 65 (Minyong, Siang: M); a Minyong “M” & “T” version narrated by Shri Tapang Tamut, Jomo, Along District of West Siang (Arunachal Pradesh) was collected and translated on my behalf by Kaling Tamut.
While the three gshen brothers headed by the elder Ya-ngal will be treated below, they and the bat named sGam-chen Pha-wang all function as mythical analogues of a set of three maternal cousins featuring in different versions of the origin myth of the first king, gNya’-khri btsan-po. These parallels are illustrated in figure 2. sGam-chen Pha-wang actually substitutes for the role of the one who successfully invites gNya’-khri btsan-po down to earth. In several earlier myths, this role is played by gNya’-khri btsan-po’s maternal cousin rKar-ma yol-lde, the rTsig-kyi lha (‘God of Ribs’), and aspects of his narrative are identical in the rabs featuring sGam-chen Pha-wang. The gshen Ya-ngal features directly in early myths as one of three gshen priests who serve and protect gNya’-khri-btsan-po specifically during his descent to earth from the sky world, the other two being mTshe-mi [gshen gyi dmu-rgyal-tsha] and gCo’u [gshen gyi phyag-mkhar], or more simply mTshe-mi and gCo-mi in the various redactions. These latter two appear as brothers who are also maternal cousins of gNya’-khri-btsan-po in some versions of the latter’s origin myth. In the rabs of Srid-pa’i lha bon, Ya-ngal’s role remains identical to that given to him in the origin myth of the first king, albeit greatly elaborated in our sources. Ya-ngal and his two younger gshen brothers function as the local analogues of ancient mythical trios of priests, namely mTshe-mi, gCo-mi and rKar-ma yol-lde or Ya-ngal, mTshe-mi and gCo-mi, depending upon which redactions one consults.

![Genealogy Diagram](image)

Figure 2. Genealogy of gNya’-khri btsan-po and his maternal cousins according to the gSang ba bon lugs narrative and their mythical parallels in Srid-pa’i lha Bon.

and Rebecca Gnüchtel during 2013; Bhattacharya 1965:51 (Shimong, Siang: T); Stéphane Gros, pers. comm., 26 July 2012, cf. Gros 2012: 380 (Drun = Dung/Rawang/Nung: T); Shelton 1925: 17–20 (Khampa, Batang: T); Ringu Tulku 1998: 109–112 (Khampa: T); Rock 1936 & Rock 1952, 2: 658 (Naxi, Lijiang: M & T); McKhann 2012: 278 (Naxi, Lijiang: M); Curiously, in an extensive review of Bhutanese folktales, neither the bat nor the trickster-type figure are mentioned among the animals and themes; Dorji Penjore 2011: 400-404.

**Ya-ngal and his gShen Brothers**

Above, we briefly introduced the divine gshen Ya-ngal known from early myths. He is one of three priests from the sky world who serve and protect the first king gNyā’-khri btsan-po during his descent to earth. Ya-ngal shares this task with mTshe-mi and gCo-mi, two other priests referred to as either bon-po or gshen in the early sources. While Ya-ngal does not accompany these two in the Old Tibetan outline of the myth in PT 1038, he appears grouped with them already in the ca. 11th-12th century dBa’ bzhed. The three appear in a 13th century redaction of the gNyā’-khri btsan-po origin myth, where Ya-ngal’s specific role in this context is clearly outlined:

The king of heaven will descend to earth,  
As the land of men is impure and polluted,  
You, Ya-ngal, go before him…  
You, Ya-ngal, perform the sel and bsang in front (to purify his path).

Furthermore, four short myths in the series of rNel dri rabs recorded in the possibly 11th century manuscripts from dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che also feature Ya-ngal as a priest. They provide another old confirmation of his profile. In this context, he is one of various priests who are invited mostly to deal with crises precipitated by accidental deaths and the post-natal illness and death of women. Each narrative is set in a different, ancient Tibetan principality, and Ya-ngal’s ritual activity is described as follows in the version set in the land of sKyi:

Elder brother Ya-ngal was commissioned.  
For three days he purified [with fumigation] (bsang).  
For three nights he chanted (dgyer).  
For three mornings he used ablutions (bshal).  
He purified the lha upwards.  
He suppressed the dri downwards.  
He opened the way for the coming of the lha.  
He shone a bright light for the lord.

In another of these stories set in the land of lHo-ga Lang-drug, where Ya-ngal appears as one of a number of priests, some of the rites performed involve the “nine father trees of the sunny slopes,

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18 The term sku-gshen used in relation to them, and referring to their service as priests caring for the ritual welfare of the person of the ruler, appears to occur only in later sources; see the references in Pasang Wangdu & Diemerberger 2000: 95, n.371-372, 97 n.386.

19 See “mTshe, Cog, Ya-ngal” in Pasang Wangdu & Diemerberger 2000: 95, n.372, and f.26, 1.5-6 of the facsimilie, appearing together in a group of ’Phan-yul priests attending a royal funeral in the Zad gtd final ‘addendum’ to the document. Compare the later sources, in which Ya-ngal is absent: the Cog-l'a Bon and Tshe-mi Bon are among priests who attend the descent of the first divine king in the redaction of the myth in the mKhas pa’i dga’ ston, 1: 159-160; early 20th century Bon histories use two of these priest names/clan titles (e.g., [I]Cog-l'a g.Yu-skidy and mTshe-mi [or 'Tshe-mi] Shag-'bar from Nyang-stod) in relation to the early scripture revealer gShen Klu-dga’ (active 11th century); Karmay 1972: 131/294, Martin 2001: 66-67.


21 It is unclear here whether the dri represent spirits or a type of pollution (cf. Dotson 2008: 62 n.64), but probably both, see Pa-tshab Pa-sangs dbang-’dus and Glang-ru Nor-bu tsh-e-ring 2007: 49, 159 f.29, 1.7-9, and for other occurrences in the same text, see: p.46, 154 f.23, 1.10 for Ya-ngal Gyim-kong in the lHo-ga Lang-drug story; p.51, 163 f.33, 1.8 for pha Ya-ngal Gyim-khyung in the dBye-mo story; p.52, 166 f.36, 1.7 pha Ya-ngal Gyim-khyung in the Glan story. It may be significant that, of the various principality or country names given for these stories, those featuring Ya-ngal may all be located in areas due north (lHo-ga lang-drug immediately) of the upper boundaries of our research area (see Hazod 2009, esp. map 3 and its Notes; Glan is not yet identified), perhaps defining a zone of circulation for Ya-ngal’s appearance in narratives?
and the nine mother trees of the shady slopes."22 Ya-ngal is mentioned in phrases with identical wording to this in all the Sel rabs of Srid-pa’i lha bon. Thus, Ya-ngal’s specialty is the so-called sel “elimination” rite. According to g.Yung-drung Bon sources, there are many variations of sel and its application. In contrast, our data from the eastern Himalayas preserves only a very specific sequence of sel rites with a single purpose. There, the performance of sel involves a complex of different purificatory practices used in a sequence, including fumigation with fragrant smoke (bsang or dud sel), lustration with scented waters (tshan), ablation with pure waters (khrus or bshal), and the elimination of negative hindrances from the path (lam sel). Accordingly, the sel related to Ya-ngal in our local rabs is only that performed in advance of the deity descending from the sky world, the same specificity as in the early myths of the origins of the divine king. This defines exactly the scope of the role Ya-ngal takes as one of the central initiator figures in Srid-pa’i lha bon. After the Lha zhu rite has been initiated by the bat Sgam-chen Pha-wang, in order to first invite the Phywa or Srid-pa’i lha to descend, Ya-ngal enters the sequence when he is called upon to solve the problem of obstacles and pollution for the descending deities, by creating a clear and secure pathway down to the site of worship.

Briefly for comparison, we can note the fate bestowed upon Ya-ngal by the redactors of orthodox g.Yung-drung Bon canonical texts when drawing upon earlier materials. This important gshen gets recycled from his illustrious role as personal priest to the divine king, and is demoted from the sky down to earth and even below ground. The gzer mig and some canonical texts contain lists of thirty-three bon ritual experts who are able to control thirty-three malevolent g.yen spirits dwelling within a three-tiered cosmos (g.yen-kams). The earth level of this cosmos has eleven spheres, endowed with the corresponding number of bon and matching sa-g.yen whom they subdue. The sri-bon Ya-ngal Gyim-kong holds sway in the sixth sphere called sri-khams, now in charge of the sri demons of the underworld.23

Title and Name
The accounts of Ya-ngal in the rNel dri rabs from dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che offer important clues for considering the possible origins of the rabs material circulating in present-day Srid-pa’i lha bon. For one thing, the site of discovery of these early manuscripts is only some 60 km up a continuous, major river valley system and premodern route for socio-cultural and economic intercourse, due north of the location where our local Sel rabs are still in use today.24 In fact, the high concentration of sites where the Sel rabs are found in Srid-pa’i lha Bon manuscripts are mainly those in closest proximity to dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che (fig. 3), perhaps indicating the earlier origins and spread of this particular rabs cycle. Furthermore, the full name attributed to Ya-ngal, as well as other details, are the same in both sets of documents and, to the best of my present knowledge, are also unique to both.

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22 See, for example, Shawa 1: [bdag >] gdags shing pha dgu dang // srib shing ma dgu dang //, cf. Pa-tshab Pa-sangs dbang-’dus and Glang-ru Nor-bu tshe-ring 2007: 46, 159 f.23, l.10-11, and the comments on this phrase by Blezer 2008: 430 n.19.

23 See gzer myig ed. Francke 1924: 281 (sri bon yang > ya ngal), 293 (sri bon ya [ngal]), Francke 1926: 324 (sri bon ya nga > ngal), cf. gzer mig: 36 (sri bon ye > ya ngal), 48 (sri bon ya ngal gyim gong), 61 (sri bon ya ngal). See also Karmay 2007: 151-153, 163 n. i, who cites a g.Yung-drung Bon canonical source. The gzi brjid section explaining the sel, lists the sri gio rite as one of its techniques. Like so many elements in the names of deities and persons occurring in the older manuscripts, Gyim is also found recycled into a place name in the g.Yung-drung Bon gzer myig, as the Gyim-shang nag-po river in ’Ol-mo lung-ring; Francke 1930: 301, Francke 1949-1950: 164.

24 At present, beyond the few details and initial speculations offered by those who published the manuscripts and their initial evaluations (Pa-tshab Pa-sangs dbang-’dus and Glang-ru Nor-bu tshe-ring 2007, Samten Karmay 2009), little can be said about the site of dGa’-thang ’Bum-pa-che and the manuscripts themselves. According to Bhutanese perspectives on regional history, the gTam-shul area surrounding the site, together with adjacent areas of lHo-brag, have long served as an early source of Tibetan rNying-ma-pa Buddhist traditions found throughout the Srid-pa’i lha Bon distribution zone to the south.
While in some rabs passages Ya-ngal has the title pha or “father”, which is rather common in many other references to gshen, the more interesting title in both sets of sources, which appears unique to them, is A-bo/A’o Ya-ngal. A-bo or A’o means “elder brother” and as a word with the same meaning is pronounced “awu” or “aulao” in some Tibetan and Tibetan-influenced dialects within our research area. Since the worship communities of Srid-pa’i lha Bon are speakers of East Bodish languages, this particular kinship marker indicates rather a Tibetan Plateau Bodic origin transmitted in written form.25 In the Srid-pa’i lha Bon rabs, Ya-ngal is indeed presented as the “elder brother” (phu-bo, pho-bo) of three, and this trio of male priestly siblings appearing in our local manuscripts (see below) form a clear mythical analogue for the earlier set of priests, mTshe-mi, gCo-mi and Ya-ngal, who work in concert to serve and protect the king during his descent from the sky world in the origin myths of gNya’-khri-btsan-po. While Ya-ngal appears to function only as a personal name—as opposed to a priestly title or category term—in all the sources we are using, elsewhere it occurs as a clan or lineage name specific to a few remote g.Yung-drung Bon communities. It seems that holders of this name (later often written Yang) originally came from gTsang, and eventually migrated westwards to Glo (Mustang) and then Dol-po in present-day northern Nepal.26 Yet this appears to be a separate

25 Tibetan A-bo is also a respectful term of address for older male relatives. In Brokpake of far east Bhutan and adjacent Tawang and West Kameng, and in Dirang Tshangla which is influenced by Brokpake due to migration, “au” means “elder brother”. East Bodish Ego-referenced forms for “elder brother” range from aach (Dakpa and Dzala) to ‘aci/achi (Kurtöp/Khomakha) to acho/ajo (Bumthap/Kheng).  
26 The seventh holder of the Ni-gu-ma Chos drug lineage, Sangs-rgyas ston-pa (a 13th century contemporary of Yang-dgon-pa), came from the family of Bon-po Ya-ngal dkar-po at Sil-ma[-la-kha] in gTsang; Roerich 1979: 743. Charles Ramble, writing in Karmay and Nagano 2003: 672, mentions another earlier historical Ya-gnal clan descendent, Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan (b. 1077), from sTag-rtsa byi-ri in gTsang-stod, but he is fully described as a lama of g.Yung-drung Bon rather than a “Bon”-identified
development, albeit drawing upon the same older mythological background of the name and priestly identity, including the role of being a mTshe-mi priest for the descent of the first king from the sky. There is no evidence that Ya-ngal is intended to signify a clan or lineage name in any of the myths we are studying here, and among the scores of old and recent clan names we know of from the research area, Ya-ngal or anything close to it never occurs. The Ya-ngal clan in the west must be regarded as a separate development. The question of whether all such old names first occur as priest names/titles or clan names remains an open one, and no unequivocal example of the direction of derivation is available in any extant Tibetan language sources to my knowledge. In the present context, one interesting theme in the origin myth of the Ya-ngal as a human clan is the role attributed to the flight of a “divine bird” (lha bya), which is a completely ubiquitous image occurring in Srid-pa’i lha Bon narratives, rites and priestly culture (see below).

The second unique reference common to both Srid-pa’i lha Bon rabs and the rNel dri rabs from dGa’-thang ‘Bum-pa-che, occurs in the full form of the name Ya-ngal Gyim-kong (also written Gyim-khong, Gyim-kyong, Gyim-dgon, etc.). In contrast to the later clan name Ya-ngal, we find that Gyim and Gyim-po do indicate an ancient clan or lineage name occurring in a range of Old Tibetan sources. In one Old Tibetan narrative, featuring a protagonist named Gyim-po Nyag-cig, we again encounter the theme of bird flight, as occurs in the Ya-ngal clan legend. The versions of the Sel rabs used in Srid-pa’i lha Bon provide an account of the Gyim origins of A-bo/A’o Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, together with an etymology of each element in his title and name. The full myth of Ya-ngal embedded in our local Sel rabs has a lengthy preamble which I briefly summarize here. Human beings appear in the world as the Four Clans of the Little Man who dwell inside the stronghold called sMra-mkhar Idem-pa, in the land of sMra-yul Thag-bgrya-d. Some of them act in a barbaric manner and pollute the world, and in so doing drive their patrilineage deities and protective gods away up into the sky. Chaos and disease then reign upon the earth, and due to this the gods cannot descend from the sky to re-establish a balance. Messengers are sent up to the sky for help, at which point Ya-ngal and his younger brothers, who in this version are named Tshan-bon Thor-cog and mGal-bon Kha-nag, are invited to descend. At this point in the Sel rabs, Ya-ngal himself is introduced as the crisis resolving gshen priest in the following manner:

There was no man who was skilled in performing the gto rites.
For the benefit of sentient being,
Two servants, those of the lha and the gsas, were dispatched [to the sky].
In the country [14a] up above the sky,
High atop the sky,
They came into the presence of the earth diviner, lDing-nga lding-cung.


Noted by Pasang Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 95, n.372.

See especially the Gyim name references and discussion in Richardson 1998 [1969]: 28-31 where he considers possible connections with eastern Tibet, also Richardson 1985: 62-63, and see also PT 1286, PT 1287 and PT 1288 accessed at OTDO. This Gyim is not to be confused with certain Tibetan renderings of the Jin and Kim elements in Chinese names found in some older documents. The Gyim element also occurs in a number of names recorded in g.Yung-drung Bon sources, see gCo Gyim-bu lan-tsha and Gyim-sham-bza’ in Karmay 1972: 42, 59, 62, 63, 102.

Thomas 1957: 16-19, 28-32, the index entries at p.194 for IOL Tib J 731 and IOL Tib J 732, accessed at OTDO; cf. also Aris 1979: 135-137.
And the [sky] diviner sGong-nga sgon-cung.30
Having studied the divination (mo) and prognosis (phya) for them,
The goddess sGong-nga sgon-cung said,
“Here [among the gods] there is no error at all,
The error is with the Four Clans of the Little Man themselves.
Through the actions of their mouths, they engage in anger and slander.
Through the actions of their hands, they commit fratricide and malpractice.
Through the actions of their bodies, they produce defilements and filth.
Here there is nothing we can do to help.
Invite A’o Ya-ngal,
And tell him, ‘Establish a great elimination (sel chen) [rite]’!
Invite Tshan-bon Thor-cog,
And tell him, ‘Use lustrations (tshan) and ablutions with water (khrus chu)’!
[14b] Invite mGal-bon Kha-nag,
And tell him, ‘Cast the whole lot’11 down onto the earth!’
The two servants, those of the lha and the gsas,
Went to search for A’o Ya-ngal.
In the land of Gyim-yul Gyim-stod,
There was the father sTon-pa gShen-rab, and
The mother Gyim-bza’ ‘o-lo, both.
The pair procreated, and so produced
A’o Ya-ngal, who declared,
“I am the elder brother A’o Ya-ngal.
After me is Tshan-bon thor-cog.
The youngest of us is mGal-bon Kha-nag.
First, there is the part of the man called A.
As for A, it is the body of non-arising Bon.
Then, there is the part of the man called O.
All the portals of Bon are chanted by way of O.
Then, [15a] there is the part of the man called Ya.
That Ya rides upon the horse of the wind.
Then, there is the part of the man called Gyim.
The maternal uncle (zhang-po) is the nephew (tsha-bo) of Gyim.
Then, there is the part of the man called Kong.
Since the gto rites have not been taught [to men], they will come to be known from Kong.32

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30 On these female names, a rabs in Lhau 2: 133 lists Ong-ma ong-cung as the sky diviner (nam ku mo ma), Ding-nag ling-cung as the earth diviner (sa ku mo ma), and Kha-ce rung-rung as the diviner of the intermediate space (bar ku mo ma), which parallel to some degree the Old Tibetan names gNam Mug-mug, Sa Ding-ding and So Tham-tham, the three divine consorts of the three sky-returning btsan-po succeeding gNya’-khri btsan-po; see PT 1286, 144-46 consulted at OTDO, but cf. also Smra’i-dang Ding-dings kyi rje and Gun-gun ma-btsun in PT1285; Dotson 2008: 48.

31 Here I understand yug chen like yug gcig; cf. Goldstein 2001: 1002.

Immediately following this passage, there is a short iconography of Ya-ngal, which I will present and analyse separately in a section below. In passing, there are two points of interest in this origin narrative. The style of syllabic etymology of names here also occurs in the eighth chapter of the gZer myig, where the titles and names of sTon-pa gShen-rab myi-bo, his parents and one of his escorts are meaningfully deconstructed in the same manner. Also, the maternal name Gyi-m-bza’ ‘o-lo for Ya-ngal’s mother recalls that of another legendary Gyi female mentioned at the beginning of the Old Tibetan Chronicle.

For reasons of space, except for a few words we cannot deal here with Ya-ngal’s two younger gshen brothers. The middle brother, Tshan-bon Thor-cog in the rabs above, is, as his name informs us, the bon priest of lustration rites using scented waters (tshan). The tshan technique is an essential aspect of the ritual ensemble that constitutes the sel. Ya-ngal’s youngest brother, named Thab-bon Me-bran or mGal-bon Kha-nag in different rabs, specializes in purifying thab-gzhob or pollution occurring in the form of noxious fumes from burnt and singed matter in the domestic hearth (thab), as his name elements all inform us. This is always noted in the context of Tibetan religions as a type of pollution which grievously upsets deities dwelling in the sky. The important point here is the hearth itself, and its extreme sanctity, as the site of the thab-lha. This ancient deity (or deities) and its physical location are closely linked to, or are actually conceived of as being, the ancestral gods of the family among many populations speaking Tibeto-Burman languages throughout the extended eastern Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau, just as the hearth itself is the centre of family life within the domestic space and the site of social ranking reflected in seating, etc. Both the use of tshan and the cleansing of the hearth with incense are essential to all Srid-pa’i lha Bon worship, and each of the younger brothers have their own rabs.

Priests with the Animal Skin Headdress

In the narratives of various Bon myths recorded in Tibetan texts, we occasionally find reference to divine and human priests, and other human agents involved in the stories who are clad in wild animal skin garments, and sometimes animal fur hats. On first encounter, the descriptions of such fur- or pelt-clad figures may seem somewhat exotic and perhaps evoke a ‘primordial’ image. Tibetan Plateau peoples have long worn wild furs and pelts, but mainly those from a very narrow range of particular animal species, and which are only used in certain ways. Key distinctions here are whether the fur or hair is worn facing to the outside or inside of the garment, and whether an entire skin or only a specific part is being used. We need only be concerned here with examples of fur worn to the outside of garments, and the use of entire skins. The favoured furs and pelts of the Plateau peoples are primarily those of various larger wild cats, and of otter. Yet, these are always used as strips of decorative trim added to specific parts of the basic, conventional woollen or sheep-skin garments; they do not form garments themselves, not even remotely. Tibetans have also worn sewn cloth hats trimmed on the outside with fox fur, which only occasionally can include the animal’s bushy tail (and this primarily in remote pastoral areas in my experience), but never including any other appendages such as the head and legs. When used as an item of material culture, a whole wild animal skin, complete with the head, legs and tail still attached, is specifically referred to as g.yang-gzhì in the literary language, while a cloak or coat made from a whole skin(s) or large parts thereof is called thul.

34 See Dags-za’i Gyi-m-pang-ma’ in PT 1286 (accessed at OTDO); Richardson 1998 [1969]: 28-31.
35 Me-bran “fire servant”, mgal “firebrand”, kha-nag literally the “black mouth”, an obvious reference to the hearth itself.
Upon the Tibetan Plateau proper, *g.yang-gzhi* are explicitly used as mats for sitting upon, in both tantric Buddhist and popular village ritual contexts, as well as in the secular culture of the social elite. By the same token, wearing of entire wild animal skins, either covering the torso or the head, is neither ethnographically nor historically attested for the Tibetan Plateau proper. The one exception I am aware of is among peoples of the deep valley (*rong*) regions in the very far south and southeast margins of the Plateau. Throughout the extended eastern Himalayas, specifically in the East Bodish-speaking areas of north-eastern Bhutan and adjacent Mon-yul Corridor, and also in southern Kong-po, Padma-bkod and sPo-bo further east, and still further east all the way across to the Yangtze River loop area north of Lijiang, there are specific populations who wear a type of sleeveless tunic made from complete wild animal skins with the fur facing outside, skins the Tibetans call *g.yang-gzhi*. The skins used for these tunics are most commonly of the wild goat called goral, especially that of the red goral (*Naemorhedus baileyi*), and also occasionally of other locally abundant wild goat species (e.g. takin, *Budorcas taxicolor*), but only much more rarely of monkey and bear (figs. 4-6).

![Figure 4. Mon-yul Corridor man wearing a goral skin pagtsa tunic, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, India, December 2009 (photo: Toni Huber).](image)

37 These traditions are largely exogenous. The *g.yang-gzhi* mats used by tantric practitioners, and commonly found in Tibetan Buddhism iconography, derive from the symbolic and ritual importance of the antelope in earlier Indian ascetic culture. Premodern use of whole tiger and leopard skin mats in Tibetan contexts, particularly by the social elite, was derived from the court cultures of the kingdoms of the Indian plains and adjacent Himalayan valleys, the same regions which also provided the animal skins via trade.

38 On the *pagtsa* in the Dakpa-speaking area of Mon-yul Corridor, see Tsewang Norbu 2008: 35, plate opp. 124 (cf. also Bailey 1957: 245 on sPang-chen). On the same tunic worn in Kong-po, see Karmay 1998: 217, Ward, Cox, *et al.* 2001: 199, and Ramble 1997: 145 who mentions its local name there as *gushu*, while Zhongguo Zangzu Fushi Bianzuan Wei yuanhui 2002: 41 has *guxi* for tunics of monkey and bear skin. On the tunic in Padma-bkod, see Ward, Cox, *et al.* 2001: 268, 270, 272, and for sPo-bo see Clarke 1997: 52 plate 50. On the tunic among the Naxi north of Lijiang, see Rock 1963: plate XXII and caption. The ethnic specificity of this costume should be carefully noted: outside of these areas just cited, this particular wild animal skin tunic is never found worn among the neighbouring Himalayan highland populations whom Tibetan, East Bodish- and neighbouring Tshangla-speaking peoples call “Lopa” (*Klo-pa*) or “Gidu”, including the various Bangru/Bengni, Tani and Mishmi language/dialect speakers of the frontier region, viz. it is *not* a “Lopa” attribute according to the traditional cliches and pejorative representations.
The first point I want to make here is that references in Bon narratives to gods and people wearing entire wild animal skins or gyang-gzhi only find their ethnohistoric parallels in the extended eastern Himalayas and valley systems of the far south-eastern Plateau margins. The wearing of such skins in various ways is precisely what is described as a central part of the costumes for certain mythical gshen priests associated with the class of gto rites, and Ya-ngal Gyim-kong is one of them. His invocation in our local Sel rabs manuscripts is as follows:

Without study [you] mastered the gto rites.
On account of that, you Ya-ngal Gyim-kong,
Elder brother Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, come forth!
With body clad in a cloak (thul) of peacock,
With head covered by the whole skin (g.yang-gzhi) of a badger,
With a victory banner of wild boar [hide] raised upon the shoulder,
Holding a stalk of Ephedra with a long root in the left hand,
And beating a tanned-leather40 drum, cham chom, in the right.
Elder brother Ya-ngal Gyim-kong,
Although we cannot come to visit you,
We invite you for the sake of living beings!
We invite you down below to sMra-yul!
We invite you down below to Thag-brgyad!41

39 Image sources: figure 5, Clarke 1997: 52 plate 50; figure 6, Rock 1963: plate XXII.
40 Bse. While we might wish for another Himalayan wild animal reference here, both meanings of bse [ru] (i.e., as “rhinoceros”, or “antelope” to which the term is also applied due to the wide-spread myth of its single horn) seem inappropriate for both drum technology and the ecological zone. Bse can also refer to a type of semi-precious stone.
In fact, this image of Ya-ngal Gyim-kong is rather typical of the manner in which the class of gshen priests are portrayed in Srid-pa’i lha Bon rabs narratives. For example, a very similar portrait of the gshen gShen-rab mi-bo’s costume and accoutrements is often present in the local rabs that are used to invoke him, for example:

That gShen-rab mi-bo,
With his body adorned by lha and gsas,
With his speech adorned by bon and smrang,
And with his mind adorned by gto and dpyad.
He wears a cloak (thul) of lynx and otter pelts upon his body.
He wears a striped tiger’s tail upon his head.\(^{42}\)
He wears short-shafted,\(^{43}\) leopard[-skin] boots upon his feet.
They are affixed with cords\(^{44}\) of stag’s gut.

[...]

As for Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, of particular interest here are the major elements of his gshen’s costume. His headgear is an entire skin including feet, tail and head (g.yang-gzhi) of the badger (grum). If grum here indeed refers to the large Mustelid known as the Asian badger or sand badger (Meles leucurus), which is the only badger species known in the proximity of the Tibetan Plateau system, then the occurrence of real animals of this type is largely confined to valley systems of the extended eastern Himalayas in southern Khams and eastern Kong-po. In the gZi brijid, this animal is required as a component for sel rites, the specialty of Ya-ngal, where it is gathered together with the monkey (see below) and the flying squirrel,\(^{48}\) both of which also only occur in the same geographical and ecological zone.

The word defining Ya-ngal’s cloak of peacock here is thul-pa, which implies the garment is made of the whole skin(s) of birds, and the image is thus of the garment being covered with feathers.

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rabs [xxx] po geig bzhugs so //, 4a, 5-4b, supplemented by readings from Shawa I text iii.: lha rab[s] dang bdud rtsi bcas pa bzhugs so, 15a, 2-15b, 1.

\(^{42}\) For references in the Grags pa gling grags (which may date to the 13\(^{\text{th}}\) century; see Blondeau 1990) to these type of pelts used by gshen and bon-po, see Vitali 2008: 389 n.10.

\(^{43}\) Lham yu thung; “long-shafted shoes”, cf. lham yu ring .

\(^{44}\) Ju thig, which also refers to a divination cord (mo skud) used by gshen and bon priests/diviners.

\(^{45}\) Skyped > sked “belt, sash, girdle”.

\(^{46}\) Qiang priests also carry their large, single-sided drums upon the backs as a form of defense for attack from behind; see Oppitz 2013, II: 1147 plates 922, 923.


\(^{48}\) Snellgrove 1967: 48-49 (= f.199a, 1.25), where he makes the common mistake of reading bya ma byel as “bat” (see also bya ma byil bu, bya ma byel bu in other Bon texts, and bya ma byi’u bye’u of the lexicions; Jäschke 1881: 373, BGT: 1864). While bya ma byi can be a synonym for pha wang, here and elsewhere in the gZi brijid (2: 93-95, 103), as well as other sources, both pha wang and bya ma byil bu and its synonyms occur side by side for the names of two different animals, one the bat (Sub-orders Microchiroptera and Megachiroptera, Family Pteropodidae) and the other the flying squirrel (Order Rodentia, Family Sciuridae). Unlike bats, flying squirrels do not actually fly; they do glide short distances on their patagium, parachute-like membranes running between their front and rear limbs. Perhaps due to this feature, they are sometimes also explicitly called lpags byi’u in Tibetan. Large flying squirrels of the genus Petaurista are found throughout the eastern Himalayas, from Bhutan to Yunnan, and are thus also coincident with local species of both the Microbats and Megabats.
This is in fact an image which constantly resurfaces in local myths from, or associated with, the distribution zone of Srid-pa’i lha Bon, being recorded in Tibetan sources dating at least as far back as the 13th century.49

Finally, concerning the stalk of the Ephedra (mtshe) shrub with a long root held in Ya-ngal’s left hand, we must point out that the classical Tibetan materia medica always stress the resemblance of the generally leafless Ephedra stalks to bamboo canes with nodes.50 Ephedra’s main medical efficaciousness in Tibetan sources is always defined with the verbs sel (“to eliminate”) and gcod (“to cut off”), which also describe Ya-ngal’s ritual activities in the local rabs. The specific reference to the stalk of mtshe here is important in various ways, and has to be understood as symbolically linking Ya-ngal to the gshen priest called mTshe-mi, literally “Ephedra man”, who is his mythical parallel in the narrative of gNya’-khri btsan-po’s descent to earth. In these myths, immediately prior to their descent from the sky world, mTshe-mi “plants” (btsugs) a stalk of Ephedra on top of the divine king’s head in order to protect his vitality principle (bla), viz. stop it from departing his body since the transition from the pure sky world to a potentially polluted earth world may render him vulnerable.51 The “planting” or “placing” of the mtshe stalk refers to a specific genre of older ritual technologies for working with the ‘vitality principle’ (pla, phla and cha in our local sources, Tibetan bla, often rendered “soul”) used by speakers of Tibetan-Burman languages. Among the East Bodish Dakpa-speaking worship communities of Srid-pa’i lha Bon living between the Kuri Chu and Tawang Chu rivers, the planting of bya ru or “bird horns” in the form of feathers on the crown of the head to protect the vitality principle (pla) is the most common example occurring in our ethnographic data, and of which the rite of “planting the

49 It first occurs in the gSang ba bon lugs redaction of Mkhas pa lDe’u: 237, when, during the narrative of gNya’-khri btsan-po’s transit through twenty-seven stations (gshegs rabs nyi shu bdun) immediately following his initial descent, he reaches the area of Bra la sgo-drug, and at a locality called Bud kyi Bram-sna encounters three smut-covered (? khre khre can) boys whose persons are adorned with bird feathers, and who are regarded as a bad sign sent by the Mon, and these three are seized and lead along although their Mon language is unintelligible: De’i tsho bud kyi bram snar byis pa khre khre can lub la bya’i spus brgyan pa gsum dang phrad do / byis pa de gsum mon gyis rtags ngan du btong ba yin te /ide gsum bzungs te khrid pas / mon skad ma go nas /’. The text later has one of the boys escape and travel through the ravine of Lo-ro, which locates his action in the narrative immediately adjacent to the Dakpa-speaking Tawang region. The entire passage is no doubt highly significant for considering the mythical origins of early clans, since these three Mon boys go on to become the clan ancestors (mes-po) of the IHo, sNyags and Myang. Note also the name Bya-thul dkar-po (“White Bird Cloak”), as the mythological progenitor of the sMyos/gNyos clan according to a Bhutanesan source; Aris 1988: 19.

50 See, for example, De’u-dmar bsTan’-dzin phun-thogs 1986: 300, snyug ma ʼi dra la tshigs yod pa’o / lo ma med pa. The same text cites phug-ron snyug-ma and gu-dur snyag-ma as being alternative names. mTshe is a standard synonym for the general classification mtshe-ldun used in the Tibetan materia medica, which describe four different types (brag-mtshe, lug-mtshe, ra-mtshe and chu-mtshe). The plant is simply referred to as mtshe in Srid-pa’i lha Bon contexts and in other types of ritual and mythical texts.

51 Mkhas pa lDe’u: 235, mtshe mi mtshe btsugs / lDe’u Jo sras: 101, mtshe mi gshen gyi rnu rgyal tshas ni dbu la mtshe btsugs. For the use of Ephedra/mtshe in various narrative and ritual contexts in earlier sources, see: PT 1134, 146, in a narrative concerning a death, where it is of “no use to plant the mtshe [on the head of the patient]” (ma rung mtshe gzugs); on the narrative of rje His-rten chen-po and mtshe His-po his-bdag in IOL Tib J 0734 see Stein 1971: 507-508, n.77 for mtshe as a support of the bla; see mtshe gzugs in the Old Tibetan Chronicle in the context of a birth in Dotson 2013: 332-333; and see Karmay 1998: 326 (and notes) for a myth where mTshe and gCo, the priests of gNya’-khri btsan-po, retrieve and restore his lost soul (sku phywa cf. sku bla); see also Snellgrove 1967: 36 for mtshe as a yas-stugs used in a gto rite of ransom (glad) for bringing a patient back from the brink of death and extending the life, as outlined in the gZi brjod. The plant is generally regarded as a “power substance” (thun rdzas) in Tibetan popular ritual, and like the more commonly used mustard seed (yung thun, yungs zor), it can also be deployed against negative spirits as a type of ritual weapon (zor); see mtshe zor in BGT: 2317 (cf. also 2473), mtshe’i rdzas la brten pa’i zor. In Srid pa’i lha Bon rites, mtshe and parched barley grains are cast towards the sky as a messenger to invite the deities; see Lawa 2, Text 10 Lha bzhung chen mo bzhugs sho. In the recent scholarship of Indo-Iranian Studies, Ephedra has now emerged as the strongest candidate for the original botanical identity of the ancient soma/haoma stimulant; see Falk 1989, Houben 2003.
[grass] stalk” (’jag btsugs ma) on the crown of the head during certain forms of the consciousness transfer (’pho ba) procedure is clearly a later Tibetan Buddhist adaptation of such older rites.\(^{52}\) Although the planting of bya ru remains an important aspect of ritual within Srid-pa’i lha Bon, little has been written about the possible meanings of bya ru. Dan Martin and Roberto Vitali have both investigated the g.Yung-drung Bon context and concluded that there it refers to a type of finial ornament or symbol atop a mchod-rten shrine, and/or a crown ornament for rulers, which is in part cognate with the first symbol.\(^{53}\) Be that as it may, the term bya ru in the context of Srid-pa’i lha Bon always only refers to bird’s feathers “planted” (btsugs, the invariable verb here) directly upon the top of the head as a form of ritual protection for the vitality principle. This specific ritual meaning is clearly older than the architectural and costume references found in g.Yung-drung Bon sources. In Old Tibetan manuscripts we find the term consistently indicates bird feathers “planted” (btsugs) directly upon the heads of persons or animals who are actors in the context of funeral rites.\(^{54}\) In our research area, the bya ru is functionally identical to the mtshe stalk.

Furthermore, like Ya-ngal (and the ancient mTshe-mi) the other prominent gshen featuring in our local rabs, gShen-rab mi-bo, is closely identified at some sites with the use and symbolism of mtshe or Ephedra, as a model of the priestly protector concerned for ritual protection of both the vitality principle and the ‘life force’ (srog). In one of the very few painted images found surviving in any contemporary Srid-pa’i lha Bon community, sTon-pa gShen-rab [mi-bo] is depicted holding a long stalk of mtshe adorned with a left-turning swastika in his right hand, and an arrow in his left hand (fig. 7). In the local ritual conception, both symbols are directly connected with rites for preservation of aspects of the life force or vitality principle. The arrow represents the srog-mkhar or “stronghold of [patrilineal] life force”, and is decorated with the white scarf of g.yang, which our ethnographic context determines we must define here as the “quintessential re/productive potency” embodied by women and cattle. The mtshe stalk is for maintaining the presence of the vitality principle within the body, but here it also appears to double as an insignia which is equivalent to the phyag-shing (sometimes lcags-shing) sceptre found in certain older—and virtually identical—icons of g.Yung-drung Bon specifically depicting gShen-rab mi-bo’s manifestation as a gshen priest (fig. 8).\(^{55}\) An interesting feature of the phyag-shing is that it is of “wood” (shing) which contrasts with common references to metal or stone sceptres such as the Buddhist rdo-rje. One could speculate that the long mtshe stalk, which is sometimes referred to as shing in our local Srid-pa’i lha Bon sources, was an older ritual device essential for the function of the the gshen and out of which the later phyag-shing developed under the selective hand of g.Yung-drung Bon redactors. In his commentary upon the meaning of mtshe and its association with bla as these terms occur together in an Old Tibetan narrative, Rolf Stein pointed out that some Tibetan lexicons gloss bla-tshe as srog-gi bla-tshe “life, long life”, but that “it is probably an interpretation of mtshe. It yields “evergreen” (the bon

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\(^{52}\) Also written ’jag ’dzugs/’dzugs/zug/tsugs, and sometimes with ’ja’ “rainbow” for ’jag in various sources. This appears particular to the ’Bri-gung-pa school, and involves planting a stalk of grass (’jag ma) upon the crown of the head to test whether the fontanelle has been opened by the ’pho ba practice, such that at the time of death the consciousness principle may smoothly exit the body; see Kapstein 1998: 98-100, 180 nn.23-28 and the further references noted therein. Perhaps significantly, the origins of the practice are claimed for a 14th century rNyin-ma-pa context in Dawks-po, not far from the northern Mon-yul Corridor; see Cuevas 2003: 91-92.


\(^{54}\) For example, PT 1136, 28 has dbul bya ru khyung ru ni btsugs for a horse as the subject; cf. also PT 1134, 118: glad la ru tigs sna bya ru ’ong ’ong; PT 1194, 45: cha yang gsas kyi glad la bya ru khyung ru ’ong ’ong, all cited from versions at OTDO. This meaning does crop up in the context of g.Yung-drung Bon, for example bya ru used as a head-piece of a priest in the Rgyal rabs bon gyi byung gnas; see Martin 1991: 125, Martín 2001: 195, and Vitali 2008: 388-392. See Zhangzhung: 164, bya ru = bya khyung gi rwa.

\(^{55}\) For commentary upon the image in figure 8, see Kvaerne 1995: 71.
symbol of permanence). This interpretation also fits with the description of the actual Ephedra shrub, which is a green-stemmed perennial.

Regional Ethnographic Parallels
We will move away from mythical gshen now, and explore the fact of some poignant regional ethnographic parallels for all these features of the ancient sel priest’s costume and accoutrements. An almost exact parallel is found in the eastern Himalayan highlands today, not too far from our research region.

Among the small, mono-clan, Tani-speaking populations living in the upper Subansiri River valley, such as the Mra whom I have studied extensively and who dwell immediately adjacent to the Tibetan region of Tsa-ri, the costume of their nyibu priests matches that of the mythical sel priest Ya-ngal Gyim-kong. Moreover, the type of Pöba rigu and Rialo rites these nyibu perform for the community when wearing this particular costume specifically involve elimination of obstacles and the clearing of spaces and routes of negative hindrances, and the holding of the vitality principle within the body—exactly the same functions as described for the Tibetan sel rites and for the use of Ephedra. When performing major rituals such as the Rialo ‘feast of merit’ and the Nyida marriage ceremony, the Mra nyibus and those from neighbouring areas wear a special headpiece known as chaybo which is the entire skin of the sirch or yellow-throated marten (Martes flavigula). This skin is not too dissimilar in most respects from that of its Mustelid cousin the Asian or sand badger, albeit usually with a longer tail and somewhat brighter colouration.

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tending to yellows and reds (fig. 9). As it hangs down from the priest’s head, covering his back like a cape, the whole chaybo is decorated with a covering of white cock feathers (rokun). The chaybo-wearing nyibu holds a ritual staff called tabiyou made from long, thin canes of bamboo (fig. 10). This cane staff is used specifically at one point during the Rialo festival honouring ancestors. Immediately—literally the initial seconds—after a mithun bull is sacrificed, the nyibu plants the end of the staff directly at the entrance of the mouth of the freshly fallen animal (fig. 11), in order to prevent its vitality principle (aram) from departing the body via the main head orifice before the first blood, fat and viscera can be harvested from inside the carcass.

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58 The same nyibu costume is found downstream on the Subansiri River at least as far south as Sippi, although porcupine quills are also attached to the skin headdress in downstream areas; see Riddi: 2006: 207-208, 225 n.67-68. Michael Oppitz informs me that Magar shamans in Nepal also wear the skin of a flying squirrel upon their backs, as well as that of red panda, as a protection against attack.
There is a further point of comparison between the two types of priests suggested by the feathers that cover the nyibu’s headdress-cum-cape and Ya-ngal’s peacock cloak. Like the bon-po at many sites of Srid-pa’i lha Bon, nyibus are strongly identified with birds. They also embark upon visionary flying journeys across the landscape to eventually arrive in parallel worlds, and in so doing, they ritually mimic the bird just as the bon-po does (recalling that the mythical messenger bat is a classificatory ‘bird’ in the latter case). The nyibu also has a tutelary-cum-mount who is a bird, the spirit of the eagle, whose wing feathers and claws called kyokam mayab they always carry as a vital accoutrement, and which must always be hanging over their shoulder (usually the right side) and down the back during actual performances of ritual chanting, as if it provided rear wings for them (one can be seen hanging down the back from the nyibu’s right shoulder in fig. 9). This strongly parallels and suggests the mythical role of the messenger bat sGam-chen Pha-wang, whom the bon-po must emulate on his verbal ritual journey to the sky world, even to the point of acting as the mount for the descending deities who hold on to the priest’s turban (thod-dkar) during flight, and whose fluted bat wings, claws and decorated body appear as designs upon the back of the old style of cape preserved and worn still by some bon-po of Srid-pa’i lha Bon (fig.

Concerning the death of a nyibu in the Subansiri region, Riddi 2006: 206 reports: “Thus, while disposing of the dead body of the Nyibu, [a] special burial structure is made and the Linyi-Pekis [or nest for Linyi, are] made to be placed on the structure. Linyi is a kind of bird with more than one long arrow type pointed tail feathers, and is believed to be the incarnation of a Nyibu. Linyi leads the flock of different kinds of birds while flying from one place to another. Linyi symbolizing the Nyibu and the birds following him represent the common people. If Linyi comes within 7th night and sits for a while in the Pekis, or burial structure it [is] believe that the deceased Nyibu has agreed for any one of his clan or family members to success [sic] him as a Nyibu.”
The Iconography of gShen Priests

12). Such bird symbolism in myths, costumes and accoutrements, and ritual practices associated with priests are found in local Tibeto-Burman-speaking highland communities throughout the extended eastern Himalayas.

Figure 12. Turbaned bon-po priests wearing the cape-like pla-pé or pla-kar jacket with triangular “wing” gussets, embroidered “feet”, and appliqué “body” representing the messenger bat, Lawa, Lhuntse Dzongkhag, Bhutan, December 2012 (photo: Toni Huber).

While mythical priests and real priests are certainly different propositions, in this case both phenomena share common ancestral roots in the past, whatever those may have been. The idea is by no means far fetched. As realities in situ, the two phenomena, as I recorded them, are currently located only some 200 km distant from one another along the extended eastern Himalayas, both around known points for north-south transit and cultural contact between Plateau and hills, where major river valleys cut through the mountain chain. The territory of the Mra and their immediate neighbours in the upper reaches of the Subansiri River is located in the highland watershed of a long Tibetan Plateau river valley system (the Bya Chu and Lo-ro Chu) via which one can easily walk all the way to Mon mTsho-sna, and the Srid-pa’i lha Bon region, as we know frequently occurred in the past. The Mra and their neighbours also live immediately south of a set of ancient Tibetan fiefdoms (dBye, mChims, Dags and Nyag) which, regardless of any historical realities, certainly had their names and so-named characters recycled over and again into old myths, including those directly featuring Ya-ngal Gyim-kong, as we demonstrated above.60

It is perhaps noteworthy that the mythical land down to which Ya-ngal Gyim-kong is finally invited to descend is that of sMra-yul, and the specific site is Thag-brgyad. There are two ways to interpret these names. As the name of a people or persons, sMra is a well-known “proto-clan” name commonly occurring in Old Tibetan sources, with sMra-yul as that clan’s purported

60 See also the map in Dotson 2008: 54 for the cluster of territories mentioned in Old Tibetan liturgies.
homeland. The Old Tibetan place name sMra-yul Thag[s]-[b]rgyad also occurs. In various Dunhuang manuscripts, such as PT 1136 concerning the sacrifice of animals during funeral rites, a priest called the sMra-bon is frequently mentioned. With the sMra spelling, this ancient Tibetan name is not found beyond the bounds of earlier myths to my present knowledge, and one would want to be extremely cautious about relating it to contemporary references. Yet, we can point out that the name in this form, when pronounced in certain dialects, is at very least completely homophonic with Mra, the clan name of the highland Tani-speaking population with the chaybo-wearing nyibu priests who fly through the sky, and who inhabit the southern flanks of the Tibetan sacred mountain of Dag-pa Shel-ri at Tsa-ri. The Mra’s own origin myth claims that the clan’s apical ancestor is a sky being, and that they landed in this part of southern Tibet after descending from the sky together with a ‘brother’ Tibetan ancestor and a horse. This is of course identical with the basic plot line for clan origin myths found among Srid-pa’i lha Bon worshippers in our research area, and for the rabs narrative of the descent of Srid-pa’i lha deities such as ’O-de gung-rgyal and his emanation/son Gur-zhi (i.e. Gu-se lang-ling). The other way to understand sMra-yul and Thag-brgyad is far more sobering. As Brandon Dotson recently reminded us, such names “may not refer to an actual place” since smra is a synonym for myi/mi or “man”, while thag-brgyad literally means “eight cords”, this latter compound appearing as an archaic technical term referring to a particular tent-like structure used in early funeral rites.

Alternative literal meanings of old names are surely important, nevertheless the idea of sMra-yul as an ancient land of origins for Tibetan and Himalayan peoples is repeatedly expressed in their myths. Nor is this merely a ‘dead letter’ of the ancient texts. sMra-yul is invoked today as the ancestral land of local human communities whenever certain rabs are chanted during Srid-pa’i lha Bon festivals in my research region, as it has been elsewhere in the adjacent Himalayas. What else might sMra-yul as the origin “land of men” refer to in relation to these peoples and their ancestors in the wider region? If one subscribes to the prevailing theory explaining the dispersal of western Tibeto-Burman languages, which entails ancient east to west migrations by early ancestral speakers of these languages from out of southwest China, and their subsequent dispersal onto the Tibetan Plateau and throughout the eastern Himalayan chain, we would be tracing routes back to the Yunnan and Sichuan regions of southwest China. It is precisely in those regions that another complex of evidence concerning ancestral priests from the ancient Tibeto-Burman heartlands is found, and will be briefly considered here.

The same unique type of headgear fashioned from an entire wild animal skin as we have been discussing among mythical and real priests of the eastern Himalayas is also found used by priests of the Qiang (Ch’iang) peoples in the Min Shan and Qionglai ranges along the eastern Tibetan Plateau margins in western Sichuan. Qiang priests or ‘shamans’, who are designated shiipi or by a variety of other terms, include in their essential ritual costume and equipment an animal skin hat-cum-headaddress called jar tâ, a hand drum of one type or other, a “sacred cane” or stick which they “plant” (like the Ephedra stalk and the bya-ru feathers) into the ground during certain ceremonies, and the flat-bell identical to the gshang of the bon-po. These are the same fundamental items, or their functional and symbolic equivalents at least, listed for the various

61 See, in particular, Stein 1961: 50-54, who lists and analyzes other apparently related forms of the name.
62 See PT 1285, r016, IOL Tib J 731, r97, r120 and IOL Tib J 739, 14r 01 consulted at OTDO.
63 PT 1136 consulted at OTDO. See also Stein 1961: 54 n.152.
64 On sMra, sMra-yul, Thag-brgyad and the related complex of names in various earlier sources, see now the interesting work by Blezer 2011; cf. also Stein 1971: 488-489 n.26.
65 On Tsa-ri and Dag-pa Shel-ri, see Huber 1999 and 1997.
69 The single-sided hand drum was in use among bon-po priests of Srid-pa’i lha Bon until recent times in the northern range of my research area; see my data on this now published in Oppitz 2013, I: 421-423.
gshen priests in the rabs of Srid-pa’i lha bon. Our surviving versions of the gshen Ya-ngal iconography cited above omit the flat-bell and substitute a long Ephedra stalk for the cane, while the iconographies expressed in painted images and in the rabs invoking the gshen gShen-rab mi-bo have alternatively all of these features as well. The Qiang priest’s jar tâ headgear is part hat or crown fitted upon the head, and part headdress which hangs down behind over the wearer’s shoulders and back (figs. 13-15). It is made from the entire skin with tail of the golden snub-nose monkey (Rhinopithecus sp., also “golden-haired monkey” in some ethnographic sources on the region), including its head with eyes and ears.70 The Qiang priest’s monkey skin headgear is also bedecked with white objects, albeit towards the front, specifically cowrie shells and bone discs (fig. 16), recalling the white feathers attached to the chaybo headdress of the nyibu in the upper Subansiri region who is also the carrier of a sacred cane.71

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70 A mythological mention for this monkey skin headgear apparently features in the 14th century Pad ma bka’ yi thang yig, “Where a rock demon of eastern Tibet appears as an old man wearing a monkey hat.”; Stein 1957: 7.
Different species of golden-haired monkey (*Rhinopithecus* sp. in the east, and the *Trachypithecus* sp., or “golden langur” in the west) are, like the bat, badger and yellow-throated marten associated with the various priests we described above, animals of the *rong* country or forested hill and valley systems of the far southern and eastern Tibetan Plateau margins. The golden-haired monkey in the Qiang inhabited regions is also the priest’s tutelary and protector. It is called *abba mula*, with the title *abba* here meaning “father”, which is also applied to the male sky god who is the principle deity in Qiang religion. This parallels the *yab* and *pha* “father” titles always applied to *gshen* names and to the primary male Srid-pa’i lha and Phywa progenitor deities from the sky in our research region, as well as in early Tibetan myths. In some Qiang communities, the same monkey is viewed as the ancestral father of all humanity, just as the monkey features as a male “father” ancestor of human beings in the well-known Tibetan *gter-ma* origin narrative of the monkey and the rock demoness, which dates back in written form to the late 12th century at least. The *abba mula* of the Qiang *shüpi* shaman is formed into an effigy made from the actual skull and other dried body parts of a golden-haired monkey, all wrapped around by a bundle of papers such that the skull is completely visible at the top end. Such monkey protectors for priests are also found among the Dakpa-speaking peoples in our research area, as well as among the Mra and their neighbours in the upper Subansiri valley. On the lintel of the main house door specifically in ancestral homes of *bon-po* lineage priests of Srid-pa’i lha Bon who dwell in the Dakpa-speaking region and adjacent areas historically connected via migration, the skull of the golden langur monkey can often be found prominently mounted as a protective tutelary (figs. 17-18) for male off-spring of the patrilineage. In upper Subansiri, during

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72 After Graham 1958: 56 figure 5.
75 See Sørensen 1994: 127 n.329, who points out the links made by Buddhist *gter-ma* compilers to monkey heroes in Indian epic literature, but ignores the mythologies of Tibeto-Burman-speaking highland peoples as an alternative source.
the burial of a deceased male, particularly a priest, certain wild animals are hunted and their body parts placed or hung directly at the grave site, including the skull and hands of a monkey. The souls of these animals are dedicated to serve the deceased in the land of the dead.\footnote{77 See Huber 2011: 91, and Riddi 2006: 201, 206.}

Figures 17-18. Monkey skulls upon the main door lintels of households of hereditary Srid-pa’i lha Bon priests in the Mon-yul Corridor, Arunachal Pradesh, India, January-February 2010 (photo: Toni Huber).

**Reflections**

I am well aware that my present contribution raises many points of speculation ranging across time and space, yet I feel this is legitimate. The work attempts to be well-informed, and is done in the exploratory and boundary-pushing spirit of science. If it stimulates debate, whether critical or inspired, then all the better. It is intended as a modest example of what Michael Oppitz once advocated as a “trans-Himalayan ethnography”.\footnote{78 Oppitz 1998: 338-341.} one which we can gradually permit ourselves as the ‘critical mass’ of reliable data on the whole region expands. So, beyond the details themselves, what might we be able to point to with the exercise?
With my comparative analysis of the iconography of gshen priests I hope to have demonstrated that such priestly figures preserved in Srid-pa’i lha Bon are, on the one hand, not merely local phenomena, nor, on the other hand, are they strictly derived from the common and better known Tibetan Plateau stock of cultural patterns which are represented in g.Yung-drung Bon or “Bon”-identified materials recorded in Tibetan language. Rather, they also fully participate in trans-Himalayan cultural patterns of narrative, symbolism and social practice, as well as systematically reflecting ecological realities of the same region. We now have to seriously consider that these and other such priestly figures who sometimes populate “Bon” myths are not merely derived from wild imaginings, or represent some unlikely attempts at exotic description on the part of authors and redactors of ancient narratives. They actually reflect, and are based upon, real regional traditions of ritual specialists and their practices that exist or once existed on the ground in the extended eastern Himalayas.

Secondly, it is clear that the ancient gshen Ya-ngal became extracted from the south-eastern Tibetan landscape that is so intimately associated with the myths of origin and descent of the first king, and went on to meet with three separate destinies in various Tibetan and Himalayan narratives. One set of interested parties had him migrate far to the west. There he was claimed as the apical ancestor of a human patrilineage which became a fledging hereditary lineage of g.Yung-drung Bon followers. Thus, the old regional pattern of claiming ancestral descent from the sky was preserved, yet the gshen ancestor himself was relegated to one end of an obscure origin myth long forgotten by all but a few. The redactors of g.Yung-drung Bon scriptures bestowed a different fate upon Ya-ngal, one that represented in all respects a major demotion in favour of another powerful gshen, gShen-rab mi-bo, whom they chose to elevate to the heights of a Buddha-like, universal saviour instead. In those Bon scriptures, gshen Ya-ngal becomes divorced from geography altogether, effectively pushed underground in an otherwise abstract and anchorless cosmology. Interestingly, while gshen gShen-rab mi-bo is certainly a more commanding figure than Ya-ngal in Srid-pa’i lha Bon, ultimately he too remains a working gshen with a strong ‘crisis management’ profile, but little else besides. In Ya-ngal’s third destiny, which we have demonstrated herein, he became—and continues to be—one of the central initiator figures appearing in the ritual antecedent narratives of Srid-pa’i lha Bon. In this role, the gshen has remained in closest proximity to the original landscape of the descent of the progenitor king. Moreover, his mythical glory and importance as personal priest to the powerful Phywa who descends from the sky to benefit human beings has retained its full integrity. The materials considered here point to the additional fact that the literary image of Ya-ngal as a gshen priest has enjoyed a millennium-long circulation in the direct proximity of my research region. I would venture that the other Srid-pa’i lha Bon initiator figures briefly considered here, the clever messenger bat and the gshen gShen-rab mi-bo, also both enjoy a very long history in the same region.

While the material presented herein is merely a sampling of similar but far more extensive data on Srid-pa’i lha Bon to appear in my Source of Life monograph, it certainly points to something different from the received wisdom about the processes and trajectories involved in the formation of Bon during the past. We can demonstrate the obvious integrity of Srid-pa’i lha Bon as a distinct, self-identified form of ‘priestly Bon’ developed out of a combination of deep roots in ancient narratives and rites, some sharing of material with certain earlier stages in the development of g.Yung-drung Bon, and features in common with trans-Himalayan priestly cultures. This now forces us to abandon the standard assumption that g.Yung-drung Bon was the single “Bon” lineal descendent and inheritor of pre-11th century Tibetan materials. Additionally,

79 In this context, mentions in the various sBarRa bzbed accounts of Bon are interesting: while most forms of Bon were stopped, only the Zhang-zhung and mTshe-mi forms were permitted to continue “on account of their eliminating obstacles for the person of the lord” (zhang zhung dang tshe mis rje’i sku’i bar chad sel ba’i phyir /; see Stein 1961a: 28 cf. mKhas pa’i dga’ ston: 332-333). The Buddhist sources appear to take the sku-gshen tradition to which Ya-ngal belonged more seriously due to its links with the progenitor king.
the orthodox notion that Srid-pa’i lha Bon merely represents some sort of ‘hybrid’ or less ‘pure’ local manifestation of Bon is entirely untenable; one only need recall that, as another heir to pre-11th century “Bon”-identified cultural materials, g.Yung-drung Bon itself came to share a great deal in common with Tibetan-style Buddhism—a development which enabled a certain ability to transcend local beginnings and regional horizons—as well as absorbing folk cultural elements from the extended eastern Himalaya, as we have given examples of here. A second rethinking will now also be necessary in terms of the geography of Bon origins. The dominant and barely questioned normative g.Yung-drung Bon narrative pronounces these origins to be firmly in the far west of the Plateau system. We must now also seriously consider the southeast, but not as being the place of Bon origins. Rather, the southeast should more productively be regarded as one of several possible developmental zones, from out of which more than one form of so-called “Bon” religion developed, probably concurrently to some extent, by way of complex and as yet little understood social and cultural processes.
Local Manuscripts:
Note: spellings are as they appear in the originals.

Da 1 = Title pages:
  Text 1: title (1a) illegible, 1a-15b.
  Text 2: Lha gzung chen mo bzhusgo //, 1a-101b [incomplete].
  Text 3: title missing; first line: Swo'o ston pa gshen rab zhal nas 'di gsung //, 17 fols. r/v [incomplete].
  Text 4: title missing; first line (f.2): Dong stan ske rte ma sku nang su las //, 5 fols. r/v [incomplete].
  Text 5: Swo bon thugs dam bskang ba bzhusgo //, 1a-4a.
  Text 6: Dgra lha spangs stod bzhusgo //, 1a-4a.

6 part collection, handwritten loose dpe-cha folios, 152 numbered folios (r/v), 5 lines/side, various pages missing or damaged. The Dgra lha spangs stod text is a Bon version in which five dgra-lha hatch from five eggs of different substances.
Private collection, Da, Bumdeling, Tashi Yangtse Dzongkhag.
Photographed December 2012.

Gortshom 1 = Title pages:
  Ka. Bshen rabs bon gyis skyabs 'gro sens bskyed bzhusgo so //, 1a-5b.
  Kha. Lha'i bsangs rabs xxx po gcig bzhusgo so //, 1a-20a.
  Nga. Lha rabs mched bzhzi bzhusgo so //, 1a-9a.
  Cha. Lha'i rgyud bshad bzhusgo so //, 1a-3a.
  Ja. Shugs pa'i smon lam bzhusgo so //, 1a-5a.
  Ta. Mtha' g.yag gyis bstod pa bzhusgo so //, 1a-3a.
  Tha. Lha la 'dus bzhzi btang ba bzhusgo so //, 1a-5a.
  Da. Bon gyi bkras sprin phung char 'bebs bzhusgo //, 1a-3a.

9 part collection (each part alphabetically marked, part Ca missing), handwritten loose dpe-cha folios, 69 numbered folios (r/v), 6 lines/side.
Private collection, Gortshom, Lhuntse Dzongkhag.
Photographed March 2012.

Lawa 2 = Title pages:
  Text 1: Bon 'di ni bsbyi bsri 'khor mo bcug gsuns bzhusgo, 14 (r/v).
  Text 2: Title page (1a-b) missing, 6 (r/v).
  Text 3: Lha rabs rgam chen pha 'ong bzhusghyo, 1a-7b.
  Text 4: Bon gyis bkra shis bzhugs sho, 1a-5a.
  Text 5: De nas yar lha sham po 'i bskang gso, 1a-2b.
  Text 6: Lha'i phul bzhugs so, 1a-2b.
  Text 7: Bon gyis bkra shis bzhugs sho, 1a-4b.
  Text 8: Bon po gshen bdur gi 'byung khungs bzhusgs so, 6 (r/v).
  Text 9: Bkra shis dpe bzhugs so, 4 (r/v).
  Text 10: Lha bzhusng chen mo bzhugs sho, 54 (r/v).
  Text 11: Bon gi bsang rab bzhugs so, 3 (r/v).
  Text 12: Tshe phog dpal phog bzhugs sho, 12 (r/v).
  Text 13: Lha'i nam la dus bzhzi bzhugs sho, 7 (r/v).
  Text 14: Sngon stod bzhugs sho, 1a-4a.
  Text 15: Btsan rta kha bzhzi'i gsol mchod bzhugs so, 1a-7a.

15 part collection, handwritten loose dpe cha folios, 137 numbered and unnumbered (r/v), 4-7 lines/side.
Private collection, Lawa, Khoma Gewog, Lhuntse Dzongkhag.
Photographed December 2012.

Lhau 2 = Title page (= 1a): Na gzung gyi dbu' bzhug sho.
Handwritten booklet bound on top margin, 102 partially numbered pages (r/v), 6-7 lines/side.
Private collection, Lhau Khampa, Tawang District.
Photographed February 2011.
Shawa 1 = Title pages:
  Text 1: Lha rabs rgam chen pha wang bzhugs so, 1a-11a.
  Text 2: Rgam chung dang spos rab bzhugs so, 12a-19b.
  Text 3: Lha rab dang bdud rtsi bcas pa bzhugs so, 21a-40b.
  Text 4: Tshe phog dpal phog phad bkra shis sogs bzhugs so, 42a-80a.
Handwritten booklet bound on top margin, 80 unnumbered pages (ï/v), 6 lines/side. Community property held by the Bon lineage priest, Shawa village, Lhuntse Dzongkhag.
Photographed January 2012.

Tibetan Language Sources:
mKhas pa lDe’u = mKhas pa lDe’u (13th cent.). 1987. Mkhas pa lde’us mdzad pa’i rgya bod chos ‘byung rgyas pa. Lhasa: Bod-ljongs Mi-dmangs dPe-skrun-khang (Gangs can rigs mdzod, 3).
OTDO = http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp Old Tibetan Documents Online, hosted by Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo, Japan.
gZer myig = Two volume, undated manuscript catalogued as Waddell I & Ia, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz zu Berlin, Berlin.

Other Published Sources:


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