Bon Manuscripts in Context

A workshop hosted by
The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg
on March 16–17, 2018
Introduction

This workshop, entitled "Bon manuscripts in Context", is the third event we have devoted to Bon manuscripts. The previous two, entitled *Bonpo Manuscript Culture: Towards a Definition of an Emerging Field (parts 1 and 2)*, were oriented to the Bon tradition itself, its possible interconnections with Naxi culture, as well as surveys of collections from all around the world. Besides being a record of history and religion in its textual sphere, these manuscripts are also material objects that form part of sustainable cultural world heritage, and it is this aspect of them that we would like to emphasise next. At the second workshop we proposed to refine and formulate our preliminary ideas into a research programme. This time especially we would like to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach, to develop our methodology and to identify all possible tools that might allow us in the future to formulate a definition of "Bon manuscript culture." Along the same lines, we would like to continue an interdisciplinary discussion that will make it possible to see Bon manuscripts in the wider perspective of manuscript studies. The participants are specialists in different academic disciplines including philology, anthropology, art history, archaeology and codicology, and will present their research on a variety of topics, including different collections of Bon manuscripts, text and illustrations, writing materials, and the historical and archaeological context of their places of origin. Thus, this workshop aims to explore various aspects of Bon written culture, with an emphasis on physical appearance, including the development of scripts, book culture through time, the layout of original manuscripts, and the transition from earlier to later traditions. Ultimately, we would like to highlight, in different ways, the relationship between the textual, paleographic, codicological and material features of manuscripts and the culture in which the objects were produced and used. Following peer review we aim to publish our contributions within the De Gruyter series "Studies in Manuscript Cultures" (see: https://www.degruyter.com/view/serial/43546)
# Programme

## Friday

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## Saturday

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Abstracts

Archaeological contexts and analyses of Tibetan paper from the Bon tradition
MARK ALDENDERFER, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

Although relatively uncommon, paper products of Bon origin have been recovered from archaeological sites in Tibet and the surrounding Himalayas. In this paper, I will describe some of these contexts, and will explore the strengths and weaknesses of currently available archaeometric methods useful in the determination of their age and origin.

Orality in the Bon manuscripts of the lay traditions from eastern Tibet
DANIEL BEROUNSKY, CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE

The paper will attempt to summarise some distinctive features of the manuscripts of lay ritualists from eastern Tibet (Phen chu, The bo, Ldong khrom). Although some local dialects might play a role in their unusual orthography and style, the main difference from the well-edited Tibetan Buddhist or Bonpo texts seems to lie in the more significant presence of orality in them. Unfortunately, these traditions were under enduring pressure from monastic specialists, and it seems that the few remnants of their living tradition present today are strongly influenced by the typical treatment of the manuscripts by Tibetan monastics, i.e. manuscripts are just copied and chanted. However, they bear distinctive inner signs that reveal that this was not always the case in the past. Some already published examples of diverse usage of manuscripts from among the Primi people and the Yi, where they serve merely as tools for much more important oral texts, will be given. The role of manuscripts is not uniform in their cases and seems that their practical usage has some regional traits. The general feature common in these cases is distrust of the mechanical pronunciation of the written word. Internal evidence from the Tibetan manuscripts themselves shows that this might well be the case of these Tibetan lay traditions in the past.

Toward a Definition of Local Orthographies of Bon Manuscripts
HENK BLEZER

In the previous century and millennium, I have been working on a good deal of facsimiles of Bon Manuscripts from Dolanji (mostly from the PL480 publications), together with several bonpo Geshes and monks. Many of the publications were reproductions of
manuscripts from the library of bSam gling Monastery in Dol po, Nepal, on loan to Dolanji (some made it back to Nepal, some apparently didn’t). The exact possible earlier migratory routes and provenance of the original manuscripts is yet to be established clearly and comprehensively.

While working on these manuscripts, I couldn’t help but notice, in my peripheral vision, that there seemed to be system and regularity to the ubiquitous idiosyncrasies in orthography and to the system of abbreviation used in these manuscripts. Occasionally, I also started recognising writing styles and even personal hands. Many of these particularities seemed to relate to local conventions, as I was also advised by some of my erudite informants.* While I took note of some of the major characteristics, I felt that these apparent orthographic peculiarities deserved to be looked into more systematically: this workshop may be a good opportunity to do so.

This paper is thus intended as a first and indeed very modest contribution toward a definition of local orthographic styles of Bon manuscripts, based on the digitized files available in my research archive (and on reproductions of the originals). I shall report on discernible patterns and regularities.

* I have discussed some of these typical orthographical features and hands with one of my informants, Lopon Trinley Nyima Rinpoche. He appeared able to identify some of the hands and the couleur locale, in fact with some measure of confidence.

Bon Manuscripts in Ludakphu, Dhe Village (Shar-ri, Lo)
Fidel Devkota, Berlin

A small cave on the crag called Ludak (Klu-dag), immediate east of Dhe village contains hundreds of manuscripts scattered around the cave floor, in dire conditions. A story in the village links these volumes to the dongba (grong-pa) of Te-pa mchod-rt’en-pa, an estate belonging to a prominent family from Dhe village. The family is said to have gone insolvent after their trade went wrong in Tibet. They couldn’t follow the rituals with their religious texts and opted to store them inside the Ludakphu (Klu-dag-phug) to avoid accumulating possible ‘sin’. These manuscripts are said to contain a complete set of Kangyur (bka’ gyur) and Tengyur (Bstan ‘gyur), and few fragments of other unknown volumes, some written with gold and silver ink. There are also few faded thangkas (thang-ka) on leather canvas and other relics inside the cave. The outer wooden block covers with golden letters are said to have been taken by the King of Lo (name/era?) as a part of loan settlement with the Tepa Chörtenpa family. Many villagers also vividly recall their childhood when they used to play with the manuscripts and destroy them in the process, especially those folios with colorful writings and images. Even though these manuscripts are exposed to wind and snow, and ground moisture, some of the manuscripts are in extremely good conditions. The path leading to the cave has deteriorated over the years and now it is almost impossible to reach it without proper climbing gears. Ludakphu and its remarkable cache stayed obscured from the researchers until 2013 when it was first briefly photographed. Village
elders also believe that some of these documents are related to Bonpo. They remember Bonpo Rinpoche from Klu brag (bsTan pa rgyal mtshan) asking them to take proper care of those documents during the 1950s. Sadly, due to their limited resources, they couldn't follow up on it, and the material was left as it was in the cave, continuously exposed to the harsh environment of Lo Mustang. Decades later villagers showed some of the folios from Ludakphu to meme tulku (gYung drung rgyal mtshan, the tulku (sprul sku) of bsTan pa rgyal mtshan) who immediately identified it as a text related to Yungdrung Bon (gYung-drung Bon) and took a small piece of it with him, a piece that is still safely kept inside his protective amulet. This presentation focuses on the Bon heritage of Dhe village and links it to the Ludak cave and the manuscripts inside, and pushes for the scientific analysis and proper identification of the documents and initiate measures for their preservation.

A proper study of the manuscripts and rock art in the vicinity (Devkota and Bellezza 2017) may lead to new findings related to Bonpos in the region, and may also provide some clues about the ever-elusive ‘second’ Bon-skor of Glo-stod which is said to be located in Shar-ri, Lo Mustang (v. Vitali 2012).

Reference


A Recently-Discovered Manuscript Relating to the Klu

PALDRUN DECHEN, EPHE - PSL, CRCAO (UMR 8155), PARIS

The best known source concerning the klu (serpent spirits) is the Klu 'bum, the “Hundred thousand serpent spirits” (hereafter Klu 'bum dkar nag khra gsun). This work, in three volumes, contains a large number of myths describing how a peaceful world was destroyed because of the disharmony between the klu and the other beings due to the offensive actions of the latter, and how a priest was able to dispel the disharmony and restore their relationship. This mythic structure is also found in a recently-discovered text from the The bo region of eastern Tibet (Gansu Province) entitled 'Phen yul rgyas pa'i klu 'bum, “The extensive Klu 'bum text from 'Phen yul”. The text comprises 132 folios but is incomplete. However, it has a number of unusual features that make it well worth our attention. For example, in each of its component myths the main role is played by the ox (glang), while the language of the text exhibits a distinctive sentence structure and makes use of archaic vocabulary (brda’ rnying).
Two Naxi manuscripts from the John Rylands Library as a key to understanding the Dongba script?
Michael Friedrich and Dan Petersen, University of Hamburg

Two Naxi manuscripts in the John Rylands Library carry a Chinese translation of the Dongba characters. Since these manuscripts belong to the oldest items in Western collections, they allow a rare glimpse into cooperation between Dongba priests, Chinese intermediaries and Western collectors before the era of Joseph Rock.

Preliminary remarks on Bonpo manuscripts in Dolpo
Amy Heller, CRCAO (UMR 8155)

The presentation will describe Bonpo manuscripts found in villages in Dolpo. The fortuitous discovery of a village library of more than 600 Buddhist manuscripts from late 11th - early 16th century has provided a benchmark of criteria for paper, handwriting, illuminations, non-canonical textual prefaces of these manuscripts (cf. Heller, A. Hidden Treasures of the Himalayas: Manuscripts, Paintings and Sculptures of Dolpo, Serinda Publications, 2009). Comparison of the Bonpo manuscripts with these Buddhist manuscripts from nearby villages leads to criteria of approximate chronological analysis and regional provenance, whether imported or produced in situ. We will illustrate the discussion with a preliminary analysis of one specific preface.

Collection of Bon manuscripts from the Mardzong cave complex in Upper Mustang, Nepal: Interpretation, Dating and Preservation
Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, University of Hamburg

This study aims to identify, date and put in context the collection of Mardzong manuscripts found in the Caves of Upper Mustang near Lo Mönthang in Nepal. These manuscripts are an extraordinary archaeological find, like the more archaic caches of Silk Road manuscripts from Central Asia, but they are not yet known. The majority of the texts, predominantly of the Bon tradition, belong to large canonical works comprising volumes of Khams chen, gZer mig and Klu ’bum, some dated as early as the 13th century. They are an information-dense repository of artefacts, history, and ideas spanning half a millennium, discovered in 2008 by a group of climbers led by Broughton Coburn and Peter Athans. Then, according to the official resolution of the local authorities, the books become the property of the people of Lo Mönthang under the curatorship of Chöde Monastery. This study presents the recent progress that comprises the description, identification and dating of the collection using integrated multi-disciplinary methodologies based on both codicology and scientific techniques such as fibre analysis, digital microscopy, and C14 dating.
Bon rubrics: The case of Ma rgyud, its traditional lore (gzhung), and addenda
J.F. Marc des Jardins, Concordia University, Montréal

This paper research the various ritual rubrics referred generally as ‘notes’ (zin ris) that head Bon ritual compendia and without which the performance of ritual becomes very difficult. Their purpose is to articulate a group ritual performance with the coordination of the central lore text (gzhung) with the insertions of extra material added over the centuries. This enables local liturgical tradition to insert as part of their own developed repertoire. To illustrate this, the ritual corpus of the Ma rgyud cycle is showcased using collected material from fieldwork and canonical sources. It also highlights syntax and the presentation of material diversity which include musical notations, ritual cake making directions (gtor ma), and others.

Paper Made Holy as It is Being Made: An Early Bon Source on Consecration of a Process Rather Than (as is Usual) the Product
Dan Martin, Jerusalem

This presentation continues working with the same volume of Bon writings as in last year’s meeting, a volume full of consecration ritual practices that accompanies the Bon scriptural canon. On the last occasion I gleaned from these texts, largely datable to the 11th and 12th centuries, their partly unique ideas about the bookbinding elements consciously employed for preservation purposes. This time I propose to focus on a difficult and peculiar passage that details the process of making paper in tandem with ritual actions and dialogues for its consecration. This is quite unusual. After all, holy items such as temples, scriptures and icons are supposed to be consecrated only upon their completion, with prayers that they remain as objects of veneration for a very long time. I only know of one other Tibetan religio-cultural phenomenon that may bear comparison with it, and that is the process of preparing canvases for sacred icons rooted in the Indic Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa, and apparently followed to some extent in consecration works by Pagmodrupa in the late 12th century.* As far as I know, this Bon paper-consecration passage could well be the first Tibetan-language source ever written about the process of papermaking, and even if it were for this reason alone, understanding it better may lead to interesting ideas and insights.**

* These canvas-preparing rites have been studied in depth in an important paper by Matthew Kapstein, “Weaving the World: The Ritual Art of the Paṭa in Pāla Buddhism and Its Legacy in Tibet,” History of Religions, vol. 34, no. 2 (February 1995), pp. 241-263.

** As with last year, I hope to benefit from consultation with at least two experts: one a well-known scholar in the field of Bon studies and the other a professional in the fields of book preservation and papermaking—Dagkar Namgyal Nyima of Bonn University and James Canary of the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington.
The Challenges of Cataloguing Bon Manuscripts: A Librarian’s Perspective
Edward Proctor, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, USA

This paper will address the following challenges: difficulties created by scribes’ use of several distinct alphabets and shorthand abbreviations; ‘single’ volumes consisting of several distinct titles (each requiring separate catalogue records); the necessity of creating metadata for categories which had not previously existed; Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules and creating access points to non-Roman originals using the American Library Association—Library of Congress Romanization Tables Transliteration Schemes for Non-Roman Scripts; difficulty finding cataloguers capable of creating detailed original descriptive cataloguing for unique, previously inaccessible material.

The Lullian Circle in Tibet: the use of paper volvelles in divinatory and exorcistic rituals
Charles Ramble, EPHE - PSL Research University, CRCAO (UMR 8155), Paris

The Catalan-Majorcan mystic Ramon Llull (1235–1315) is regarded by some as the founding father of computer science. The invention that earned him this sobriquet was the so-called “Lullian Circle”, a device consisting of two or more superimposed paper discs...inscribed with alphabetical letters or symbols that referred to lists of attributes. The discs could be rotated individually to generate a large number of combinations of ideas. A number of terms, or symbols relating to those terms, were laid around the full circumference of the circle. They were then repeated on an inner circle which could be rotated. These combinations were said to show all possible truth about the subject of the circle. Llull based this on the notion that there were a limited number of basic, undeniable truths in all fields of knowledge, and that we could understand everything about these fields of knowledge by studying combinations of these elemental truths. (https://obscurantist.com/oma/lull-ramon/)

In fact, Lull’s paper computer (technically known as a volvelle, or wheel chart) was not his invention at all, but was based on the Persian zairja, whose creation is attributed to no less a figure than Al-Biruni (973–1048) (http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/decoding-the-medieval-volvelle/). Simple forms of the volvelle are also known in Tibet, where they are used for astrological and divinatory calculations. This presentation will discuss two volvelles used by a Bonpo lama, one to determine the position in which the serpentine divinity of the earth, Toche Nagpo, is lying so that the earth can be dug without incurring the wrath of this god; and the other to decide on the direction in which effigies are to be expelled from the site of exorcistic rituals. The presentation will include video footage of the device being employed in the course of a ritual, and also of the lama explaining its usage.
“Tibetan Books of Spells”
SAM VAN SCHAIK, THE BRITISH LIBRARY

In Tibet, Buddhist and Bonpo ritual specialists have both used spells to heal the sick, repel evil spirits, perform divinations, and bring rain. In this paper I will discuss a Tibetan book of spells, recovered from the cave library in Dunhuang, China, dating from the tenth century. The book contains a plethora of brief rituals for different purposes, and seems to have belonged to a specialist in this kind of magic. I will show how the physical and textual features of this manuscript suggest that it was used by a ritual specialist. In addition, I will look at aspects of these rituals that are still practised today by modern ritual specialists, as reported by anthropologists.

Bon divinatory literature as a mirror for religious syncretism: a preliminary research report on the Zhang zhung ju thig
ALEXANDER SMITH, PARIS

As a member of the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities at Friedrich Alexander Universität, I have been working for the past six months to translate selections from the Zhang zhung ju thig, a well-known but largely unstudied collection of rope divination manuals attributed to the 19th century Bon scholar Nam mkha’r gyal mtshan. This has resulted in the translation of a number of previously unpublished mythological narratives and ritual materials, which I will share for the first time. More significantly, a recent collaboration with contacts in Kazakhstan has revealed a number of striking similarities between ma sangs rdel mo, a form of pebble divination popular in gYung drung Bon communities, and a structurally identical form of bean divination found in Kazakhstan, known in Kazakh as kumalak. Reading these similarities against the earliest extant pebble and rope divination manuals preserved in the Bon cannon, I would like to present a provisional hypothesis regarding the assimilation of non-Tibetan divination practices into the Bon clerical tradition during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Manuscripts of Srid pavi Bon of vBrug chu in Amdo
Tsering Thar, Beijing

Vbrug chu is a county of Ganlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province. There are still many sngags pa, practitioners of the Bon religion, scattered through villages in mountainous areas of the county, and they have been practising Srid pavi Bon—an indigenous tradition of the Bon religion—for thousands of years, performing different rituals for many reasons throughout the year. Manuscripts of these rituals are going to be published in Gansu very soon. Field research to document these rituals was carried out in 2016. This paper will present these rituals and the manuscripts on which they are based.