

gSHEN

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The term *gShen*, indicating in Tibetan a specific category of Bon priests, has often been the subject of tentative interpretations. In *ye-gshen*, the *ye* only has an emphatic value; according to the Bon tradition this applies then to higher, divine *gshen*. The most satisfactory explanation so far seemed to be the one put forward by H. Hoffmann seeing in *gshen* an old Tibetan word for "shaman", even though he recognised that this interpretation does not satisfy the totality of cases. F. W. Thomas and J. V. Manen interpreted it as a derivative of *shan* (old Tib. *shen*= butcher). On the other hand, A. H. Francke realised that the *gshen*, based on their activity as described in the *gZer-myig*, might be saviours or teachers¹. Most of the Nine Ways (Tib.: *theg-pa*), the practices that a Bon-po has to go through to reach his state of perfection, are qualified by *gshen*, for instance *snang-gshen* (the method of exorcism) or *srid-gshen* (the teachings about the afterdeath state in the *bar-do*). As in these cases, the use of *gShen* in *gShen-sras* (buddhist: *dgra-bcom-pa*=arhat) for the Bon deity *gShen-Lha'* *od-dkar* in Sambhogakāya is not to be explained in a shamanistic sense. This interpretation remains dubious mainly for the understanding of the name of the semi-legendary organiser of the Bon religion, *gShen-rab-mi-bo*, whose biography also does not indicate being a practising shaman, even if shamanism played a considerable role in the old Bon.

On the other hand, we know from the language of Zhang-Zhung, the old stronghold of the Bon religion, that the term *shen* (*shin*) is equivalent to Tibetan (*rnam-*) *shes* and *shes-pa*, particularly as "to know" but also with the meaning of "soul"². The dropping of prefixes, like the *g* in *gshen*, is not unusual in Zhang-Zhung. According to *dGe-bshes Chos-kyi-grags-pa*,³ Tibetan *rnam-shes* is rendered in Chinese as (*shen-shih*), and *shen* in Chinese, like the *shen* in Zhang-Zhung, also means "soul", including its derivatives as "to recognise" and "to know". I have often indicated the correlation of the Zhang-Zhung language with the old Chinese and with the languages of Si-Hia and Mi-Nyag. On the basis of our current knowledge, the

term *gshen* becomes meaningful in all the above mentioned occurrences with the help of the Zhang-Zhung language. The fact that the five *gshen* emanated from gShen-rab-mi-bo are also called *ye-shes-kyi-lha*, viz. "divinities of knowledge or wisdom" is in line with the definition of *gshen* we have found.

Turning to the meaning of gShen-rab-mi-bo in particular, we should again refer to Zhang-Zhung, where the syllable *ra* or *rab* equals the Tibetan *rgya(s)*. As I could show in my studies on the interpretation of the Zhang-Zhung language, the classical language of the Bon-po (see note 2), its lexicon provides valuable help towards the understanding of many supposed Tibetan terms from the sphere of the Bon Religion. For instance, there is a Dang-ra in the Tibetan lake region, where ra(b) corresponds to Tib. *rgya* and *dang* (Chin.: *tang*) to Tib. *mtsho*⁴.

Accordingly, a meaningful interpretation of gShen-rab is then Shesrgya or Shes-rab. The West-Tibetan region of Mar-yul offers another example of how useful the Zhang-Zhung lexicon can be. In Zhang-Zhung, *mar* is the Tibetan *gser*. We are therefore dealing with Suvarnagotra (Suvarnabhumi), the Chinese Si-li. *Si* is the Tibetan *gser* (Zhang-Zhung: *mar*) and *li* the Zhang-Zhung word *rig* (=Tib.: *yul*). The mixture of Zhang-Zhung and Tibetan, also as in Shes-rab, was by no means unusual well into the 8th century A.D., when Zhang-Zhung was still a lingua franca. Even many of the names of the old Tibetan kings only acquire a meaning with the help of Zhang-Zhung if, for instance, *khri* (Zhang-Zhung) equals Tib. *Sems* and *mu* (*dmu, rmu*) in Mu-khri the celestial region (Tib.: *nam-mkha'*)⁵. We know that Gri-gum-btsan-po was avenged by one of his sons, Bya-khri. Gri-gum's sons Bya-khri (birds), Shakhri (carnal beings, mammals) and Nya-khri (fish) correspond to the three regions of the Bon cosmology, *stang-lha*, *bar-btsan* and *gyog-klu*. Finally, we should also mention here the first mythological king of Tibet, gNya'-khri-btsan-po known as a *sa-bdag* according to A.H. Francke⁶. gNya'-khri could be a late aetiological spelling for Nya-khri. The usual translation of *khri* as "chair" or "throne" does not seem convincing.

We can therefore state that *gshen*, also in gShen-rab-mi-bo, cannot possibly be an old Tibetan word for "shaman" which has then

undergone certain mutations of meaning in the organised Bon. On the contrary, the term comes from Zhang-Zhung, the classical language of the Tibetan Bon religion, and corresponds to Tibetan (*rnam-*) *shes* or *shes-pa* in its different applications.

With this interpretation, also two statements about gShen-rab-mi-bo which H. Hoffmann (l.c., p.348 ff.) quotes from the *gZer-myig* acquire a new meaning in keeping with the concepts of the Bon religion. He is described as "*gshen-rab-cig-gda*" (I 27 a4), which Hoffmann translates as "he is an excellent gShen". With the help of Zhang-Zhung however, "he is a Shes-rab", a frequently used appellation in the Bon religion for important spiritual personalities⁷, among whom he is the highest⁸. In li 282 b3 it is said that gShen-rab-mi-bo dwells after his death in "*gshen-grub-pa'i-dbyings*", which Hoffmann translates "in the sphere (*dbyings*) of the perfect gShen". Our reading "(he dwells) in the *ye-shes-kyi-dbyings*" i.e. in the sphere of Sambhogakāya is also supported by a note in the "Lexicon of archaic terms" (l.c.) according to which gShen-rab-mi-bo is a *gshen-rab-sems-dpa'*, that is a Dhyāni-bodhisattva (*ye-shes-sems-dpa'*)⁹. We have therefore obtained the following equivalents: *gshen* = *shes* (-*pa*) and *ye-gshen* or *gshen-rab* = *ye-shes* or *shes-rab* (*rgya*).

Notes

1. H. Hoffmann, "Gsen. Eine lexikographisch-religionswissenschaftliche Untersuchung" (in *ZDMG* 98,2-3; NF 23, 1944, p.340 with bibliographical references on the subject): *Jenissei-Ostyak seanen* = shaman.
2. S. Hummel, "Materialien zu einem Wörterbuch der Zan-Zun-Sprache" (in: *Monumenta Serica* XXXI, 1974-75: II Anmerkungen zum *mJod-phug*, p.513; XXXII, 1976: III Entsprechungen aus dem *mJod-phug* und *Zang Zung Dictionary*, p.328).
3. *brTsams-pa'i-brda-dag-ming-tshig-gsal-ba*, Peking 1957.
4. According to R.A. Stein, "La langue Zan-Zun du Bon organise", (in: *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient*, LVIII, Paris 1971, p.231 ff.) the Tun-Huang texts also give Dang-ko for Manasarovar. Concerning the examples for the relation of Zhang-Zhung to the languages of East-Tibet and neighbouring areas in "Materialien zu einem Wörterbuch der Zan-Zun-Sprache", Stein also mentions *mur* (= snake) dialect of Dvags-po: *murui*; le (=wind) Ch'iang: le, Si-Hia: *xlī*; la (= tiger) Mo-So: la, Lo-Lo: la.

5. Cf. also E. Haarh, *The Zhang-Zhung Language*, Kobenhavn 1968, p.29 a.
6. Quoted by L. Petech, *A Study of the Chronicles of Ladakh*, Calcutta 1939, p.25. The domains of the *sa-bdag* and of the *klu (naga)* are sometimes indistinct, corresponding to the old Tibetan *se (bse)*. For instance a *chu-bdag* can be found among the *sa-bdag* (B. Laufer, *Ein Suhngedicht der Bon-po*, Vienna 1900, p.32 and 46), whereas the *klu* are also said to be spirits of the land, of the mountains and rocks (A. Schiefner, *Das weisse Naga-Hunderttausend*, Memoires de l'Academic de St. Petersbourg, VII, 28/1, 1881, p.27). About the *klu* as *sa-bdag* see also P. Kverne, "A Preliminary Study of Chapter VI of the Gzer-mig" (in: *Tibetan Studies*, Warminster 1980, p.186); S. Hummel, "Profane und religiose Gegenstande aus Tibet und der lamaistischen Umwelt" (in: *Tribus* 13, 1964, p.61). Doubts about the reading *gnya'* (= neck) can already be found in the *Blon-po-bka'i-thang-yig* (7a, 2 ff.), where it is read *nya* and understood as full moon of the time of birth.
7. Index in Samten G. Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, Oxford 1972.
8. gYung-drung-rgyal-mtshan-dpal-bzang-po, *Lexicon of archaic terms*, Delhi (Tibetan Bonpo Foundation) 1966 p.138: *gshen-rab-mchog* (Scr. jnanavara).
9. Lokesh Chandra, *Tibetan-Sanscrit Dictionary*, New Delhi, vol. 10, 1961, p.2168.