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Tibet—Bon Religion: A Death Ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos, by Per Kvaerne. State Univ. Groningen, Inst. Religious Iconography, Iconography of Religions, XII.13. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985. xii + 34 pp., plates i-xlvi. ISBN 90 04 07083 4. No price.

It may well be wondered why this little book should receive notice in a journal devoted to Buddhist studies, since it describes the death ritual of a religion which vehemently asserts itself to be non-Buddhist and at times even anti-Buddhist. Anyone familiar with the development of Bonpo studies in recent years, however, particularly as these have been pursued with great profit by Per Kvaerne, will know that this religion is so completely suffused with Buddhist doctrine that it can be regarded simply as another, somewhat eccentric, form of Tibetan Buddhism. The Bon religion claims historical priority over the teachings of Śākyamuni for reasons that have yet to be properly revealed. It must surely have had something to do with the fact that in the competitive spiritual climate of Tibet in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, to assume the appearance of being utterly different in origin from the emerging Buddhist schools immediately placed the Bonpos on a level at once above and beyond their rivals, all of whom looked to the same foreign source for their legitimacy. True, the source of the Bon religion was also asserted to be foreign, but it was said to have been implanted in Tibet and become naturalized there long before Śākyamuni's teachings were introduced. The tendency among scholars now is to discount the face value of these claims while admitting that the Bonpos do maintain a stratum of genuine pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices deeper than that preserved by their rivals, but one that has been wholly turned to a "Buddhist" purpose. For their part the Buddhists admit only with some reluctance to their continuing observance of some pre-Buddhist practices.

Kvaerne's descriptive analysis of a death ritual of the Bonpos as it took place at their main refugee centre in India in 1981 does not alter this picture in any way, but instead adds some fine detail. He analyses the structure and purpose of the second, most interesting of three independent rites which together make up the whole business of helping the dead find salvation beyond the round of existence: (1) *'pho-ba*, the "transference (of consciousness)," (2) *byang-chog*, the "ritual of the *byang-bu* (a 'tablet' containing a drawing of the deceased)," and (3) cremation, followed by the *klong-rgyas* ("extended vastness") ritual. In the *byang-chog* the officiating lama uses the *byang-bu*, which holds the con-

sciousness of the deceased, to lead him step by step to final liberation. Firstly a "ransom" (*glud*) is offered to the malignant spirits to persuade them not to disturb the ritual. The consciousness of the deceased is then summoned to enter the *byang-bu*, to which a set of offerings are made. A series of initiations or consecrations are then bestowed on the *byang-bu*, at the end of which it is conducted through the thirteen spiritual stages of "an unchanging spiritual hero" (*g.yung-drung sems-dpa'*, approximating to *byang-chub-sems-dpa'*, *bodhisattva*). Finally the lama, in a state of meditation, transfers the consciousness to the final state of liberation, and the *byang-bu* is then dismantled and the drawing is burnt. (It is not clear to me how this second act of *'pho-ba* relates to the one that has already taken place before the *byang-chog*.)

The complex details of the whole process are very ably summarized by Kvaerne with the help of numerous illustrations. He takes pains to point out those features which are genuinely variant or ancient. In this way, some aspects of the ritual fall into the category of adaptations from standard Buddhist practice, while others are traced back to pre-Buddhist observances. This latter group includes the ransom offering, the use of *tsag-li* ("ritual cards") for the presentation of offerings and other purposes, and the choice of a yak, horse and sheep to show the consciousness the way to liberation. But it seems only the role of these animals really separates the Bonpos from their Buddhist counterparts: the ransom and the use of *tsag-li* (etymology ?) are well known to Buddhist tradition, too.

Well known, too, is the offering of "the smell of singed objects" (*gsur*), which Kvaerne seems to have missed. The term appears in the untranslated title he supplies (p. xii) for the second of the three texts used in this version of the *byang-chog*, all composed by the abbot of sMan-ri, Shes-rab dGongs-rgyal (b. 1784): *Tshe-'das-kyi gsur-bsngo snang-ba'i 'dod-dgu gter mdzod*, "The Treasury of All Desires in which There Appears the Dedication of Merit [Associated with] the *gSur* of the Deceased" (my translation). Panglung Rinpoche has recently affirmed that "the *gsur* forms an essential part in the funeral ritual of the Bon-pos today" and that the first appearance of the term is found in a pre-Buddhist funeral liturgy preserved in a Tun-huang text studied by R.A. Stein: see Jampa L. Panglung, "On the Origin of the Tshagsur Ceremony," in Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization: Proceedings of the 1982 Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies Held at Columbia University* (New Delhi: 1985), pp. 268-71, at p. 271. The Buddhist

use of *gsur* was the subject of an interesting controversy summarized by Panglung. It is a pity that his study appeared too late to encourage Kvaerne to notice and explore the Bonpo use of *gsur* in their death ritual.

The book is otherwise typical of Kvaerne's solid and stimulating approach to Bonpo history, doctrine and ritual. The first three chapters, which provide a brief historical background to the *byang-chog* ritual and its setting, will be useful to students wanting a basic introduction to this religion. The book also stands witness to the extraordinary cultural resilience of the Bonpos in exile, best exemplified in the life and work of their abbot, Sangye Tendzin, who acted as the officiating lama in this performance of the ritual. It is difficult to see how Bonpo studies in the West could have developed so much in recent years without the encouragement and co-operation provided by this fine scholar-administrator, and also by the monastery's head teacher, Tendzin Namdak. (It was the abbot Sangye Tendzin, incidentally, who kindly lent his copy of the book to your reviewer, who had managed to lose the copy sent to him by this journal.)

Michael Aris

