

CONCLUSION

An ancient group of Tibetan death rituals that share many basic elements in common has been studied in this book. These native documents include an illuminated funerary manuscript, manuscripts of the Dunhuang and Gathang Bumpa collections, and texts of the Eternal Bon religion. These textual assets build upon each other to reveal an archaic eschatology and praxis of great depth and intricacy.

Virtually all of the ritual edifice in the Old Tibetan language was composed and transcribed anonymously, reflecting its deeply embedded cultural and chronological character. These documents do not appear to have been proprietary or sectarian in nature; they were the patrimony of a wide cross-section of Tibetans. The Classical Tibetan Mu-cho'i khrom-'dur, while being nominally attributed to the sage Mu-cho ldem-drug, furnishes scant bibliographic data as well. Even if religious history was viewed differently by its Eternal Bon compilers, this anonymity is emblematic of a long and hazy past, as are the Old Tibetan funerary materials.

This monograph has mainly considered literary sources written in the Old Tibetan language or in an early form of Classical Tibetan. Old Tibetan ritual texts pose formidable philological challenges to those who would comprehend them. As this work has shown, one of the keys to unlocking the archaic lexicon of Old Tibetan is the various dialects of spoken Tibetan. Translations made in this work have benefited from vocabulary and syntax present in the vernacular of Khams, Hor and Stod. A wealth of Old Tibetan terms and grammatical structures exist in the dialects of these regions and in others of the Bodic world. Nevertheless, for this linguistic treasure to be more readily available to students of Old Tibetan, an amplification of lexicographic research (including the publication of dialectal dictionaries) is needed.

Another key to understanding Old Tibetan ritual literature lies in the Eternal Bon corpus, for this resource has retained the linguistic and historical signposts needed to elucidate archaic ritual traditions. In particular, the texts of the Mu-cho'i khrom-'dur collection have proven pivotal in unraveling the conceptions and activities written about in older funerary sources. The Mu-cho'i khrom-'dur is in effect a bridge between the archaic traditions and those still observed in Tibet today. This cycle of texts has retained a wide spectrum of archaic concepts and practices, wedding them to Buddhist sensibilities and doctrines. Moreover, the Bonpo composed these funerary texts in Classical Tibetan, a product of their early second millennium CE authorship. The more familiar language of the Mu-cho'i khrom-'dur, combined with the sedulous efforts of its authors to preserve ancient traditions through the agency of religious principles still flourishing today, makes it an ideal departure point for the exploration of the older literary corpus.

That Eternal Bon has preserved archaic cultural traditions is resounding confirmation of R. A. Stein's thesis that the *bon* of Eternal Bon and the *bon* of the Dunhuang manuscripts is the very same word.⁵³⁹ As this eminent Tibetologist makes clear in his analysis, the signification attached to the term *bon* has indeed changed over time, but the semantic chain linking its evolution

⁵³⁹ For this thesis, see Stein 2010 (*Antiqua V*), pp. 232–246. In his exposition, Stein also makes note of the ideas of David L. Snellgrove and Samten G. Karmay in determining the nature of the word *bon* and its application to the contemporary Tibetan religious setting. Less clear is the interrelationship between the *bon* of archaic ritual texts and

remains unbroken. In the funerary sphere, the Mu-cho'i khrom-'dur stands out as historical proof of this continuity in Tibetan culture and religion. Tibetologists may continue to quibble over the extent and nature of cultural continuity, but Stein's thesis concerning the historical profundity of *bon* remains as valid today as when it was formulated a generation ago.

The explicative role played by the Mu-cho'i khrom-'dur in this study of archaic funerary traditions is not an isolated occurrence. From the readings I have made, it becomes evident that Eternal Bon literary resources can be brought to bear with great effectiveness on other Old Tibetan ritual traditions, divination and therapeutic rites paramount among them. While graphologic analysis of handwriting, grammatical inquiry into individual words and structures, literary theory, and statistical analysis of single words and word patterns have all added to our knowledge of the Old Tibetan ritual tradition – each in its own way – it is surely the philological exposition of these texts that is called for first and foremost. It is here, in understanding what has been written, that Eternal Bon sources are invaluable. For fathoming the significance of ideas articulated in Old Tibetan and spotlighting their cultural historical background, there is no better tool. Nonetheless, Eternal Bon texts are not some silver bullet to all the obstacles in the path of understanding older sources. For one thing, they are incomplete in scope. Eternal Bon sources must also be harnessed judiciously, avoiding above all else the archaization of Indic infiltrations and transfigurement resulting from Lamaist reinterpretation.

The manifold conceptual and procedural bonds in the texts of this study establish the existence of an essential funerary tradition in ancient Tibet. All the texts featured share a fundamental thanatopsis, one based on the belief in a transitional existence immediately following death. As we have seen, this postmortem world was viewed as fraught with danger, requiring the ritual aid of specialized personnel. These funerary priests were culturally invested with the power to free the departed from deathly obstacles and demons. A battery of elaborate rituals was developed for this purpose, each tailored to specific causes of death. Highly diverse in material and liturgical terms, all of these practices had but a single aim: to extricate the dead from the postmortem morass and catapult them into the ancestral paradise.

The Tibetan literature surveyed in this work presents all the major eschatological and practical elements exhibited in any highly developed funerary ritual system. We have examined materials that deal with the preparation of the corpse for interment, the construction of burial structures, entombment, the honoring of the departed, protection from the ghouls of death, security for the living, and guiding of the dead to heaven. That said, there are still funerary materials from Dunhuang that have not been adequately presented and analyzed in Tibetology. The second or procedural half of the *do-ma* ritual in Pt 1134 and the extensive ransom offerings (*glud*) that constitute ITJ 734 are two of the longest texts that require further attention. It has not even been determined whether ITJ 734 was designed for purchasing the dead from the hell beings or if it is a ritual dedicated to the needs of the living. There are also a number of shorter Dunhuang texts that pertain to dying, death and resurrection that could be re-examined to good effect. Texts such as Pt 1042, Pt 1060 and ITJ 733 immediately come to mind.

Elements of the archaic funerary tradition resonate strongly with other types of ritual traditions in Old Tibetan literature. It is not unusual to find that the gods of the funerary rite are the same gods of divination, or that human personalities in the myths of death also grace the accounts

use of the word by different cis-Himalayan peoples to denote various aspects of orally transmitted indigenous religious traditions. This is an area of study that demands far more attention than it has received to date.

of healing and well-being. Furthermore, the *mo* (divinatory rites), *phywa* (prognostic rites), *gto* (beneficial rites of various kinds), and *dpyad* (diagnostic and therapeutic rites) of funerals have much relevance to the curative regimen expounded in Old Tibetan documents. One cannot fully appreciate the historical and cultural significance of this quadpartite ritual armory without examining all areas of usage. Here again, Eternal Bon literature can help, for it is a fecund source of information about the basic structures and specificities of many ancient rites.

The encompassing nature of ancient Tibetan death rites reflects a vibrant societal component articulated through common ceremony and household observance. However, the texts are largely mute on collateral aspects of funerals. There is little indication about the rules governing attendance and behavior at funerals, the clothes attendees may have worn, mourning customs, or about meals served to guests. The archaic funerary texts also omit discussion about customs regulating memorial services and priestly working conditions. Perhaps the most glaring of all omissions is that little of written substance on mortuary architecture has come down to us (only archaeological research can fill this lacuna).

Aside from entire segments of ceremonial and customary expression missing from the extant archaic funerary texts, the ritual provision is itself incomplete. Around twenty Old Tibetan funerary ritual texts of any length are known to have survived, but conceivably there may have been many dozens if not hundreds of variants in early historic times. We lack documents for the funerals of warriors, priests and sages, etc. Perhaps the passing of luminaries in ancient society did not entail a knotty rite. In any case, the social aspects of such funerals would have constituted an impressive spectacle. Grand processions and public functions connected to these deaths must have abounded. As with the passing of great lamas in later times or notable persons in other indigenous cultures, perhaps in pre-Buddhist times, the sky was perceived as ablaze with signs marking the event. We can only imagine. Moreover, there is a range of causes for premature, violent, or accidental death for which there is no dedicated ritual performance. It might be surmised that those who met their end through poisoning, fires or warfare, etc. may have warranted specially designed funerals, as perhaps did young children. It is plausible as well that origins tales once accompanied the deployment of virtually all ritual tools and offerings. We can expect there were once Old Tibetan etiologic myths for drums, arrows, vessels, textiles, costumes, jewels, precious metals, conduits, tents, caskets, burial mounds, and all other types of funerary instruments. Likewise, trees, flowers, cakes, beer, mead, sweets, dairy products, water, and grain are likely to have had their own origins myths recited on appropriate occasions. Although there are etiologic tales for funerary deer, sheep and horses, those for the various species of birds (save for vultures) and other animals that appear in the ancient eschatological tradition are conspicuously absent from the written record. It must be added that Eternal Bon has recorded a good many etiologic myths, a large portion of which remain virtually unknown to the outside world.⁵⁴⁰

It can be persuasively argued that the archaic funerary texts tell us more about how people lived in ancient Tibet than how they died. This argument can of course be made in the study of any funerary tradition the world over. Perhaps the most salient of these anthropological matters is the principle of reciprocity that governed social life in early Tibet. It seems that the Tibetans of a millennium or more ago possessed a stringent sense of honor and entitlement, each societal action

⁵⁴⁰ The Eternal Bon *smrang* of a few select ritual objects can be found in Bellezza 2005, pp. 419–483. For a translation of the Gathang Bumpa myth explaining the origins of beer and gold, see Bellezza 2011d. Much more work is required to understand the true breadth of Eternal Bon etiologic tales, a rewarding research topic for future efforts.

carrying its own established price and reward. Infractions of the social and legal codes met with what was seen as the commensurate sanction or punishment. The scenario painted here is derived from the great lengths the texts go in furnishing the dead and the agents of death with everything that is due them. The ritual execution is punctilious in this regard. All who participated in the funeral had to do their part, nothing less and nothing more.

Hence, as regards the Tibetan archaic world view, the textual evidence adduced in this monograph points to the principle of reciprocity governing social relations as having been closely aligned to the commensurability of the twin ontological categories of the living and the dead.

Ancient Tibetans operated *a priori* from a different cultural perspective than do their modern descendants. Needless to say, differing sets of beliefs and practices engender or inform alternative world views. Before proceeding further, it is prudent to observe that a broad-strokes approach to understanding the past is beset by the same intrinsic drawbacks as any overarching perspective on history. With this admonition in mind, I tender the comments below as a rough sketch of the funerary *Zeitgeist* of the archaic era and the Lamaist era.

The ritual texts of the Lamaist religions are thoroughgoing in their offering of obeisance to the wisdom deities and/or the Buddha. These sources are also very vocal in paying homage to religious doctrines and in their praise of holy masters. No such lavish displays of allegiance and affection are expressed in the archaic funerary texts. These sources remain laconic, as if such concerns were largely irrelevant or taken for granted. Ancient Tibetans certainly had their share of gods and human exemplars but these were not singled out in Old Tibetan texts for worship, rather they appear to have been part and parcel of life, in the same way as any other unspoken reality. We might read into this that the divine was an all-embracing affair, as natural as the trees and stones, or drinking water and walking down a road. Even what arguably was the greatest of archaic religious masters, Gshen-rab myi-bo, is accorded just one praiseful word in Old Tibetan sources: father (*pha*). That these *gshen* and *bon* came from the sky and were the descendants of deities is seen as sufficient endorsement of their holiness. But even here they were not unique, because the same was more or less claimed for the entire ancient Tibetan population. It is not my intention to overly romanticize early Tibetan religious culture, but to simply point out that matters seen as critical in the Lamaist tradition were not accorded the same weight in earlier times. In this light it is worth mentioning sacred ejaculations or mantras: these loom large in the Indic tradition but are hardly recognized in Old Tibetan funerary texts.⁵⁴¹

Another central issue pertains to the exercise of virtue. The ritual narratives of Old Tibetan literature are primarily preoccupied with practical techniques required to treat illness and death. They dwell far less on the philosophical or ethical dimensions of human suffering. It is clear that victims and their relations were afflicted with much distress and grief, otherwise painstaking and costly ritual procedures would hardly have been necessary. The thrust of each story always remains on the ritual measures themselves, rather than on any moral or emotive justification for

⁵⁴¹ The booklet of the Gathang Bumpa collection containing the *gnag-rabs*, *byol-rabs* and *gser-skyems* texts has six mantras (*sngags*) inscribed on the last folio (Pa-tshab pa-sangs dbang-'dus and Glang-ru nor-bu tshe-ring 2007: 129). This folio is partly cut away, thus there may have been additional lines of mantras as well. These mystic formulae were written in a different hand and in a more refined script than the rest of the document, indicating that they were an amendment. They were probably added after 1000 CE, in response to the growing use of mantras in Tibetan ritual, a custom adopted (at least in part) from Vajrayāna Buddhism. There are also three lines of spells in *Sha ru shul ston rabs*; see *supra*, p. 192.

their implementation. These tales, as a matter of insuring the common good through the path of action, have an almost juridical tone. They are the product of a people of much industry and ability, who placed their faith in the tenets of historical ratification and professional authority. Moreover, the archaic funerary texts are devoid of reasoned argumentation or sacerdotal musing. In contrast, in Lamaist ritualism, an airing of fundamental philosophical ideas and ethical imperatives customarily precedes or accompanies physical responses.

I am inclined to see Lamaist professions of holiness and virtue as not only mirroring a different religious make-up, but also as indicative of a different kind of social contract. This compact was in part predicated on sectarian loyalties, which have had a profound influence on the course of history in Tibet. In contrast, in the archaic era, religious loyalties appear to have been ordained mainly through genealogical and regional channels.

While the various sects of Buddhism and Eternal Bon have been embroiled in rivalries, they have been largely united in combating or revamping vestiges of the archaic cultural legacy. A critical facet of the Lamaist project in the last millennium has been the drive to assimilate or eliminate pre-existing traditions and customs (wherever these are seen as inimical to its core values and ethos). There is much ethnographic and doctrinal evidence to show that Eternal Bon and Buddhism are still on guard against unwanted archaic or unorthodox influences impinging upon their religious ideology. In order to thrive, Lamaism has resorted to a variety of social strategies, from winning the love and regard of populations to suppressing those things seen as sinful. The efforts to disseminate the Eternal Bon-Buddhist doctrine (*bstan-pa*) have been highly successful and this creed and the Tibetan people are now inseparable.

Yet, Lamaism as Buddhism or a Buddhist-like religion is a work in progress, as revealed in a variety of heterodox practices and old-fashioned ideas still circulating in the Tibetan cultural domain. Flagrant discrepancies stalk the cultural landscape of Tibet, contradiction in one form or another a part of all societies. Take the popular notion of the *bas-yul*, hidden lands to which Tibetans are thought to escape in times of turmoil. It is popularly believed that the inhabitants of these secret paradises achieve immortality. The *bas-yul* as a nonpareil world recalls the afterlife of the archaic funerary tradition. Perhaps its intellectual genesis is partially attributable to such eschatological conceptions, an almost unassentive acknowledgement of the cultural past. Other dramatic examples of unconventional beliefs include the *ro-lang* ('reanimated dead') and *mi-shi btsan-skyes* ('a person dies, a *btsan* is born' ghosts), cultural phenomena closely associated with the Lamaist era. These two types of the unrestful dead are not very Buddhist doctrinally speaking. Nonetheless, they haunt the popular imagination and require substantial ritual intervention. Perhaps such irregular beliefs stem from a misconceived or misappropriated archaic cultural heritage, specters of an unresolved past. Whatever their etiology, the *ro-lang* and *mi-shi btsan-skyes* are symptomatic of a Lamaist funerary culture that has for a millennium struggled to cope with death and its aftermath.

Were followers of the archaic traditions also keeping at bay the demons of alternative beliefs? There is no written indication that they were, but the early historic-period record is very scant and drawing a firm conclusion either way is not possible. We can assume though that archaic Tibet, like Lamaist Tibet, had its own apparitions of fear and disgust. The robust ritual framework of the early historic period, and its attribution to an earlier era, however, seems to have served the interests of its adherents well. The unambiguous language of the relevant texts bears this out. The priests are cast in this literature as getting on with their mission without a profession of faith enshrined in a written set of abstract principles or devotional articles. Not only do the archaic

ritual texts indicate that early Tibetans enjoyed long established historical precedents in their cultural and religious affairs, their origins were assigned a native, not a foreign, pedigree. That at least is how the authors of the *smrang* would have it. Autochthonous origins (as real or contrived as they may be) appear to have imbued early historic-period Tibetan society with a secure and firmly rooted sense of itself. The observations I draw here are well suited to the textual posture, even if historical reality was quite different. Perhaps imperial-period Tibetans were engineering origins myths to cope with their own demands, such as those incumbent in the maintenance of a polity fit for upholding an empire. This would seem to have been so.

The ideas encapsulated in the archaic death rituals of Tibet are rich and exuberant, the product of a people with a deep regard for the workings of the cosmos and human mind. The religious concepts of the ancient Tibetans have a literalness about them not found in the Lamaist religions. As do certain modern religions, ancient Tibetan belief held that there is an essential persona after death, one that migrates to the underworld or afterworld. This perceived form of existence had its own reality, born from the consensus of social imagination and dialogue. Lamaism and its subscription to the doctrine of the 'nature of emptiness' (*stong-pa nyid*) poses a stark contrast by comparison. No such reversion to a permanent self or eternal condition is required in this highly evolved philosophical dictum. Yet, the physical interpretations of what ancient Tibetans considered was truly real colored their world view as completely as does the sublime *Weltanschauung* of Eternal Bon and Buddhism. Whatever the respective philosophical merits of these diverse perspectives on death, their collective social impact could in theory be measured utilizing a cognitive archaeological or ethnohistorical metric.

The sheer intellectual and material wealth borne in the archaic funerary traditions broadcasts that Tibet was endowed with culturally advanced societies in the time before the spread of Lamaism. An extensive assortment of material goods are cited in the texts, their creation requiring sophisticated manufacturing capabilities and systems of trade and distribution. One of the strongest manifestations of cultural brilliance in the early historic period is the Old Tibetan language itself. Although relatively few documents in this tongue are extant, what has survived supplies us with a veritable treasure trove of philological data. The purview of Old Tibetan personal pronouns, technical terms, modifiers, and verbs is exceptionally wide. Moreover, its syntax is very economical from which springs a potent expressive capacity and outstanding rhetorical eloquence. With the rise of Buddhism, the Tibetan language acquired a vast new vocabulary and the grammatical adroitness to articulate the highly refined systems of logical discourse and prosody originating in India, a huge step in its linguistic development. On the other hand, the innate facility in Old Tibetan to convey the mythic, the ritual and the epic gradually atrophied. While Old Tibetan only appeared in written form in the 7th century CE, its uniqueness and grammatical competency communicate a language that had already sustained many centuries of endogenous development.

An open question is to what degree the Tibetan archaic funerary tradition correlates with archaeological facts on the ground. In my fifth book, *Zhang Zhung*, in a bid to reconcile the empirical and textual bodies of evidence, I begin to address this matter. Impeding further inquiry into this topic is the nascent state of Tibetan archaeology. Save for my efforts in Upper Tibet, comprehensive surface surveys are still pending in other regions of the Tibetan Plateau and legitimate excavations everywhere have largely stalled. Whenever the pace of archaeological research picks up in Tibet, the findings can potentially be scrutinized against the archaic funerary tradition of the texts. It remains to be shown how closely allied the empirical and textual approaches to understanding death in ancient Tibet really are. Ultimately, this will be a multi-generational project, but there is no better time to make headway than right now.

In this monograph, the archaic Tibetan funerary tradition has been treated almost solely as an artifact of Tibet. Follow-up studies could to good effect investigate how this funerary complex informed other cultures over time and space, and how in turn it was influenced by other peoples.⁵⁴² Coming to grips with the historical and environmental forces that may have kindled cultural transactions in Inner Asia and beyond is crucial to further discovery. We know that major mythic themes and ritual motifs associated with ancient Tibet rippled through a variety of cultures. Some of these are virtually universal in scope, having little or nothing to do with culture A directly impacting culture B. Universally held convictions include a hell in which human beings are tormented and a paradise where they reside joyfully. These common conceptions and impulses notwithstanding, the Tibetan archaic funerary tradition may prove instrumental in better understanding extinct or moribund beliefs and practices in other parts of Eurasia. Whether in the realm of ideas formulated, words spoken or actions taken, it remains to be determined to what scale pervasive funerary traditions are representative of historical, cultural or ethnical ties. The historical value of the Tibetan archaic funerary tradition as a touchstone for cross-cultural inquiry is further enhanced by its anachronistic mantle. It appears that the early historic-period Tibetans were among the last peoples in Eurasia to systematically record in their literature widely distributed funerary materials that do not bear the mark of modern religions.

Fruitful comparative study could focus on a broad spectrum of ethnological and antiquarian phenomena. For instance, the passage of the dead through the obstacle-laden netherworld to the happy land of the manes in Orphic religion seems particularly relevant to Tibetan funerary mythology. The role of dogs in funerary rites, the various mythic rivers separating the damned from the liberated, the divine saviors of the dead, ritual instruments and costumes, to mention just a few areas, are all ripe for cross-cultural inquiry as well.

This conclusion has touched upon some of the ways forward for advancing our knowledge concerning death in ancient Tibet. To be sure, in one form or another, the desire to understand the greatest of existential questions is a perennial preoccupation. This study of Tibetan funerary traditions is dedicated to that quest, one small step in a never-ending journey of discovery.

⁵⁴² For a preliminary study in this area, see Bellezza 2008, pp. 543–568.

