

# Tibetological Collections & Archives Series [part 1] Cataloguing Canonical Texts of the Tibetan Bon Religion

Research >  
Central Asia

In Tibet inventories of books belonging to canonical collections existed in many monasteries. Most of these were destroyed by the Chinese Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s together with the destruction of the monasteries themselves; manuscripts or printed books were often either burned or simply destroyed by chopping them into pieces.

By Samten G. Karmay

The Bonpo canon is comprised of two parts. First, texts that are considered to be the words of gShen-rab Mi-bo, who is regarded as the founder of Bon religion, are known as *bKa' gyur* (Kanjur, 'translation of the word'). Second, texts composed by others than gShen-rab Mi-bo are called *bKa' rten* (Katen, 'based on the word'). For this article, I should like to introduce three representative types of catalogues (*dkar chag*) of the Bonpo canon. All three offer different approaches to the subject matter.

## The Catalogue of Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin

In 1974 Per Kværne published the first ever translation of a catalogue of Bonpo canonical texts, the one composed by Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin (b.1813): *The Canon of the Tibetan Bonpos*.<sup>1</sup> Kværne scrutinized the catalogue and systematically numbered all the titles given there. His work now serves as the standard reference for all researchers in the field.

Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin's catalogue was compiled at the hermitage of mKhar-sna just below sMan-ri Monastery. It is partially based on the collection of manuscripts kept at the monastery just mentioned of which Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin (b.1813) was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Abbot. His autobiography is included in the present edition of the canon by Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma (vol.90). The catalogue is enti-



The Menri Abbot and head of all Bonpo's, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche, and Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, the former Triten Norbutse abbot (and Menri Lopon), at Triten Norbutse Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal, the site of the project.

led: *bKa' gyur brten 'gyur gyi sde tshan sgrigs tshul bstan pa'i me ro spar ba'i rlung g.yab bon gyi pad mo rgyas pa'i nyi 'od* and was published in India in 1965 (*Satapitaka Series*, vol.37, pt.II, pp.31).

However, the catalogue by Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin in its treatment of the subject reveals a somewhat critical attitude regarding the admissibility of texts into the canon and the order in which the texts ought to be arranged. It is therefore a theoretical work rather than simply an inventory that contains a list of real texts existing in a particular place. It is considered among the Bonpo as the official standard for grouping together canonical texts. He has rejected the inclusion of a certain number of texts that were included in the canon in the catalogue by Kun-grol grags-pa, whose catalogue will be discussed anon.

Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin's approach to the subject echoes the treatment of the rNying-ma-pa texts given by Bu-ston Rinchen-grub (1290–1364) when he compiled the catalogue of the Buddhist Kanjur. Bu-ston allowed only five rNying-ma-pa tantras to remain in the Buddhist Kanjur. The central argument of Bu-ston for rejecting most of the rNying-ma-pa tantras concerns the question of authenticity. In his view, most of the rNying-ma-pa tantric works never had any Sanskrit originals. They are therefore apocryphal and not fit for inclusion in the Kanjur. The very term Kanjur (see introduction) conveys the idea of translation being involved.

Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin's criticism of Kun-grol grags-pa's catalogue, on the other hand, rests on a different argument. In it, Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin stands for a purist approach of the Bon tradition. Works considered to have been influenced by Buddhist teachings he excluded from the canon. From about the thirteenth century onwards, however, a particular trend among the Bonpo developed. This trend has the following theme as its ideological determinant: the sage Dran-pa nam-mkha' and his wife 'Od-ldan 'bar-ma produced twin sons. They were Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin and g.Yung-drung mthong-grol. The teachings they later revealed became the dominant doctrine of the trend. The group became known as 'Chi med yab sras bzhi, 'The four deathless ones: father, mother and the two sons'. It is of particular significance

that the personage g.Yung-drung mthong-grol of the group was believed to be identical to the legendary Buddhist saint Padmasambhava, who is regarded as a founding father of Tibetan Buddhism and in particular of the branch of the rNying-ma-pa (the 'Old' tradition). They are therefore believed to have lived in the eighth century.

Therefore, it is believed that no contradiction exists if the Bonpo accepts a certain type of teaching of Padmasambhava. Even the rNying-ma-pa have taken the four as their saints. This trend of the Bon tradition later became known as Bon gsar ma, the 'New Bon'. In the following centuries a considerable number of works have been produced by religious figures belonging to the New Bon Tradition. It is the corpus of the masters that in their outlook are primarily inspired by the *bka' thang* literature of the rNying-ma-pa that Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin has refused to include in the Bonpo canon. However, in rejecting the 'New Bon', the conservatives face a dilemma. A certain number of great authors, such as Blo-ldan snying-po (b.1360), belong to the new tradition, and their works, such as the *gZi brjid*,<sup>3</sup> have in fact been accepted among the cores that make up the canon. Blo-ldan snying-po's other writings are also included in Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma's edition (vol.271).

## The Catalogue of Kun-grol grags-pa

Kun-grol grags-pa (b.1700) was born in the region of rDza in Khams (South-eastern Tibet) and in his later life he flourished as the prelate of the kings of rGyal-rong, especially those of Khro-skyabs and Chu-chen principalities (also Southeastern Tibet).

Kun-dga' nor-bu, the king of Khro-skyabs, had a manuscript set of the canon made that consists of 281 volumes. It was placed in his palace called Drug-zur rnam-rgyal-rdzong. Urged by the king, Kun-grol grags-pa in 1751 compiled a catalogue of the manuscript set in the palace of the king of Rab-brtan in Chu-chen, known as Li-ver rnam-par rgyal-ba'i rdzong. The catalogue is entitled *Zab dang rgya che g.yung drung bon gyi bka' gyur gyi dkar chag nyi ma 'bum gyi 'od zer*.<sup>4</sup>

It was under Kun-grol grags-pa's

guidance that the kings of Khro-skyabs and Chu-chen had simultaneously undertaken to carve the woodblocks of the Bonpo canon in the eighteenth century. Aided by a number of assistants he edited the texts and supervised the whole enterprise of preparing the woodblocks. In 1766 he wrote an account entitled *Par gyi dkar chag srid pa'i sgron me* that describes how the woodblocks for a certain part of the canon were made.<sup>5</sup> He is thought to have died that same year. Whether the carving of woodblocks for all the texts that he has listed in his catalogue was completed before 1766 remains uncertain, because bSod-nams dbang-'dus, the king of Rab-brtan of the Chu-chen principality, was at war against the Manchus for a number of years prior to 1766. He finally lost the war in that year, but Kun-dga' nor-bu, the king of Khro-skyabs, had continued the carving of his own woodblocks in spite of the decree issued by the Manchu Emperor Qianlong forbidding the practice of the Bon religion in rGyal-rong.

Kun-grol grags-pa's catalogue was the most detailed inventory of the canon that had ever been made. Not content to give just the titles of texts, he also provides all the chapter headings of all works that he has listed. This catalogue was published in Beijing in 1993 under the title of *g.Yung drung bon gyi bka' gyur dkar chag*. The woodblocks of the canon were completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

## The Catalogue of g.Yung-drung tshul-khrims dbang-grags.

g.Yung-drung tshul-khrims dbang-grags was a disciple of sNang-ston Zlaba rgyal-mtshan (b.1796) and was a native of the Khyung-po province in Khams. He was one of the founders of the monastery known as Khyung-po sTeng-chen. His catalogue is entitled *rGyal ba'i bka' dang bka' rten rmad 'byung dgos 'dod yid bzhin gter gyi bang mdzod la dkar chags (chag) la blo'i tha ram bkrol (dkrol) byed 'phrul gyi lde mig*. This catalogue is included in Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma's edition (vol. 234). It is the catalogue of the manuscript set of the canon that was kept in the monastery. He began to compile it in 1876 and completed it in 1880. In this he closely followed the example of the catalogue by Kun-grol grags-pa in giving all the details including chapter headings. However, there is an innovation in his work. Unlike his predecessors he has numbered all the title entries, though only section by section and not as a whole. During the Cultural Revolution this monastery was destroyed as was its library. <

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## Notes >

- 1 *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol.XVI, nos.1–2, 1974.
- 2 As is already clear from a section of the title of the work: *sde tshan sgrigs tshul*.
- 3 A new edition of this work has appeared: *mDo dri med gzi brjid*, vols.1–12, Lhasa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang (2000).
- 4 Rig-'dzin Kun-grol grags-pa, *g.Yung drung bon gyi bka' gyur dkar chag*, Beijing: Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang (1993).
- 5 On this catalogue see S. G. Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle, Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, pp.41f., Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point (1998).

## Tibetological Collections & Archives Series

Samten Karmay's articles on the 'Bonpo Katen Cataloguing Project' itself and on the background to 'Cataloguing Canonical Texts of the Tibetan Bon Religion' are the eighth contribution to the Tibetological Collections & Archives Series, which is devoted to important projects on cataloguing, 'computerization' (inputting and scanning), editing, and translation of important Tibetan language text-collections and archives. In this series various colleagues briefly present their initiatives to a larger public, or update the scholarly world on the progress of their already well-established projects. Some are high-profile projects, of which at least Tibetologists will generally be aware, yet some may also be less well known. Nevertheless, I trust that it will be useful to be informed or updated on all these initiatives and I also hope that the projects presented will profit from the exposure and the response that this coverage will engender. If you are interested in any of the projects described, feel free to contact the author of the article. In case you would like to introduce your own (planned) work in the field, please contact the editors of the *IIAS Newsletter* or the author of this introduction. We should very much like to encourage our contributors to keep us informed on the progress of their projects by regular updates.

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**It may be of interest** to note that the latest version of the Bon canon is presently accessible at the Library of the Kern Institute in Leiden. It was purchased in 1999 with funds provided by the Jan Gonda Foundation (at the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, KNAW) and the International Institute for Asian Studies. The Katen catalogue discussed here is an indispensable tool for accessing this part of the Bon canon. Yasuhiko Nagano, Samten Karmay and their team at Triten Norbutse Monastery (Kathmandu, Nepal) deserve great credit for making this basic catalogue available and the unprecedented speed with which they have completed and delivered it. We are now looking forward to the completion of the Bon Kanjur catalogue, which - judging from what I have seen so far - will be an extremely detailed and informative resource to this collection, a must-have for everyone working with the Bon Kanjur or with Bon literature in general. This catalogue has been researched by Per Kværne and his team during the Oslo Bon Canon (i.e., Kanjur) Project of 1995-96 and presently awaits the finishing touches. - Henk Blezer