

Buddhism and the Suppression of Bon: A Paradox of Peace and Religious Hegemony

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Abstract:

Buddhism is widely recognized for its teachings on non-violence (ahimsa), compassion, and tolerance. Yet, history reveals that when it became intertwined with state power, it sometimes participated in the suppression of other traditions. The case of Bon in Tibet is a striking example. Despite its core principles of tolerance, Buddhist rulers and institutions engaged in the systematic marginalization, suppression, and even destruction of Tibet's indigenous religious system. Despite its suppression, Bon demonstrated remarkable resilience, adapting to Buddhist influence while preserving its distinct identity. By analyzing this case, the paper explores the paradox of how a religion of peace contributed to the systematic erasure of another faith. The study highlights how institutionalized religion, even one rooted in peace, can become an instrument of religious hegemony when intertwined with state power.

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1. Introduction

Religious expansion has often been accompanied by conflict, even in traditions known for peace and tolerance. The case of Buddhism's rise in Tibet and its impact on the Bon religion presents a paradox: how did a non-violent faith contribute to the suppression of an indigenous spiritual system? Bon, an ancient Tibetan tradition with shamanic, animistic, and ritualistic elements, faced systematic persecution following the royal endorsement of Buddhism in the 7th century CE. This paper explores how Buddhism, when institutionalized and aligned with political power, marginalized Bon, leading to the near-erasure of Tibet's Indigenous spiritual heritage.

Historical Background

Bon, an ancient Tibetan spirituality, predates Buddhism in Tibet. Initially, Bon and Buddhism coexisted, with Bon practitioners incorporating Buddhist elements into their practices.

However, as Buddhism gained popularity in Tibet (7th-10th centuries), it began to supplant Bon. Buddhist monks and rulers saw Bon as a threat to their authority and began to suppress Bon's practices, labeling them as "demonic" or "heretical"

2. The Nature of Religious Expansion: Politics vs. Spirituality

While Buddhism in its purest form advocates non-violence, the way it spread across regions often depended on political circumstances. In Tibet, Buddhism was introduced not just as a spiritual path but as a state-sponsored ideology. Rulers who adopted Buddhism often did so for political reasons, using it to consolidate power, unify territories, and establish connections with powerful Buddhist civilizations like India and China. In this process, Bon was seen as an obstacle to religious and political unity, leading to its suppression.

3. The Arrival of Buddhism and The Political Suppression of Bon

3.1 Buddhism's Introduction to Tibet

Buddhism entered Tibet in the 7th century CE during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo. While Bon remained dominant, Buddhism gained favor through the king's marriage alliances with Buddhist princesses from Nepal and China. However, it was under King Trisong Detsen (that Buddhism was officially declared the state religion, marking the beginning of Bon's suppression.

3.2 State-Sponsored Persecution of Bon

Destruction of Bon Temples and Texts – Buddhist reformers, including Padmasambhava, sought to eliminate Bon's influence by destroying its religious sites.

Persecution of Bon Priests – Many Bon practitioners were forced into exile or assimilated into Buddhist monastic structures.

The Samye debate (792-794 CE)

It marked a turning point for Bon in Tibet.

- Buddhist master Kamalauīla debated Chinese Chan master Moheyan on gradual versus sudden enlightenment.
- Kamalauīla’s gradualist approach won, solidifying Buddhist orthodoxy in Tibet.
- Bon, seen as a rival tradition, faced suppression and persecution.
- Bon practitioners were forced underground, and texts and temples were destroyed.
- The debate’s impact on Bon was devastating, yet the tradition survived in secret.
- Bon’s revival in the 20th century led to recognition of its importance in Tibetan culture.

3.3 The Reign of King Langdarma (836–842 CE)

King Langdarma is often portrayed as an anti-Buddhist ruler, but some scholars argue that his policies aimed at restoring Bon’s influence. His assassination by a Buddhist monk in 842 CE, marked a turning point, as the revival of Buddhism after his death intensified the persecution of Bon practitioners and Buddhism regained full control, intensifying Bon’s suppression.

3.4 Ideological Warfare: Declaring Bon as ‘Demonic’

With the revival of Buddhism in Tibet in the 11th century, Buddhist leaders sought to further delegitimize Bon. Buddhist texts labeled Bon as a corrupt and demonic tradition, reinforcing state policies that excluded Bon followers from political and monastic institutions.

Demonization of Bon Practices – As Tibetan Buddhism evolved, it sought to delegitimize Bon by portraying it as a corrupt or heretical path. Buddhist texts labeled Bon practitioners as sorcerers, demons, or practitioners of “black magic,” reinforcing negative stereotypes that persisted for centuries.

Forced Adaptation to Buddhist Norms – During this period, Bon underwent significant changes to survive. Many Bon monasteries adopted Buddhist-style monastic structures, incorporated Buddhist terminology, and reinterpreted their teachings in response to Buddhist dominance. This led to the emergence of Yungdrung Bon, a reformed version of Bon that blended pre-Buddhist traditions with Buddhist elements.

These ideological attacks created a long-lasting stigma, reducing Bon's legitimacy and influence in Tibetan society.

3.5 Theocratic Domination and Further Marginalization

With the rise of the Gelugpa school (Yellow Hat tradition) in the 15th century, particularly under the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), Bon faced even greater persecution.

Conversion of Bon Monasteries – The state officially converted many Bon institutions into Buddhist monasteries, effectively erasing Bon's influence in many regions.

Exclusion from Political Power – Bon followers were barred from holding government positions, further solidifying Buddhist control over Tibetan society.

3.6 Religious Syncretism: Absorption Rather than Coexistence

As Bon struggled to survive, it had to adapt by absorbing Buddhist elements. This led to:

- The emergence of **Yungdrung Bon**, a form of Bon that incorporated Buddhist monastic structures, rituals, and terminology.
- Bon practitioners adopt Buddhist cosmology, reinterpreting their deities to align with Buddhist concepts.
- The eventual recognition of Bon as a “fifth school of Tibetan religion,” but only after centuries of decline and forced adaptation.

This process mirrors how dominant religions throughout history have absorbed and transformed indigenous traditions rather than coexisting with them.

3.7 Monastic and Political Exclusion The Gelugpa Domination:

The rise of the Gelugpa school, led by the Dalai Lamas, further marginalized Bon. The fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) declared Bon a “false religion” and banned its practices in many regions. Bon monasteries were converted into Buddhist institutions, and Bon texts were rewritten to align with Buddhist philosophy.

Bon Practitioners as Outcasts:

Bon followers were often treated as second-class citizens in Tibetan society. In some regions they **were barred from government positions and faced social discrimination**, ensuring Buddhist elites controlled Tibet's political and religious life.

Bon monasteries were either destroyed or converted into Buddhist institutions, further weakening the tradition's institutional presence.

Bon practices were often outlawed or forced underground, many bon rituals had to be practiced in secret or disguised as Buddhist ceremonies leading to their loss in many Tibetan regions.

4. The Modern Revival of Bon and Reassessment of Buddhist Dominance

4.1 The Chinese Invasion and Tibetan Diaspora (1959–Present)

Ironically, the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 led to the destruction of both Buddhist and Bon monasteries. However, it also led to the global spread of Tibetan religious traditions, including Bon. Bon masters, such as Lopon Tenzin Namdak, played a crucial role in preserving Bon's teachings in exile, particularly in Nepal and India.

Bon Institutions in Exile – The Menri Monastery in India and the Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal became key centers for Bon's revival.

Western Interest in Tibetan Spirituality – The global interest in Tibetan religion has included Bon, helping to recover and preserve its teachings.

4.2 Recognition by the Dalai Lama

In the late 20th century, the 14th Dalai Lama recognized Bon as Tibet's fifth religious tradition, marking a reversal of centuries of marginalization. However, this recognition came only after Bon had largely adapted to Buddhist structures and was no longer a direct ideological threat.

4.3 Modern Revival Efforts:

In recent decades, Bon has experienced a revival, with efforts to revive and document Bon practices, texts, and traditions (Karmay, 2001). The Tibetan government-in-exile and some Buddhist leaders have acknowledged the historical suppression of Bon and have taken steps towards reconciliation (Central Tibetan Administration, 2019). Interfaith dialogue and cooperation between Buddhist and Bon leaders have increased, promoting mutual Understanding and respect. Institutions like Menri Monastery in India and Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal are dedicated to preserving and reviving Bon practices. Western interest in Tibetan spirituality has also contributed to Bon's resurgence, particularly its teachings on Dzogchen and shamanic rituals.

5. Understanding The Paradox: How Could A Non-Violent Religion Do This?

The historical treatment of Bon by Buddhist authorities presents a paradox. Buddhism emphasizes compassion, tolerance, and non-violence, yet its historical actions towards Bon contradict these principles. This paradox highlights the complex interplay between power dynamics, cultural imperialism, and the desire for religious dominance.

5.1 Institutional Buddhism vs. Philosophical Buddhism

The paradox of Buddhism's role in the suppression of Bon can be understood through the lens of institutional Buddhism vs. philosophical Buddhism.

The Buddha's original teachings emphasized tolerance and non-violence. However, when Buddhism became institutionalized—especially under state sponsorship—it was sometimes used as a political tool for domination.

This is not unique to Buddhism; many religions, including Christianity and Islam, have had peaceful core teachings but were used as instruments of power by rulers.

5.2 Buddhism's Strategy of Religious Absorption

Unlike some traditions that sought to eradicate rival faiths through violence, Buddhism often absorbed competing religions by:

- Incorporating their deities and rituals into Buddhist cosmology.
- Reinterpreting their texts and teachings to fit Buddhist doctrine.
- Encouraging syncretism, leads to the gradual erasure of the original tradition.

This strategy, seen in Tibet with Bon, mirrors Buddhism's expansion in other regions, such as Hinduism's influence on early Indian Buddhism and the fusion of Chinese folk traditions with Buddhist thought.

4.3 The Role of Tibetan Kings and Monastic Elites

The suppression of Bon was not driven by Buddhist philosophy but by Tibetan rulers and monastic elites who used Buddhism to legitimize their authority and establish political and cultural unity so as to secure alliances with powerful Buddhist civilizations like India and China.

5. Conclusion: A Case of Religious Hegemony, Not Buddhist Violence

The suppression of Bon by Buddhism in Tibet was not an act of direct violence like religious wars seen in other traditions, but rather a **gradual process of state-sponsored suppression, ideological domination, and forced adaptation**. The suppression of Bon by Buddhism in Tibet was not an act of direct violence like religious wars seen in other traditions, but rather a gradual process of state-sponsored suppression, ideological domination, and forced **adaptation**. This paradox—of a peaceful religion being used as an instrument of religious hegemony—demonstrates that religious dominance is often shaped more by political strategy than by spiritual principles.

Today, with the modern revival of Bon, scholars and practitioners are reevaluating its contributions to Tibetan culture, spirituality, and history. However, the legacy of Buddhist dominance over Bon remains a reminder that religious expansion is often shaped more by political strategy than by spiritual principles.

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