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**Chogyal Namkhai Norbu. *The Light of Kailash,
A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet.***

**Translated from the Tibetan and edited by Donatella Rossi;
English editing by Nancy Simmons.**

**Volume One: The Early Period. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2009.
Volume Two: The Intermediate Period.
Volume Three: The Late Period.**

Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 2013

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

The Light of Kailash : A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet is a three-volume series by the late Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, former professor of Tibetan and Mongolian Language and Literature at the University of Naples L'Orientale. Born in Derge, Tibet, he spent much of his career researching the origins of pre-Buddhist Tibetan culture, finding sources in an ancient civilization, Zhang Zhung¹, and an indigenous ritual tradition, Bon².

The Light of Kailash presents a compelling alternative to the standard versions of Tibetan history in which Zhang Zhung is given short shrift, and Bon nearly erased, eclipsed by its powerful post-Buddhist 7th century successor civilization, Central Tibet under Emperor Srong-btsan sGam-po, a perfect example of history being re-written by the (of course!) victors.

"Great scholars and practitioners of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have universally proclaimed that Tibet did not have a written language, let alone a culture, before the advent of the Dharmaraja Srong-btsan sGam-po," according to Chogyal Norbu. "They essentially defined the country as a region of darkness." (234, III)

¹ Many sources point to a civilization known as Zhang Zhung, a large area of what is now western and northwestern Tibet, a society loosely centered around Mount Kailash, called "the navel of the world," (23, I) Kailash, from ancient times was said to be the sacred source of four holy rivers. This was regarded as pure myth. Western expeditions traced the sources of those rivers: the Indus, Brahmaputra, Karnali, Sutlej eventually admitting that the myth was the truth. Likewise, the existence of Zhang Zhung, to this day is often dismissed and regarded as mere legend, wishful thinking.

² Bon--an ancient and complex tradition of practical rituals carried out in symbolic fashion to achieve specific worldly outcomes; these rites are then performed by practitioners who then can pass on such knowledge down, teacher to student. This tradition arose in Zhang Zhung; this tradition was reformed and systematized by Tonpa Shenrab Miwo (dates uncertain) often cited as the founder of Bon.

The three-volume work, dedicated to Tibetan youth in particular, is inspired by a desire to reverse persistent misconceptions about the roots of Tibetan culture, in which pre-Buddhist Tibet is portrayed as a wasteland, "peopled" by a race descended from the coupling of a local ogress and a hairy ape³.

The Light of Kailash initially began as lectures Professor Norbu gave at the University of Nationalities in Beijing in 1988. Professor Norbu then elaborated upon the topics, doing further research, adding sources after source, until a final manuscript (1,900 handwritten calligraphed pages) was complete.

To elucidate certain errors, Professor Norbu compiled a dazzling, dizzying host of primary sources from which he quotes extensively, often comparatively, over three rich volumes, creating a compelling vision of pre-Imperial Tibet, tenaciously reconstructing it from the scraps and shards left after acquisitive imperialist Emperor Srong-btsan sGam-po of Central Tibet decided it was time to usurp his richer, more powerful neighbor, Zhang Zhung, and swallow it whole.

Ch. Norbu states, "Starting from the time in which the precious teachings of the sacred dharma appeared in the vast country of snowy mountains that is Tibet, the majority of scholars who were born there and become renowned have done their utmost to show the contrast between all the good that flourished in the country with the arrival of Buddhism and all the bad that had existed before then, maintaining that . . . Tibet was an obscure, uncivilized place and that the ancient Tibetans living there were all dim-witted and dull." (240-241, III)

Histories and historians of Tibet still share this view: pre-Buddhist Tibet was not worth a second glance until glorious Emperor Srong-btsan sGam-po got his hands on it.

Side note: glorious Srong-btsan sGamp-po achieved this glorious victory by arranging the assassination of Lik-mig-kya, the Emperor of Zhang Zhung. The army of Zhang Zhung was too powerful to defeat in a fair fight, so the glorious Emperor, adjusting to circumstances, had him ambushed.

After the conquest, Zhang Zhung vanishes.

Bon, suppressed, goes underground.

Bring in the Buddhists.

³ Well, and we still believe in the hairy ape but not so much the local ogress, do we not? Viz. Sir Charles Bell, "The Tibetans anticipated Darwin by claiming descent from a monkey." p.21, "Tibet, Past and Present" by Sir Charles Bell, Oxford University Press, 1924, 1968.

Gloriously spread the teachings of Buddha while acting as if arranging for the assassination of your own brother-in-law, as Zhang Zhung Emperor Lik-mig-kya had been, doesn't count as really bad karma.

Ingloriously spread new history according to the viewpoint of the new glorious Emperor: where there had been no writing, the new glorious emperor makes it magically appear. All that was crude is now civilized! Prior magico-ritual traditions are co-opted or banished, almost erased, certainly replaced.

Splice in the story of the ogress and the hairy ape.⁴

Interestingly, this pattern of disparagement and erasure continue to this day; as Imperial Central Tibet once dismissed, disparaged, and erased Zhang Zhung, today, Tibetan civilization is viewed as "less than," according to eminent Central Asian scholar Christopher Beckwith:

It is probably no exaggeration to say that all of the general books (and most of the specialized books) about Tibet assume, and stress constantly throughout, that the country and its people were and are abnormal. Biases unfortunately die hard.⁵

Over decades, the author consulted original historical texts from both the Bon and Buddhist traditions, meticulously reviewing existing published texts, collected unpublished texts, consulted literary and ritual sources, using narratives from scrolls such as Old Tibetan Annals, Old Tibetan Chronicles found in caves of Dunhuang.

Prof. Norbu interprets facts and symbols gleaned from sets of ancient ritual instructions; from a wealth of sources, in these volumes, he presents a (sacred?) mountain of evidence, almost an avalanche of evidence: multiple versions of names and texts, side by side (in transliterated Tibetan⁶), so that readers can judge patterns for themselves, can see precisely the bases for his conclusions, a process he has adopted throughout his career, reviewing multiple points of view in texts, "endeavoring to clarify their fundamental characteristics."⁷

⁴ "The Tibetans anticipated Darwin by claiming descent from a monkey," Sir Charles Bell in "Tibet, Past and Present" Oxford University Press, 1924/1968, p21

⁵ "The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power Among the Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese During the Early Middle Ages," Christopher I. Beckwith, Princeton University Press, 1987

⁶ Wylie transliteration is used throughout. It's a hard slog but unavoidable.

⁷ "Drung, Deu, and Bon: Narrations, Symbolic languages, and the Bon tradition in ancient Tibet" by Namkhai Norbu, Translated from Tibetan into Italian edited and annotated by Adriano Clemente, Translated from Italian into English by Andrew Lukianowicz, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharmasala, 1995. Introduction, xix.

Volume One begins with stories of beginnings, first describing the primordial origin of the universe. There are many to choose from, and Professor Norbu cites several; here he quotes a passage from an old Bon text⁸ "which clearly describes the arising of the elements." (20, I)

"From totally void emptiness,
a totally clear light appeared.
That light completely transformed itself,
and came into being as a luminous wheel,
whirling spontaneously.
From the self-produced energy of the wheel,
weightless,
wind came into being." (20, I)

Whirling spontaneously⁹, as in evolving of itself, arising through its own arising; moving and continuing, coming more and more into being through movement itself, moving of itself, not from any outside force, self-existing.

Hardly the cosmology of dunces.

These illiterate yokels seem to have quite sophisticated thoughts about how the universe came into existence, how things came to be, do they not?

Chogyal Norbu presents sections from identifiably non-Buddhist¹⁰ texts on the origin of the universe, the origins of a number of pre-human groups, then lists the first human generations of Zhang Zhung.

In the section transitioning, from, literally "not-men" (mi-ma-yin) to human beings, Professor Norbu quotes from the 12th-century history written to narrate ancient events, *lDe'u rgya bod kyi chos 'byung*; there is an ordered list of the appearances of various, um, ruling groups; it distinguishes them by name and weapons of war, as things evolve over time.

"The first to rule was the Black gNod-sbyin . . . from that time, bows and arrows were used as weapons.

The second to rule was the mGo-g.yag dDud-yul Re-lde. . . at that time axes and hatchets were used as weapons.

⁸ gSas spyi spungs kyi bshad byang, Dechen Lingpa (b. 1833) u-med ms., Chengdu

⁹ Rang gyis rang gyurpa "means originated only on the basis of movement, without reliance on any other factor other than the power of movement itself."

¹⁰ Which are clearly non-Buddhist because Buddhists do not do cosmic eggs. Many cultures do, not them.

The third to rule was the Srin-po gNya'-ring Phrag-me . . . catapults and Srin-mo boots¹¹ were used as weapons.

The fourth to rule was the lHa [deity] dMar-ljam; . . . from that time, goothe 3-pointed kha tam¹² was used as a weapon.

The fifth to rule were the Klu [and the country] was called Ngam-Brang Cang-Brang; from that time, spears were used as weapons.

The sixth to rule were the 'Dre, [and the country] was called Lang-tang Ling-tang; from that time maces [rkyug pa skog can] (an iron ball studded with iron spikes swung around on a rope) were used as weapons." (17-18)

This account, weirdly enough, is given specific credence in an article on the ancient history of iron from Cassier's Engineering Monthly of 1915; where writer George F. Zimmer states that "the aborigines of Tibet" have had iron since 3,000 BCE and were making iron swords and iron hatchets at that time. He further states that the later Chinese "Emperor Yu received tributes from them [the aborigines of Tibet] in supplies of iron, circa 2000 BC." ¹³

This suggests that way back in ancient Tibet, that backward backwater, iron war weapon-making had already begun even before men were, even, well, men.¹⁴

From volume to volume, the literature moves in an almost perfect Zhang Zhung creation metaphor, whirling around like the universe creating itself, spiraling back and re-visiting basic topics as each round provides a deeper and richer analysis. Professor Norbu presents the reader with ever more precise documentation: cosmologies, human generations of ancient Zhang Zhung, early family/clan genealogies of ancient Zhang Zhung, the early royal dynasties of Zhang Zhung, Bon priestly lineages of ancient Zhang Zhung before and after Shenrab Miwo; the written language and scripts of ancient Zhang Zhung; the origins of the Bonpo lineages; kings, gShen-pos, and Bonpos; royal castles of ancient Tibet; Bonpo lineages in the later period.

¹¹ "*srin mo rkang* , "ancient weapon consisting in iron boots with a pike on the front with three longer pikes protruding from it."(18, n5)

¹² Knife/khatvanga

¹³ "The aborigines of Tibet . . . have iron swords and hatchets at that time [the time of Tubal-Cain in Genesis, and Emperor Yu received tributes from them in supplies of iron, circa 2000 BC." He also states that they had iron "since the time of Emperor Fo-Hi" and Tubal Cain, earlier. "The Antiquity of Iron," *Cassier's Engineering Monthly*, Vol 47, 1915 by George F. Zimmer, p 14, p88

¹⁴ See, "mi-ma-yin, p7, above.

Painstakingly collected and presented in almost unfathomable detail, viz., The Succession of Thirty-Four Tibetan Dynasties of the Intermediate Period According to Twenty Different Sources (Table 8, Volume II Chapter III, The Royal Lineages of Tibet). Twenty sources? Thirty-four dynasties? You do the math.

We learn about artifacts of its uniquely magical culture: self-created ornaments; traditions of medicine and healing known nowhere else, certainly not mere imports from "greater civilizations."¹⁵

Each aspect merits further mention: distinctive methods of divination: by dice, scapulimancy, rituals for health, wealth, averting obstacles, rituals that have been in use over thousands of years; these are rituals considered sufficiently effective as to have been passed down through the centuries and are still practiced, still practical and relevant, to this day.

Every topic is addressed with such precision, fully annotated, beautifully translated by Donatella Rossi (Professor of Religions and Philosophies of Eastern Asia at the Sapienza University of Rome) and crafted gloriously into English by the literary genius of editor Nancy Simmons.

The Light of Kailash: A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet is stunning; it is inspiring and slightly impossible.¹⁶ Its scope and depth are beyond my ability to cognize, but well within my ability to recommend.

Perhaps with *The Light of Kailash*, seen in light of the archaeological findings of John Vincent Bellezza¹⁷, the erasure of Zhang Zhung may itself become erased.

¹⁵ Of particular interest, I think, to those interested in the comparative study of civilizations is the apparent pattern of erasure and contempt; in this trilogy, as Professor Norbu attests, the erasure by Imperial Tibet of Zhang Zhung; as Beckwith attests, the disdain with which later Tibetan culture is still met, its achievements still invisible, passed over.

¹⁶ The impossible part is, of course, the transliteration of Tibetan. Unavoidable, alas. No way out.

¹⁷ *The Dawn of Tibet: the Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*, by John Vincent Bellezza.