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# Earth and Wind, Water and Fire: Book Binding and Preservation in pre-Mongol Bon Ritual Manuals for Consecrations

**Abstract:** Bon religious texts dating to more-or-less a thousand years ago do contain not only signs of a well developed ‘cult of the book’, but also some unexpectedly informative passages about the book making arts. This essay concentrates on ideas about bookbinding found in early Bon ritual literature on consecration of icons, including scriptural Volumes. These evidence a remarkable concern for book preservation, as well as a keen awareness of how each element of the binding is meant to protect the book from damage by a specific physical element. This bears comparison and contrast with closely contemporaneous evidence on book binding found in the consecration literature of Tibet’s predominating schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Even if not the very first, certainly one of the earliest and, as time would prove, by far the most widely influential of the treasure revealers for Bon tradition as a whole was Gshen chen Klu dga’ (d. 1035 CE), the *Great Shen*. It is recorded in what I regard as the most reliable of the early accounts that, after his scriptural findings in 1017 CE, he kept silent for a period of one twelve-year cycle about them and their teachings. In the same source we learn how one named Sbrags sto Ku ra had built a chorten and invited a physician named Zhang to consecrate it. During the course of the consecration (here using the word *zhal sro*), the Great Shen raised a question about what a chorten of Dharmakāya might be, insisting that there is nothing about a chorten that could apply to Dharmakāya. After this debate, an event that signaled his debut as a teacher, he gradually over the coming years allowed his excavated scriptures to be copied by others. Among his first followers was one named Cog lha G.yu skyid, who asked to see them all. Then Cog lha made a special request to make his own copy of the *Khams chen* scripture, and as things turned out constructed two copies, one for the Great Shen and one for himself. The one for himself was called the *Red Hundred-Thousand* (*’Bum dmar*), and the one he made for the Great Shen was called the *Royal Hundred-Thousand with Hardened Leather Book [Boards]* (*Bla ’bum bse gleg[s] can*). The last-mentioned is

the one that the Venerable Tenzin Namdak once told me that he had seen with his own eyes when he was still living in Tibet, prior to his escape to India.<sup>1</sup>

A set of consecration texts is always included in the lists of the Great Shen's scriptural findings,<sup>2</sup> and we will say more about these shortly. What I would regard as a more problematic text on the life of the Great Shen's disciple Zhu yas Legs po (1002–1081 CE) has its own elaborate story about how the first copies of the scriptures were made by him soon after their discovery. In this version, the intent to make copies of the scriptures was there even before they were excavated. The Great Shen speaks to him in verse:

The teachings that belong to you  
are currently under the ground.  
In order to extract them from the soil  
I need a load of axes and picks.  
I need thirteen able-bodied men.  
I need six loads of paper and ink.  
I need a hundred scribes to copy them out.<sup>3</sup>

While quite detailed and dramatic, this story does not sit easily together with the other account that has the Great Shen doling out scriptural texts one or several at a time over a lengthy period, which is one of several reasons for my reservations. Disregarding that for now, our text goes on to say that sixty-five scribes worked for three months and five days. Their work was checked over three times, resulting in eighty-six volumes of scripture.<sup>4</sup>

In 1038, following the same source, he had a vision at the site of an ancient temple Zo bo Khyung slags that inspired him to build there. When the new temple was completed, he invited seven teachers to the consecration. Among them,

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<sup>1</sup> This summarizes information found in Martin 2001, 66–67, where complete references are to be found. Shenchen Luga I will go on to call the 'Great Shen', translating the first part of his name that is in its fuller form Gshen chen Klu dga'. Shen is the clan name. Sometimes he is called Gshen sgur, with reference to a postural anomaly of his due to some kind of accident. We might translate this as *Hunchback of the Shen Clan*.

<sup>2</sup> See the study of these listings in Martin 2001, 239–261, and especially no. 5 on p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> Martin 2001, 83.

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion on the historical usefulness of the Zhu yas text, see Chapter Eight of Martin 2001, especially p. 86, and for the full quote, pp. 83–84. I often choose to capitalize the word Volume when it stands for Tibetan *glegs bam* as a holy object and icon-like representation of the speech-acts of a Buddha (*glegs bam* itself refer to the book as a whole, inclusive of the binding elements). On the importance of holy, blessing-bestowing objects in Tibet in general, see Martin 1994.

despite the chronological impossibility, was the Great Shen himself, who would have already died in 1035. Even more strangely, the guest list included the Bengali teacher Atiśa (d. 1054), who would only arrive in Tibet in 1042. Atiśa performed a special ritual called *Stong gsum snang srid g.yen bcos* ('Mending Divisiveness in the Phenomenal Triple Thousand [Universe]').<sup>5</sup> It appears it was at that same meeting that Atiśa gave him names for his son Skyid po as well as his future grandson Jo thog.<sup>6</sup> So, our main point here is just that consecration rituals are not only found among the Great Shen's textual discoveries, but they also play an important part in the associated biographical narratives.

It has been over 25 years since I first noticed some remarkable connections between these consecration texts of the Great Shen and the consecration text of Atiśa. Most impressive is the fact that in both we find the chorten topped by a finial formed by a pair of Birdhorns (*bya ru*), and the two Birdhorns are said to symbolize wisdom and means. It is most surprising to find Birdhorns in a non-Bon text, and I know of no other case of *bya ru* being used in them with the same meaning.<sup>7</sup> These texts are begging to be compared in a major study, but for now we will limit ourselves to isolating and comparing particular passages about a particular subject: the items that together with the inscribed pages themselves form a sacred Volume (*glegs bam*). We will call these items the *accessories*, although by the end of this essay, we may find good reasons to call them *protectors* instead.

But first, a few observations about consecration and its literature in Tibet. Our Bon texts generally prefer the term *zhal bsro* in place of the much more familiar *rab gnas*. *Zhal [b]sro* literally means *face warming*, but I think *heart warming* is a more communicative rendering. We will not find this vocabulary difference so surprising when we learn that *zhal bsro* is the form known in Old Tibetan texts and inscriptions from the imperial period, while *rab gnas* is not locatable in them.<sup>8</sup> Another related Bon term is *nang rdzong*, for the pre-consecration rite of

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5 I believe this title indicates a kind of *mdos* ritual similar to what is known as *Stong gsum 'khrugs bcos*, but I am uncertain of it, and this requires research.

6 For the place of these persons in the Zhu family tree, consult the tables that follow p. 474 in Lhagyal 2000, at Table 3.

7 I have noted some non-Bon usages in Martin 2001, 63, n. 31, and see also p. 88; Martin 2013, 172. See Atiśa, *Sku dang gsung*, 514 and Gshen chen 1999c, 224. These Bon consecration texts were catalogued in Changngoba 2003, 137–141. Atiśa's consecration work itself is subject of Martin 2018, published without submitting any galleys for author's approval, and for this reason rife with editorial errors.

8 The term occurs in a Dunhuang cave inscription (in its past tense form, *zhal bsros*), as found in Imaeda 2007, 94, n. 4. A search of the OTDO did not find a single usage of the term *rab gnas*, although it may be important to point out that this excellent database, while quite successfully

depositing holy items that is usually called *rten gzhus*.<sup>9</sup> So there are certain peculiarities like these to be found in the Bon literature. If we look at the general literature on consecration in pre-Mongol Tibet, what we find are perhaps four lengthy manuals or sets of manuals, apart from those of Bon. Of these, the Rong zom pa and Atiśa manuals date to around mid-eleventh century, while the Sakya master Grags pa rgyal mtshan's dates to the late twelfth (1147–1216 CE).<sup>10</sup> We should also mention that there are a number of less lengthy manuals by Kagyü masters of the late twelfth century. Among them the most substantial are Phag mo gru pa's.<sup>11</sup> In terms of sheer volume, the Great Shen surpassed them all.

We can basically exclude the manuals of Rong zom pa and Phag mo gru pa for now, for even though they do mention that books are among the items that might be consecrated, they do not devote any passages of significant length to this subject. The remainder of this essay will be a presentation of a particular Bon consecration text passage on what might be called for reasons to be clarified the 'protective accessories', with comparison to passages on the same subject in the works of Atiśa and Grags pa rgyal mtshan, with some concluding remarks about their significance for Bon and Tibetan manuscriptology.<sup>12</sup>

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excluding the Buddhist scriptural and commentarial texts that form the bulk of the Tibetan texts cached at Dunhuang, has as its main concentration secular documents and rituals related to royalty.

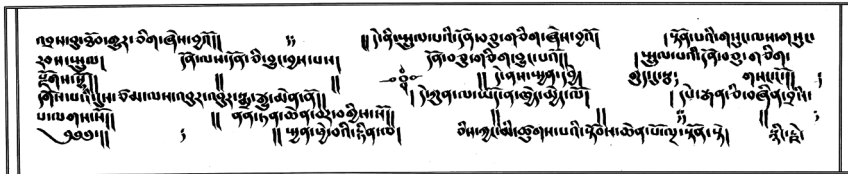
**9** The term is in fact used by Phag mo gru pa in his late twelfth-century consecration text, but this is rather exceptional (see Phag mo gru pa 1507, fol. 112<sup>v</sup>, line 2).

**10** I primarily made use of the bilingual edition of Grags pa rgyal mtshan with Tibetan and English on facing pages, for which see Bendor 2015.

**11** For an extensive bibliography of both Indian Buddhist and Tibetan consecration literature, see Bendor 1996. Since it is brief and no more than an outline, we omit the text of Lo chen Rin chen bzang po, even if it is frequently cited in the later literature. Atiśa's text was composed in Sanskrit at Vikramaśīla Monastery near the Ganges River. He translated it together with his Tibetan disciple in around 1040 and apparently took the only copy with him to Tibet, as I know of no indication that it had any influence in India, no surviving Indian manuscript fragments and so on. Two more Indic texts will be mentioned soon, but I cannot pretend to supply much coverage for the other Indic consecration literature, listed in detail in Bendor 1996, 349–353, although I did search for the main terms in online databases, and could not locate further relevant passages using this method.

**12** As far as previous scholarship on the *protective accessories* is concerned, I would send interested readers first of all to Bendor 1996, 298–299 and 310–311. The binding elements as well as the types of bindings are treated in Helman-Ważny 2014, 52–75. For recent Tibetan-language literature, see Padma bkra shis 2013, 32–65, this being a chapter on the *binding items* (*sgril chas*). Another recently published book proved especially useful for myself, and I much recommend it, is Gyurme Dorje's translation of Jamgön Kongtrül (1813–1899 CE) (Dorje 2012, 245–272), the section subtitled 'Representations of Buddha Speech'. On the collections of Buddha-speech recep-

The Bon passage is extracted from the very end of the text entitled simply *Volume* (*Gleg[s] bam*), because it is devoted to the consecration of Buddha-speech receptacles (*gsung rten*). After all, the chief icon of enlightened speech acts is the Volume complete in all its parts. It is part of a trilogy of texts for consecrating receptacles of Body, Speech and Mind.<sup>13</sup> It has some difficulties even if I could consult with a few experts. James Canary is a professional bookbinder, preservationist and Tibetanist with long-cultivated interests in Tibetan bookbinding and papermaking practices, while Dagkar Namgyal Nyima is a former Bonpo monk and Geshé currently working in Bonn. The Geshé very kindly went over the points I was having difficulties with via Skype on the first day of the holiday of Losar. Although I noticed this passage a few decades ago, many of the technical terms, terms for the parts of the sacred Volume in particular, eluded my understanding. Today, with the expert help just mentioned, I can feel confident of making a reasonably acceptable translation.

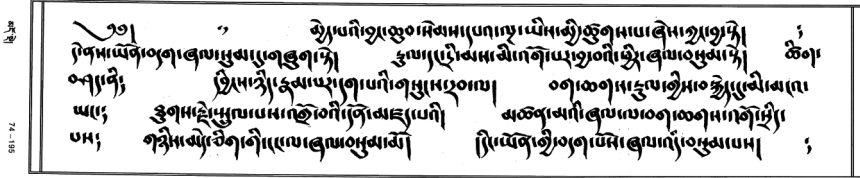


spyan phyé ba'i rtin [~rten] la / cis kyang mi tshugs pa'i stobs chen po lnga ston ste / snying rje

Here we show the five great strengths by which nothing at all can bring harm to the consecrated ('eye opened') receptacle.

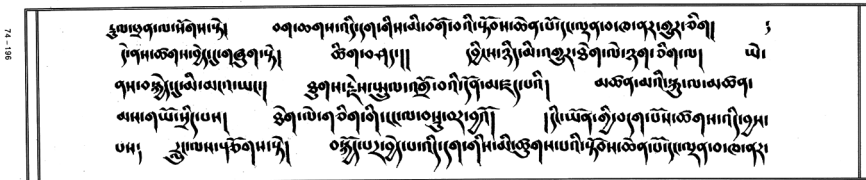
tacles kept at Reting Monastery, many of them connected with Atiśa and his immediate disciples, see Iuchi 2016, 44–46, the section subtitled 'Sacred Objects of Speech'. For a study of books as sacred icons, see Diemberger 2012 in general and p. 11 specifically for mention of the items used in binding them.

**13** I hesitate to insist that the main passage we will study actually dates to the 1017 rediscoveries because it occurs at the very end of the title after the excavator's colophon was already given, and it comes immediately before a copyist colophon that ought to date three generations later, perhaps already into the twelfth century (see the comments in Changngoba 2003, 139–140). For a translation of the excavator's colophon, evidently composed by his immediate disciple Zhu yas, see Martin 2001, 51–52.



myed pa'i byang chub sems dpa' lnga yis myi tshugs pa zhes kyang bya ste // de nas yon bdag zhal sum du gzhug ste / rdul dang dri mas mi 'go par bya ba'i phyir zhal bsum ste / tshig bshad ni / dbyings nyid rnam par dag pa'i gsungs rab la / bag chags rdul gyis bskyed du mi mnga' yang / thugs rje sprul pas 'gro ba'i don mdzad pa'i / mtshan ma'i zhal la bag chags 'go srid pas / gnyis med cig gi ngang la zhal bsum mo // ding yon gyi bdag pos zhal 'di bsum pas //

These are also called *no harm through the five pitiless Bodhisattvas*. Then the patron inserts it into the [bag] closure. The closed up bag is so that dust and stains will not adhere to [the Volume]. The verses are: Even if the dust of hidden karmic formations does not arise on the scriptures of the immaculate Realm itself, yet it is possible that they may adhere to the surface (*zhal*) of the Body 'with signs' that serves the purposes of sentient beings with compassionate emanations, so in the continuum of single nonduality is the closed up bag. Here and now the patron says, 'With the closing of this [bag] opening',

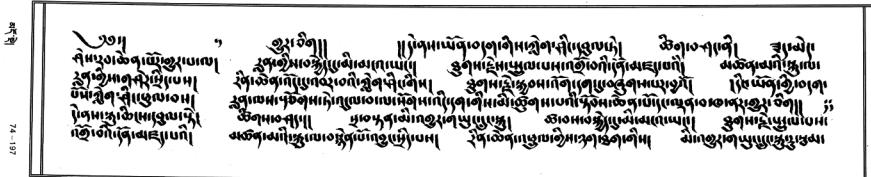


rdul phran la sogs ste / bag chags 'di dag gis mi bgo ba'i stobs chen po dang ldan ba kha nar gyur cig // de nas tshags byed du gzhug ste / tshig bshad // dbyings nyid mi 'gyur theg le nyag cig la / ye nas bskyed du mi mnga' yang / thugs rjes sprul 'gro ba'i don mdzad pa'i / mtshan ma'i sku la mtshan mas g.yo srid pas / theg le gcig gi ngang la bsdu bar bya'o // ding yon gyi bdag pos tshags 'di byas pas / rlung las rtsogs ste / bskyod par byed pa 'di dag gis mi tshugs pa'i stobs chen po dang ldan pa kha nar

'May [this book] be one that is possessed of the great power of invincibility in which the motes of dust and so on, to which these hidden karmic inclinations, do not adhere'. Then the patron starts neatly aligning the pages.<sup>14</sup> The verse: Even though from the beginning of

<sup>14</sup> Without the help of Namgyal Nyima I would not have understood this. According to him, the modern verbal phrase *tshags rgyab* is used for what one does when making all the leaves of a

time there has never been anything produced by the singular drop,<sup>15</sup> it is still possible that they may be moved by the signs of the Body ‘with signs’ that serves the purposes of sentient beings with compassionate emanations, so they must be dissolved into the continuum of the singular drop. Here and now the patron says, ‘By performing the alignment, may [the book] be one that is possessed of the great power of invincibility that prevents it from being moved by air and so forth’.



gyur cig /// de nas yon bdag gis kleg shing dbul te / tshig bshad ni / zad med shes rab chen  
 por gyur pa la / rlan gyis bskyed du mi mnga' yang / thugs rjes sprul pas 'gro ba'i don mdzad  
 pa'i / mtshan ma'i sku la rlan gyis gsher srid pas / rin chen 'od du 'bar ba'i kleg shing gis /  
 thugs rje skyabs 'og dag du bzhugs par bya'o /// ding yon gyi bdag pos kleg shing phul bas /  
 rlan las rtsogs te 'dul ba la sogs 'di dag gis mi tshugs pa'i stobs chen po dang ldan pa kha nar  
 gyur cig /// de nas sku chings dbul ste / tshigs bshad // sra bstan [~bstan] mi 'gyur g.yung  
 drung sku / tsha bas bskyed du mi mnga' yang / thugs rje sprul pas 'gro ba'i don mdzad pa'i  
 / mtshan ma'i sku la bsnyen po 'byung srid pas / rin chen 'phrul gyi nyag thag gis / mi 'gyur  
 g.yung drung sku ru sham

Then the patron offers the bookboards. The verses are:

In something that forms a great inexhaustible insight  
 there is no way that moisture can arise.

Yet in the Buddhabodies *with marks* that act for the benefit  
 of animate beings with compassionate emanations  
 it is possible that there could be wetness from moisture.  
 With bookboards blazing with the light of precious substances

book perfectly align with each other so that not a single one sticks out, by making a shuffling motion with the hands and tapping the whole book on the table. For simplicity's sake, I translate this as 'neatly aligning' (the pages). Because the pages have edges that are deliberately roughened, they tend to cling together so that single pages are less likely to be lifted up and scattered by the wind. See below.

**15** *Singular drop* is a literalistic translation of *thig le nyag gcig*, a Bon philosophical concept applied to the ultimate reality that is resolutely unitary such that nothing can ever actually be taken from or added to it. This is a central theme of the book translated in Klein and Wangyal 2006 where they in fact translate *thig le nyag gcig* as *unbounded wholeness*. As Namgyal Nyima pointed out, *thig le* can also bear the concept of *zero*.

[the book] is to dwell beneath the protection of compassion.  
 Here and now as the patron offers the bookboards, he says,  
 ‘May [this book] be one that is possessed of the great power of invincibility  
 from softening and so on from such things as moisture’.

Then is the offering of the binding strap. The verses:

In solid, stable unchanging *yungdrung* Body  
 there is no way that heat can arise,  
 yet in the Buddhbody *with marks* that act for the benefit  
 of animate beings with compassionate emanations it is possible.  
 So one must bind it up with the unchanging *yungdrung*  
 using the amazing guy rope (*nyag thag*) of precious substances.

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ཡུལ་གྱི་ རྒྱལ་ཡོད་ཀྱི་འགྲུབ་པ་ རྒྱལ་ཡོད་ཀྱི་འགྲུབ་པ་ རྒྱལ་ཡོད་ཀྱི་འགྲུབ་པ་ རྒྱལ་ཡོད་ཀྱི་འགྲུབ་པ་  
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par bya'o // ding yon gyi bdag pos / sku chings 'dis sku sbams shing phul bas / skal pa'i me  
 tshan la sogs te / 'gyur ba'i sdug bsngal la sogs pa thams cad kyis mi tshugs pa'i / stobs chen  
 po dang ldan pa kha nar gyur cig // // de nas yon bdag gis na bza' dbul te / tshigs bshad gsal  
 la / rngos med ye shes chen po nyid / bsnyen pos mi tshugs 'gyur med g.yung drung sku /  
 mi bde dgra dang ye nas bral lags kyang / thugs sprul pas 'gro ba'i don mdzad pa'i / mtshan  
 ma'i sku la byung tshor g.yo srid pas / shad ras ci'i na bza' rgyan du gsol / ding yon gyi bdag  
 pos na bza' 'od gsol ba'i byin gyis brlabs gyis / brnyen po gang gis mi tshugs shing / thams  
 cad zil gyis gnon pa'i stobs chen po kha na dang ldan par gyur cig / zhes 'byung ste / jis  
 kyang mi tshugs pa'i stobs lnga bstan pa'o // de nas

Here and now the patron says, 'After binding it up with this binding strap and making an  
 offering of it,

may it be one that possesses the great power of invincibility  
 that is not harmed by anything, not by the suffering of change,  
including the heat of the eon-ending fire'.

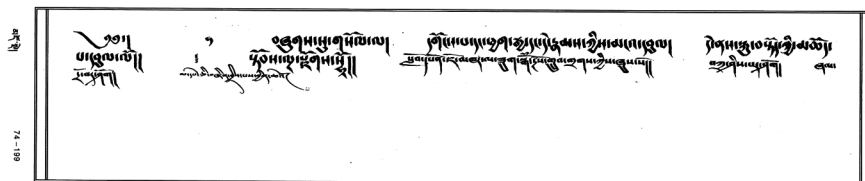
Then the patron offers the clothing,<sup>16</sup>

'In the great full knowledge without dimensions,  
 the unchanging *yungdrung* body imperious to harm,

<sup>16</sup> *Na bza'* is a more honorific or literary term for what is more commonly known in modern Tibetan as *dpe thum* ('book wrapper') or *dpe ras* ('book cloth'), according to Namgyal Nyima.



there can hardly be any discomfort or opponents,  
yet in the body *with marks* that benefits beings through compassionate emanations,  
there may be commotions of “sensing” (*byung tshor*),  
so it may be ornamented by clothing of all kinds of soft combed fabrics’ (Just a guess!),  
Here and now the patron says, ‘By the blessing of putting on light as clothing, may it be  
without any injury and have the great strength that outshines all’.  
This has been the exposition on the five strengths by which nothing at all can bring harm.



bzhugs su gsol la / dgongs pa dang phyag rgya dang de rnams kyis mnga' dbul / de nas sku  
bstod kyi mchod pa dbul lo // stobs lnga rdzogs s.hô // [small letters:] slob dpon jo mkhar la  
zug sgom rngos grub grags [-dngos grub grags] kyis zhus so // bkra shis par shog / zhal dro  
bar shog / ma dpe ci bzhin bris pas byin che'o /

Then request the divine figure to abide, perform the royal honours with contemplations,  
*mudrās* and those things [we have mentioned]. Then offer the offering of praise. This ends  
the five strengths. It was requested by Zug sgom Rngos grub grags in the presence of the  
teacher Jo mkhar. May it be auspicious! May it be consecrated (*zhal dro ba*). Being copied  
exactly from the mother copy, it bears great blessings.<sup>17</sup>

There are quite a number of things in this passage that beg for further study and interpretation.<sup>18</sup> I do not venture an explanation of the shockingly unheard-of expression ‘pitiless bodhisattvas’, since this would require consultation with Bonpo lamas in order to avoid indulging in personal speculations. Even the syntax

<sup>17</sup> Jo mkhar was grandson of Zhu yas Legs po, so this places us well into the twelfth century. See Lhagyal 2000, 454, where it says he later became known as Zhu sgom 'Khrul zhig, the first of two figures known by that name. Jo mkhar was a brother of the previously mentioned Jo thog. The *zhal dro ba* is just an unusual spelling for *zhal sro ba*. The two spellings are likely to be pronounced identically.

<sup>18</sup> For example the intriguing fact that the verses for the binding strap contained in the manuals of Smṛtijñānakīrti and Grags pa rgyal mtshan share with the verse for the wrapping cloth in the Bon text the infrequent term *ye shes chen po*. Since apart from the (after all culturally ubiquitous) references to comfort and the sense of touch, and of course the names for some of the binding elements, we find no other specific correspondences in wording between the Bon and Chos sources that could suggest direct borrowing.

here is problematic, and the reading therefore unsure for still other reasons. Still, I take it as an alternative way of speaking about the five ‘accessories’ that are the main subject that follows, as they must militantly defend the book from the elements. We will largely limit ourselves to a discussion of what those five objects are.

- [1] The first item is the one I was initially most confused about. The simple and most surely correct conclusion is that *zhal bsum*<sup>19</sup> refers to a bag or pouch with a closed mouth, perhaps one closed with a drawstring. Even if no elemental opposition is directly named here, since it protects from *dust* (and the karmic propensities symbolized by dust), the element in question must be *earth*.
- [2] The second item, strangely enough, is not an object but an action, named by a term that is also problematic. Usual meanings of *tshags* include sieves, sifters and stencils. So my translation as ‘neatly aligning’ is based on the advice of Namgyal Nyima, who says it refers to the practice of keeping all the pages neatly and evenly aligned with each other by tapping the bundle with the hands or on top of a flat surface. But why does this help against damage by air (or wind)? It is in fact part of Tibetan bookmaking art to roughen the edges of the loose leaves so that they tend to adhere with neighbouring pages. If the pages are stacked neatly, this helps the pages to stay in place when the wind is blowing.<sup>20</sup>
- [3] It had never occurred to me that bookboards could provide defense against moisture damage until I asked the Tibetan book preservation specialist James

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**19** That it is a nominal, referring to an object, is clear on its first usage, where the patron performs the act of inserting the book into the *zhal [b]sum* (I take the past tense form to be more correct in this instance). Namgyal Nyima told me that the modern non-honorific form of this, *kha bsum* means a sack with its open end closed up, while the verb *[b]sum* itself means precisely the scrunching together of the open end of a bag or bag-like object (whether or not any type of fastener is used). I have never previously encountered the use of bags as a binding element, so I cannot say if this is a prescription that was ever followed, or if it may have fallen out of usage over the centuries. Note the word *dras* (~*gras*?) translated as *covers* in some verses of ‘Phags pa translated in Schaeffer 2009, 131: ‘Groups of artisans skilled in a variety of arts, / Covers and book boards, book straps, and wraps / Made complete and beautiful / To perfect the human mind.’ Note in the same book more references to the bookbinding elements on pp. 27, 30, and 133.

**20** As Agnieszka Helman-Ważny pointed out to me in her editorial review, the roughened fibers may act as a filter or screen to discourage the entry of dust and insect pests. This understanding would allow us to take more seriously the ‘sieve’ and ‘filter’ meanings of the Tibetan word *tshags*. The painting of these same rough edges with colors, too, could have been done with the motive of repelling insects, as we find in Islamic bookmaking practices of recent centuries. See Couvrat Desvergues 2014.

Canary about it. I now wonder how I could have missed this before, but actually, the top board protects the pages from drips or precipitation from above, while the bottom board protects the pages from water that might pool on the surface below. For preservation purposes it is also important that pages, once moistened, should dry out quickly before mould has a chance to develop, which could explain why Tibetan books are not normally boxed, but left open on the sides.

- [4] Likewise I had never imagined that the bookstrap could preserve the written material in case of fire. Still, as James Canary informed me, if the pages are tightly strapped together and compressed, without any spaces left between them, it is entirely possible for books to escape a fire with nothing but singed edges, leaving the written area intact. Of course if the surrounding heat is too intense and long lasting, only a miracle can save them.
- [5] Finally, the clothing. Here again, no element is named, although the only one among the five elements not previously assigned would be the ether or space element. What we do find in the verses is an emphasis on the sense of touch. And elsewhere we do find cloth associated with, or even symbolic of, the sense of touch.<sup>21</sup> However, the element most likely to be associated with touch is earth, and not space, or so it seems to me from what little I know.

Now I thought it is interesting to know that we could find four other relevant and roughly contemporary passages in consecration manuals that do not belong to Bon. Dating to mid-eleventh century is the first of them, one by Atiśa. I could make use of an unpublished draft translation made almost 30 years ago by Yael Bentor in consultation with two Tibetan Lamas. The work as a whole describes consecration in general terms, but this passage is more specific, telling us what is special about the consecration of sacred Volumes. This passage reads, according to my present understanding:

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<sup>21</sup> Beer 1999, 194 and 202: ‘Akshobhya represents consciousness as the faculty of touch, symbolised by the silk cloth’. In fact, in the consecration manuals of both *Smṛtijñānakīrti* and *Graṅs pa rgyal mtshan* – the latter is largely based on the former – the clothing offered to the book is also associated with the sense of touch and comfort. See Bentor 1996, 282, 297, 305 and 310. For the association of touch with the earth element in thirteenth-century Europe, see Mütterich 1955. For a fascinating discussion of the four (or five or six) element cosmology shared with Empedocles and its use in meditation practices of the Pāli Buddhist sources, see Anālayo 2020. To his article much could be added about element meditations in use within Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and these ought to be considered in any discussion of Buddhist physics and, more generally, ideas about materiality.

## Books

As for the consecration of books, there are nine things [special for their consecration]:

1. Blessing such expressions of meaning as *birthless* and *deathless*.
2. Expressions of words.
3. Seed syllables.
4. Scriptures.
5. Blessing as the forty ancillary immeasurables.
6. Offering throne. 6. Binding boards.<sup>22</sup>
7. Binding straps.
8. Cloth cover.
9. The seven levels of seals.<sup>23</sup>

[For the consecration, generate the divine forms of] Prajñāpāramitā,  
Great Mother, Sūtra section, Vinaya, Great Bodhi,  
Tantra section, Vajradharma and so on.

If you know the appropriate ritual and divine form (*yi dam*) for these,  
perform the specific one. If not, do the general ritual, or,  
imagine the two truths in the forms of letters.

Of course, only 6a through 9, totaling five items, correspond to the book accessories. As for no. 9, the Tibetan Lamas insisted it meant ‘The seven punctuation marks’ without offering further information. At the time I found their explanation not at all intelligible. Much later on I was able to recognize in this phrase a clear reference to the ‘seven levels of seals’ applied to the original Volume of the Prajñāpāramitā (and notice that Prajñāpāramitā is mentioned immediately

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**22** How the nine items ought to be numbered isn’t sure, so for this reason the number ‘six’ was used twice by the translator. I am guessing that the throne and binding boards could be regarded as a single object. The meaning of the phrase ‘forty ancillary immeasurables’ is not clarified.

**23** The phrase appears as *rgya rim pa bdun*, a clear echo of the Sūtra text. Conze (1968, 170–171), famously found the book sealed with seven seals in the Buddhist scripture uncannily similar to the one found in the Book of Revelations, and this is true enough. In the 8,000 Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, the sacred volume was ‘sealed with seven layers of seals’ (*rgya rim pa bdun gyis btab bo*). There is a Tibetan interpretation, found in a few dictionaries, of the seven seals as seven things that prevent texts from getting disturbed or mixed up. These start with the punctuation marks called *tsheg* and *shad*, and end up with the label on the outside of the volume. There are yet other understandings of the *seven seals* that developed in the Zhijé and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This deserves a separate study since there is much to say about it. For now I would just add that I believe the connection of the seven seals with the Volume of the Prajñāpāramitā is one Atiśa very surely knew, while at the same time it may be too much to assume that an Indian like him would have had in mind such things as the *tsheg* punctuation mark and the *bam po* divisions of manuscripts, as these were not known in India.

afterwards). Only recently I found out about what set of seven things the Lamas must have had in mind: it is clear that items 6 through 8 do correspond exactly to items in the Bon passage.

The other passage, by Grags pa rgyal mtshan, dates to the second half of the twelfth century, and is interesting because like the Bon text it devotes a verse to each of the accessories. Like Atiśa, and unlike the Bon text, it includes a *throne*, and that means a bookstand or *lectern*. It is very interesting that a source composed by an Indian underlies this passage and largely explains it, a Tanjur work by Smṛtijñānakīrti (fl. late tenth century CE).<sup>24</sup> Here is the passage by Grags pa rgyal mtshan:

Then make the enthronement offerings that are especially for books.  
Here is the outline:

A throne, clothing, bookboards, and book strap.

First offer a throne.

‘This lion throne made of plentiful precious substances,  
Covered with an assortment of captivating clothes,  
By offering it to the supreme scripture, free of mental elaborations,  
May beings find their seats on the *vajra* throne [of enlightenment].  
*Oṃ vajrāsana Āḥ Hūṃ Svāhā.*’

Offer clothing.

‘This precious fine garment varicolored as a rainbow,  
When touched is a cause of bliss,  
I offer for purifying my mind,  
May all be adorned with the best garment of patience.  
*Oṃ vajra-vastra Āḥ Hūṃ Svāhā.*’

Offer the two bookboards.

‘Though the holy *dharma* of the two becoming one is completely devoid of grasping,  
By offering a cover, an omen like the sun and the moon,  
Interconnected method and wisdom,  
May people attain the union of all dualities.  
*Oṃ vajra-prajñā-upāya-advaya Āḥ Hūṃ Svāhā.*’

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<sup>24</sup> I could learn about the parallel by performing a search at TBRC ([www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org)). The passage in question appears in a consecration work by Smṛtijñānakīrti 1994–2008, 34–35.

Then offer a book strap.

‘Even though it has been greatly expanded through multiplicity of elaborations,  
The great enlightened wisdom (*ye shes chen po*) has one taste,  
Likewise by offering the best article that transforms the book into a single entity,  
May beings realize the great enlightened wisdom.  
*Oṃ vajra-pustaka-bandhāya Āḥ Hūṃ Svāhā.*’

These are enthronement offerings for books.<sup>25</sup>

These verses have some remarkable things in common, not least of all the use of a quite infrequent phrase here translated as ‘great enlightened wisdom’ (*ye shes chen po*), found in both. In the one it is used in the verse for the clothing, and in the other in the verse for the book strap.

When we compare all three pre-Mongol period examples, we see that the earliest, the Bon example, has two anomalous items, while Atiśa has one anomalous item. The Bon example lacks the throne of the other two examples.

**Table 1:** A chart for comparing the lists of binding elements.

Great Shen	Atiśa	Grags pa rgyal mtshan and Smṛtijñānakīrti
1. Bag (earth?)*	6a. Throne.	1. Throne.
2. Pages aligned (air)*	6b. Bookboards.	2. Clothing.
3. Bookboards (water).	7. Bookstrap.	3. Bookboards.
4. Bookstrap (fire).	8. Clothing.	4. Bookstrap.
5. Clothing.	9. Seven Seals.*	

For the time being I just call attention to these differences without coming to conclusions why they are there. I assume all three are in the order in which they would be offered to the book, and so must correspond to the order in which they would ordinarily be used even outside the ritual context. With this in mind, only the last one by Grags pa rgyal mtshan follows what I would regard as the originally correct order. The bookboards need to be added after the pages are wrapped in the cloth. If the cloth goes outside the bookboards then the water-repelling function of the bookboards will be in large degree lost. None of them mention

<sup>25</sup> Grags pa rgyal mtshan 1968, the translation by Bendor 2015, 158–161, with only inconsequential emendations and omitting the footnotes.

another book element that ought to be mentioned, which is the label flap extending out of the small end of the book, sometimes called the *gdong bkra* or *gdong dar*, unless Atiśa intended it to be one of the ‘seven levels of seals’, which seems doubtful. Is it possible the label flap was as yet unknown?<sup>26</sup>

I think there are a few things of significance that we might say about what this evidence does tell us. It tells us that for at least the last thousand years (at the time of writing, 2017, it was exactly one millennium since the discovery of the texts), Bon had a cult of the book that was very similar to that found in the other schools. In all three cases (but especially clear in the Bon and Sakya examples), the accessories were the most important offerings given to books in the enthronement (*mnga’ dbul*) rite that forms a significant part of the larger consecration ritual. But one obvious aspect of all this stands out with abundant clarity in the Bon sources that can scarcely be seen in the others. The Great Shen’s text shows an awareness of the rationales for the use of these accessories. It shows that Bonpos in particular, as probably Tibetans in general, were in fact concerned about book preservation a thousand years ago.

Deserving of special comment, the reasons behind the strange expression for the protective binding assessories, ‘pitiless bodhisattvas’, I predict will still be pondered by literary critics far into the future. Is it irony, paradox, hyperbolic overstatement? Or is it plainly blunt prose telling us just how awful a bodhisattva can be? In the mean time we might muse about somehow comparable views of the cat as book protector that we find not in Tibet but in Chinese Buddhist monasteries, explored in an amusing unpublished essay by Hua Kaiqi.<sup>27</sup> The cat’s cruelty to rodents that might damage the scriptures did not go unnoticed by the monks. Noticeably absent from the classical Tibetan texts we used here is mention of a major source of book loss that seems to have been the greatest concern in China: warfare and the deliberate destruction and looting that go with it. The use of insect-repelling and insecticidal materials in books, another subject that goes unnoticed in them, would seem to evoke ethical concerns about killing similar to those that we find in Chinese sources about the cat.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This question seems to be answered to some degree in Padma bkra shis 2013, 53, which says that in earlier centuries the title flap was not as it is today a separate object, but formed an integral part of the title page.

<sup>27</sup> Hua Kaiqi, ‘Cats and Chinese Buddhism’, an unpublished draft courtesy of the author dated 19 February 2020.

<sup>28</sup> On the use of insecticidal substances in the making of Tibetan paper, see Helman-Ważny 2014, 208–209. On some pre-modern Indian measures against book damage, particularly damage by insects, see Couvrat Desvergnès 2014 and literature cited there. On Chinese motives and meth-

So finally here is a thing or two that can be placed on the table setting Bon apart from general Tibetan book culture: the explicit conservation aims, as well as a somewhat different set of book accessories. If we had time I would set these special aspects in a wider context that might temper this picture of specialness, since I believe Bon and Chos ('Tibetan Buddhism') overall are quite similar in their cults of the book, with roots in the Prajñāpāramitā and *Khams brgyad* sections of their respective scriptural canons, and with their associated, seemingly kabbalistic letter mysticisms. I believe this kind of letter mysticism is historically grounded in prayer and devotion directed toward the holy book. When books achieve holy icon status, are enshrined as objects of veneration, every element that goes into their making is elevated along with them. With their exceptional emphasis on letters, papermaking and protective coverings, the Bon consecration manuals make these micro-level consecrations explicit as an integral part of the consecrating process. The very limited area that we've chosen to consider in this essay can only give some hints to those larger complexes of ritual-devotional thinking within which the holy book has been enmeshed.<sup>29</sup> Knowing these ways of thinking is of primary importance if we are to achieve any worthwhile understanding of the physical book or its material aspects.

In closing, I accept the risk of naively informing fully enlightened ones about something very elementary: one of the primary aims of the ritual of consecration is to preserve the sacred object, not just as a physical object, but as a focus of *continuing* devotion. As one of the consecration works of Phag mo gru pa says,

May this image abide for more than an eon,  
for more than a hundred eons,  
and be protected by all divinities from earth,  
from water, from fire and from air.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, the elements that make up our worlds and our bodies from the beginning can prove destructive in the end. As Smṛtijñānakīrti says in his consecration text:

The master and the patron both  
hold on to the seating throne of the image,

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ods of book preservation, see for example Wang 1989, especially p. 27 and sources it mentions.

<sup>29</sup> An attempt is made to locate these wider complexes within the history of Indian Buddhist usages of the alphabet in Martin 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Phag mo gru pa (1507), I 221 verso line 4: *gang 'di sku gzugs bskal pa 'am / bskal pa brgya bas lhag gnas shing // sa dang chu dang me dang ni / rlung las lha mams kun gyis srungs.*



'May you, the Blessed One, remain here  
serving the needs of all sentient beings  
until the destruction of the eon  
by water, fire and wind.' <sup>31</sup>

In their efforts to conserve the holy book, I would say that the motive was not to preserve the *status quo* so much as thinking ahead to avert disaster or, failing that, at least to mitigate the inevitable. In this, at least, they demonstrated much practicality and concern for the material elements and their destructive potentials, even as those elements were being sanctified. The idea that thousand-year-old traditional methods could reveal to our post-modern world such a degree of self-consciously practiced wisdom is liable to be a source of wonder for our more hidebound modernists.

### Acknowledgements

This essay is dedicated to the memory of the late Abbot of Menri Monastery (Sman ri Khri 'dzin), Sangyé Tenzin Jongdong (1927–2017). His comments on the subject of consecration back in 1989, occasioned by Yael Bentor's research on the subject, may be regarded as the ultimate cause of this essay. For last-minute help crucial for my understanding of the subject matter, I must thank James Canary (Bloomington) and Dagkar Namgyal Nyima (Bonn). I feel I should excuse myself for my too-frequent references to my own publications. This is a strategy to conserve space and energy by reducing the number of bibliographical references. If these have already been supplied previously in the works cited, I feel no need to repeat them. I am conscious I have neglected the general Indic consecration literature, and even the Indian Buddhist texts are considered only if they are directly contingent to the Tibetan texts that form the main focus of interest here. An important writing on Indian Buddhist consecration I would like to recommend is Mori Masa-

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31 Smṛtijñānakīrti (1994–2008), 37: *slob dpon dang ni yon bdag gis // sku yi gdan khri nas bzung nas // ji srid sa chu me dang ni // rlung gi bskal par 'jig par du // sems can kun gyi don gyi phyir // bcom ldan khyod ni bzhugs par mdzod*. Compare Bentor 1996, 317 (and again on p. 320): '...and particularly, as long as these receptacles of Body, Speech and Mind are not destroyed by the harm of earth, water, fire and wind, acting immeasurably for the sake of sentient beings, may you firmly remain.' These lines are repeated in expanded form in the consecration work by Gling ras pa (1128–1188 CE), *Rab gnas kyi cho ga*, ed. 1985, 319 (I tacitly resolve abbreviated spellings): *de nas slob dpon dang yon bdag gnyis ka'i sku'i gdan khri nas bzung nas / me tog gi phring ba [~phreng ba] phul te gsol ba btab la / ji srid me dang chu dang ni / rlung gi skal pas 'jigs bar du / yon bdag bsod nams spel ba dang / sems can kun gyi don gyi phyir / ... de bzhin 'dir yang bzhugs su gsol*. This work by Gling ras pa is another fairly long consecration manual of the pre-Mongol era that should have been given more attention.

hide 2005. For a recent book on the Indian Buddhist cult of the sacred Volume, see Kim 2013.

## Abbreviation

OTDO = Old Tibetan Documents Online, <<https://otdo.aa-ken.jp/>> (accessed on 29 September 2022).

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