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Towards a Definition of Local Orthographies of Bon Manuscripts: A Pilot Study

Abstract: Tibetan manuscripts in general, and Bon manuscripts in particular, are often characterised by orthographic inconsistencies and multiple contracted forms (Tib. *bsdus tshig* or *bskungs yig*). While these features may be a nuisance to the reader, they deserve to be analysed more systematically: it is possible that these heterodox spellings and other scribal peculiarities, far from being random errors, may represent local writing conventions. On the basis of an extended study of facsimile reproductions of Bon manuscripts from Bsam gling monastery in Dolpo, Nepal, this chapter aims to explore the best way forward towards defining local orthographic styles and other codicological features. A major starting hypothesis to be tested is that ‘heterographies’ may help us to detect oral and written modes of transmission.

1 Introduction

Since the early nineties, together with several Bonpo Geshe and monks,¹ I have worked on a large number of facsimiles of Bon manuscripts, mostly published by Menri Monastery (Dolanji, India). Often these were published within the Library of Congress PL480 program². Many of these facsimiles are reproductions of manuscripts from the library of Bsam gling Monastery in Dol po, Nepal, on loan to Dolanji. The regional provenance of the text, possibly of the manuscript, is usually indicated in the metadata of the facsimile publication, but the exact earlier migratory routes and provenance of the original manuscripts are yet to be established clearly. There seems to be some system or regularities to the apparent idiosyncrasies in orthography and abbreviation (or better ‘contrac-

¹ Amongst others, notably, Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, Namgyal Nyima Dagkar, and Kalsang Norbu Gurung.

² Facsimile reproductions of Tibetan texts, mediated by E. Gene Smith within the frame of Public Law 480 (1954), based on an agreement between the United States and India, under the United States Food for Peace program. See <http://digitaldharma.com/cast/3/57> (accessed on 30 August 2022).

tions’)³ deployed in these manuscripts. Occasionally, one can recognise different *dbu med* (‘headless’) writing styles and even personal hands (author, copyist) that are shared between manuscripts.⁴ An erudite informant from Dol po told me that many of the orthographic particularities observed in the manuscripts seem to relate to local conventions in Dol po rather than being indicative of poor spelling.⁵ While the Tibetan written language has been standardised at several periods, these standardisations remained limited. I annotated the major characteristics of the orthographic peculiarities that I observed by entering them into e-texts *ad litteram*,⁶ in non-emended text editions in Tibetan font (closest to diplomatic editions), and by duly recording in footnotes these presumed heterographies, which may in fact be local orthographies (both indeed often in plural), and I also suggest emendations (which therefore may occasionally be hyper-corrections), usually with the help of literate native speakers (usually Bonpo monks and scholars). These apparent orthographic peculiarities deserve to be looked into more systematically. This paper is intended as a first and indeed still very modest contribution, a pilot study of sorts, scouting the best way forward towards defining local orthographic styles of Bon manuscripts, based on the e-text files that have accumulated in my research archive. I shall report on discernible patterns and regularities but avoid commenting on common deviations from the rather obvious fiction of the currently preferred Lhasa Tibetan spelling. Editions in e-text of the most revealing manuscripts will be made available through the website *Rituals of the Bön Religion*.⁷ The choice of the facsimiles on which I have

3 In Tibetan called: *bsdus tshig* or *bskungs yig*, effectively serving both to save space and as a shorthand.

4 For issues related to the identification of Tibetan handwriting see for example Dalton et al. 2007 or Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021, 32–34, 107–112. In recent years a number of helpful tools based on pattern recognition have been developed, including HAT 3 (Version 3.0.0) software developed by Hussein Mohammed at the CSMC (2020): <http://doi.org/10.25592/uhhfdm.902>; see also Mohammed et al. 2022.

5 Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, who originally hails from Dol po (where the mentioned Bsam gling monastery is located), was able to identify some of the hands, particularly those related to his own family lineage, and point out elements of the specific *couleur locale* of Dol po spelling and style.

6 Where necessary, I designed and added customised letters to a commercial Robillard Tibetan font, in order to be able to represent unusual graphemes, exactly as they appear in the facsimiles, but then adjusted to the *dbu can* (cf. ‘serif’) Robillard Tibetan font style used (I used Fontographer, then developed by Altsys, now owned by FontLab Ltd.).

7 TibBon 5–7: <http://kalpa-bon.com/node/78>. TibBon 1, 2 and 4 are available as an appendix to the author’s 1997 PhD thesis (Blezer 1997; see link in the bibliography) and follow a slightly different editorial policy: the original readings that have been emended in the main text were

based these editions is not random. They are part of miscellaneous collections of presumably oral or aural teaching transmissions from the so-called (*Zhang zhung*) *sNyan rgyud* ([*The*] *Aural Transmission [from Zhangzhung]*). Some variants diverge so widely that they appear to be variant manuscript transmissions in their own right, paraphrases loosely based the same teaching tradition, of which the primary mode of transmission in most cases originally may indeed have been oral. Those diverging variants highlight differences in rendering of the same or of a similar ‘text’, which in those cases comes closest to an orally transmitted teaching, not a manuscript. Another, larger and broader sample would be needed to achieve statistical significance. In the following, the facsimiles are listed with their metadata (as included in the facsimile publication), which often include tentative references to regional provenance.

1. **TibBon 1** (probably produced in A mdo): *Snyan brgyud bar do thos grol gsal sgron chen mo*, in *Zhi khro sgrub skor*, pp. 605–691, facsimile: Delhi 1967;
2. **TibBon 2** (probably A mdo): *Zhi khro bar do 'phrang grol gyi thos grol las byang bag chags rang grol*, in *dBang ldan zhu yi ring lugs kyi zhi khro'i sgrub skor*, Vol. II, pp. 249–330, facsimile: Dolanji 1975 (=I-Tib 75-903251, IASWR microfiche nur SB 774);
3. **TibBon 3** *Gsas mkhar rin po che spyi spungs zhi ba g.yung drung yongs su rdzogs pa'i 'phrin las*, Karmay (1977), 29.7, Zogai 614 (K.71);⁸
4. **TibBon 4** (from A mdo Shar pa): *Snyan rgyud thos grol bar do 'phrang sgrol chen po* in *Bonpo Popular Canonical Texts*, pp. 321–429, facsimile: Dolanji 1974 (LTWA Acc.No. 808);
5. **TibBon 5** (from Bsam gling, Dol po): *Ma bcos gnyug ma'i don bstan pa'i gdams pa* and *Bar do 'od lnga ngos bzung ba'i man ngag*⁹ both in *Zhang zhung*

moved to the footnotes and numerous, unproblematic contractions have been silently resolved. For this paper, these early editions were revisited, and the original readings were reintroduced into the main text, but not the common contractions. TibBon 1–4 are different manuscript versions of one teaching, as are TibBon 6–7. All these editions, except TibBon 3 (incomplete), will also be available on the mentioned website. Research on these texts was facilitated by a 1997–2000 research fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS).

8 TibBon 3 is a slightly different version of TibBon 1, 2 and 4, but has not yet been fully entered into an e-text file and edited, and therefore is not included in this analysis.

9 According to the colophon, Yang ngal dpal bzang (thirteenth–fourteenth century CE) received the teaching from Slob dpon gYung drung rgyal mtshan. While the lineage is known, be it shrouded in a long and nebulous pre-history, the authors of both texts remain unknown (and no mention of a manuscript at the time). The dating of Yang ston dpal bzang remains insecure; the present dates are based on contextual cross-referencing. Yang ston dpal bzang is considered to be the author of the *Rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyi rtsis byang themis yig rgyas pa*, an overview of historical sources on the *Zhang zhung sNyan rgyud* lineage masters. Based on

snyan rgyud kyi mam thar chen mo sogs dang brgyud phyag bcas kyi gsung pod, *A collection of texts of the Bonpo Žaṅ Žuṅ sñan rgyud precepts of rDzogs chen practice*, reproduced from a manuscript from the Samling Monastery in Dolpo (north-western Nepal) by Yongs 'dzin sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin, pp. 335–344 and pp. 344–359, facsimile: Dolanji 1974;

6. **TibBon 6** (from Bsam gling, Dol po): *Bar do dus kyi sgron ma* in *Snyan rgyud rig pa gcer mthong*, Bon-po oral transmission precepts granted by Srid pa rgyal mo to Bon zig khyung nag (1103–1183),¹⁰ pp. 215–244, facsimile: Dolanji 1972;
7. **TibBon 7** ('from library in Dolanji'): *Bar do dus kyi sgron ma* in *Rare Bonpo Texts Belonging to the Abhidharma and sñan rgyud rig pa gcer mthoṅ Cycles*, pp. 367–383, facsimile: Dolanji 1976.

TibBon 5–7 show the most numerous and most interesting variants. For those facsimiles, every orthographical peculiarity (or heterography) is marked and standardised readings are suggested in a footnote in the editions. To facilitate tracking, these footnotes numbers will additionally be referred to in footnotes to the sample Tibetan renderings below. Since the text of some of the manuscripts over time seem to have become corrupt to the point of becoming incomprehensible, occasionally, I also comment on an apparently corrupt passage or try to disentangle an obscure reading that would surely also puzzle other readers. The 'heterographies' will be juxtaposed to schoolbook 'orthographies', in Tibetan script.¹¹

2 What to look for?

The main point of this article is to evaluate, based on this non-random sample of Bon manuscripts,¹² whether recording apparent patterns of (mostly) orthographic

what lineage histories and colophons suggest and imply, he is usually dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century CE. Recent materials from the Mardzong cave in Mustang, analysed by Charles Ramble, put Yang ston dpal bzang in the fifteenth century, still flourishing in the later part of it (see Ramble in Helman-Ważny et al. 2018, 187 n. 169, 188 and 195–202).

10 See Achard 1998, 28–57. The colophon of TibBon 6 is difficult to parse at places: it was requested by an assistant (*do pa*) [of] A khol Bla ma at a temple called Mtha' bral(?) lding zhig, which is unknown to me.

11 Due to the nature of the graphemes, Wylie transliteration is not an option here.

12 These texts contain information that is relevant for understanding the early development of Bon ideas on intermediate states, such as between death and rebirth, which was the topic of previous research (see, e.g., Blezer 2009). I started digitizing these manuscripts from 1997

characteristics of Bon manuscripts, which I here should like to style ‘fingerprinting’, could contribute to our understanding of the transmission history and regional (or temporal) provenance of Bon manuscripts. ‘Fingerprinting’ could be complementary to more usual emic Tibetan scholarly and etic Tibetological resources, such as colophons, transmission histories (*brgyud rim*), records of teachings received (*gsan yig*) and other sources of metadata on textual transmission, such as data from informants, various genres of historical works, (auto) biographies etc, and also to etic Tibetological tools, such as content analysis, intertextuality, stemmatic analysis. Particularly intriguing is the prospect of having quantitative and qualitative data on local scribal and manuscript traditions that are ‘blind’, in the sense that that these data are not involved in traditional narratives on lineages and the like and thus appear without auctorial or researcher bias. This ‘fingerprinting’ may independently challenge or confirm some of the assumptions that are based on the mentioned emic and etic Tibetological resources. Aspects of textual transmissions that recommend themselves for closer analysis via these manuscripts are:

1. Frequency analyses: syllables, particles, words, phrases (obviously these frequencies mostly are independent of a manuscript or blockprint form in which a text is realised, and these analyses obviously recommend big data)
2. Phonetic peculiarities: these are ideal for pinning down regional features and a major starting hypothesis for this pilot study
3. Peculiarities in spelling: here one should distinguish dialectal or historical variants and plain errors
4. Abbreviations, *bsdus yig/tshig* or *bskungs yig*: frequency, types, typical irregularities; N.B.: the principle of economy may overrule phonetics here, as some of the examples will show: some prefer a shorter version above a orthographically correct one
5. Grammatical peculiarities
6. Palaeography and identification of hands

onward, over several research projects. Most of them I read carefully with the unstinting help of Menri Geshe Namgyal Nyima Dagkar, without whose learned assistance and keen eye I would not have been able to resolve many irregularities in spelling and corruptions in the texts. Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, the head teacher of the Menri Shedra, has been invaluable in resolving remaining problems. I of course take full responsibility for the errors in interpretation and emendation but can claim little merit for the parts that are right. The following paragraph is complementary to the standard reference work on *Codicology, Paleography, and Orthography of Early Tibetan Documents* published by Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016, fording later stages of Tibetan writing.

7. Page layout: number of lines, measurements of margins, frames, and other elements of the layout (examining paper types obviously would require liberal access to the originals)
8. Conventions for annotation, correction, and deletion

In this article I only shall consider items 2 through 5, all briefly and in varying levels of detail. For the relative frequencies of occurrences, the reader is referred to the text editions; but whenever a variant occurs more often than once, the number of occurrences appears in parentheses after the reference to the text location in the footnote. Several colleagues, such as Sam van Schaik, Brandon Dotson and one of the editors of this volume, Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, have been working on items 6 through 8 for quite some time, with excellent results; this pilot study intends to be complementary to their efforts, looking at other aspects (2 through 5) and slightly different time periods.¹³ Specifically for Buddhist sources, Michael Radich has opened the first-mentioned item as a fruitful avenue for research with TACL.¹⁴ To the best of my knowledge, for Tibetan sources this computer-assisted, quantitative and statistical approach is still in its infancy. However, digital resources, for instance at the BDRC¹⁵ and THL,¹⁶ are presently growing exponentially and have been accumulating data to a point where computer-assisted quantitative and statistical approaches may become viable and perhaps even recommended options to pursue in the near future; hence this pilot study. Access to big data is obviously a prerequisite and we may indeed have reached that critical point of mass where, purely from a quantitative point of view, statistical analyses seem to have become real options. But this will put demands on qualifying editions in electronic form, which still remains a bottleneck and a desideratum. For that reason, statistical computation falls outside the scope of this article, which has had to focus on a small and non-random selection of sufficiently qualified input. Recommendations for such future engagements and critical reflection on research strategies, however, are part of the goals of this pilot study.

¹³ E.g., Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016 and Van Schaik 2007.

¹⁴ The TACL text analysis software suite, developed by Michael Radich and Jamie Norris, specifically designed for the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), but adjustable for other corpora (see <https://pythonhosted.org/tac1/>; this website and all others quoted in this article were accessed on 30 August 2022).

¹⁵ See <https://www.tbrc.org/>.

¹⁶ See <http://www.thlib.org/>, with a wealth of digital scans, e-texts, OCR, outlines, various metadata, and the like.

2.1 Phonetic peculiarities: possibly regional features

Initially, the inquiry into phonetic peculiarities and irregularities seemed to hold great promise, particularly for coming to grips with the complex oral *cum* written traditions of Bon manuscripts. Variant readings suggestive of oral transmission and written variants seemed helpful for separating one mode from the other more clearly, and also promised tools for using dialect features to localise manuscripts in view of their lineage histories, as far as they are known. The oral-written divide was therefore a starting hypothesis for this pilot. As I shall argue below, however, these initial hopes may have been only partly warranted.

As is well known, older Bon texts are notoriously difficult to date and (particularly when they are very early) often have long and complex histories, with multiple revisions. Even texts that appear to have genuinely early origins may be available only in surprisingly recent recensions. Their early readings and origins hide behind opaque and incremental layers of sometimes up to a millennium of additions and revisions; not to mention the copying, not always very careful, by scribes, who often will silently emend texts according to their own linguistic abilities and understanding (a clear and clean text, up to the latest standards, is usually preferred over an old, original reading). There is plenty of information on transmission of teachings, but very little on copyists and manuscripts. Manuscripts and people move about and copyists, obviously, do not necessarily hail from the same region as the original author(s). Bonpo lineages also often could not afford prestigious, sponsored, standardised and proof-read wood-carved editions. If they did (for example, the wood-carved version of *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud* texts published by Lokesh Chandra and Tenzin Namdak, Delhi 1968), there are often indeed noticeable differences, resulting in higher-quality, proofed redactions. However, this is not always the case, as can be seen in the difference between the high quality of the blockprints of Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan's collected works in his own Teng chen dgon wood-carved edition and the edition that was later typeset in metal type in the People's Republic of China, which, according to the late Menri Abbot, Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma rin po che, involved barely literate lay people, often young girls, chatting and typesetting at the same time.

In any case, frequent renewal by copying of worn-out or damaged manuscripts often results in an increasingly opaque transmission, allows for intractable changes, and also invites alterations and corruptions. Indeed, a lower frequency of reproduction obviously also favours preservation of older readings

(such as, based on preliminary comparisons, I strongly suspect to be the case with the *textus receptus* of the Bon 'Bum bzhi vis-à-vis that of the *Rgyud bzhi*).¹⁷

An additional complicating factor is that producing, copying or multiplying manuscripts often involves reading out a text aloud, while others write the recited text down.¹⁸ Therefore, dialect peculiarities may be less indicative of the author or area of origin of a text than one might perhaps be inclined to assume at first. Markers of local language influences indeed could have entered the complex history of transmission of Bon manuscripts at various points. For instance, the texts used for this analysis, the provenance of which is identified as (possibly) A mdo, PRC, in fact show relatively few Eastern Tibetan linguistic influences compared to those that are associated with Dol po; and this study takes into account fluke occurrences due to writing mistakes (such as, possibly, omitting the Tibetan diacritics for vowels; see, for example, the first instance below, where the omissions of the 'greng bu ('e') and gi gu ('i') diacritics may be easily mistaken for different vowel renderings indicative of Eastern dialects).

- (A mdo?, TibBon 1¹⁹): ལྷ་བཞུག་ ལྷ་བཞུག་ (cf. Dol po TibBon 7, below)
- (A mdo?, TibBon 2²⁰): འོག་མེན་ འོག་མེན་ (this may also be due to writing conventions, such as the style of rendering of gi gu ("i") and 'greng bu ("e") diacritics?);
- (Dol po, TibBon 6): བང་ བངས་;²¹ cf. བང་ བོང་ (writing);²² ལྷ་ བཞུགས་;²³ ཡིད་ ཡུད་;²⁴ ཆ་ ཆེ་;²⁵ རྩ་མ་ རྩ་མ་ (writing?);²⁶ རེང་ རེང་ རེངས་;²⁷ བང་ བོང་;²⁸ ཆེས་ ཆོས་ འཆོས་ (writing?²⁹, also in TibBon 7);³⁰ ལྷ་ན་ ལྷ་;³¹

¹⁷ See Blezer 2007 and 2012 (which includes a sample textual comparison, see p. 143).

¹⁸ While this information was shared by several of my informants and is occasionally alluded to in secondary sources (e.g., Silk 1994, 14), I am not aware of any detailed studies that are available in publication. Schaeffer 2014, 22 discusses vocalising texts while proofreading.

¹⁹ See TibBon 1, note 9; henceforth TibBon1:9.

²⁰ TibBon2:37.

²¹ TibBon6:288.

²² TibBon6:7.

²³ TibBon6:495.

²⁴ TibBon6:530, 531 (2).

²⁵ TibBon6:532.

²⁶ TibBon6:173.

²⁷ TibBon6:430.

²⁸ TibBon6:7.

²⁹ TibBon6:105.

³⁰ TibBon7:115

³¹ TibBon6:371.

- (Dol po, TibBon 7): འདུས་པ་ འདས་པ་;³² མ་ཡངས་ མ་ཡངས་;³³ གྲུལ་ གྲོལ་(?);³⁴ རག་བྱ་ རིག་བྱ་;³⁵ རྒྱ་རངས་ རྒྱ་རིང་ (cf. also A mdo, TibBon 1, above);³⁶ ཆ་རིགས་ ཆི་རིགས་;³⁷ སྒྲག་པ་ སྒྲིག་པ་;³⁸ སྒྲངས་པ་ སྒྲོང་པ་ (writing?);³⁹ སྒྲིང་ སྒྲིད་ (writing?).⁴⁰

2.2 Phonetic and spelling peculiarities: general features

During the workshop in Hamburg in March 2018, Sam van Schaik kindly pointed out to me that he has had to change his mind on what initially appeared to be oral features of irregularities in textual transmission.⁴¹ Apparently, even when copied by hand and without aural intermediaries, phonetic factors will still enter into the fray, because of the way in which the human brain processes language. Human language is typically first acquired through listening and vocalising, and we simply seem to be hard-wired that way. Also, when visually engaged in reading and writing, the auditory cortex is still involved (e.g., detectable in the motor activity, such as of the movement of the lips in silent reading).⁴² Phonetic mistakes, such as substitution with a phonetic equivalent (homophone) that is semantically different, are thus not necessarily indicative of oral transmission.

- (A mdo ?, TibBon 1 & 2): ཀྱི་རི་ ཅི་རིགས་;⁴³ (A mdo?, TibBon 2): ཕྱིད་ ཕྱད་;⁴⁴

³² TibBon7:166.

³³ TibBon7:231, 246, 475, 921, 922 (5).

³⁴ TibBon7:253.

³⁵ TibBon7:296.

³⁶ TibBon7:541.

³⁷ TibBon7:708.

³⁸ TibBon7:885.

³⁹ TibBon7:418.

⁴⁰ TibBon7:346.

⁴¹ See, for example, the initial hypotheses and research set up in van Schaik 2007, 183–208.

⁴² See, for example, Perrone-Bertolotti et al. 2012.

⁴³ TibBon1:5, TibBon2:31.

⁴⁴ TibBon2:23.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): ངའོ་ར་ རོ་པོ་ར་;⁴⁵ ཆེན་འོ་ ཆེན་པོ་;⁴⁶ ལྷོ་ མགོ་པོ་;⁴⁷ རེ་ས་ རང་ (cf. TibBon 7 མགོ་འོ་ མགོ་པོ་; རྒྱུ་འོ་ རྒྱུ་པོ་)^{48,49} ཅེན་པོ་ བཅན་པོ་;⁵⁰ བྲོད་པར་ བཟློད་པར་;⁵¹ འགྲེས་པར་ འདྲིས་པར་;⁵²
- (Dol po, TibBon 6): འབྲུམ་ས་ འཇམ་;⁵³ གཡར་ དབྱར་;⁵⁴ བཅད་ ལྷད་;⁵⁵
- (Dol po, TibBon 7): ཉི་ཁྲ་ ཉིང་ཁྲ་;⁵⁶ རྩ་ རྩས་;⁵⁷ ལྷན་ རྩན་;⁵⁸ ཆེལ་ རྩེལ་;⁵⁹ འཕྱར་པར་ འཁོར་པར་ (writing?);⁶⁰ འགྲུའ་ འཕྲུག་;⁶¹ ལྷག་འདར་ ལྷག་མདར་;⁶² བན་པར་ བན་པར་;⁶³ ཡུའ་ ཡུག་ (writing);⁶⁴ བྲོད་ བྲོད་;⁶⁵ འབྲོའ་ འབྲོགས་;⁶⁶ འགྲུའ་ འགྲུའ་;⁶⁷ འགྲུ་ འགྲུ་;⁶⁸ ལྷམ་འགྲེས་ ལྷམ་འདྲིས་;⁶⁹ ལྷ་བ་ འཕྲད་པ་;⁷⁰ ལྷམ་ས་དངས་ ལྷམ་གངས་;⁷¹ ལྷ་རྩ་ ལྷག་རྩ་;⁷² དན་ བཟླད་;⁷³ བྲམ་ཁྲ་ བྲད་མེད་.⁷⁴

45 TibBon5:20, 21 (2).

46 TibBon5:53.

47 TibBon5:294.

48 TibBon7:174 and TibBon7:454.

49 TibBon5:235.

50 TibBon5:286.

51 TibBon5:317.

52 TibBon5:405.

53 TibBon6:319.

54 TibBon6:479.

55 TibBon6:636.

56 TibBon7:3.

57 TibBon7:25.

58 TibBon7:51, 53, 882 (3)

59 TibBon7:179.

60 TibBon7:183.

61 TibBon7:234.

62 TibBon7:291.

63 TibBon7:298.

64 TibBon7:321.

65 TibBon7:334.

66 TibBon7:385, 399, 400, 401 (4).

67 TibBon7:469.

68 TibBon7:436.

69 TibBon7:437, 696 (2).

70 TibBon7:439.

71 TibBon7:648.

72 TibBon7:756, 828 (2).

73 TibBon7:831.

74 TibBon7:835.

2.3 Peculiarities in spelling: scribal ‘errors’

Many of the instances below, and above, may also not be so much structural features of language production and manuscript transmission as simply indicate that in family lineages and small monastic environments not all copyists/writers were highly literate. Some variants are clearly due to typical *dbu med* (‘headless’; cf. sans serif) reading/writing errors, such as confusing graphemes that look similar specifically in *dbu med*; or also elisions (that is, not rendering letters); and, very frequently, a different understanding or lack of knowledge of sandhi rules for particles.

- (A mdo?, TibBon 1): ལྷན་ བདུན་ (typical *dbu med* copying problem);⁷⁵
- (A mdo?, TibBon 2): རེགས་ རེས་ (elision);⁷⁶
- (A mdo, TibBon 4): རྩོན་ གཡོན་ (*dbu med* scribal problem; cf. TibBon 6: རྩོན་ ཡུན་);⁷⁷
- (Dol po, TibBon 5): ལྷ་ ཅི་ (and vice versa TibBon 6);⁷⁸ ལྷ་ ཅི་ (TibBon 6);⁷⁹
- (Dol po, TibBon 6): ཀ་པ་ལ་ ཀང་ལག་;⁸⁰
- (Dol po, TibBon 7): དམིག་ མིང་ (da’o may be an *dbu med* copying problem: preceding *tsheg*);⁸¹ ཁྱེལ་ འཁྱེལ་;⁸²
- (For most of the samples): And indeed, following up on the last lemma, many *sngon* ‘jug and yang’ jug consonants are dropped or, occasionally, also added;
- (For most of the samples): Ditto for superscripts;
- Also, note many switches between medial and surd consonants of the same class, occasionally including aspiration.

2.4 Peculiarities in spelling: idiomatic, ‘unclear status’, and scribal ‘peculiarities’?

In this category we find preferential spellings of technical terms (such as *rtog pa* vs *rtogs pa* below: i.e., dual and non-dual modes of understanding), which at

⁷⁵ TibBon1:12.

⁷⁶ TibBon2:28.

⁷⁷ TibBon4:57. TibBon6:405, 447

⁷⁸ TibBon5:56, 225, 236, 385 (4); TibBon6:405, 447, 484, 487, 505, 507, 508, 535, 537, 560, 621, 626, 629, 662, 677 (15). Vice versa, TibBon6:463, 467 (2).

⁷⁹ TibBon6:75, cf. 73 (1/2).

⁸⁰ TibBon6:271.

⁸¹ TibBon7:184.

⁸² TibBon7:377.

some point in Bon (*rdzogs chen*) literature assumed special meaning and were systematically distinguished,⁸³ but in later literature these technical terms may still appear confused (due to scribal inaccuracies). I have also included one entry to show the broad spread of ‘variant’ spellings, which, in the end, basically includes all possible spelling options in Tibetan (*tog pa* (*rtogs pa*), *stog pa* (*gtogs pa*)).

- (A mdo?, TibBon 2): མ་རྟག་ མ་རྟགས་ (later, technical *rdzogs chen* terminology)⁸⁴ cf. clearly erroneous spellings of the same, e.g. (Dol po, TibBon 6): མ་རྟག་པ་ མ་རྟགས་པ་;⁸⁵
- Cf. also (Dol po, TibBon 7): རྟག་པ་ རྟགས་པ་;⁸⁶ རྟག་པ་ གརྟགས་པ་;⁸⁷

2.5 Peculiarities in spelling (also phonetic?): prescripts

Some of the alterations below are extremely frequent and occasionally appear almost at random. The second in the list, *sngon 'jug 'a* ↔ *ma*, is so common as to suggest a different preferred spelling (and also happens to appear very frequently in older Tibetan sources). In modern pronunciation, phonetically, they are roughly equivalent, but one may wonder whether, through time and space, they always were. We would need bigger data sets and would need to correlate those with metadata, such as time, region, scribe or scribal workshop and the like, in order to pursue this meaningfully. Here too, the biggest obstacle remains the need for non-emended and preferably tagged editions in electronic form, that, alas, are not customary practice for most colleagues, whether they be producing e-texts for their provisional private use or are involved in the production of e-texts at the major digital resource centres. Random distribution of variant spellings in extant Bon sources (which for organised Bon do not reach far beyond the tenth/eleventh century CE), barring any oral enclosures or preserved relics that give access to earlier linguistic phases, would argue against any high hopes for ever recovering the earliest Tibetan phonetic values of prescripts. However, later phonetic shifts, such as developments of tones and the weakening of pronunciation of prescripts, may be detectable. The data we have from Bon sources, particularly those that we

⁸³ I am not sure when precisely, but Menri Pönlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche informed me that he has not seen a clear distinction being made before the thirteenth century CE.

⁸⁴ TibBon2:1.

⁸⁵ TibBon6:540.

⁸⁶ TibBon7:535.

⁸⁷ TibBon7:572.

may presume to be early, deserve to be studied on a par with phonological transcriptions from Tangut and sources in Old Tibetan.⁸⁸ This would need to be done in collaboration with linguists. In any case, I would advise against dismissing the variance observed in this particular section as mere spelling errors.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): *sngon 'jug ba* ↔ *ga* གདམས་པ་ གདམས་པ་ (cf. TibBon 7 དམ་པ་ གདམས་པ་)^{89,90} བཞེས་ བཞེས་;⁹¹ but also: གཙོས་ བཙོས་;⁹²
- 'a ↔ ma འཛོང་ མཛོང་;⁹³ འཁན་ མཁན་;⁹⁴ འཆིར་པ་ མཆིར་པ་;⁹⁵ འཁལ་མ་ མཁལ་མ་;⁹⁶ འཆེན་པ་ མཆེན་པ་;⁹⁷ but cf. མདུན་པ་ འདུན་པ་;⁹⁸ and cf. རྩོན་ འགོན་ མགོན་;⁹⁹
- da'o ↔ sa-mgo དཀར་ སྐར་ (TibBon 6);¹⁰⁰
- (Dol po, TibBon 6): *sngon 'jug ma* ↔ *ga* མཁུག་མ་ གུལ་མ་.¹⁰¹

2.6 Peculiarities in spelling (also phonetic?): superscripts

As in the previous category, many of the alternative spellings of superscripts¹⁰² also deserve to be taken seriously for the study of their possible phonological values in Tibetan dialects and in historical linguistics, in view of older language phases, rather than to be dismissed as mere spelling errors.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): *ra-mgo* ↔ *ga'o* ཉན་ གཏན་ (also in TibBon 7,¹⁰³ cf. also ལྷན་ གཏན་;¹⁰⁴ ཉེ་ལྷག་ གཏེ་ལྷག་;¹⁰⁵ and ཉི་ལྷག་ གཏི་ལྷག་)^{106,107} ཉན་ ཉན་ གཏན་ (cf. vice versa,

⁸⁸ Cf. Tai 2008.

⁸⁹ TibBon7:560.

⁹⁰ TibBon5:1, 197, 363, 404, 417 (5).

⁹¹ TibBon5:4, 206 (2).

⁹² TibBon5:164.

⁹³ TibBon5:32, 366 (2).

⁹⁴ TibBon5:250.

⁹⁵ TibBon5:331.

⁹⁶ TibBon5:337.

⁹⁷ TibBon5:350.

⁹⁸ TibBon5:390.

⁹⁹ TibBon5:400.

¹⁰⁰ TibBon6:95.

¹⁰¹ TibBon6:440.

¹⁰² Meaning, superscribed letters (*mgo*: 'head') in Tibetan orthography.

¹⁰³ TibBon7:647, 935 (2).

¹⁰⁴ TibBon7:713.

¹⁰⁵ TibBon7:353.

¹⁰⁶ TibBon7:456.

¹⁰⁷ TibBon5:9.

- TibBon 6: གདན་པ་ བནན་པ་;¹⁰⁸ also: གདོད་ རྟོད་;¹⁰⁹ cf. also TibBon 7 རྟོང་ གདོང་)¹¹⁰;¹¹¹ རྟུག་ གུམ་ག་ (cf. TibBon 7 རྟན་ བཙན་);¹¹² རྟང་ གཏང་;¹¹³
- ra-mgo \leftrightarrow da'o ཁའ་ དཀའ་;¹¹⁴
 - ra-mgo \leftrightarrow sa-mgo ལྷམ་ ལྷམ་ (TibBon 6, cf. TibBon7);¹¹⁵ ལྷལ་ བརྟལ་;¹¹⁶ ལྷན་པོ་ རྟན་པོ་ (TibBon 7);¹¹⁷
 - (Dol po, TibBon 7): ལྷུ་མ་ཁན་ ལྷུ་མ་ཁལན་;¹¹⁸ but cf. ལྷི་ལམ་ ལྷི་ལམ་;¹¹⁹ ལྷམ་ ལྷམ་ (cf. TibBon 6);¹²⁰ ལྷ་ རྟ་ (semantic);¹²¹ ལྷང་ ལྷངས་;¹²² ལྷངས་ ལྷངས་;¹²³
 - Cf. (Dol po, TibBon 6)¹²⁴: sa-mgo \leftrightarrow ra-mgo བལྟན་པ་ བནན་པ་ (cf. TibBon 7 ལྟན་པ་ བནན་པ་;¹²⁵ cf. ལྟན་པ་ གདན་པ་)¹²⁶ and vice versa རྟ་ ལྷ་;¹²⁷
 - (Dol po, TibBon 5): ra-mgo \leftrightarrow 'a རྟེ་ འདྲེ་;¹²⁸
 - (ba+)ra-mgo \leftrightarrow aspiration *ming gzhi*; རྟེ་ར་མར་ རྟེ་གས་མར་ (A mdo, TibBon 2);¹²⁹ བཙལ་མ་ རྟལ་མ་ རྟལ་མ་ (A mdo, TibBon 4);¹³⁰
 - Also to be noted are certain rarer exchanges of (other) superscripts, such as sa-mgo \leftrightarrow la-mgo བཟློད་པ་ ལྷལ་པ་ (Dol po, TibBon6);¹³¹
 - Cf. (Dol po, TibBon 5): elision ལྷུགས་ ལྷུགས་ (not discussed separately, only mentioned as a class of elision).¹³²

108 TibBon6:220.

109 TibBon6:363.

110 TibBon7:328.

111 TibBon5:77.

112 TibBon5:191, 193, 195, 410, 415 (5).

113 TibBon5:330.

114 TibBon5:344.

115 TibBon6:58.

116 TibBon7:580.

117 TibBon7:619.

118 TibBon7:45.

119 TibBon7:57, 458, 653, 781 (4).

120 TibBon7:60.

121 TibBon7:112, 283 (2).

122 TibBon7:123.

123 TibBon7:140.

124 TibBon6:360.

125 TibBon7:34, 241, 446 (3).

126 TibBon7:713.

127 TibBon6:685.

128 TibBon5:29, 33, 266 (3).

129 TibBon2:20.

130 TibBon4:5.

131 TibBon6:273.

132 TibBon5:333.

2.7 Peculiarities in spelling (also phonetic?): final consonant

Perhaps the most remarkable part in this section concerns presumably archaic morphological features, which in some contexts (and usually only together with other such archaic features) are indicative of archaisms, for instance, the frequent appearance of a *rjes 'jug 'a*, a feature that is well-known from old Tibetan sources (such as from Dunhuang). Even in instances where the *rjes 'jug 'a* appears to be a feature that is not present in later spellings, it may also (instead) indicate regional (other) spelling preferences, possibly with phonetic value (which may once more caution against their usefulness as markers of antiquity by themselves). While, as mentioned, this particular feature is very prominent in Bon sources, it is not always clear whether these *rjes 'jug 'a* are always genuine heterographies pertaining to the locality of the manuscripts or whether they were perhaps crafted to make the text appear old.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): *rjes 'jug 'a* (cf. Dunhuang) ཀལ་ ཀ་;¹³³ cf. ཀ་ ཀ་;¹³⁴ (cf. vice versa TibBon 7 ཏ་ ཏ་;¹³⁵ ཀལ་མ་ ཀལ་མ་;¹³⁶ གཏ་ གཏ་);¹³⁷ རཁོལ་བ་ རཁོ་བ་;¹³⁸ རཁོལ་ རཁོ་;¹³⁹ རཁོལ་ རཁོ་;¹⁴⁰ རཁོ་ རཁོ་;¹⁴¹ མཁོལ་བ་ མཁོ་བ་;¹⁴² but cf. also གཞ་ གཞལ་ (cf. TibBon 7 ཞལ་ཚཞ་ གཞ་ཚཞ་)^{143, 144} རཏལ་ རཏ་;¹⁴⁵
- Cf. also (Dol po, TibBon 5) འཁམས་ འཁམས་ (not discussed separately, only mentioned as a type of elision)¹⁴⁶
- See also other peculiarities, such as (also TibBon 7): སྒྲེབ་ སྒྲེབ་.¹⁴⁷

¹³³ TibBon5:11.

¹³⁴ TibBon5:40.

¹³⁵ TibBon7:156.

¹³⁶ TibBon7:187.

¹³⁷ TibBon7:579.

¹³⁸ TibBon5:107, 115, 377, 378, 379 (5).

¹³⁹ TibBon5:402.

¹⁴⁰ TibBon5:151, 153, 258, 297, 310, 314, 316, 359 (8).

¹⁴¹ TibBon5:110.

¹⁴² TibBon5:391.

¹⁴³ TibBon7:47, 435 (2).

¹⁴⁴ TibBon5:117.

¹⁴⁵ TibBon5:300, 302 (2).

¹⁴⁶ TibBon5:108, 112 (2).

¹⁴⁷ TibBon7:614.

2.8 Peculiarities in spelling (perhaps also phonetic?): subjoined letters

This section may have similar value for (historical) linguistics and regional language developments as have the previous two. The alterations between *ha-btags* ↔ *sngon 'jug 'a* seem interesting for a possible assessment of (local) phonetical value of the *sngon 'jug 'a*, which may be realized not just as a prefixed nasal (which is the common value in later Tibetan), but as aspiration of a voiced plosive consonant. The *ya-btags* ↔ *sngon 'jug ga* and *rjes 'jug ga* conform to regular shorthand *bdsus yig* or *bskungs yig* conventions.

- (Dol po, TibBon 5): *ha-btags* ↔ *sngon 'jug 'a* ལྷག་ འགག་;¹⁴⁸
- རྒྱབས་པའི་ འབྲས་པའི་;¹⁴⁹ ལྷག་པ་ འབྲས་པ་;¹⁵⁰ (see also TibBon 7 ལྷག་ འབར་)¹⁵¹
- *ha-btags* ↔ *sngon 'jug ma* ལྷག་ མགོ་;¹⁵²
- *ya-btags* ↔ *sngon 'jug ga* རྒྱུར་ གཤིར་;¹⁵³ རྒྱུན་ གཤེན་;¹⁵⁴ རྒྱུངས་པ་ གཤུངས་པ་;¹⁵⁵
- But also *rjes 'jug ga* རྩ་ འགག་;¹⁵⁶ རྩ་ ཆེག་;¹⁵⁷ མཆོ་ མཆོག་.¹⁵⁸

2.9 Abbreviations/Contractions

As is well known, a large number of *bdsus yig* or *bskungs yig* are used in Bon manuscripts, something that is particularly evident in TibBon 5, 6 and 7. Some are so numerous and common as effectively to replace the otherwise unabbreviated and ‘regular’ spelling (such as the ubiquitous final consonant ར་, for final གས་) and therefore defeat exhaustive annotation. There are many hand lists and reference works available for regular *bdsus yig* or *bskungs yig* and here I shall only mention some atypical, apparently deviating Bon examples (the extant hand lists notwithstanding, there would be merit in collecting them further from these and other Bon manuscripts, also with a view on taking stock of such peculiarities,

148 TibBon5:7.

149 TibBon5:78.

150 TibBon5:365.

151 TibBon7:689.

152 TibBon5:294 ; Cf. 349.

153 TibBon5:30; cf. *bdsus yig*.

154 TibBon5:189, 264, 282, 321, 324, 326 (6); cf. *bdsus yig*.

155 TibBon5:198; cf. *bdsus yig*.

156 TibBon5:104.

157 TibBon5:201.

158 TibBon5:259.

by way of further ‘fingerprinting’). Bon manuscripts generally exhibit a greater economy than the Buddhist manuscripts that I am familiar with, as seen in the copious use of contractions, with the elision of elements that are usually retained for secure identification (first item); but then there is also the use of elements that seem superfluous (second item) or even erroneous (third item); and there are miscellaneous oddities as well. Particularly intriguing is the last item: consistently, the superfluous vowel diacritic *gi gu* seems to be added only if there is a *rjes* ‘jug’ consonant present, with only one exception, in rather frequent occurrences; there seems to be a pattern here.

- (A mdo?, TibBon 2): ‘economy’: དངོས་, usually: དངོས་ དངོས་ལྔ་;¹⁵⁹ འདོར་ འདོར་ འཁྱུར་;¹⁶⁰
- (A mdo, TibBon 4): ཞུང་ ཞུང་ (cf. *’dren pa* ཞུང་;¹⁶¹ (Dol po, TibBon 5):
- (Dol po, TibBon 5): ཟློང་ ཟློང་ ཟློང་ གཟུགས་མེད་ (see the ubiquitous use of ‘na log’ for ‘med’ here: ས་ མེད་)^{162,163} གཟུང་ གཟུང་ བཟློང་ (is there a sense of phonetic equivalence between ‘ja’ and ‘bya’, thus erroneously retaining a *ya-btags*?);¹⁶⁴ ཞུང་པ་མེད་ ཞུང་པ་མེད་ ཞུང་པ་མེད་;¹⁶⁵
- (Dol po, TibBon 7): ལྔ་མ་ལྔ་ ལྔ་མ་གསུམ་;¹⁶⁶ ཟློང་འཁྱུར་ སྤང་འཁྱུར་ སྤང་གཟུང་;¹⁶⁷ ལྔ་ གཟུགས་ལྔ་;¹⁶⁸ ལྔ་ ལྔ་ (the numeral 2 here seems to be used for *sgra*?)¹⁶⁹
- economy: (Dol po, TibBon 5): ལྔ་གཟུང་ and¹⁷⁰ ལྔ་གཟུང་;¹⁷¹ cf. ལྔ་གཟུང་ and¹⁷² ལྔ་གཟུང་ (with only one exception for both).¹⁷³

159 TibBon2:24.

160 TibBon2:27.

161 TibBon4:62.

162 TibBon5:passim (64).

163 TibBon5:109.

164 TibBon5:119.

165 TibBon5:280.

166 TibBon7:198.

167 TibBon7:225.

168 TibBon7:299.

169 TibBon7:318.

170 TibBon5:121, 261, 254, 273 (4).

171 TibBon5:141, 156 (2).

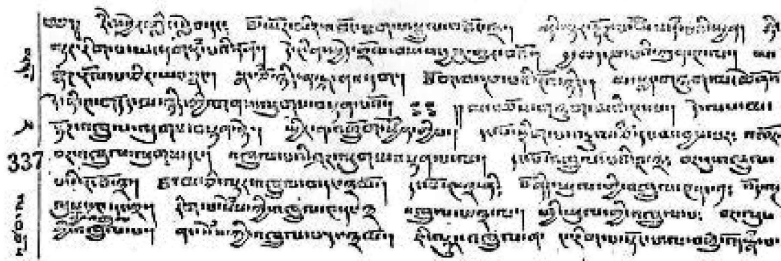
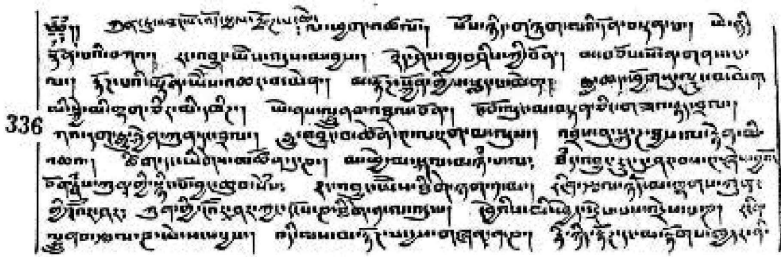
172 TibBon5:12.

173 TibBon5:17, 38, 44, 45, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 60, 62, 96, 100, 102, 159, 179, 186, 199, 209, 213, 215, 216, 217, 218, 221, 222, 329, 358, 374, 384, 413, 414 (33).

2.10 Grammatical peculiarities

- Deviating or different use of particles, perhaps indicative of erosion of grammatical distinctions (e.g. genitive and ‘instrumental, agentive, or ergative’; almost at random; see the e-texts);
- Deviating use of the aspect of verbs (this is very frequent; see the editions).

Compare for example, the following brief passage from TibBon 5 in the facsimile (fols 336–337), in the edition (original readings), and with all variants normalised and short-hand contractions resolved (note the different conventions regarding the use of a final *tsheg* (inter-syllable dot) before the final *shad* caesura (‘period’); note also the greater economy of the original, in writing and in paper use:



Non-emended e-text, 336.7–337.4: བོན་ཀླམས་ཀུན་གྱི་ཤིང་པོ་བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་ལ་ རང་འབྲུང་ཡི་ཤེས་ཐོག་
ཡི་ཉམ་ཀ་མ། རང་བཞིན་ཅུལ་ཉིད་མ་སྒྲགས་ཀུན་གྱིང་འོར་ཤེས་ ཀུན་གྱིང་འོར་ཤེས་ཀྱང་དོར་ས་ཆ་ཐོག་ཡི་ཀ་ལ་འདུས།
དབྱེའི་ས་མི་ཕྱིད་སྲིས་པས་འདྲིས་པ་ཆ། རང་བཞིན་ལྷན་གྲུབ་ཅུལ་ཆ་ཡི་སངས་རྒྱས་ འདི་ལས་མ་རྟེན་སངས་རྒྱས་གཞན་ན་ཆ་
རྟེན་ཉིད་རྟེན་དང་མ་རྟེན་གསུང་པར་ནི། ॥༣༣༧॥ རིན་ཆེན་གྱི་ར་སྒྲིང་སྒྲིབ་དང་། ཐོ་ཡོར་མིར་འཐོའི་ཐག་པ་སྤྱལ་མ་ཐོའི་འདྲ། འདི་
ལྷར་རྟེན་པ་ཡི་ཤེས་དམ་པའི་བྱུང་། རིན་ལྷར་རེག་པ་ཡང་དག་དམ་པའི་དོན། དེ་ཅིན་གྱིད་གྲོལ་བས་སངས་རྒྱས་ཕ་སྤྱུར་པའོ།
ཆུ་དང་ཆ་པའི་ཀུན་ཅུལ། མ་སྒྲེན་པོལ་པ་ཅིར་ཡང་སྤང་། སྤང་ཅམ་ཉིད་ན་ཀ་རྒྱས་དག། ཐོག་མ་ཆ་པའི་དོར་ཉིད། མ་སྤྱང་
གཉག་མ་ཆེན་འོ་དེ་ཅི་ཅ་གདོད་མ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་གནས་ལྷགས་པ་བསྒྲན་པའོ། ་་་

Normalised (Lhasa Tibetan): བོན་རྣམས་ཀྱི་ཕྱི་ཤིང་བོ་པུང་རྒྱལ་སེམས་། རང་འགྲུང་ཡི་སེམས་ཐོག་ཡོད་ཅིག་
ཏེག་མ། རང་བཞིན་ཟུལ་ཉིང་མ་འགགས་ཀྱི་ཕྱི་ཤིང་བོ་པུང་རྒྱལ་སེམས་། ཀྱི་ཕྱི་ཤིང་བོ་པུང་རྒྱལ་སེམས་མིང་ཐོག་ཡོད་ཅིག་ལ་འདས།

དབྱིང་ཕྱིས་མི་ཕྱིད་སྤྱིས་པས་འབྲིས་པ་མིད། རང་བཞིན་ལྷན་གྱུ་ཅུལ་མིད་ཡི་སངས་རྒྱལ། འདི་ལས་མ་རྟོགས་སངས་རྒྱལ་
གཞན་ན་མིད། འདི་ཉིད་རྟོགས་དང་མ་རྟོགས་ཁྱད་པར་ནི་ །།³²།། རིན་ཆེན་གསེར་སྒྲིང་སྤྱབ་དང་། ཐོ་ཡོར་མིར་མ་ཐོང་ཐག་
པ་སྤྱུལ་མ་ཐོང་འདྲ། འདི་ལྟར་རྟོགས་པ་ཡི་ཤེས་དམ་པའི་ཤུན། འདི་ལྟར་རིག་པ་ཡང་དག་དམ་པའི་དོན། དེ་བཞིན་གཉིས་མིད་
སྤྱོལ་བས་སངས་རྒྱལ་སྤྱུ་གྱུར་བའོ། རྒྱ་ཆད་མིད་པའི་ཀུན་གཞི་ལ། མ་འགགས་རྩལ་པ་ཅེར་ཡང་སྤང་། སྤང་ཅམ་ཉིད་ན་ཀནས་ན་
ས་དག། ཐོག་མ་མིད་པའི་ངོ་བོ་ཉིད། མ་སྤང་གཉུག་མ་ཆེན་པོ་དེ་ནི་གཞི་གདོད་མ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་གནས་ལྷགས་བཞུན་པའོ། བློ་

3 Conclusions

Upon closer reflection, while the working hypothesis and hopes for pinning down oral and written modes of transmission based on examining peculiarities in orthography as found in Bon manuscripts may not have completely evaporated, they may have become a little fainter in the process of reporting and reflecting on these findings, since the matter of oral and written modes of transmission may be more convoluted than one might have presumed at first. Nonetheless, many of the deviating or alternative spellings and writing conventions still promise to provide useful data for historical linguistics of Tibetan and for our understanding of regional language developments.

The initial goal of evaluating the utility of morphological data in Bon manuscript traditions for ‘fingerprinting’ texts is complicated by the highly involved nature of the morphological variance, such as the entangled registers of oral and textual transmissions mentioned above: many of the variants need to be analysed on their own grounds, according to different ‘algorithms’ and ‘parameters’ (e.g., oral and/or written registers, old or new spelling, regional dialect differences, and scribal practices). Also, the very limited sample size, which moreover is far from random, is of course not amenable to any sweeping conclusions: one would need much bigger and also more diverse data sets. Moreover, the texts that are presently extant in our major repositories would require carefully planned tagging that retains and marks morphological peculiarities or rarities even when inputting texts. It stands to reason that most of the users of the mentioned repositories are primarily interested in matters of content. The considerable extra effort one would need to invest in preserving the exact readings of the original manuscript would only be relevant for that *rara avis* textual scholar who works on some type of text-edition or is involved in stemmatic analyses.

But even though such a big data project appears somewhat remote because of practical and technical difficulties, based on this pilot study I would argue that it is worth considering. The major caveat here is that one would have to convince

peers to start securing usable data sets for future analyses; no doubt a labour of love, both for the inputter and the advocate of the cause.

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