

‘Soiled with the dust of faulty renderings’: change in performative aspects of Bonpo liturgy

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It may be said that a large part of the Bonpo doctrines as they survive, represent a stage in the development of Bon reached only after contact with Buddhism which led them to rebuild their doctrinal system along similar lines. However, they represent Tibetan religion as a whole since they built up their doctrine by incorporating freely the new imported ideas of Indian origin that began to penetrate Tibet from the 8th century onwards while at the same time delving into the storehouse of existing autochthonous beliefs.

We approach the questions posed by the study of the performative aspects of rites, in particular the nature of the process of change in the liturgy. Since in my view codified liturgy represents a way in which institutionalized religion describe ritual, I examine ritual prescriptions in literary sources and compare them with actual performance practices. Thus, I try to expose the nature of the social and historical forces that have shaped change in the performative aspects of Bonpo liturgy in the past and during the present period of social and political upheaval. Similar forces may have been at work in different settings during critical periods of Tibetan history. I explain some native categories for the classification of the liturgy and analyze one important performative aspect of the rites namely the procedures used in the recitation of texts and the special manipulations to which they are subjected.