

CONTEMPORARY BÖNPO COMMUNITY IN TIBETAN REFUGEE CAMPS

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This article¹ describes a religious minority group called the Bönpo who live in Tibet (China), Nepal and India. Bönpos live in villages, in scattered communities and in two Tibetan refugee Bönpo camps in Himachal Pradesh (India) and in Kathmandu Valley (Nepal). This article presents the social policy of religious leaders from both camps, who have been mixing different ethnic groups and nations in one camp in order to help this niche culture survive. One of the effects of such policies carried out over the last 50 years is the deep influence of Tibetanness on Himalayan people, mostly from Mustang and Dolpo, who have grown up in Bönpo refugee camps. In the article, I analyse population data in detail to show how small the Bönpo community is and why their leaders have pursued such a social policy focused on religious and Tibetan identification despite ethnic and national differences.

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Artykuł opisuje mniejszość religijną bönpów istniejącą wśród Tybetańczyków i ludności himalajskiej. Bönpowie żyją na terenach tybetańskich zajętych przez Chiny, w Nepalu i Indiach. Mieszkają w zwartych społecznościach wiejskich, w rozproszeniu oraz w dwóch tybetańskich obozach dla uchodźców z rodzin bön w Himaćal Pradeś (Indie) oraz w Dolinie Kathmnadu (Nepal). Artykuł przedstawia politykę społeczną liderów religijnych obu obozów, którzy mieszają różne etnicznie i narodowo grupy w jednym obozie, po to, by przetrwała ta niszowa kultura. Jednym ze skutków takiej polityki prowadzonej w ciągu ostatnich 50 lat jest głęboki wpływ tybetańskości na ludność himalajską, szczególnie z Mustangu i Dolpo, która wychowała się w obozach uchodźców dla bönpów. W artykule szczegółowo analizuję dane populacyjne, aby pokazać, jak małą społecznością są bönpowie i dlaczego ich liderzy prowadzą politykę społeczną skoncentrowaną na religijno-tybetańskiej identyfikacji, mimo różnic etniczno-narodowych.

K e y w o r d s: Himalayan people, Tibetans, Dolpo, Mustang, Bön, population, religious minority, migration, boarding school.

HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF BÖN²

There is rich scientific literature on the history and philosophy of Bön². Research on this religion and culture began at the beginning of the 20th century, but developed in earnest after the discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts in China. Up to 1997,

¹ This article has been partially compiled from some of my previous publications: Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2004, 117–134; Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2006, 264–283; Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2011, 177–202.



An internet map with the location of the Himalayan regions of Dolpo and Mustang and the Indian village of Dolanji in Himachal Pradesh (prepared by A. Szymoszyn)

Dan Martin had counted 260 publications (articles and books) on Bön in English, German, French and Tibetan.⁴

This religion, according to its followers, originated from deep pre-Buddhist times (from the so-called holy time), when great heroes were active. It was to be one of the basic elements that was remnant from the ancient kingdoms of Tazig (*sTag gzig*, *rTag gzigs*)⁵ (Karmay 1998, 104; Rossi 1999, 18; Tenzin Wangyal 2002, xix) and Shang Shung

² In this article I use the transcription of the Tibetan word *Bön*, because it better reflects its phonetics, however, in Western publications, the transliteration *bon* is equally often used. Transliteration of the Tibetan language according to Wylie (1959) has been adopted in Tibetan literature, although transcription notation is equally common. Due to the large geographical and dialectical diversity of the Tibetan language, its historical development and different scientific traditions, there are several transcriptional recordings of Tibetan (see: Bareja-Starzyńska and Mejer 2002, 56–57; also *The Transliteration and Transcription of Tibetan*).

³ Bön – the name of the original Tibetan religion and culture. Bönpo – (*bon po*) a Tibetan term specifying a follower of the Bön religion, belonging to Bön culture.

⁴ On the Bön religion see: *Bön Bibliography* 2011; Martin 1997; Martin 1999; Bansal 1999; Baumer 2002; Namkhai Norbu 1995; Nyima Dakpa 2005; Reynolds 2005; Rossi 1999; Sangye Tenzin, n.d.p.; Snellgrove 1980; Tenzin Wangyal 1993; Tenzin Wangyal 2002.

⁵ Another recording of the name of the land appearing in the literature: *Ta zig* (Namkhai Norbu 1995, 4, 224), *Tagzig* (Nyima Dakpa 2005, 5), *Tazik* (Kvaerne 1995, 14), *Ta-zig* (Martin 1999, 260).

(*Zhang zhung*) (Kvaerne 1985, 4). Researchers are of the opinion that Tazig land could have existed in or adjacent to Persia (Karmay 1998, 104, Martin 1999, 278) or indeed west of Western Tibet, on the border between Gilgit and Bactria (northern Pakistan and north-east Afghanistan) (Martin 1999, 266). Some see the similarity of the name with Tajikistan. The kingdom of Shang Shung was located at the current borderland of India-Tibetan-Nepal (eastern regions of Kinnaur, Spiti, Zaskar, Ladakh and Dolpo) and Western Tibet (Ngari Province in the Tibet Autonomous Region, PRC). Bön culture spread from there to all of Tibet, and followers of this religion chose the first Tibetan king from the historic Yarlung Valley. The land of Shang Shung was ruled over by the ancient and medieval royal dynasty Ligmincha (*lig myi rhya*), with Bön as the state religion. The last king of Shang Shung was ruling the country in dramatic times (the 7th century), when Tibet conquered his kingdom (Karmay 1998, 114).

Both religions of Tibet – Bön and Buddhism, fought bloodily between the 8th–11th centuries. Traditional believers (Bönpos), as members of a less consolidated state-political system lost control and influence among Tibetans. For centuries, Bönpos were discriminated against because of their religion by Buddhists, although their beliefs and rituals imperceptibly penetrated into Buddhism itself.

An unambiguous definition of what is and what is not the Bön religion has given scientists many headaches in connection with the historical development of not only this religion but also Tibetan Buddhism and the communities that both traditions cultivated. Per Kvaerne (1995, 9–10) divided Bön into a pre-Buddhist religion (Yungdrung Bön – *g.yung drung bon*) already present in the area of Tibet around 2000 BC, and later Bön which he defined as a Tibetan, folk system with non-Buddhist beliefs and practices. In addition, he noted that scientists have found that the so-called new Bön religion (*bon gsar-ma*) came into being in the 10th–11th centuries after coming into contact with Buddhism. According to other sources, new Bön emerged only in the 14th century (Karmay 1998, 121, Reynolds 2005, 10).

Over the centuries, Bön and Buddhism have interacted with each other, absorbing elements from each other and thus becoming similar. Thus, Tibetan Buddhism (mainly based on the Vajrayana) is very different from its Indian ‘cousin’ and the philosophy of contemporary Bön resembles more that taught by Shakyamuni and his disciples. To this day, disputes persist as to whether Bön belongs to a broadly understood Buddhism or if instead it is a completely separate religion.

If the doctrine and practice of both religions is compared, it is very difficult to identify significant differences between them. For believers, both terms equate to doctrines regarding such ideas as law, truth and reality. Philosophical concepts such as *samsara*, *nirvana*, *karman*, awakening and suffering are the basis for both⁶. These religions are, however, mutually contradictory, which is evident in the dissimilarity of

⁶ The form the article takes does not allow for explanations of all the concepts mentioned.

some rituals, iconography, and names which are emphasized today in the statements of their devotees. Above all, however, differences rely on the interpretation of the origins of the world and sacred time and in addition, both religions have different sources of origin. Buddhists derive their doctrinal foundation from Buddha Gautama Shakyamuni of Terai (Nepal) while the Bönpo derive theirs from Tönpa Shenrab of Tazig. Some scholars believe that differences (such as turning prayer mills and circling holy places and temples in the opposite direction, different mantras, images of deities and the names of Buddhist equivalents, the Shang-shung alphabet and the language used for some rituals) are external manifestations of the same system of beliefs and norms, because at their core both Buddhism and Bön are the same performing rituals to achieve enlightenment and awakening. In both religions there is also a belief in the existence of Buddhahood as an enlightened being and Bodhisattva as an awakened one who for the good of humanity, returns to earth to develop *dharma*⁷ and help others in reaching enlightenment. Therefore, Bön is considered by some of the interested as a part to broadly understood Tibetan Buddhism. Others, however, emphasize the fact that a different concept of sacred history and sources of religious authority are essential elements and therefore classify Bön as a separate denomination. This is not the place to delve into the nuances involved, although it is worth noting that these philosophical discussions are reflected in the life of Bön community members in India, Nepal and the West (see: Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2011).

Bönpo Tibetans remain aware of the fact that they are “the vessels” of the “true religion of Tibet”. For believers, their religion is *Yungdrung Bön*, equating to “eternal Bön” or “always faith”. The name was coined after the 10th century (Rossi 1999, 17–18). They believe that the first person to be awakened was a cosmic Prince named Tönpa Shenrab Miwoche (*sTon pa gShen rab mi bo*). This refers more to a title than a name, and means “a great teacher” and “a supreme, extraordinary priest” (Baumer 2002, 85–86; Guard 1995). He lived long before Shakyamuni in the land of Tazig (*sTag-gzig*). Tönpa Shenrab was supposed to have spread *Dharma* in Shang Shung and Tibet and be the creator of teachings that were largely codified in the Middle Ages. The teachings were hidden in times of persecution and then considered as *termas* (*gter ma*) – religious treasures hidden for ordinary people, and discovered and interpreted by *tertöns* (*gter ston*) – special defenders and *dharma* teachers. In the 11th century, the cult of Tönpa Shenrab and mythology related to him developed.

Bön followers define their religious identity differently. It is less radical among the Himalayan population, stronger among Tibetans, but the strongest of all among western followers. In general, I was confronted with the opinion that believers were advocates of treating them as a separate denomination (different than Buddhist schools).

⁷ *Dharma* (*Skt*; in Tib.: *bon, chos*) – The term has multiple meanings. In relation to Bön, it means both spiritual teachings that originate from Buddhas and one’s own spiritual path. It can also mean “existence” or “being” (Tenzin Wangyal 2002, 140).

But when they had to identify themselves in wider social perspective (for example on the background of a nation or Christianity), there were two different understandings of belonging: some of them recognized themselves as members of a larger community as broadly understood Tibetan Buddhist one, others as a more or less separate religious community. Borders are not explicit and as clearly defined as they are for example, in Christianity, where all agree that Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Lutheranism are separate denominations which can be grouped under the umbrella term of Christianity.

In the Tibetan tradition, a lot of Bönpo relationships with Nyingmapa (*rNying ma pa*)⁸ are met – in the lines of socio-religious communication, Dzogchen philosophy (*rDzogs chen*), the tradition of successive incarnations, discovering the *termas*⁹, the use of oracles, even in connecting families through marriages. Such connections (though less frequent) exist also in other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In the everyday lives of Himalayan and Tibetan inhabitants, this manifests itself in mixing of different holy figures, celebrating holidays from other denominations, and in sending siblings to monasteries belonging to different religious schools: to Bön and Nyingma, or as is usually the case in Mustang – to Bön and Sakya (*sa-skya pa*)¹⁰. Many times in the houses of the Bönpo in Mustang (Nepal) as well as in the Tibetan refugee camp in Dolanji, pictures of Bön and Tibetan Buddhism deities side by side can be seen. Cases have been known of finding *tülku* (*sprul sku*)¹¹ for Nyingmapa in Bönpo families and vice versa.

This does not mean, however, that in Buddhist families such an amalgamation of traditions is commonplace. The attitude of Buddhists from other schools to the Bönpo is generally negative. They are treated as an unorthodox sect that plagiarizes Buddhist rituals (Rossi 1999, 19, Kvaerne 1995, 13). Such a picture of Bönpo people was transferred to the West by Tibet's first explorers, who received their information of Bön from Buddhists. To this day, some Buddhists treat their Bönpo neighbours as some sort of believers in primitive non-Buddhist cults. Scientists, however, have proved that many rituals and customs taught in Tibetan Buddhism stem from Bön, including the hanging of prayer flags, the offering of five-colour *lungta* little pieces of papers during the *sang* – smoke offerings, making *torms*, the burning of incense, the use of oracles, the *cham* dance and some Dzogchen teachings (see Namkhai Norbu 1995; Kvaerne 1990, 143–153; Kvaerne 1995; Karmay 1998; Rossi 1999; Baumer 2002).

In the fifteenth century the Bönpo began to organize their monastic life modelled on that of Buddhist monasteries. In 1405, Sherab Gyaltzen (*gShen rab rgyal mshshan*)

⁸ Nyingma – one of the main Tibetan Buddhist schools, called the old order.

⁹ *Termas* (*gter ma*) – religious manuscripts with the teachings hidden in times of persecution and considered as religious treasures in order to be discovered and interpreted by *tertöns* (*gter ston*) – special defenders and *dharma* teachers.

¹⁰ Sakya – one of the main Tibetan Buddhist schools. Sakya and Bön run intense missionary activities in the Mustang area and are therefore the most popular.

¹¹ *Tülku* – bodily manifestation of an enlightened being, or a conscious reincarnation, although *tülku* generally does not remember his previous incarnation.

founded the Menri Monastery (*sMan ri*) in Thob-Rgyal, in the Tsang Province of Central Tibet (Kvaerne 1977, 83–98). It was there that the rule regarding freedom of choice was initiated in deciding who became abbot which has continued until today. He is elected by a draw of lots from among all monks possessing a *geshe* degree (*dge bshes*)¹² and not as a result of being the reincarnation of his predecessor, as in the case of Gelukpa (*Dge-lugs pa*), or by inheritance as practiced in Sakyapa. Lots are drawn during a religious celebration and the winning candidate becomes spiritual leader of the entire Bön line.

In 1834, the Yungdrung ling (*g.yung drung gling*) monastery was established in Tsangu. In the 19th century an abbot of this monastery assumed leadership over the whole Bön, a position which he held until the mid-twentieth century, sometimes rivaling the Menri. The aftermath of this rivalry has still survived in a hidden form and manifests itself in the delicate relations between lamas of both monasteries, but also in the approach of European Bön believers to individual teachers.

THE BÖNPO COMMUNITY IN EXILE

Up until September 2017, the head of Bön lineage was the Menri abbot, the 33rd Trizin – geshe Sangye Tenzin Yongdong (*sangs rgyas bsTan 'dzin ljong ldong*), who was named Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche (*lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma rin po che'i*)¹³. The Menri main monastery was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in Tibet under Chinese occupation. In connection with this, 33rd Trizin decided to rebuild the monastery in the Tibetan refugee camp in Dolanji, India. Construction began in 1967 and it was also in this year that the first group of monks came. The Yungdrung ling monastery was also destroyed during the Chinese invasion and transferred operations to the Triten Norbutse monastery (*khri brtan nor bu rtse*), built in 1987, in the western

¹² *Geshe* – a degree awarded to monks who have completed Buddhist theological and philosophical studies at a dialectical school and have successfully passed the exam. In an international context, this degree is translated as a doctor of philosophy (a Buddhist one). However, the mode of education and the way the exam is passed is far from European procedures. It is closely related to religious practices and rituals. The final exam lasts for several days, takes place in a temple and at its core is a religious ritual. Answering the questions asked by the examiners is a highly ritualised process and is done in the presence of other monks, one's family and other invited guests. It resembles more a religious ceremony than an academic exam. Even if the candidate fails to answer most of the questions, he acquires the *geshe* title because the completion of many years of study, the passage of religious initiation ceremonies and the acceptance of one's superiors are more important than the exam itself. The consequences of an inferior performance can be a loss of face.

¹³ He died on Sept. 14, 2017. His life history see: <http://www.ligmincha.org/index.php/en/boen-buddhism/lineage-of-teachers/hh-lungtok-tenpai-nyima.html>, access Sept. 2017. New, 34th Trizin, Geshe Dawa Dhargyal was drawn on Dec. 2017, see: <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/international-news/421-34th-menri-trizin.html>, access Jan. 2018.

part of Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The main teacher of the Bön lineage, known as Lobpön (*slob dpon*)¹⁴, resides there. The present main teacher and founder of the monastery is Yongdzin Lobpön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche (*slob dpon sangs rgyas bsTan 'dzin rin po che'i*)¹⁵. There is a strictly defined hierarchy and delineation of functions between the abbots of the two centers, although the *Rinpoches* from individual monasteries generally have large autonomy in their lifestyle and how they transfer their teachings and thus attract differing types of personalities as students.

Both monasteries when they functioned in Tibet flourished, and up to 1959 they housed a total of several hundred monks. There were also Bönpo monasteries in eastern Tibet in the provinces of Kham and Amdo, and in the Himalayas, especially in Dolpo. In exile, religious centers in Dolanji and Kathmandu are blooming, educating many monks, largely thanks to donations from Western believers and non-governmental cultural and religious organizations.

Until the late 1960s, most of the Tibetans living in exile worked in the Himalayas on the construction of roads. Because of the extremely hard work involved, many of them died, including the 32nd Menri abbot – Sherab Lodro at the age of 28, in 1963. In order to integrate this religious minority in exile and protect it from being absorbed and disappeared in the vast mass of Buddhists, the main then Bön teacher, Lobpön Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche, who had emigrated from Tibet in 1959, decided to settle in one place all Bönpos. He received from the 14th Dalai Lama, the head of the Tibetan Government In Exile, and from the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru permission to settle in the State of Himachal Pradesh in India in the Solan district village of Dolanji.

In 1965, the Indian authorities granted permission for the Tibetan Bon Foundation¹⁶ to register, and in 1966/1967 Lobpön Sangye Tenzin received from the local authorities land in and around the village, which he bought from local landowners thanks to the Vatican Catholic Foundation. This place was named Thopgyal – after a village in Tibet, where the original monastery was located but soon began to be called colloquially “Dolanji Settlement”. Bön Tibetans began arriving from different parts of India, Nepal and Tibet to settle there. The first group of settlers was a group of 68 road workers’ families from Manali. Each family received a house and a piece of land and in 1968, the new 33rd Trizin began building a temple and monastery and ordered all Bön monks living in exile to come to the monastery in Dolanji in order to carry out their monastic life¹⁷. Thus, in the 1960s, the only Tibetan exile camp created

¹⁴ Triten Norbutse monastery history see: http://www.triten.org/TR/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=53, access Sept. 2017.

¹⁵ His life history see: <http://www.ligmincha.org/index.php/en/boen-buddhism/lineage-of-teachers/yongdzin-rinpoche.html>, access Sept. 2017.

¹⁶ www.bonfoundation.org, access Sept. 2017.

¹⁷ A history of the camp was written by me in 2004 on the basis of interviews with the main teachers of the Menri monastery in India –33 Trizin, Nyima Dakpa Rinpoche and Ponlop Thinley Nyima (materials

exclusively for Bön followers in India was established. The aim of this project was to take care of them, integrate them and help a unique culture survive, one that would undoubtedly disappear among other Tibetan mostly Buddhist refugees.

For many centuries, Tibetan Buddhists treated the Bönpo worse but this state of affairs began to change in exile. In 1977, for the first time, a representative of the Bön religion was included in the parliament of the Tibetan Government In Exile, and the Dalai Lama officially recognized Bön as the fifth school of Tibetan spirituality. In addition, the then religious leader of the Bön confessors received the title Trizin (“the lessee of the throne”) from the Dalai Lama, which put him on equal footing in religious relations with the Tibetan hierarchs of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism and with their highest representatives (Baumer 2002, 17). Confirmation of the rehabilitation of the Bön religion was conferred on it by the Dalai Lama as the head of the Gelugpa School and political leader when in 1987 he visited the main monastery of Menri in Dolanji. He taught about the values and contributions of pre-Buddhist religion to Tibetan culture and issued a letter in which he emphasized that Bön is the indigenous religion of Tibet and the fifth school of spiritual tradition (Dalai Lama 1987). This letter was posted on the official website of Menri monastery after a second visit of the Dalai Lama to Dolanji in 2007.

All of this does not translate into the attitude of the Buddhist population to the Bönpos which would change at once. Some of my respondents in their thirties remember suffering school harassment because of their religious affiliation. However, in Tibetan schools in exile, the pejorative approach of teachers to pupils from Bönpo families is changing, especially after the addition to the Tibetan school curriculum elements of knowledge on the pre-Buddhist history of Tibet. In 1988, the Council for Tibetan Education at the Dalai Lama’s Office, in cooperation with the then Bönpo representative in the Tibetan National Assembly, published an illustrated book depicting the story of Tönpa Shenrab, the founder of the Bön religion, written in 1960 by Sangye Tenzin, the then main teacher of Menri. This book has also found its way onto the reading list for Tibetan students (Sangye Tenzin n.d.p.).

THE BÖNPO POPULATION

There were two main reasons why monks agitated for Himalayan inhabitants to send their children to a boarding school for the Bönpo in India: First was the fact that in 1980s less and less Tibetan Bönpo families were settling in Dolanji and community

from ethnological fieldwork in the archives of the author). Therefore, this version may differ in detail from the current state of affairs existing. However, I am more interested in the memory and content conveyed to believers and a wider circle of interested people, as well as those reproduced in brochures and distributed by the monastery mainly among Westerners and tourists as potential sponsors.

leaders became afraid that the population could easily transfer their religious allegiances to Tibetan Buddhism. As a result, they started to expand the population in Dolanji by combining the Himalayan Bönpos with Tibetans. The second reason for this concern was because of the amount of financial subsidies received by the Tibetan refugee camp from the Tibetan Government in Exile and the Indian authorities which began to wane. As less newcomer registered in the camp, less money was received. One of the main goals of monks' agitation among Himalayan inhabitants was to raise children in a compact and homogeneous community of Bönpos and thus maintain the vitality of the culture and religion for future generations. As a result, in the years 1987–2016, only 800 children came to Dolanji¹⁸. The Triten Norbutse monastery in Kathmandu used to receive only boys, so the number of children learning there became much lower than in Indian Dolanji.

The high numbers of children migrating, so how massive this phenomenon has become among Himalayan inhabitants, are not only confirmed by my own field observations (In 2009, in Jomsom, Mustang and nearby hamlets almost every family had a child or children sent to be educated outside the district), but also by statistical data that can be deduced.

Population and demographic studies by the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala do not give detailed information about how many Tibetan Bönpo families there are in contrast to followers of Tibetan Buddhism¹⁹. Conducting such research would be very difficult because along with Tibetan refugees from Bönpo families, there are also representatives of Tibetan ethnic groups from Nepal who are not refugees, but are in the camp to boost the Bonpo population. Thereby, when conducting statistical surveys aimed at calculating the population of Bön religious followers among Tibetans, it would be necessary during research to differentiate between families who are not refugees (they do not come from Tibet, but from the Himalayas, although they live in the camp). It is a very socially and politically sensitive issue and the Tibetan authorities try to turn a blind eye to it.

The Nepali government does not distinguish between Tibetan Buddhism schools either, and includes Bönpo, as all other Himalayan residents, to Buddhists²⁰. The only data which exists distinguishing individual Tibetan denominations concern the number of monks and nuns in exile. According to data published by the Tibetan authorities in

¹⁸ Data calculated by Nyatri – The Aid Foundation For Children of Tibet and the Himalayas, based on their own observations and census data provided by the managers of educational centers in Dolanji (Himachal Pradesh, India): Bon Children's Home and Bon Children Welfare Centre.

¹⁹ See: Bhatia, Tsegyal Dranyi, Rowley 2002; *Demographic Survey...* 2009 (the last Tibetan census in exile carried out by CTA took place in 2007 and included both refugees in India, as well as in Nepal and Bhutan – a total of almost 130 000 people). <http://phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=24426&article=CTA+to+conduct+second+demographic+survey+of+Tibetans+in+exile%22>, access Oct. 2011.

²⁰ See: *Population Census...* 2002; analysis of the results of the census in Nepal in 2001: Dahal 2002.

Dharamsala in 1999, the Tibetan monasteries in India, Nepal and Bhutan founded after 1959, total 181, encompassing 17 376 monks and nuns, of whom 549 lived in 5 monasteries belonging to the Bön tradition. This amounts to 3.16% of the Bönpo population. It is worth noting, however, that among these there were also people who originated from ethnic minorities in the Himalayas who were not refugees but citizens of Nepal.

Statistical surveys carried out in China give religious affiliation. Of the 4.6 million Tibetans living in the Tibet Autonomous Region and the Qinghai and Sichuan provinces nearly 160 000 are Bönpos. They make up 3–4% of the population (Baumer 2002, 16²¹). In East Tibet the percentage of the Bönpo population is higher than for the entire area so it should be assumed that 4% is the upper limit of the percentage scale. Krystyna Cech (1987, 11) states, however, that Bönpos constitute about 1% of the entire Tibetan population²². Considering that the Bönpo families that emigrated from Tibet mainly came from central and western Tibet and not from the east then it can be assumed that the value given by Cech is at the lower limit of the percentage scale. Therefore, if the Himalayan Bönpo families, mainly from Dolpo and Mustang²³, are included the entire Bönpo population in the Himalayas and Tibet is somewhere between 1 and 4% of the indigenous population of this area. When viewed in the light of other Tibetan and Himalayan groups of Tibetan origin, this is indeed a small percentage.

Looking at statistical analysis from Mustang (Nepal), it can be seen that the phenomenon of sending children to both lay and monastic educational centers is large. In 2014, around 4 120 children and adolescents between the ages of 0 to 19 lived in this district, of which almost 1 000 (over 24% of the population in this age group) were officially educated outside Mustang²⁴. A similar situation occurs in Dolpo, but official statistics, for unknown reasons, do not show the real picture. According to data from 2014, over 18 000 children and youths in the 0–19 age-group lived in Dolpo, and only 11 of them were permanently in educational centers²⁵. How false this data is can be evidenced by the fact that only in the Bönpo-family-camp in Dolanji, India, about one third of the children raised there come from Dolpo. So a similar proportion should be found as it is among children from Mustang. It can therefore be indirectly inferred that in Dolpo the percentage of children and youths raised and educated

²¹ Baumer refers to Ma Rong's research published in Kvaerne (ed.) 1994, 509.

²² In the mid-1980s, when the researcher was conducting research in Dolanji, the total population was around 500 of which the vast majority came from Tibet. She found – based on interviews with Tibetans and her own fieldwork – that half of all Bönpo families in exile lived in the Dolanji Camp. To put this in proper perspective of a 100 000 Tibetan refugee population, it was 1% are Bönpos.

²³ I assume that the percentage ratio of Bönpos to the followers of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas oscillates around 3%.

²⁴ See: http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/Population/VDC-Municipality%20in%20detail/42%20Mustang_VDCLevelReport.pdf, access 16.10.2016.

²⁵ See: http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/Population/VDC-Municipality%20in%20detail/62%20Dolpa_VDCLevelReport.pdf, access 16.10.2016.

outside the home is high and reaches over 20%. This is an impressive number in regard to migration studies.

The question then arises as to what part of this percentage are children from Bönpo families. If the population of Bönpos in Himalayan ethnic groups is considered to be approximately 3%, and if the population aged 0–19 in Dolpo and Mustang is considered (totaling about 22 185 people), then it would amount to 665 children. Thus, if my calculations are correct then at least 160 children from Bönpo families (24%), in 2014, were brought up and educated far from their homes. This high number is correlated with field information. From the end of the 1980s, Bönpo monks have regularly agitated for families to send their children to their centers. Every year, they organize a group trip for approximately 20–30 small children for education purposes to Dolanji and Kathmandu. This network is very well organized, cooperates with the local -government and district authorities, and has its own leaders and financial resources. Therefore, it can be assumed with a high degree of certainty that with the influence of this institutionalized recruitment activity, the percentage of children from Bönpo families leaving for education is higher in relation to the entire population of Bönpos than children from Buddhist families analogous to the Buddhist population. Statistical analysis shows that the Bonpo as a small religious group sends at least a quarter (if not more) of its children to be educated outside its region of origin. Of the 30 years the educational centers have functioned, around 1000 children were admitted to the Tibetan refugee camp in Dolanji, most of whom came from Dolpo and Mustang. Given the small population of these two Himalayan regions, this means that virtually almost every family has sent one or more of their children to India to be educated and brought up.

How significant this phenomenon is, can be amongst the first generation of young adults Lopa²⁶ (from Mustang) and Dolpopa²⁷ (from Dolpo) who have taken advantage of global communication and built up an extensive network of connections based on childhood relationships. This serves them in identifying themselves and helps them to migrate for studying and work purposes all over the world.

MIGRATION OF HIMALAYAN CHILDREN TO TIBETAN REFUGEE CAMPS

The phenomenon of sending Himalayan children to be educated outside their district, began in the 1980s and has intensified in the 21st century. Educational centers where children go are served by other cultural and educational systems than those

²⁶ Mustang is known as a Lo Montang (the land of Lo) and is inhabited mostly by ethnic group of Lopa. The Lopa belongs to Tibeto-Himalayan ethnic groups.

²⁷ Dolpo is inhabited mostly by ethnic group of the Dolpopa, who belongs to Tibeto-Himalayan ethnic groups.

operating in the Himalayan area. Initially, the inhabitants of Dolpo and Mustang, as well as the neighbouring Himalayan areas from Nepal, sent only boys to monastic schools. Focusing on children from Bönpo families, from 1978, it was possible to send boys to be educated to the Menri monastery in Dolanji. From 1975, there was a local primary school (6 classes) for refugee children. In 1985, several Bönpo monks carried out the first intensive missionary and recruiting activities in Tibet and the Himalayan villages. As a result, in 1987, a dozen or so of the first lay teenagers came to Dolanji and were housed in a barrack near the school. This is how Bon Children's Home came into being at a Tibetan refugee camp. In the following years, small 4–6-year-old children, both girls and boys, began to be admitted. Due to the increasing number of pupils in school year-on-year, the school was extended to eight classes in 1989. In 2003, the right to learn at lower secondary school level (classes 9 and 10) was obtained, and in 2011 this was extended to a full secondary school (11 and 12 grades) with the right to conduct state-level final exams²⁸. It only took one decade (2004–2014) for the largest number of migrant children to live in Dolanji – around 500 (including about 300 children in a secular BCH center, about 140 boys in a male monastery and about 60 girls in a nunnery), with the vast majority not Tibetan refugees, nor their children but instead inhabitants of the Nepalese Himalayas²⁹.

The regular recruitment activities of monks in Himalayan regions and their offer to take children to the Tibetan refugee camps and educational centers for Bönpos in Kathmandu and Himachal Pradesh met with a positive response, especially from Mustang and Dolpo inhabitants. They saw in the monks' proposition a solution to their problems in regards to education and in helping to maintain future generations.

In the second half of the twentieth century and into the 21st, there existed a developed international system of assistance for Tibetan refugees residing in India and Nepal, where none existed for other marginalized inhabitants of the Himalayas. They belonged to the poorest population of one of the poorest countries in the world – Nepal. Illiteracy was rife mainly due to a lack of access to education and the Kingdom of Nepal did not invest in the development of these regions due to the extremely difficult climatic and geographical conditions and low population density which pertained. An important factor adding to the neglect of the Himalayan regions was Nepalese ethnic policy, in which groups belonging to Tibetan ethnic groups had lower status than others and thus were treated as not fully Nepali. They were distinguished by racial origin (Mongoloid appearance), culture (of Tibetan origin), languages (from the Tibetan-Burmese group), religions (Buddhism and Bön), customs, traditions and a differing history. Some of the Himalayan valleys were incorporated into the Nepalese state only in the twentieth

²⁸ Data based on the author's field studies and the official school website (<https://www.cstdholanji.org/english-aboutschool>).

²⁹ Data obtained in the field and from the Nyatri Foundation.

century (the Mustang Kingdom in 1976). In these regions, memories of independence and self-determination were lively, and thus – it was uncertain as to how well they would take to the integration policies of Nepal. The Himalayan population required the support of international organizations, but few worked on a regular basis to develop these communities, focusing their efforts mainly on helping Tibetans.

The Himalayan people decided to use their resemblance to the Tibetans to benefit from NGOs' help. A case in point being the center I studied in Dolanji. The Tibetan refugee camp in this Indian village is intended for Tibetan Bönpo families. However, children from Bön families from the Himalayas were also admitted to the boarding school and monasteries. To be able to enroll them in the school, register them at the center and receive subsidies for them, the leaders recorded them as Tibetans, changing their place of origin accordingly in the register, and sometimes also their names (if they did not sound Tibetan enough). In this way, the center grew in numbers, received higher government subsidies and attracted more and more Western sponsors. In return, the center offered free, good education at elementary school level and later secondary. Families were exempt from any children-related fees and expenses, which meant that more and more parents were in positions to send their children there. Another important motivating factor behind sending children outside of Nepal was the civil war in 2001–2007. It was during this period that most children came to Dolanji. The Maoist guerilla groups had their headquarters in the Himalayas, mainly in Mustang and Dolpo, regularly taking captives among the population, including children. To protect them, they were sent to schools in Kathmandu and India.

During the aforementioned civil war, several aid organizations from the West began to operate in Nepal. Foreigners established them on the spot, mainly to save street children. However, only after a catastrophic series of earthquakes, in 2015, did Nepal receive structural assistance. Hundreds of NGOs began working in and for Nepal, which resulted in not only the reconstruction of the country, but also the emergence of new road, electric, telephone, internet and school infrastructure, which found its way to remote villages also. As a result, we have observed a decline over the last two years in parents sending small children to Indian boarding schools and an upsurge in putting them in schools closer to home (In 2017 there are only about 150 children in BCH, compared to over 300 in 2007).

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the size of the Bönpo population, the fears of Bön leaders regarding their culture and community being absorbed by a dominant Buddhist culture, are understandable. Hence, in teachings, official self-presentations and all kinds of conversations, geshe emphasize the need to integrate Bönpos, support them and



Girls from Bon Children's Home in Dolanji (H.P., India) 2004. Photo A. Szymoszyn.

develop their identity and awareness of Bön. These objectives justify the leaders' actions in accepting not only Tibetan refugees and their descendants into the Tibetan center for Bönpo families, but now also mainly representatives of the Himalayan ethnic groups from Nepal. The supremacy of religious and cultural identification over ethnic identification is intensively promoted. This is manifested in the organizing structural system of the camp, its socio-religious activity and religious teaching of children and youths. Nonetheless, clan, ethnic and national divisions function among them in the centers, building informal structures between them, compared to those known from their home lands. The solution for traditional divisions is to unify (for all Tibetan schools in exile) education and upbringing in a spirit of Tibetan patriotism. In this way, Tibetanness influences deeply and is permanently intertwined with the process of constructing individual identities of the Himalayan youth grown up in Tibetan social environment. To this complicated mix has to be added the impact of global culture in modern Indian outfit which affects children and teenagers every day at school and during their leisure time. This interesting cultural mix makes most young boarding school-graduates in adulthood define their own identity as multicultural³⁰.

³⁰ The issue of transculturality and identity of Himalayan youth I discuss in another article being prepared for publication.

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