The term gShen, indicating in Tibetan a specific category of Bon priests, has often been the subject of tentative interpretations. In ye-gshen, the ye only has an emphatic value; according to the Bon tradition this applies then to higher, divine gshen. The most satisfactory explanation so far seemed to be the one put forward by H. Hoffmann seeing in gshen an old Tibetan word for "shaman", even though he recognised that this interpretation does not satisfy the totality of cases. F. W. Thomas and J. V. Maté interpreted it as a derivative of shen (old Tib. shem = buteche). On the other hand, A. H. Francke realised that the gshen, based on their activity as described in the gzis-rig-pa, might be seers or teachers. More of the Nine Ways (Tib.: gthe-pa), the practices that a Bon-po has to go through to reach his state of perfection, are qualified by gshen, for instance snang-gshen (the method of exorcism) or srid-gshen (the teachings about the after-death state in the bar-d). As in these cases, the use of gShen in gShen-mas (buddhist: dgra-bcom-pa-snrin) for the Bon deity gShen-lha-'od-dkar in Sambhogakāya is not to be explained in a shamanistic sense. This interpretation remains dubious mainly for the understanding of the name of the semi-legendary organiser of the Bon religion, gShen-tab-mi-bo, whose biography also does not indicate being a practising shaman, even if shamanism played a considerable role in the old Bon.

On the other hand, we know from the language of Zhang-Zhung, the old stronghold of the Bon religion, that the term shen (shin) is equivalent to Tibetan (raum-) shes and shes-pa, particularly as "to know" but also with the meaning of "soul". The dropping of prefixes, like the g in gshen, is not unusual in Zhang-Zhung. According to dgra-bcom Chos-lugs-rges-pa, Tibetan ron-shes is rendered in Chinese as (shen-shih), and shen in Chinese, like the shin in Zhang-Zhung, also means "soul", including its derivatives as "to recognise" and "to know". I have often indicated the correlation of the Zhang-Zhung language with the old Chinese and with the languages of Si-Hsia and Mi-Nyag. On the basis of our current knowledge, the
term geshe becomes meaningful in all the above mentioned occurrences with the help of the Zhang-Zhung language. The fact that the five geshe emanated from gShen-rab-mi-bo are also called ye-shes-kyi-lha, viz. "divinities of knowledge or wisdom" is in line with the definition of geshe we have found.

Turning to the meaning of gShen-rab-mi-bo in particular, we should again refer to Zhang-Zhung, where the syllable ra or rab equals the Tibetan rgya(s). As I could show in my studies on the interpretation of the Zhang-Zhung language, the classical language of the Bon-po (see note 2), its lexicon provides valuable help towards the understanding of many supposed Tibetan terms from the sphere of the Bon Religion. For instance, there is a Dang-ra in the Tibetan lake region, where ra(b) corresponds to Tib. rgya and dang (Chin.: tang) to Tib. mdzad.

Accordingly, a meaningful interpretation of gShen-rab is then Shesrgya or Shes-rab. The West-Tibetan region of Mar-yul offers another example of how useful the Zhang-Zhung lexicon can be. In Zhang-Zhung, mar is the Tibetan gser. We are therefore dealing with Suvarnagota (Suvannabhumi), the Chinese Si-li. Si is the Tibetan gser (Zhang-Zhung: mar) and li the Zhang-Zhung word rgya (=Tib: yul). The mixture of Zhang-Zhung and Tibetan, also as in Shes-rab, was by no means unusual well into the 8th century A.D., when Zhang-Zhung was still a lingua franca. Even many of the names of the old Tibetan kings only acquire a meaning with the help of Zhang-Zhung if, for instance, khri (Zhang-Zhung) equals Tib. sms and mu (drug.mu) in Mu-khri the celestial region (Tib.: dam-khri). We know that Gri-gum-btsan-po was avenged by one of his sons, Bya-khri, Gri-gum's sons Bya-khri (birds), Shakhri (carnal beings, mammals) and Nya-khri (fish) correspond to the three regions of the Bon cosmology, stang-lha, bar-btsan and ggeg-lha. Finally, we should also mention here the first mythological king of Tibet, gNya-khri-btsan-po known as a sa-hlag according to A.H. Francke's gNya-khri could be a late etymological spelling for Nya-khri. The usual translation of khri as "chair" or "throne" does not seem convincing.

We can therefore state that geshe, also in gShen-rab-mi-bo, cannot possibly be an old Tibetan word for 'shaman' which has then
undergone certain mutations of meaning in the organised Bon. On the contrary, the term comes from Zhang-Zhung, the classical language of the Tibetan Bon religion, and corresponds to Tibetan (rnam-)

shes or shes-pa in its different applications.

With this interpretation, also two statements about gShen-rab-mi-bo which H. Hoffmann (l.c., p.348 f.) quotes from the gZer-myig acquire a new meaning in keeping with the concepts of the Bon religion. He is described as "gshen-rab-chig-ga" (l 27 a4), which Hoffmann translates as "he is an excellent gShen'. With the help of Zhang-Zhung however, "he is a Shes-rab", a frequently used appellation in the Bon religion for important spiritual personalities, among whom he is the highest 8. In II 282 b3 it is said that gShen-rab-mi-bo dwells after his death in "gshen-grub-pa'i-dbyings", which Hoffmann translates "in the sphere (dbyings) of the perfect gShen'. Our reading "(he dwells) in the ye-shes-bri-dbyings" i.e. in the sphere of Sambhogakāya is also supported by a note in the "Lexicon of archaic terms" (l.c.) according to which gShen-rab-mi-bo is a gshen-rab-soms-dpa', that is a Dhyāni-bodhisattva (ye-shes-soms-dpa') 9. We have therefore obtained the following equivalents: gShen = shes (spa) and ye-gShen or gShen-rab = ye-shes or shes-rab (rесп).

Notes

6. Quoted by L. Petech, A Study of the Chronicles of Ladakh, Calcutta 1939, p.25. The domains of the so-bdag and of the klu (naga) are sometimes indistinct, corresponding to the old Tibetan se (lhae). For instance a chu-bdag can be found among the so-bdag (B. Lauer, Ein Suhngedicht der Bon-po, Vienna 1900, p.32 and 46), whereas the klu are also said to be spirits of the land, of the mountains and rocks (A. Schiefler, Das weisse Naga-Hunderttausend, Memores de l'Academie de St. Petersbourg, VII, 28/1, 1851, p.27). About the klu as so-bdag see also P. Verne, "A Preliminary Study of Chapter VI of the Gier-mig" (in: Tibetan Studies, Warminster 1980, p.185); S. Hummel, "Profane und religiöse Gegenstände aus Tibet und der lamaistischen Umwelt" (in: Tribus 13, 1964, p.61). Doubts about the reading gya' (neck) can already be found in the filon-po-bka'u/thung-gyi (Ts. 2 ff.), where it is read nga and understood as full moon of the time of birth.


8. gYung-drung-gyals-mtshas-dpal-bshang-po, Lexicon of archaic terms, Delhi (Tibetan Bupon Foundation) 1966 p.138; gaban-rab-mchog (Ser. 'gbanavarpa).