

## John Vincent Bellezza and the Pre-History of Tibet

### *Spirit-mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet: Calling Down the Gods*

By John Vincent Bellezza

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Review by Michael White

There was a time in the ancient history of our globe when people believed the earth was a living being ruled over by all the forces of the sun, moon and stars and all the particulars of nature were living elementals. These supernatural forces were in a hierarchy, and the tallest mountains and largest lakes were the divine monarchs of the pantheon of local deities. John Vincent Bellezza's work documenting the pre-Buddhist history of Tibet has opened a window into this ancient history, which, incredibly, still survives on the high reaches of the Trans-Himalayan mountains of Tibet. He has published four major studies with another forthcoming. These include *Antiquities of Northern Tibet* (2001) and its companion, *Antiquities of Upper Tibet* (2002), which survey a great variety of archaeological sites on the high plateaus of Tibet. These books are richly illustrated with photographs of different types of ruins, including megalithic remains and prehistoric rock art on the high plateaus between 14,000 and 18,000 feet. These two books provide detailed archaeological surveys of a large number of ruins of pre-Buddhist sites without going into detail regarding the anthropological or ethnographic information associated with the sites.

His other two books, *Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilizations in Tibet* (1997) and *Spirit Mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet: Calling Down the Gods* (2005) provide more detailed anthropological and ethnographic information along with textual and linguistic research that casts a light on the pre historical remains that he documents. Another title, *Antiquities of High Tibet:*

*A Comprehensive Ethnoarchaeology and Textual Analysis of Pre-Buddhist Archaeological Monuments and Rock Art in the Tibetan Upland*, is forth coming.

His books mark a huge advance in the study of the ancient civilizations of Tibet. He carries on in the tradition of Guiseppe Tucci, George Roerich, Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin and others who have explored Tibet seeking out archaeological sites. He uses a combination of history, archaeology, ethnology, anthropology and linguistics. To many students of Tibetan Buddhism, the history of Tibet begins in the sixth and seventh centuries C.E. In his books, Bellezza explores the pre-Buddhist history of Tibet which he divides into two great periods. First is the history of the country known as Zhang-zhung, which included most of modern Tibet in its territories. Zhang-zhung held sway over this territory until the seventh to eighth centuries when the kingdom of the Yarlung Valley in central Tibet rose to power and, in an act of political sabotage, assassinated the last King of Zhang-zhung. Afterward, the Yarlung dynasty slowly came to dominate the region including the ancient capital of Zhang-zhung in western Tibet. The religion of Zhang-zhung, called Bon, continued to hold sway in remote parts of Tibet up until about 1250 C.E. and even now ten percent of the populations is Bon.

Secondly, he reaches back before Zhang-zhung and the Bon to the Neolithic and Bronze Age. He begins delineating the time spans for these periods and puts the Neolithic from 3,000 BC to 1,500 BC, and the Iron or Metal Age from 1,500 BC up to 700 C.E. In these ancient traditions, the people believed that the great mountain peaks, the lakes and all the forces of nature were supernatural beings. The divine dyads of the title of his first book are the places where there is a mountain peak associated with a certain lake. The divine beings that are personified in the mountain and the lake are consorts who are responsible for the well being of the entire area. He studies two particular dyads that are found in the region of central and western Tibet. He shows how these deities are personified in the liturgical texts that are used in their worship. He also gives a review of the literature showing how these elemental local deities are depicted, first in the Bon

tradition and later in the Buddhist tradition. Finally, he provides a detailed archaeological survey of the areas around the lakes. Each of the two lakes is surrounded by caves and ruins, and, in some cases, the walls of the caves were covered with petroglyphs and pictographs. He provides an in depth analysis of these cave paintings with cross-cultural information to begin the process of dating them. Some of the paintings are of great antiquity.

In the foreword to *Divine Dyads*, written by Namkhai Norbu, he says, “Zhang-zhung is the source of Tibetan culture and history.” He also says the population of Zhang-zhung was largely nomadic, living primarily in tents. They were a confederation of tribes but had a capital city, a king and a national religion. They built castles and fortresses to govern and guard their country. He does a very detailed survey of the ruins of some of these and explores the local legends that still cling to these spots. There were also religious institutions, and they were especially centered around the sacred lakes and utilized the caves in the mountains around the lake’s shores.

Zhang-zhung was defined geographically by three great dyads which mark the Western area, the center and the Eastern region of the great plateau and lake region known as Bhang thang. The first of these in the West is Mt. Kailish, which he refers to by its Tibetan name, *Gangs ti se*, along with lake Manosovar. In *Divine Dyads*, he writes that because so much has been written about Mt. Kailish he is going to concentrate on the other two dyads. Yet these are not the only such pairs of local deities, and he reports that there are hundreds of them to be found in the great expanses of Tibet. He visits the remote areas where these indigenous traditions continue to survive in the high mountains of contemporary Tibet. It is remarkable that the world can sustain these remote areas where ancient indigenous traditions can survive. The intense climate of Byang thang which has many areas between 14,000 to 18,000 feet in altitude helps to preserve these traditions which include the deification of meteorological, celestial and topographical features along with animal and plant life. The Bhang thang is roughly eight thousand square miles in what has come to be called the Trans-Himalaya region. In this context, the great

mountain peaks and the huge lakes that form on their slopes are the most dominant of all these features and stand out as the rulers in a pantheon of supernatural forces.

He explores the literature of the Bon tradition and the later onset of Tibetan Buddhism and demonstrates how the same strategy was used in relation to these indigenous deities in both traditions. The indigenous tradition of the mountain deities ruling over their kingdom was already in place when the ancient Bon tradition was established. There are hagiographic stories in the Bon scriptures telling how the great founder of Bon subjugated the mountain deities and made them protectors of the Bon religion. They claim these ancient deities were blood-thirsty, wrathful beings that were tamed by the Bon. The Buddhist make very much the same case in reference to Padmsambhava, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism, and there are stories of Padmasambhava entering into spiritual combat to subjugate the mountain deities and make them protectors of the dharma.

These deities, known as *yul lha*, protect the vitality and sanctity of their kingdoms, and, as long as the people under their domain subscribe to their religious and environmental obligations, all will be well in the kingdom, but should they violate any of these protocols they will feel the wrath of the deities, which can manifest as severe hail or other crop-destroying weather, disease for flocks or even personal health problems. In order to maintain proper relations with the mountain deities, the Bon, and later the Buddhists, carry out elaborate rituals and ceremonies to honor and supplicate them. Activities such as fire pujas, building cairns on the mountain passes, circumambulating the mountains and the lakes and flying pray flags are ways of supplicating the mountain spirits. There is even a genre of Tibetan literature known as *Gsol kha* that deals with ceremonial texts written in praise of the indigenous deities. Even now in some villages, they are still appeased with animal sacrifices and with offerings of meat or horns from slain animals. The deities are fed with incense and—as the newer religions dictated that blood sacrifices were no longer allowed—*torma*, images formed of dough that substituted for the animal sacrifices. He even finds a scriptural text with detailed instructions describing a series of

offerings that include an “offering of a beautiful young woman.” His research includes archaeological finds from ancient tombs that indicate ransom sacrifices in which, upon the interment of a high status person, other people were sacrificed to accompany them in death.

The life force of the mountain is personified in local iconology where the deity is pictured as a robust man riding a white horse carrying a crystal mala in one hand and a bow and arrow in the other. However, the life force of the deity can also manifest in other forms, such as a gigantic snake, a bear, a wolf or even a dragon. These animal forms reflect totemic beliefs from ancient shamanic traditions.

The research for these books took him on many treks across parts of Tibet that are over 12,000 and 14,000 feet in altitude. For many years, he spent half the year in Tibet exploring archaeological remains and the other half in Dharmasala, where he studied at the Tibetan Archives to sharpen his language skills so he could conduct interviews and read the texts associated with the various deities he was studying. On some of the trips, he made pilgrimages circumambulating the sacred lakes and mountains on foot. He would survey ancient ruins, taking photographs and interviewing local nomads and villagers along with any Bon or Buddhist lamas who resided in the area.

He has documented three main types of ancient sites: first, caves, many with paintings on the walls, second, megalithic remains including standing stones, stone circles and unusual rectangular arrays of standing stones, and, third, ancient buildings made of stone that were in some cases hilltop castles and fortresses and in others the ruins of ancient Bon religious institutions. He carefully catalogs these sites, surveys their dimensions, photographs the remains, interviews the local people to find out if any memory survives about the sites and finally studies the historical, hagiographic and religious literature associated with the sites.

The oldest of the rock art sites show vibrant portraits of animals, men on horseback armed with bows and arrows and people in combat with shields and swords. He has inventoried many different kinds of megalithic sites including single standing stones, circles of stones and rectangular arrays that can have up to 1,000 standing stones. These

large arrays are typically accompanied by adjoining structures. His research indicates these standing stones had some funerary purpose.

In *Calling Down the Gods*, he goes into great details about how these indigenous gods are able to speak through spirit mediums. These spirit mediums are possessed by the local indigenous deities and speak for them. However, the deities of the dyad, the deity of the mountain and the lake, are too powerful to enter into any human receptacle and only lesser members of their retinue are suitable for accommodating the consciousness of a human. In contemporary Tibetan society, under Chinese rule, these mediums risk imprisonment if they allow themselves to be possessed openly. The bronze mirrors that were part of their costume have now been outlawed. This kind of mirror was referred to as “the entire world” and was the place where the deity resided until called forth in the ritual. Then, during the possession of the spirit, the personality of the medium was kept in the mirror. During the trance, the medium is able to predict the future and to heal using a *kata* which he or she holds to the body of the person who is ill and sucks and tugs on the other end of the scarf to extract the cause of the illness. He found thirteen lineages of mediums including some that were possessed by zoomorphic deities such as Red Copper Wolf, Black Bear with the White Shoulders and Owl with the Long Beak. Before his work, little was known about Zhang-zhung. As a result of his many field trips to document Pre-Buddhist sites associated with Zhang-zhung, he has begun the process of establishing the extent of its boundaries, its chronology and its religious traditions. While Zhang-zhung was largely nomadic, he has found agricultural areas with ruins of houses which served as fixed settlements at least during the growing season.

He found evidence that the priests were also warriors and carried weapons and led troops into battle. The priests had costumes that included horned helmets. The Bon tradition had both ceremonial magic, ritual sacrifice and also a *dzog chen* tradition of meditation. Zhang-zhung came to its end not so much due to conquest but more so due to climatic decline. The climate became dryer and dryer, and many of the lakes that were settlement areas and agricultural centers

became salinized. When the Yarlung Dynasty finally took over, it was after several hundred years of climatic pressures.

He has inventoried over 500 Zhang-zhung sites and over 100 rock art sites between 14,000 and 18,000 feet. This extreme altitude has acted to preserve both the ruins of the ancient pre Buddhist societies as well as the tradition of the indigenous deities, which still survives within both the Bon and Buddhist communities in these high mountain areas.