

THE GAME OF GO IN ANCIENT AND MODERN TIBET

by Peter Shotwell

This article is a revised, corrected and expanded version of Go in the Snow, originally published in GoWorld No. 69, Winter 1993. In 1994, it won the first Bob High Memorial Prize awarded by the American Go Association for the best article published on go for the general public, and was translated into Tibetan by Sonom Chogyl of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences for the Tibetan Journal of Social Sciences. It is a report on what I had the rare opportunity to see and investigate as best as was possible during two trips in the early 1990s. Since its initial publication, according to my informants, no new material has surfaced.

* * * * *

Concerning Yesterday: Everything we know of the people, ideas and events of early Tibet lies in a confusion of ruins, records and remembrances that have been preserved, altered or lost for many reasons. What we do now is impose various concepts on them, but the results can only be shadows of what once was.

Concerning Today: There are seductive ideas of going to Tibet and finding in the Himalayas a lost monastery, a Shangri-la, where high Buddhist Lamas, with all the accumulated wisdom of past lives, place go stones on the boards, while they monitor the slow tunings of the Great Wheel of Time. Of course, these are illusions.

The study of go in Tibet is in a preliminary stage. It is preliminary because much more is unknown than known. Those who have studied it have not been anthropologists, historians or Tibetans, and those who have studied Tibet have not known a great deal about go. Both have missed much.

Further investigation will be a difficult task. Tibet is enormous. The speaking area covers the modern territory plus large parts of Qinghai, Gansu and Szechwan Provinces in China, and extends into Nepal, Bhutan, Mustang, and Sikkim in Northern India. Most future research will have to be done in the countryside where travel is not allowed. Even if it was, much of Tibet is a desolate wasteland that is over 12,000 feet. The climate is hostile most of the year, there is little food, the water is polluted, and there is little mechanized transportation outside the few main roads. A simple trip of 100 km. can take a week. There are often no telephones or clocks, so interviews and meetings can be very difficult to arrange. Knowledge of Tibetan is imperative, but there are many dialects. As in many poor countries, using a lot of money to solve these problems can be counterproductive.

On the other hand, while the spirit of the culture remains, the content is disappearing rapidly. Tibetan go will die with the older men of this generation. (1)

What Is Known

The first article on go in Tibet was written in 1982 by Cheng Xiao Liu, 6-dan, now the editor of a Chinese *wei qi* magazine. Mr. Cheng proposed that the Chinese brought go to Tibet in the 7th century, and that stories about Tibetans playing go before this were made up later. There is a possibility that, writing when he did while the Cultural Revolution was still somewhat in effect, it may have been impolitic to say otherwise. His article was discussed by Yasunaga Hajime in the Japanese *Go Magazine*, by myself in the *American Go Journal* and, more extensively, by John Fairbairn in *GoWorld*. (2)

In 1993, an article, *Symbolism of Black and White in Tibet*, was written by Yian Zhen Zhong in Chinese for the magazine *Tibetan Culture*. Mr. Yian, a founder of the Tibetan 'Strange

Occurrences Society,' considerably enlarged Cheng's efforts with many new stories and records. While not entirely focusing on go, nor following out the conclusions, he argued that there was a parallel development of Tibetan and Chinese *wei qi*, and that early tales of its being played in Tibet were accurate. His reasoning will be examined, but first some background is necessary.

Before its partial unification in the mid-7th century, most of the Tibetan area was a patchwork of small warring kingdoms. The religion was *Bon* (or *Bon-po*). Strictly speaking, *Bon* means only 'priest'—not 'religion' and refers to individual 'shamans.' To them, as D. L. Snellgrove phrased it,

The phenomenal condition is not a self-existent structure but is dependent on other states of being. He who knows how may work things to his will for good or evil. (3)

Outwardly, they differ from the Buddhists because their 'swastika' is reversed, they walk counter-clockwise around sacred sites, and they chiefly worship their Persian founder, yShen-rab.

During that same critical period of 600-700 AD, the Buddhists began to arrive in force from India, eventually converting most of the population. They invented an alphabet and writing appeared for the first time. The religion that developed, however, absorbed many of the *Bon* beliefs and what resulted was very different from what had originated in India or the style that was been adopted in China after the 3rd century, AD. For example, oracles and astrology were used, and one could reach Nirvana in one lifetime.

Meanwhile, the *Bon* developed into three types: the 'White' (often indistinguishable from the Buddhists); the 'Striped' (a mixture of older practices, often confused with the original Buddhist sect of 'The Old Ones'); and the 'Black' (the old, pure form). By the 1100s, in defense and in imitation of the Buddhists, many *Bon* started to organize themselves into monasteries and began to write down sutras and records.

The first serious contacts between the Chinese and Tibetans also began in the seventh century, although 'contacts'

is perhaps a euphemism—a Chinese princess, whose equipage included a go set, was given as tribute to a Tibetan king and, later, the Tibetans sacked the Tang Dynasty capital of Chang An (modern Xian). A contemporary Chinese account found that,

Many people serve the God of the goat and ram, and believe in Shamanism. The people do not know how to discern the seasons, but reckon the barley-harvest season as the beginning of the year. Chess [i.e. go], gambling, trumpet blowing as well as beating drums are their chief games. Bow and sword are never far from the body. The people honour the young and neglect the old ... (4)

The kingdom collapsed in 842, and the next phase, which has lasted until today, brought the famous alliances and fights between the Buddhist Lamas and, first, the Mongols (inhabitants of Mongolia who conquered China in 1271), and later the Chinese. ‘Dalai’ Lama is a Mongolian word, and most Mongolians are (or were) Tibetan Buddhists.

From very early on, the Buddhists (whose monks formed about a quarter of the male population) were prohibited from playing *wei qi*, while it formed a definite part of the *Bon* tradition. It continued to be played by the aristocracy until the collapse of the old order, being one of the ‘Nine Activities’ of an accomplished gentleman.

Records and Remembrances

Care must be called for in determining which game is being referred to, especially in the oral records. Today, *Zang qi* (from *Xi Zang*—‘Tibet’) is used in common speech throughout the country, but *qi* is a Chinese imported word. Most books will use *mi* (or *mig*) *mang*, which means ‘many eyes’ and refers to the board, although it may have originally meant ‘many stones.’ However, according to those members of the former aristocracy that I met, *mi mang* refers to *wei qi* only in the Lhasa area. Outside the capitol, the name can also refer to *bKugom bu Chos* and other kinds of games played on go or go-like boards. Its rules, but not the intensity of play, are entirely different from

those of *wei qi*. While care must be taken in examining records, it should also be realized that the *wei qi* form has a far greater prestige than these other games.

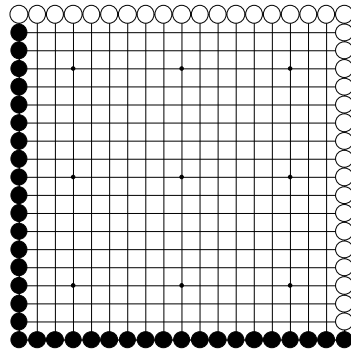
1) On Mt. Bunburi, 'three days east of Llahsa,' an early Indian Buddhist priest came over the mountains to this *Bon*-controlled area. The local *Bon-po* challenged the interloper and the two agreed to a debate over doctrine. Speaking different languages, they couldn't understand each other, so they decided to play *wei qi*. The *Bon* won the game but the Buddhist won the last contest by hopping on the first beam of morning sunlight and beating his rival in a race to the mountaintop.

Yian thinks this indicates that go was a traditional *Bon* game, there being no history of go playing in India.

2) There are many kinds of spirits in Tibet. *Kadomas*—*Dakinis* in Sanskrit—are very common. Female teachers of secret doctrines, they are either not of this world or exceptional people who have been re-incarnated as women. They have red or green eyes. The leader of one group has the head of a lion and the body of a woman. On Mt. Zari, in southern Tibet, is a natural stone board where she played go with her cohorts. Once every twelve years, during the Year of the Monkey, the locals offer devotions and walk around the stone in *Bon* fashion, hoping to gain favors and wisdom. Tibetan elders recall hearing stories about the *Khadomas* playing go in the storms and wind with the black and white clouds of the skies. Always, the good *Khadomas* would win.

3) Don Drob Lha Ghal, a *Bon* specialist, told me that in Ghalrong, the village he had grown up in north of Llahsa, he had played Tibetan *wei qi* as a child. He said the local *Bon* know about *wei qi* but, for relaxation, they played another extremely complex kind of game with go sets, where black and white stones are lined up on the sides at the start of the game and then move out and jump over each other until all of one player's stones are lost or trapped in the corners. Perhaps this is *bKugom bu Chos*, which a high Lama I met in Sarnath, in northern India, called a game he had played in his youth south

of Llahsa (he broke into tears of memory when I showed him my go stones).



The opening of a Tibetan Game (possibly *bKugom bu Chos*)

4) Both Cheng and Yian describe a carved stone board in Qinghai where King Gesar's wife (and presumably Gesar) and the military staff played *wei qi*. Subject of the longest folk poem in the world, he was a leader of one of the smaller districts after the breakup of the Tibetan Kingdom. In some versions, *wei qi* was recorded as being played before important decisions were made. The name 'Gesar' probably comes from the Byzantine use of the word 'Caesar.' There is doubt as to whether he was Buddhist or *Bon*, or even Tibetan or Mongolian, and a special department is studying him at the University of Tibet.

5) Cheng and Fairbairn relate one of several folk tales about the royal and aristocratic fondness for go. A certain king had a parrot that would fly about his palace and report back to him about what it had heard. One day, it became apparent that the (or a) queen was plotting treason. He forced her to play a game of go and analyzed the resulting tongue-fighting, which traditionally accompanies Tibetan playing (see below), From her answers, he deduced that what the parrot had reported was true. Appropriate actions were taken: the queen was demoted to the rank of commoner and all her family executed.

6) Yian relates from a *Bon* document that, sometime before the Buddhists came, a certain boy's father had been

killed by an enemy. His son grew up feeling the stirrings of revenge, but was it 'time?' Would he be able to kill his adversary? His mother gave him a *wei qi* set and, with one hand taking White and the other Black, with his *doppelganger* spirit sitting on his right shoulder offering advice, his mother shouting 'power mantras' he played a game with himself. The game was close but finally White, 'his side'—the 'good side'—won. This indicated it was a good time for the enterprise, which, as it turned out, it was.

7) Cheng mentions a very early record that the Buddha played 'excellent' *wei qi*. However, this was not translated into Tibetan until after 700. Yian thinks that it was faked by the Buddhists, indicating their jealousy at not being able to play well.

8) In Tome, near Shigatze, where Yian says 'The King of *Wei Qi*' once ruled and all the monks played go,' I showed some villagers a game diagram and they became fearful. They didn't want to talk about it, saying it was 'Black *Bon*' and, 'This is what they used, when they would tell you things like how long you had to live.'

The King of *Wei Qi* must have reigned after 1100 when *Bon* monasteries were first organized. I tried to visit but was arrested by unsympathetic police, it being too near a notorious prison. What little I did see of the buildings and iconography of the bottom part, where I managed to talk to some of the officials, was 'White,' as all the *Bon* monasteries now seem to be. No one knew of any go being played by the monks there. I was prevented from seeing the main buildings on the top of a hill, however, and it would have been interesting to talk to some of the older monks, if there were any left. However, there was a 25-year dispersal and only a very partial repopulating of a few Tibetan monasteries following the Cultural Revolution.

9) In Turfan and Dunhuang, which interface Tibet, China and Mongolia along the old Silk Route, various Tang Dynasty go objects have turned up. These include the oldest go painting (on a silk manuscript, now in London), various full-size stones and miniature go sets, and official Chinese reports on the

Tibetans' fondness for playing dice and *wei qi*. Yian points out that these would have mentioned Chinese origins, if that had been the case.

Other records indicate that there was a great deal of study of the game in during these times and that there were even books of strategy, but these references may be to Chinese *wei qi* since the *Dunhuang Xieben Qejing*, a tactics book from the Sui Dynasty, was also discovered there.

10) The four old Tibetan *wei qi* players that I met in Lhasa all say that they think the game originally came from Mongolia (where only the terminology is different—see below). Yian thinks this is because in c.1200 two high-ranking Tibetans visiting Khublai Khan asked for and received the expensive gift of a go set. He doesn't discuss the possibility of a connection with go and go-like stones that have been found in Shamanist Siberia and in the epic, *The Tale of the Nissan Shamaness*. (5)

11) In the late 1600's, as discussed in Fairbairn's article, three games may have been played between a Tibetan 'Yellow Hat' Lama and a Mongolian general.

There is another story that after the Gtsang dynasty had taken over Tibet for the first time in the 17th century and tried to suppress Buddhism, the 5th Dalai Lama made a secret pact in 1641 with the Mongol general Gu-shri Khan, leader of the Khoshut tribe, as a result of which Gu-shri threw out the Gtsang. But the Mongols decided to stay in Tibet under Gu-shri's successor, Lha-bzang Khan, with Lha-bzang as king and the Dalai Lama as ruler. The arrangement worked, and ushered in a period of peace, but when the Lama died in 1679, his trusted retainer Sangs-rgyas rgyamtsho hid the fact while he sought the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama (the dead one's soul was supposed to transmigrate into the body of a child) and had himself appointed a minister-regent in the Lama's name. Relations with Lha-bzang became strained, but with both men surrounded by strong military forces they eventually decided to play a match of three games of go, under public gaze, for

hegemony of Tibet. Lha-bzang Khan won and eventually killed Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho in 1705.

To the highly superstitious Tibetans go then became unlucky, and the game declined among the populace, although it remained popular with the aristocracy. It was their custom, during the festival of Playing in the Garden on the 15th day of the 4th month of the Tibetan calendar, to invite their friends to their flower gardens, there to dine, sing, dance and play games—with go regarded as the most important.

Fairbairn added, however:

*I have not been able to find this corroborated in English versions of Tibetan history. The most scholarly version I know is *China and Tibet in the Early XVIIIth Century*, by L Petech, *Monographies du T'oung Pao*, Vol. 1, (E.G. Brill, Leiden 1972), pages 8ff. While this account does not rule out the anecdotal version, it makes it sound highly unlikely—although apparently there was a huge gathering of priests from both sides. I imagine it falls into the category of stories like Sir Francis Drake supposedly finishing his game of bowls before sailing out to crush the Spanish Armada. (6)*

My informants say that this story is not recorded in the Tibetan histories, and they may have not been playing for the 'hegemony' since it was only later that the Tibetan was killed. If the story was true, it might have added fuel to the eventually victorious 'Yellow Hats' (and Buddhists) general condemnation of go playing, but my informants said this was probably more through fear of losing to outsiders than as an 'omen.' This and other issues in this passage will be discussed in more detail below.

12) Stored in the library of La Brong Monastery in Gansu Province there is (or was) a 16-page 19th century manuscript on go by Dempa Diazo, a famous player, aristocratic *bon vivant* and astrologer. By then, the Yellow Hats were not only looking down upon go but had also made playing it illegal, at least for the commoners and monks. I explored part of the library with

the old Tibetan monk-librarian, but the fear of possible political entanglements with the government may have prevented him from showing it to me, if it still exists. Yian thinks it was probably burned with many other materials in the library during the Cultural Revolution. I also explored the Beijing National Library with several Tibetans who were scholars but uncovered nothing.

These are all the records I could find, and it is quite possible that there is nothing else left. All but four of the 2500 monasteries in Tibet, along with most of their contents, were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and even the Potola in Lhasa was marked for destruction until Chao En Lai had it surrounded with troops. This purge probably obliterated whatever had survived the persecutions of the Buddhists, who, even if they couldn't suppress the playing of the game among the aristocracy, at least prevented its theoretical development. The only new things we are likely to find are oral records or possibly artifacts in new archeological sites.

The Rules

Yian argues that part of the evidence that Tibetan go did not originate in China lies in the completely different terminology and, especially, in the famous killing rule. You must wait one move before killing any one-eyed group or before playing where a stone, or stones have been captured. In some circumstances, as far as a one-stone capture is concerned, this is an interesting rephrasing of the ko rule, which is universally stated as, 'No whole board-position is allowed repeat itself.' Perhaps this element of mercy is a later Buddhist innovation, since it is hard to imagine the *Bon* being overly concerned—they used *wei qi* board 'divination' to 'destroy bad things' in general, and cast spells and distributed poison to accomplish it in reality.

Another striking difference between Tibetan and Chinese go occurs in the beginning of a game when the board is automatically partitioned into areas of influence by twelve large

black and white stones called 'Bo,' which means something like 'scarecrows or 'protectors (of your fields).'

The center is *kong*—'empty' or 'belonging to everyone,' and the center point is often marked with a Vajra (the Buddhist 'symbol' of sudden enlightenment).

The smaller stones are called 'Diu'—'small, tough rocks' or actually anything small and tough. The total of all the stones on a side is supposed to be 301, even though the traditional 17x17 (cloth) boards (I saw one 15x15) have only 289 intersections. Note that $289 + 12 = 301$ (White has 151). The 12 starting stones also have significance in the *Bon* system. The year has 12 months and the (square) city of Olmolungring—equivalent to the Buddhist Shambala or Shangri-la—has 12 palaces. The board thus becomes a miniature representation of Time moving around a square Earth, in the manner of square-board games throughout the world. However, this kind of board is certainly not a converted 'duo-decimo calendar,' as amateur go champion and researcher Yasunaga Hajimi theorized in an article about the northern Yin Dynasty of China (1384-1112 BC). (8)

The difference in stone size provides additional evidence for the separation of Chinese and Tibetan go. In a very incomplete set of full size stones (about 20 in all) that I saw in the Dunhuang Museum, two of the black ones were exceptionally large and the rest were tiny, all in the Tibetan tradition. On the other hand, the stones of a game-in-progress on a miniature funeral board I saw in the New Delhi Museum in India, also from Tang-era Dunhuang, are all the same size, like the Han Dynasty 'tomb stones.'

Like Chinese stones, one side is flat, the other round. In the old Sikkimese set that I saw, some of the white stones were like moonstones but most of them seemed to be of the type one sees today in good Chinese sets from Yunnan. The black stones showed an eerie green translucence when held up to the light. Although both black and white stones appeared to be made of glass or marble, traditionally they have been made from secret recipes of what the locals call 'fused powdered rock—'not marble, not glass.' Perhaps some of the white stones

had been lost and replaced, or perhaps the moonstones were from an older, more 'primitive' set.

Players choose for Black and White by rolling the stones in a way reminiscent of the Taoist method of talking with the spirits. Certain combinations of flat- and round-side up mean various things. White (the 'good' color, but not necessarily the best player) goes first and receives $\frac{1}{2}$ a point for his efforts (i.e. White wins a tie). Handicaps are given in points and not extra stones. A *bo*, if captured, counts as one point like ordinary stones.

Play always begins at the corners, and you must play within one intersection of a previous play or *bo* (a knight's move is OK)(!) The center intersection is worth five points, and if you lose your two corners (the 1—1 points) and the opponent keeps his, there is a 20-point penalty (!!). Not knowing this detail is how I lost the one game I was able to play with these rules. Unfortunately, I was unable to record it and was hampered in the translation of details of the rules.

With these rules in mind, see what you think of the game that Fairbairn transposed from an old photograph.

Game to be inserted

(9)

My informants told me it was too early in the game to tell what the level of the players was. They also noted that 'all the really good players, who could think ahead 15 moves, are now dead.'

My informants added to Yian's list many other rules, customs and names that may seem strange to us, but whether these apply outside the Llahsa area, only further research can tell. For example, Yian reports on the famous 'tongue-fights' that the players would engage in as they placed their stones down:

'This is a mouse—it will eat out your house.'
'This is a cat—it will capture the mouse.'

'This is a rabbit—it will eat holes everywhere underneath you.'
'This is an eagle—it will catch the rabbit.'

'This is a leopard—it is so powerful.'
'This is a tiger—it has equal powers.' (10)

Yian contrasts these lively dialogues with the silent 'handtalk' and 'pure conversation' of c. 7th century Chinese *wei qi*. (11)

Also in contrast to Chinese and Japanese go, where Buddhist names abound, Tibetans use animal names for various shapes. 'Like a fish' is a two-eyed corner formation. 'Like 8 male deer (with horns protruding)' is another corner formation. You can 'Eat a puppy' (take an opponent's stone) and 'Cut its neck' (break a connection).

In Mongolian go, the big stones are called 'bulls' and the small ones are 'dogs,' and the effect is, literally, as Assia Popova describes in an interesting treatise on Mongolian gambling games, that they 'surround' and try to protect their own bulls. (12)

GO AND THE 'THIRD LEG' OF *BON*

The importance of go in Chinese Buddhist tradition is mirrored in the importance of Buddhism in Chinese *wei qi* terms and ideas, such as *ko* ('Eternity') and the concept of casting away the '27 Veils of Ignorance' that mask the 'Truths' of 'Time and Space.' Thus, it is curious why the Buddhists of Tibet prohibited the game.

Although *wei qi* takes away sacred-studies time, the Lamas did not prohibit all games for their monks. A simple 'children's and women's' game, 'five-in-a-row' (called *renju* in Japan) was permitted to be played on go boards. So was a dice game called *Sa-Lam Nam Shak*—the Indian 'snakes and ladders'—in which the participants would (temporarily) gamble on their 'salvation' or 'damnation.' Was it perhaps a lingering

jealousy over not being able to play well in the early days, when Buddhist first met *Bon*? Or was it something deeper?

As cultural artifacts, games reflect the values of the cultures that play them. Probably the most fascinating thing about go is that it has lasted so long and been adopted by so many religions and interest groups in China and elsewhere. To the people who have played it over the centuries, it was not just something to do but something that *should* be done and, therefore, something important to teach to their children.

Before the Buddhists embraced the game, it had already agreed with the ideas of the 5th century BC ‘School of the *Bing Jia*’—the ‘Dark’ or ‘Left-handed’ Way of the early Taoist Strategists, such as Sun Tze and Sun Wu. They thought that the strategies to influence and take advantage of the waning and waxing of Yin and Yang during the on-going process of the universe were the same as those used on go boards. This feature was dramatically illustrated by the Japanese 18th century playwright Chikamatsu, in his *The Battles of Coxinga*.

The Confucians, who originally opposed its play at least in their writings during the Han period, were glorifying its virtues after the 3rd-5th century AD, when poetry became a legitimate ‘art’ form to express their feelings. By the 5th and 6th centuries, go players had even become involved in the political process as a result of their skills. It was felt in many circles that if one could master the ‘microcosm,’ one could certainly master the ‘macrocosm.’ By the time of the Ming in the medieval period, go would become elevated to one of the ‘four pleasures’ and ‘accomplishments’ of the cultivated *literati*. This feeling lasted until the collapse of the traditional Chinese culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In Japan, after a similar collapse of the Edo culture, go not only survived but prospered, becoming a mass sport by combining the interests of businessmen-players who learned to appreciate its lessons for ‘market sharing,’ and newspaper owners who sparked this interest by sponsoring professional tournaments which increased their sales.

Communist China, which originally supported go playing, practically prohibited the ‘bourgeois’ game during the Cultural Revolution, only to revive it as their ‘national’ game (and, until

recently, promote it as the good use of an overabundance of spare time, and as a source of rare social advancement). Later, as a result of the Chinese winning international tournaments, go playing became a highly respected profession and a way to gain riches beyond former beliefs.

In the West, go is losing its reputation as a 'quaint,' tradition-bound game, and has attached itself to the interests of the rising computer/Internet elite. After 'Big Blue' defeated Gary Kasparov in chess, go has become the 'fruit fly' of computer game strategists and artificial intelligence studies, and also the subject of an increasing number of books and movies. (13)

How, then, did go fit into the *Bon* scheme of things? According to Numka Norbu, its leading expert, there are three 'legs' of *Bon*: 'Poetry' (i.e. control of the word); 'Spiritual' (control or mediation with the spirit world); and 'Wisdom' (knowledge about the nature of things). We have seen instances of the affinity of *wei qi* with the first two appendages; even more interesting is the relationship of go and games to the third one.

Religious attitudes towards games are often strange and complex. This is not only because games are recreational play that, in traditional cultures, often mark seasons and important events where they are accompanied by ritual gambling.

From a larger point of view, games involve the general problem of the resolution of conflict. The study of a culture's games leads us to their religious attitudes about seeing into the future—the abode of the gods—and thus to what they think about such things as fate, fortune-telling, gambling, chance and probability.

For example, as I have argued elsewhere, there seems to be a critical point in the development of Chinese myth, when King Yao taught his so-called 'idiot' (actually 'rebellious' or 'unruly') son *wei qi* in c. 2000 BC. It is possible that the original forms of this myth may be memorializing the idea that, by mastering a strategy game, man was attempting for the first time to see into the future on his own—that he was in control of his 'destiny,' so to speak. (14)

Similarly, in pre-Muslim tradition, there is the story of an Indian king who invented 'nard,' a dice game, to show that

nothing is gained through cleverness and skill. This was too one-sided, so he (or a minister) invented chess to suggest that success goes to the prudent, while misfortune befalls the ignorant. However, later strict Muslim theologians encouraged it because the player left himself in the hands of God, while they largely tried to prohibit chess because the players were trying to outwit God regarding their fates on the board.

On the other hand, in the medieval Christian world, monks could play chess because God gave man the power of rationality, which should be exercised. To play dice was often thought to invite the Devil, in the form of 'Chance,' into life.

The *Bon*, however, had no God, and in our sense of the word, probably no 'gods.' Underlying their whole system was a dualism probably imported from Iran. There has always been a war between 'Black' and 'White,' and between 'Good' and 'Evil,' which neither side will ever win. At any given moment in time there is a certain balance that permeates the universe. The Tibetan 'Great Wheel of Time' reflects this idea. The 'final' victory, when the 'Good Kings' will ride out of the city of Olmolungring, is only the beginning of another turning. The knowledgeable person in *Bon* is able to calculate this balance.

In the story about the boy playing himself, who was taking Black? It was not 'Death' (as in Bergman's chess-centered movie, *The Seventh Seal*), or the Devil (as in some science-fiction chess stories), nor was it the 'unseen opponent' (of yourself) as in Aldous Huxley's trope. The boy and his mother were not looking for an 'omen' or 'fortune-telling,' in our sense of the word. It was the condition of the universe that they were seeking to discover. 'God' was not outside of them.

In the same way a shaman might 'be danced' by powers greater than he, the stones were 'playing the boy.' It wouldn't have mattered if this had been a game of chance or skill—he could have been rolling dice just as well. But this was not Muslim-style fatalism, either. His future had not already been decided. The game activity was simply another part of the fluctuating totality of the whole system of the universe.

Under these circumstances of a 'continuous present,' a Black win would have indicated that it was an 'Evil Period'—black being the color of death and bad deeds, of the wild,

untamed Yaks, the underworld, the shade and shadows, the night, etc. The win by White showed it to be a 'Good Time.' White represents the dawn, the top of mountains, the light, the stars, the moon, the tame Yaks (crossed with cows), and the color of the stones that people put on the tops of their houses.

The 'logic' behind the events of the 17th century thus becomes more understandable. The victory of the Mongolian in go was only a 'sign' of the generally bad times—it was not an 'omen,' in the sense that it might have made go playing 'unlucky.' The actual 'winning' and 'losing' of games used in this 'sacred' sense, although they are called acts of 'divination' in English, are really meaningless in this system—they are only reflections of the state of the present turning of the Wheel of Time. In this situation, as Pharcis (who are Persian dualists now living in India) have told me, 'One does the best one can.'

It can be seen how this attitude might be offensive to a Buddhist frame of mind. As opposed to *Bon*, Buddhism is fundamentally anti-dualist and a 'salvationist' type of religion. Despite the fact that the Tibetan form employs oracles, the principal message is that you can 'win,' if you have enough faith. The fundamental *Bon* feeling is that you can only *find out* if you can win.

Given the Buddhist system of strict hierarchical monasteries which, probably for economic reasons, co-opted the energies (and appetites) of a fourth of its male population into studying scriptures with no other worldly concerns, it is no wonder that the Buddhists would prohibit such a *Bon* game. There was no psychological room left for distracting, competitive games of skill, which might also be useful (or threatening) in that they could inform the player of the state of the current universe.

The down-to-earth aristocracy, although outwardly Buddhist, had no such objections, but not because they were *Bon*-influenced. My informants said that they would not have been playing on the '15th day of the 4th month,' as has been reported, since this was a Buddhist holiday, but they certainly felt no compunctions about playing it at other times. It was boring to be always thinking about one's salvation. More important, they could also gamble at it. The Sikkimise family

had tales of Muslim merchants enthusiastically playing their fathers. (While the Muslims were prohibited from gambling, there were always 'presents' exchanged when they left.) (15)

Additionally, for the aristocracy, the game had status because their less-intelligent members couldn't play it well, the monks were prohibited and the lower classes didn't have the time to understand its complexities. Most important, it also fitted into their cultivated sense of symbolism. Beside the alternating darkness and lightness of the Tibetan landscape, there was also the contrast of the whiteness of their bones lying in the darkness of their bodies. In fact, in their most important origin legends, the first people were colored black and white.

* * * * *

Footnotes

1) I was extremely fortunate to meet Sonom Chogyal of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences, who, besides becoming a friend, helped translate and provide theoretical background on *Bon*. (The conclusions about go, games and *Bon* are my own, however). Through him, I met members of the once-royal family of Sikkim whose hospitality and interest in their culture are justifiably famous. Mr. Yian was also extremely helpful in elucidating some obscure points. A number of other people were also very generous with their time, energy and contacts: Zang Jian and Cheng Xiao Liu of the Chinese *Wei qi* Association, De Je Bai Ma and her grandfather, and *Bon* specialist Don Drob Lha Ghal.

2) John Fairbairn; 'Go on the Roof of the World,' *GoWorld*; No. 58; Winter 1989-90. See also his homepage at <http://www.harrowgo.demon.co.uk> and his work at <http://www.msoworld.com/mindzine/news/orient/go/go.html> for updates and scholarly papers on other aspects of the history of go in China, Japan and Korea.

3) See especially: Richardson and Snellgrove; *A Cultural History of Tibet*; Oxford; 1980.

To disentangle *Bon* from early folk religion is beyond the scope of this article.

4) He added,

... When our side was weak, the other side became strong, and when our side became strong, then the other side became weak. When the other side became strong, then they invaded our borders; when they were weak, they submitted themselves to our instruction. In regard to the way of treating them kindly, the Confucian scholars mostly talk about maintaining the peaceful relation, while the military generals expect to fight of . . . They flew on the Han territory like eagle. Unexpectedly, they revolt; and unexpectedly, they submit themselves, or relaxing or tensing. Even though they take the instructions of propriety and righteousness, their minds are like wolves.

Don Y. Lee, Tr.; 'The History of Early Relations between China and Tibet,' *Chiu t'ang-shu, a Documentary Survey*; Eastern Press; Bloomington, Indiana; 1981.

5) See my article in *The Go Player's Almanac 2001*; R. Bozulich, ed. (Kiseido Press; 2001) and posted elsewhere on this site. There is a complete discussion of unanswered questions about the relationship between go and Asian religions involving, for example, mysterious stones found in c. 1,000-5,000 BC archeological sites in Siberia and Shang Dynasty tombs, possible connections between shamanistic psychedelic mushroom taking and old Chinese references to mythical go players 'flying' up to mountain tops to play and etc.

6) Fairbairn *op. cit.* pp. 12-3.

7) Contrast this with the rather placid *yin-yang* sign that often adorned old Chinese *wei qi* boards. Sometimes, flowers would be sewn onto the cloth Tibetan boards in the same

manner that one of the old Han stone boards had persimmon flowers drawn in its corners. These old Han boards (which were made only for use in the next world) also had different sizes. One was 18x21. The earliest Chinese stones were rough and square, only later were they rounded off. They have been pictured in various official Chinese archaeological magazines over the years.

8) Yasunaga Hajimi; *Chugoku no Go*; JiJi Tsushinsha, Tokyo; 1977. See Shotwell, *op. cit.* for a complete discussion and refutation of the popular idea among go players and go histories that what they are 'seeing' on the go board is a representation of the heavens on the go board and the derivative idea that it was rival shaman throwing stones (representing stars) down on the board trying to 'divine' the future, which resulted in the first go games being played. See, for example, Donald Potter, *Go in the Classics; Go World*; No. 37; Autumn, 1984 and No. 42; Winter; 1985-6.

9) Illustration taken from Fairbairn, *op. cit.* p. 12. The photograph was taken by Heinrich Herrar (of *Seven Years in Tibet* fame) and was published in: Siegber Hummel and Paul C. Brewster; *Games of the Tibetans; FF Communications*, Vol. LXXVII; No. 87; *Academia Scientiarum Fennica*; Helsinki; 1963; pp. 1-33. Incidentally, the game the Prince of Sikkim played with Iwomoto 9-dan, which created such a stir in Japanese go circles and is illustrated and commented on by Fairbairn, seems to have been played with mixed rules, possibly out of politeness to the Japanese.

10) Cheng adds others, as translated by Fairbairn:

This is a rabbit.
My stone is a fox.

This is a panther.
This is a tiger.

My stone is a sparrow.

My stone is a nightingale. (and so on through the names of birds)

Fairbairn suggests that they may have rhymed or started with the same letters in Tibetan. I neglected to ask about this.

See also Richardson and Snellgrove, *op. cit.* for a wonderfully long and complicated tongue-fight between a Chinese and a Tibetan over how a mountain goes about breaking an egg.

11) According to Loh Wai Fong, the concept of 'handtalk' may have actually evolved from the need for secret communications between rebellious Confucian intellectuals of that period who were rebels to authority. (Private communication).

12) Fairbairn suggested that this phrasing might be a mistake, but it takes into consideration the aesthetics of the extreme 'hominess' of this type of go. See Assia Popova; *Analyse Formelle et Classification des Jeux de Calculs Mongols (Formal Analysis and Classification of Mongol Games of Calculation)*; *Etudes Mongoles*; Vol. 5; Nanterre; 1974; pp. 38-9, 45.

'Anthropomorphism' seemed to linger on in Chinese and Japanese go, too. The Chinese started with two 'home' stones each. The traditional Japanese custom of playing in the opponent's right-corner first, as several high-level players have commented, has no really valid mathematical reasoning behind it and there are, for example, openings which have utilized the center to attack 'downwards.' See Shotwell, *op. cit.*, for a discussion of a possible relation of this practice with the Chinese concept of *feng shui*.

13) See Shotwell, *op. cit.* for a complete discussion of these issues. Go has been featured in Kawabata's, *The Master of Go* (still in print in English), Travarian's 1970s best-selling thriller, *Shibumi*, Oliver Stone's TV series, *Wild Palms*, the first joint Japanese-Chinese film *The Go Masters*, and most recently,

if somewhat inaccurately, in the cult movie hit, *Pi* and the Hollywood production, *A Beautiful Mind*.

14) See Shotwell, *op. cit.* for a complete discussion. The 'unfilial son' aspects of the story seem to be a later Confucian overlay (a 'reverse-euhemerization'). The pattern of the story was transferred to two other early emperors, as the structuralist analysis of Sarah Allan and others have shown.

15) See Shotwell, *op. cit.* for a complete discussion of the 'sacred' and 'secular' aspects of gambling and go. See also, *The Rules of the Game*; Manfred Eigen and Ruthild Winkler; Harper & Row; 1983. Eigen, a Nobel Prize winner in molecular biology, discusses the idea that 'play' in the form of probability is something that permeates all the 'action' (excuse the pun) of the universe, from molecules to galaxies.