

A study on the Bon religious apparel

Abstract

Bon religion, an ancient faith of the Tibetan people, manifests its rich cultural heritage through distinctive religious apparel. However, Bon religious apparel due to its scattered distribution and limited records, still remains insufficiently researched. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Bon religious apparel and enhance the understanding of Chinese Bon culture, this study explores the color, pattern, and style in Bon religious apparel, revealing its deep correlation to Tibetan history, traditions, and society. Through substantial research, this study has concluded that Bon religious apparel mainly employs five classic colors, each representing fundamental elements and spiritual values; the patterns, including types of geometrics, animals and plants reflect Bon's spiritual criteria and societal norms; Styles like the lotus Hat and three-pointed hat signify historical evolution and cultural integration of Bon religion.

Keywords: Bon religion, Bon religious apparel, Tibetan history, Tibetan culture

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Introduction

Bon religion is a primitive local religion developed on the basis of natural worship and is the highest form of Tibetan ancient civilization in China.¹ In history, Bon religion was mainly prevalent in the three major Tibetan regions of Weizang, Kangba, and Anduo.² Later, due to the controversy between Bon religion and Buddhism, Bon religion was excluded and has only been spread in remote Tibetan areas in China to this day.³ The profound history of the Bon religion has nurtured its rich Bon culture, including diverse doctrines, rituals, apparel, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and artistic aesthetics.⁴ These cultures mainly rely on the study and analysis of limited ancient texts of Bon religion.^{5,6} As a mirror of the times and a representation of culture, the apparel of Bon religion is an important carrier of early Tibetan culture, reflecting the historical origins, cultural traditions, and social civilization of the Tibetan people.⁷ For example, the white, yellow and red apparel worn by Bon believers are related to the historical facts, teachings, and belief system of Bon religion.⁸ The patterns of Bon religious apparel reflect the spiritual criteria and societal norms.⁹ The diverse styles of the hats, robes, and other apparel of the Bon religion reflects the rich traditions, artistic aesthetics, historical evolution and cultural integration.⁵ It can be seen that the apparel of the Bon religion is an important component of traditional Tibetan apparel culture, and as a unique symbol, it vividly displays the rich and diverse culture of the Bon religion. However, due to its scattered distribution and limited records, Bon religious apparel gained low academic attention, high research difficulty, and a small audience, lacking comprehensive research. Thus, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of Bon religious apparel, examining its colors, patterns, and styles to reveal its deep correlation with Tibetan history, traditions, and society, thereby enhancing the understanding of Bon culture.

Colors of Bon religious apparel

The colors of Bon religious apparel mainly include five classic colors, which is white, red, black, blue, and yellow. These colors correspond to the colors, elements, wisdoms and characteristics of the Five Buddhas, representing earth, water, fire, wind, and space, respectively.¹⁰

White color on Bon religious apparel

White symbolizes innocence and chastity in Bon religion. Bon religion adores white and often uses white to represent the image

of gods in sacred ceremonies and ceremonies.¹¹ Many of the gods worshipped by Bon believers are mostly dressed in white apparel. Besides, Bon believers often wear white loop skirts, white linen shirts, and white crowns on their heads. Moreover, the commonly seen silk fabric Hada of Tibetan ethnic group is often white, indicating welcome and blessings to distinguished guests.

Red color on Bon religious apparel

Red represents flame and blood in Bon religion, and is a symbol of strength, slaughter, and vitality.¹² In the traditions of Bon religion, red can avoid the invasion of ghosts and monsters, and has the function of warding off evil. During the Tubo period, warriors were required to wear red robes and sometimes even paint their faces red to demonstrate bravery and brutality, intimidating the enemy. Another theory is that believers consider red as the least valuable color among all colors and use this color as the color for monks' apparel to express their desire for spiritual detachment and disdain for appearance.

Black color on Bon religious apparel

In addition to white worship, there is also black worship in Bon religion.¹² It is said that Bon believers worship nature and are afraid of disturbing the tree gods in the mountains and forests, so they do not cut down trees and prefer to wear black apparel. In the local Tibetan community in China, the apparel of the Bon believers is mainly black, and their hair is often wrapped in black cloth as well.

Blue color on Bon religious apparel

Blue symbolizes the sky in Bon religion, serene and profound.¹² The Bon believers regard blue as the most sacred color. In the existing Bon temples, we can see that the apparel worn by Bon monks is adorned with a blue border at the shoulders, robes, and brims, which is a witness to the ancient tradition inherited by the influence of primitive Bon religion.

Yellow color on Bon religious apparel

In Bon religion, yellow symbolizes the vitality, rebirth, and prosperity of the earth. This color represents the source of life and abundance, full of vitality.¹³ The nobility and faith represented by the yellow hat of the Bon religion stem from the historical events of its saints wearing yellow cloth during their practice.

Patterns of Bon religious apparel

The patterns of Bon religious apparel are one of the important manifestations of the Bon spirit, mainly including types of geometric pattern, animal pattern and plant pattern. These patterns not only reflect the aesthetics of Bon religious apparel, but also reflect the spiritual criteria and societal norms.

Geometric pattern on Bon religious apparel

Sun, moon, stars pattern: The sun is considered a symbol of eternity, while the moon and stars are considered symbols of light and purity, expressing the respect and gratitude of Bon believers towards these sacred natural objects.¹⁴ They are widely used in the Bon religious apparel, where the light of the sun is depicted as “米” shaped ray placed inside a circle or represented by only a few simple rays as the radiant sun. Stars are represented by solid small dots, embedded between the rays symbolizing the sun rays. The moon is represented by larger solid circles, which are decorated with different patterns according to personal preferences. Apparel adorned with the sun, moon, and stars are usually worn by Tibetan women in China, but in some traditional festival performances, men who dress up as women also wear them according to the needs of role-playing.

Spear pattern: The Spear pattern symbolizes victory in Bon religion.¹⁵ It is said that during a war, Genghis Khan was defeated. He knelt under a big tree and prayed. At this moment, lightning flashed, and thunder roared. A spear fell from the sky and landed on the tree. Genghis Khan knew it was fate's will and used it as his own flag representing victory. From then on, he won every battle.

Yongzhong pattern: The Yongzhong pattern of the Bon religion symbolizes the worship of nature, too.¹⁶ It is said that the earliest meaning of Yongzhong was light, and its shape was painted in a color resembling the radiance of the sun. The Bon religion worships light and uses it as a symbol of the Bon religion, meaning eternal life and immortality. It can be seen everywhere in Tibetan apparel in China, with different forms of Yongzhong patterns in headwear, collars, boots, and other places, some used alone, some overlapping or continuous, often appearing in the form of two consecutive patterns, indicating longevity, happiness, and eternal auspiciousness.

Animal pattern on Bon religious apparel

Peng pattern: Bon believers worship the Peng and revere it as a totem god, using Peng as a symbol of faith, which carries auspicious meanings.¹⁷ The Peng pattern is widely used in Bon religious apparel. For example, the traditional apparel of Ali Pulan women has the image of the Peng pattern, and the color of Tibetan women's apparel is also similar to the color composition and religious meaning of the Peng pattern, which is deeply influenced by the Bon culture.

Tiger pattern: In Bon religion, the image of a tiger also frequently appears. Many angry gods use tigers as mounts, while many great achievers, vajras, and guardian gods surround themselves with tiger skin. In some auspicious paintings with distinct ethnic characteristics, such as the Mongolian tiger picture and the wind horse flag, the image of the tiger is particularly common. Although the symbolic meanings of tigers vary across different artistic mediums, their basic meanings in Bon religion are consistent: tigers often represent a great power and positive values with terrifying images, which can dispel disasters and ward off evil, bringing happiness and peace to all beings.¹⁸

Plants pattern on Bon religious apparel

From the perspective of plant patterns on Bon religious apparel, it is mainly composed of small petal flowers unique to the Qinghai Tibet

Plateau such as the eight petal Gesang flower, Saigan flower, and snow lotus, as well as large petal flowers from mainland China and India such as peony and lotus.¹⁹ Other traditional Tibetan auspicious patterns such as Yongzhong pattern is used as embellishments for various apparel along with the plants pattern. Many patterns are cleverly combined into a harmonious layout of intertwining and interlocking, reflecting the national character of unity and friendship.

Styles of Bon religious apparel

Due to the abundance of apparel in the Bon religion, various different types of apparel have emerged through the integration with various religious cultures. This study takes hats as a typical example to analyze their style.

Lotus hat

Lotus hat symbolizes the history of Bon religion and is an important reflection of Bon culture. It is composed of a group of four to eight petal shaped flowers, with an upright decoration at the center of the top. Some branches of Bon religion have different top decorations on the lotus hat, all of which have many symbolic meanings. The main body of the Garmozejie hat in the Songpan region is red and white, with a heart shaped white pointed top that is about 15 centimeters long and has a front curved tip. The central decoration of the hat barrel is made of blue cloth folded into a hairline, and the 2cm wide blue angled line is exactly the “ascending light rope” on Zanpu's head as described in Bon mythology. According to the royal mythology system constructed by early Bon believers, Zanpu came from the heavenly gods to help and lead people in the pursuit of a better life, and ultimately returned to the heavenly realm through the ascending light rope.²⁰

Three-pointed hat

In the Minjiang region of China, Bon believers of Qiang ethnic group often wear a three-pointed hat made of golden monkey skin. There are three points standing upright on the top of the hat. It is said that one point represents black and white, meaning black and white are distinct, while the other two point represent heaven and earth, respectively. There are three leather ribbons behind the hat, and there are seashells on the front left and right in the shape of eyes. Some even decorate the brim with red silk or a row of toothed seashells. It represents the imagination and pursuit of heaven and nature, as well as the blending relationship between the Qiang people and other ethnic groups in the historical migration for generations.²⁰

Conclusion

This study has thoroughly explored the colors, patterns, and styles of Bon religious apparel, revealing its profound connection to Tibetan history, traditions, and society in China. By examining the five classic colors of white, red, black, blue, and yellow, this study has identified their symbolic representations of fundamental elements and spiritual values in Bon culture. Patterns such as the sun, moon, stars, Peng, tiger and plants have been shown to reflect the spiritual criteria and societal norms of the Bon religion. Additionally, styles like the Lotus Hat and three-pointed hat illustrate the historical evolution and cultural integration within Bon religious practices. By shedding light on the diverse attributes of Bon religious apparel, this study underscores the importance of preserving and studying these cultural artifacts. It also opens avenues for further research into other aspects of Bon culture in China, encouraging a deeper appreciation and recognition of Chinese historical and cultural heritage.

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Conflicts of interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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