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### **Study Abroad Research Context**

As someone who is deeply concerned, both intellectually and ethically, with issues of national violence and displacement, particularly in the developing world, conducting research in a refugee settlement in Nepal was the most important educational opportunity during my four years at Cornell. For me anthropology's unique contributions lie in its methodology. By immersing oneself into a different social world, while simultaneously examining one's own socialization and lived experiences, the anthropologist comes to know and understand a different way of life intimately, and begins to comprehend the complexity of a community or issue. Nepal—the Hindu kingdom in the midst of civil war and political upheaval, and one of the poorest countries in the world—indeed enabled me to critically examine my own world, while seeking to understand one that was extremely different. In other words, exploring a different community in some ways “like” my own, enabled me to return to my own community with new eyes in many ways.

While conducting my research independently in a Tibetan refugee settlement, I was able to go beyond the reading of ethnographic material, and do anthropological work while living with a family, conducting interviews, and participating in everyday life. Further, I was able to question, study and engage in issues important to contemporary anthropology that I had studied at Cornell giving me real experience doing the kind of research I hope to pursue in the future.

My own position as a diasporic subject, whose family had been refugees in the wake of the Armenian Genocide committed by the Turkish government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915, undoubtedly informed this encounter. I myself had traveled to the Republic of Armenia to take part in the rebuilding of the nation—playing hero—for one month in the summer after my sophomore year in college, constructing a school in an Armenian village. More importantly, perhaps I went to Mt. Kailash to meet Tibetans, and to understand myself.

The “encounter” in my own research was made apparent for me on April 24. On April 24, a Sunday, I awoke early, as usual. The sun was shining and the air was heavy, as monsoon season would soon begin. According to the Tibetan calendar, which follows the phases of the moon, the day was auspicious—a full moon day. Simultaneously (in my imagination which disregarded the time change),

Armenians around the world filled churches and halls to remember the ninetieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. My father would be at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City taking part in the national commemoration. Being socialized as an Armenian-American, I felt it was something I should also take time to remember, and perhaps because they had shared so much with me, I described for my Tibetan friends the meaning of the day for Armenians.

They were delighted! They were delighted to see me as, in a way, like them. The more urgent question was about the homeland, and they were more delighted to know that after centuries, Armenia had gained independence. This, for them, corroborated the idea, as did the State of Israel that it was only a matter of time; that historical example and the natural push and pull of historical change was on their side.

What became unique about that moment in my own imagination was that it seemed to signify an important part of my relationship and gravitation to Mt. Kailash. It brought to my attention what had brought me, a third-generation Armenian-American, to that place. Remembering the displacement of my own great-grandmother at the *ghompa* evoked a meaning of my desire to ask Tibetan grandmothers about their journeys, and Tibetan youth about their experiences as refugees.

In this way the Tibetans at Mt. Kailash contributed to my national mythology, and my way of knowing myself, however entirely imaginary that knowing would be. My own journey in the Mt. Kailash Settlement exemplifies the diasporic longing for self-knowing, and its active imagination. I came to the refugee camp driven by something akin to what drove Nepal-born Tibetan students to draw fanciful pictures of an imaginary Tibet, and desire to hop on the Kathmandu-to-Lhasa bus.

# We Could Be Heroes: Mythico-History, Diasporic Nationalism, and Youth Identity among Tibetan Refugees in Nepal

## Introduction

In her book on the national cosmology of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, *Purity and Exile*, Liisa Malkki writes, “in uprooting, a metamorphosis occurs: The territorializing metaphors of identity—roots, soil, trees, seeds—are washed away in human floodtides, waves, flows, streams and rivers” (1995:15). Malkki argues that in the modern age of nation-states, culture and identity are conceived in fundamentally territorial terms. Thus, being *out of place* disrupts and threatens national identity which attempts to appear pure, whole and natural. The “[v]iolated, broken roots” of displacement “signal an ailing cultural identity and a damaged national identity” (15).

This theory of diaspora, of communities outside of their “original” place, the place they call their homeland, is the fundamental basis upon which this study rests. This paper examines the way one diasporic community negotiates the local boundaries of its host country and community, and constructs and expresses a national identity and national cause outside of the territory that defines it. Like the refugees of mass violence in Malkki’s study, the community presented here, Tibetan refugees in Nepal, also defines itself in light of a specific history of violence and subjugation. The force of the violence experienced by individuals, and collectively experienced by members of the community produced profound trauma and a particular way of constructing their identity as a group whose cultural and physical survival is at risk, threatened from the outside.

In 1951 Tibet was invaded by Mao Zedong’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which instituted a violent colonial policy that led to the destruction of Tibetan religious institutions and traditional ways of life, as well as a tremendous amount of physical violence against Tibetan people. In 1959, after the violent suppression by the PLA of an uprising staged by Tibetans in the capital city of Lhasa, the Dalai Lama, the religious and political leader of Tibet, fled to India. There, he established a government in exile and procured lands from the Indian government as places of settlement for the 100,000 Tibetan people who followed him. Most settled in India, Nepal and Bhutan; later, some continued on to Europe, the United States and Canada.

For the exiled survivors of this period, the violent events which gave birth to the diaspora compose the primary history by which the Tibetan community in exile conceives its identity as a people. The history is conceptualized, told and retold in a way that reflects individual and collective memories of violence and destruction in the past. The local circumstances, of the isolated refugee settlement in Nepal, where, half a century after their settlement, the Tibetans remain refugees, lacking social and economic stability and political rights, provide the impetus for history and identity construction in the present.

This way of conceptualizing and narrating history is what Malkki calls “mythico-history,” a cosmological ordering of the world in which actors define themselves in opposition to an “other” in binary terms of good versus evil. The past becomes an allegory for present events, which are conceptualized in the same, moral terms as the history of violence (Malkki 1995: 53–5). How then does the Tibetan community in exile reproduce history, memory and grief; construct identity; and conceive of and act out their national duties?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the local conditions of Tibetan refugee life in Nepal, and discover how this community constructs its identity as Tibetan. My research finds that they seek resources outside of their host nation, from an international network of Western supporters, and eventually define themselves globally. However, the certainty of belonging for exiled Tibetans is ultimately challenged. While the Tibetans embraced the Western aid workers and sponsors as “second parents,” ultimately, intermarriage with westerners, for example, was feared and seen as challenging the natural order of national identity. Even those sources a community employs to claim and assert national identity may challenge its purity and completeness. How does the exile community avoid what Malkki calls “the annulment of an ‘other’”, the “fearful symmetry inherent in the nationalist beast” (Malkki, 258). In other words, in re-claiming life after devastation, and claiming nationality in exile, what local conditions allow a community to remember the past without demonizing the perpetrator community and returning to violence?

## **Methodology**

The research for this study was conducted in April and May of 2005 for one month of a semester-long stay in Nepal with the Cornell-Nepal Study Program, in the Mt. Kailash Tibetan Settlement. (The name of the settlement where the research was conducted has been changed. Mt. Kailash is a fictional name.) Prior to my research, I was fortunate enough to meet Tsering Dolkar, a twenty-year old student of economics studying at the local women’s campus

near the Mt. Kailash Settlement. Her home, where I met her while traveling, was an isolated settlement in the north, where she was visiting her father and sisters at the time. However, for the past year she had stayed with her aunt and uncle at Mt. Kailash, where she had also lived for many years while attending primary school as a child, and later while in high school in the nearby city. Having Tsering Dolkar, an insider in the community, as my guide during the month of my research was invaluable.

The primary language used in my interviews with young people was English; depending on the interviewee's level of English fluency Tsering Dolkar acted as my translator. She introduced me to people, arranged meetings and interviews, and acted as an ever-present guide at Mt. Kailash, providing answers to my unending questions. The friendship of Tsering Dolkar and her family, as well as teaching social studies at the settlement's primary school every day, gave me a wealth of opportunities to get to know people, and observe and participate in daily life. The young people I spoke to were primarily from the ages of 18 and 22, though while volunteering at the school I also had the opportunity to talk in depth with teachers and young parents who were slightly older.

The interviews quoted directly in this paper draw on my interviews with young people, both male and female, most of whom were still in school, but some who had left school to work selling handicrafts to tourists. This group was more educated than the average Tibetan exile. This is most likely due to the fact that Tsering Dolkar often introduced me to her friends, with whom she attended college, or had a similar level of education. For this reason, the sample group is not representative of all youth in the camp, but represents those young people who had the interest and aptitude to continue their studies.

## **Historical Background**

By 1955 the Chinese government began to strictly enforce Communist ideology and a colonial-style policy in Tibet, including the collectivization of property, oppression of religious expression, and disarmament of citizens. On March 10th 1959, sparked by new rumors of a Chinese plan to kidnap the Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans poured into the streets in protest of the occupation. By March 17th an armed battle had commenced between the PLA and the small Tibetan army, forcing the Dalai Lama and his family to flee to India (Avedon 1979: 36–56). Hearing of their leaders flight, and due to the condition of their own home villages and cities, thousands of Tibetans followed. Once in India the Dalai Lama embarked on the mission to aid his exiled subjects, and preserve the culture that was being destroyed inside

Tibet. A large part of this task was the establishment of refugee settlements. By 1998 there were 46 refugee settlements, providing homes and communities for most of the 100,451 Tibetan refugees in India, Nepal and Bhutan (Dawa Norbu 2002: 189). With the urging of the United Nations and individuals, the Nepali government offered the International Committee of the Red Cross land on which they established the first four settlements in Nepal, later growing to 11 settlements throughout the northern part of the country, including two in the capital Kathmandu (Forbes 1989: 25–30).

Today, Tibetan refugees in Nepal face a complex set of circumstances. Neither international refugee law, nor a national legal code for refugees governs the status and treatment of the Tibetan community in Nepal. Refugee identity booklets had been issued to approximately 4,000 Tibetans, and although in 1995 the government began issuing more, only enough were issued for approximately one quarter of the total refugee population (Frechette 2001: 127). In February of 2005 I had interviewed the Dalai Lama's representative in Nepal, Wongchuck Tsering-la. He estimated that little over half of the approximately 20,000 Tibetan refugees, mostly elders, possessed the identity card. He told me that the card grants freedoms such as movement within the country, protection from undue arrest, and gives limited access to university education. However, the card does not authorize employment, which limits exiled Tibetans' capacity to find paying jobs (Wongchuk Tsering 2005). Despite donations from various governments and NGOs, their status as refugees and, increasingly, Nepal's Maoist insurgency and consequent drop in tourism, have made it difficult for many Tibetans to make a living.

The Tibetans' political status as non-citizens of Nepal also impinges on their ability to actively impact the Tibetan homeland under China and its struggle for cultural survival and independence. In her book on Tibetans in Nepal, Ann Armbrecht Forbes explains that the Nepali state "already feels that the overt acceptance of this group defined by Chinese as its enemy endangers the sensitive relationship between the two countries." Fearing China's size, power, and potential "expansionist motives," but also being a recipient of Chinese aid, Nepal seeks to appease China by containing public political expression by the Tibetan community (1989: 148). In their studies of Tibetan communities in Nepal, Forbes (1989), as well as Frechette (2002), and Moynihan (2002) compare the situation of Tibetans in Nepal to those living in India. Based on Nepal's position vis-à-vis China, as compared to India's position, their studies view the Nepali government as limiting the political freedom of Tibetans living there. For example, in April of 2003, Nepali officials caught a group

of eighteen Tibetan refugees who had been traveling for two months to reach Kathmandu, and deported them back to China where they were to be tried for illegally crossing the border. This unprecedented event shocked Tibetans and Tibet supporters, who saw it as a hostile action against the Tibetan community in a place that had acted as a safe haven in the past (Jayshi 2003).

The Tibetan settlement where the fieldwork for this project was conducted is one of Nepal's older and larger settlements, opened with the aid of the Swiss Development Corporation and the Nepali Government. At the time of its establishment, 130 Tibetan families, including 600 individuals, came to settle in the new camp. Most of these families, 95% by the estimate of the camp's settlement officer, came from the region around the Nepal border, in the U-Tsang, or western province of Tibet.

In 2005 the population of the camp had grown from to 1,152 individuals, including 180 family units. New families were not permitted permanent residence, so besides 21 non-permanent families; most of the inhabitants were the original settlers and their descendents. Within the camp is a primary school, a *ghompa* and monastery, an old age home, a Tibetan medicine as well as a Western medicine clinic, and a community hall. The most recent construction was a hostel that provided room and board for Tibetan students coming from remote settlements that lacked primary school facilities to study at the primary school. The carpet factory, one of the first Tibetan carpet production centers in Nepal, as well as the handicraft shops, were attractions that brought occasional tourists to the settlement and provided a small income for the community members.

## **The Local**

Tibetan refugees at Mt. Kailash Settlement had an acute sense of themselves as Tibetans, as refugees, and of their historical and contemporary struggle as a people. Their sense of history and their own identity was informed by the local conditions in Nepal, as well as of the Tibetan homeland. Although Tibetans in the camp had varying opinions about when and if Tibet would gain independence, all, without exception, said that they would return to Tibet if given the chance. The Tibetan youth at the camp felt a strong commitment to both the political struggle for Tibet's independence and the current material conditions of the country, as well as a sense of responsibility to the Mt. Kailash community and the exile community in general.

The Tibetan youth in exile faced a problematic combination of two of the key realities: a profound desire to contribute to the plight of the Tibetan people and the internal factors that prohibited them from actively impacting their

national struggle. The Tibetan youth of the Mt. Kailash Settlement were raised in an environment that fostered a strong sense of Tibetan identity and belonging to the Tibetan community. In a study on Tibetan refugees in Europe and North America, however, Gyaltzen Gyaltag explores the disjuncture in Tibetan families and Tibetan youth identity in the West. The author argues that the vast differences in the Western cultural and social experiences of youths, and the Tibetan values and expectations of their parents, lead to conflict within the family and disjuncture in the developing identities of young people. Most Tibetan youths in Switzerland, for example, do not attend full-time Tibetan schools, like the ones in India and Nepal, and use Swiss German in daily conversation (Gyaltzen Gyaltag 2002: 249–51). Gyaltzen Gyaltag writes that “the limited command of their mother tongue and lack of knowledge of their own culture create communication difficulties between the parents and their children” (249). The Tibetan youth is “torn between contradictory feelings for his parents and for his own origins and the demands of the foreign cultural reality of life.” Further, “Tibetan parents are generally not able to pass on the relevance of their own values and norms in daily life. First of all, it is not possible to lead a traditional life in Switzerland. Secondly, their culture is marginalized in a dominant foreign environment” (252–53).

The youth experience at Mt. Kailash differs from the Western experience of the Tibetans described in Gyaltzen Gyaltag’s study. First, Nepali society has significant similarities to Tibetan society, unlike Western European cultures. Nepal has a long tradition of Buddhism starting from Buddha’s birth in Lumbini in the south of the country, and many ethnic groups in Nepal are historically and culturally linked to Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Like Tibet, Nepal is a primarily agricultural society. The two countries the environment of the Himalayan Mountains, and trade routes that have brought people, idea and goods throughout the region for centuries.

The younger generations in the camp had a different relationship to their homeland than their parents and grandparents who grew up in, and fled Tibet. Tibetans in the Kailash Settlement imagined Tibet and Tibetan identity in ways possible only in exile, and that caused them to feel uniquely obligated and empowered to be agents of change for their national community.

Tibetan youth in the settlement were fundamentally concerned with the Tibetan way of life, and with the erosion of culture in the homeland they seek to regain. They expressed a desire to maintain a traditional Tibetan way of life, ethnic solidarity and unity, and to impact the fate of the community and nation. Physical markers like “Free Tibet” tattooed on boys’ arms, embroidered on t-



shirts, or painted in giant letters on a building central to the camp, highlight the importance of the national cause, and also the public nature of its expression.

As Tibetans living in exile, outside the influence of Chinese oppression, and as educated, literate and tri-lingual members of the community, the youth saw themselves as the necessary bearers of the national struggle. Relying on newspapers, magazines, TV and radio, as well as extensively on internet sources which they accessed in internet cafés in the city, youth acquired knowledge about the current situation in Tibet in ways that their often non-reading, not to mention computer illiterate parents and grandparents could not.

Although most of their parents made a living selling handicrafts and souvenirs, the young people that I spoke to, most of whom were pursuing higher education, hoped to have careers that would allow them to impact the Tibetan community more positively. Two sisters, Passang Lhamo and Chime Lhadon, who were both studying at the Nepali women's college in the city, expressed this sense of duty:

PL: We want to help.

CL: Our government has helped us. We have to pay back. It's our responsibility... I want to {work for} the Women's Association. Encouragement, empowerment, and give them some more knowledge.

During the time I stayed in the camp, one of the major Nepali news stories concerned a new tourist bus line running between Kathmandu and Lhasa. This topic provoked conversation among young people, who were concerned about the negative impact of the bus line and increasing tourism on the wellbeing of Tibet, but also provoked an ironic confusion over how the refugees themselves might benefit from the new mode of travel.

PL: Yeah, we get the chance to see the whole Lhasa, though we weren't born in Tibet, but we can see, at least.

TD: Aah, no. No, no, no. Impossible. We need to be Nepali citizen or other foreign citizen. Actually, there are Tibetan refugees with refugee cards. [But for] them going too, it's impossible. They are not allowed to go... There is a lot of tourism in Lhasa, but all [is] run by Chinese government, so if they get lots of money, it will not help Tibetan people, it will help the Chinese government.

Tsering Dolkar was concerned that the bus line would bring more tourism to Lhasa, which would further degrade Tibetan lifestyle, and that the Chinese government, not Tibetans, would profit from the new arrangement. The concern over the bus line also spoke to a deep sense of frustration and injustice that they, as Tibetan refugees, without citizenship or a national passport, could not access the simple transport of a bus system between Kathmandu to Lhasa.

The following comment, made by Tsering Dolkar in a conversation with her friend, Passang Dolkar, and myself, illustrates Anderson's "long-distance nationalism" as it plays out in the settlement:

Many [Chinese are] living now in Tibet... Maybe [Tibet] will be just like Hong Kong. In exile [we] will preserve Tibetan culture. So in Tibet, right now, we see in the movie, [and] picture, the young Tibetans are very, very fashionable! Compared to exiles, very fashionable! They are talking Chinese now, they speak Chinese language only...so different. So some old people they [continue] their old culture... But young people [in Tibet], uuh! Fully changed... [But] the Tibetan exiles very much know the modern education. They are shouting [protesting]... Before, yeah, before in New York, at the UNO. Because the Chinese Prime Minister, or something, came in the UNO, so the Tibetans and many American people in New York, they are shouting to the Chinese.

Tsering Dolkar's comment suggests not only the concern for Tibet's survival, but also the effect of technology, here movies and photographs, in creating knowledge about the homeland. Tsering Dolkar sees the exile community, and by extension, herself as a member of this community, as responsible for action, like the Tibetans "shouting," what we might call "making some noise" at the United Nations in New York. Not only this, but she sees this community as an ultimately global one. Tsering Dolkar's comments about the transformation of Tibetans in Tibet on the basis of videos and photographs, presumably shot by non-Tibetans, and her attention to Tibetans in New York at the United Nations which she learned about on the internet, further highlight the impact of the transnational in the formation of identity. While hindered and marginalized by local conditions, and unable to rely on local and national resources and technologies, like the bus, the second- and third-generation youth rely on media and technology which is global in its reach.

Unlike the case of Tibetans in the West there was little desire or tendency on the part of Tibetan youth to adopt Nepali practices, or integrate themselves

into Nepali social, cultural or political life. In discussing the situation in Tibet, youth focused on human rights violations and social and environmental degradation committed by the Chinese government. They were concerned that the Tibet of their imaginations—of miles of open space scattered with yak herds, plentiful milk and butter, and colorful prayer flags blowing in the wind—was disappearing. They discussed China's policy of resettlement of Han Chinese into sparsely populated Tibet, as well as the population control policy and its effect on the survival of the Tibetan people. Other topics were Chinese-language education and the death of the Tibetan language; the sale of inexpensive alcohol and cigarettes; prostitution in Lhasa; and the destruction of monasteries and ancient art.

The Tibetan youths at the Mt. Kailash Settlement attended Tibetan schools from nursery until the completion of high school. From nursery until eighth grade they attended the primary school located inside the settlement. Following the completion of primary school, those who chose or were able to continue with their education, were bused to the Tibetan secondary school in the city each day, a school conducted in English and Tibetan. Rather than completing their final two years at a Nepali higher secondary school near the settlement, the students traveled to Kathmandu where they lived in a hostel for Tibetan students for two years while attending the Tibetan higher secondary school.

In the settlement, each school day began with a Tibetan prayer to Lokeshwori, the Buddhist goddess of wisdom, followed by a rousing rendition of the Tibetan National Anthem, and finally the Nepali Anthem. The school's curriculum included Nepali language, and used Nepali social studies textbooks which focused on Nepal and South Asia. Outside of the Nepali language class, however, all other classes were conducted primarily in Tibetan, with some instruction in English. These classes included math and science, as well as Tibetan language and literacy, Tibetan history, and Tibetan music and dance. Usually, it was not unless a student continued to college that they mixed with their Nepali contemporaries. Most Tibetans at Kailash worked outside of the settlement, but rarely with Nepali people. Most often Tibetans worked independently or with a group of Tibetans from the camp, selling handicrafts and souvenirs to tourists, or sometimes for a Tibetan business owner.

Though the Tibetans and Nepalis had little intimate contact, they saw and interacted with each other in superficial ways on a day-to-day basis. The settlement itself was located on the lower part of a hilly area, sandwiched between Nepali houses and fields on the up-hill side, and the major road leading to the city on the downhill side. Nepalis often came down from the hillside into the

camp, usually to sell their produce. Their presence was evidenced by calls of “bananas and grapes are here!” and the like. There were also Nepali adolescents who worked in the homes of some of the wealthier Tibetans in the settlement. In the area where the settlement was located, the Nepali farmers of the hillside, in their run-down and makeshift houses, were often worse off than the Tibetans in their well-constructed settlement. While the Tibetan community was aided by the exile government in Dharamsala, and various foreign sponsors sympathetic to their plight, Nepal suffers as one of the poorest countries in the world, whose traditionally feudal-like system and contemporary political turmoil have left the rural population in destitution.

The local conditions of poverty for both Nepalis and Tibetans, and the political disempowerment of the refugees created a deep mistrust between Tibetans and Nepalis, and a feeling among the Tibetan youth that the conditions of Nepal prohibited them from acting freely for the sake of their national cause, and thus expressing their national identity. One young woman compared Tibetans living in Nepal to being “handicapped” in their capacity to “do something for [their] country.” The most interesting and recurring way that young Tibetans talked about their situation in Nepal was in recounting a particular, annual commemoration of the March 10th Uprising Day that took place in the city in the late nineteen-nineties. This event, and the way it was remembered and narrated by young people, is a key example of the formation of “mythico-history,” as a present event experienced in exile became an allegory of the past, mirroring the moral ordering and remembrance of the original March 10th Uprising Day of 1959. It was also the most important way by which I came to understand the impact of the local conditions of the Nepali host country on what it meant to be Tibetan in Nepal. The following are three separate tellings of the event.

Pema Kelsang was a twenty-year-old student living in the settlement with his mother, father, and three siblings, and attending a Nepali higher secondary school. Due to health problems, he was forced to leave the Tibetan school in Kathmandu and return home, where there is no Tibetan school for the upper grades.

PK: The political situation, it's difficult now. Nepal is under this problem, very big problem. So, if we try to do some political [activity] in Nepal, it is very difficult because most of the Nepal government is [financed by] Chinese. So, it is very difficult. Like, in one of the Tenth March. [Beatings] from Nepali police.

SB: So when was this?

PK: 10th March.

SB: Of which year?

PK: Five years [ago]. Five, six years [ago].

SB: So they were, the police were beating people?

PK: Yeah, beating people. And some of our parents were put in prison. And they have made agreement like that, if they do again like that, they will put them in for a long time, in the prison. An agreement we have made, never to do again. So, now the political situation [is a] problem for Tibetans in Nepal.

When I asked Passang Dolkar about her involvement in Tibetan activities she immediately began talking about Uprising Day:

PD: Yeah, through the school. And we've involvement in Uprising Day.

SB: So what kind of activities have taken place in the past for Uprising Day?

TD: Hunger Strike. This is many years before. Right now the Nepal government can't do, yeah? Can't allow to do. Before, many years. Before very peace in the country. So, we all participated in the hunger strike [in the city]. So at that time Nepali police take large stick and...

PD: And put in jail.

TD: Some Tibetans also put in jail at that time. So we all are just running here and there.

PD: And then nobody allows us into their homes.

TD: Even the Nepalis, the shopkeepers, they close, when we [tried to]

enter, they close the door. So sad that time. So also many boys they got [beat with] stick from the police.

Passang Lhamo, a twenty-year-old student of commerce at the women's campus, was also quick to speak about the March 10th events as a primary way that she was involved in the Tibetan community's organized social and political activities.

SB: Then, have you been involved in any kind of social or political activities for Tibet?

PL: So many, yeah. On 10th March. Yeah, on the 10th March, most of the Tibetan people from [the city] all the people came to [the center of the city]. We marched all around [the city].

SB: And, what was the purpose? To draw attention to the Tibetan cause? So, the purpose of the march was to commemorate March 10<sup>th</sup>, and also to publicly draw attention to...

PL and TD: yeah, yeah, yeah.

SB: And what do you remember about that march?

PL: During that march, we all the people are gathered together in one big hall. Then the Nepalese police came there. And, then the Nepali police, they have got a lot of Tibetan people, and...*speaks in Tibetan*...tear gas also, they used. They take most of Tibetan people in jail. And later they said that they gave one agreement...*speaks in Tibetan*...they gave one agreement that now, today onward, we will not do this kind of march.

There are a number of key themes that emerge from these three recollections of the March 10th protest. First, many of the same themes from the original history of March 10th, 1959 are maintained. For example, the overpowered Tibetans rally for the freedom of Tibet; they are suppressed by a brutal non-Tibetan force; and, perhaps most interestingly, in Pema Kelsang's account, the Chinese are still the ultimate cause of the Tibetan's oppression, and at the root of the violence against them, as "the Nepal government is [financed by]

Chinese.” The new actor introduced into the mythico-history is the Nepali police and state, as well as the Nepali people. The Nepalis, in the telling of the story, become the agents of violence, humiliation, and exclusion. When Passang Dolkar and Tsering Dolkar described Nepalis shutting Tibetans out of their shops and homes, they describe a moral order, defining the Nepalis in opposition to the Tibetans. At the same time, they also evoke the problem of exclusion and marginalization of refugees in Nepal, which ultimately informs a sense of urgency, hopelessness and desperation, but which also leads Tibetans in Nepal to rely on sources beyond the Nepali state—supranational, global sources of empowerment and action which enable them to negotiate and transcend the disempowering local.

### **The Global**

Tibetan youth negotiate their local circumstances to actively impact the Tibetan national cause by relying on global resources, both technological and social, and constructing themselves as part of a transnational community. In *Modernity at Large* Appadurai writes, “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (1996: 31). The Tibetan youth at Mt. Kailash had an essentially global frame of imagining themselves and the world they inhabited. They constituted what Appadurai calls an *ethnoscape*—“persons and groups [that] deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move” (34). Their parents came from Tibet to Nepal; within three or four decades their brothers, sisters and cousins moved to Bangalore, Geneva, Toronto and Seattle; and their own imaginations are cast simultaneously back towards Tibet but more realistically, and perhaps hopefully, on following their fortunate contemporaries to the West.

Three primary structures informed a sense of global identity, and enabled a sense of empowerment and action. These were the global dispersion of Tibetan families; the international support for the Tibetan cause and people; and the modern technological apparatuses that enabled various forms of communication and the dissemination of information across worlds, the Internet and e-mail. Through the Internet, the youth were able to be in regular contact with their sponsors in France, their siblings in India or the United States, and with a whole global network of Tibetans they had never seen or met, through chat rooms and information posted on web pages about Tibetan activities in Tibet, Nepal and India; but also in London, New York and San Francisco. In this way, at Mt. Kailash, Tibetan exile identity was performed for an international

audience of potential benefactors in ways that relied on global technology and the international orientation. By forging connections with, and performing exile identity for foreigners who they saw as potential sources of support, they, in turn, actively impacted the national cause.

In her book on the role of international assistance in the Tibetan community in Nepal, Ann Frechette argues that the context of a foreign audience, comprised of agents of assistance to the Tibetan cause, creates the public, performative nature of the March 10th festivities and Tibetan culture in certain spaces of exile. We see that identity expression and cultural performance is informed by the contemporary circumstances of the international audience and support of the exile community. This trend that Frechette describes in India is also exhibited at the Mt. Kailash Settlement in Nepal.

From European NGOs and students of Buddhism to an American dental clinic westerners were a regular presence at the camp, and were implicitly understood and treated as donors and volunteers, or potential donors, even if they were only a tourist buying a Buddha statue or a “Free Tibet” belt. In this way youth at Mt. Kailash grew up understanding westerners as their greatest ally in the struggle for a free Tibet, and in many ways constructed their own identity around Western expectations and acted in accordance with a desire to create connections and enlist the support of Western travelers.

Using Federal Express, DHL and e-mail; finances, commodities, ideas, and conceptions and expectations about the other and their culture were exchanged on a regular basis. At Mt. Kailash, every youth either had, or was expecting to receive a French sponsor who funded school fees and often sent small gifts and regular correspondences.

One of the everyday ways that people from Mt. Kailash took an active role in the Tibetan cause was by informing their business customers about the Tibetan problem. Many youth who worked in business, selling handicrafts to tourists, talked to patrons about the Tibetan struggle in hopes that one might have political influence, or be able to lend financial support. Though mundane, this practice involved a particular performance of Tibetan exile identity involving a regular narrative about the Tibetan struggle in Tibet and in exile.

In attempting to enlist the help of foreigners and participating in the national struggle, youth also used more organized and even spectacular means. The following comes from an interview with Pema Kelsang, in which he describes the ways the community, and he as an individual agent, engaged in the political struggle by performing the Tibetan cause to westerners.



PK: I feel very bad, I feel very bad. I am, like me, Tibetan boy with nothing to do for Tibet, I feel very bad. If I want to do anything, I can't, so I feel very bad. Usually I want to go and, on the Internet, express my view on website. Like, free Tibet issues...these are allowed in Nepal. But, political action, not allowed. Indirectly, it's allowed, wearing t-shirt, tattoos.

SB: Indirect expression... Are there other things like that?

PK: Yeah, peace march.

TD: It's [called] peace march, but indirectly....

PK: The peace march is the most important thing in Nepal for the Tibetans.

SB: When is this peace march?

PK: Before some of the Tibetan people who are interested in doing that, organized the people, [for] the Panchen Lama birthday...hunger strike.

SB: When was that?

PK: One of our Tibetans, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, was in prison in Tibet, while hanging, because he was doing some political [action].

SB: He was executed?

PK: Tried to kill. But we have to do some expression—send letters, write, do hunger strike in our camp, like that. We express our feelings to the UNO, to the leaders of other countries. So, until now he has not hanged, but we don't know what actually is going on.

SB: So, when was it that he was sentenced?

TD: 2004.

PK: A few months ago. I have done something on that date [at that time]. On internet I searched this issue, and which ones is an important issue, and I collected, and I make a paper, and I took it to all the foreigners, and Tibetans who are doing hunger strike, and I am awaring them, [what the] Chinese are going to do to Tenzin Delek.

TD: His brother was already executed by Chinese government.

SB: So you wrote letters?

TD: In the Internet ... so he made photo copies, and distributed to all Tibetans.

SB: And you said something about letters to the UN?

PK: Yeah, I sent some letters to the UN also. One of my friends, also abroad, like foreigners, like you, making aware. They can also make others aware.

TD: Yeah, many people came.

PK: Many foreigners come, shooting video, shooting photos.

TD: So maybe if they show the videos and photos they will not execute him.

Although Pema Kelsang begins by bemoaning his inability to be active in the national cause, saying that in Nepal “political action” is “not allowed,” he quickly uncovers a number of ways that Tibetans “indirectly” engage in the struggle and express Tibetan identity.

One of the most striking elements in the passage is the prominence of information and communications technology. First Pema Kelsang uses the Internet as a source of information and self-empowerment. By searching for information, he educates himself about the events. Second, he uses the Internet to express his opinions to others. He then uses the photocopier to mass produce information to be distributed to many people simultaneously. Last, he sees the technology employed by the foreigners who came as spectators of the hunger strike—shooting videos and photographs—as a final means by which information is spread, by which

change may be affected. We see a chain of information passed through modern, technological devices. The hunger strike functions to make foreigners aware of the problem in Tibet, but also creates a spectacle that they desire to film and photograph. This is seen as ultimately powerful—“so maybe if they [the foreigners] show the videos and photos they [the Chinese] will not execute him.”

For the Tibetans at Mt. Kailash, the Internet, as well as video and photography made possible a particular type of global, diasporic identification—a form of what Appadurai describes as *mediascapes*—the “repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscap[es] [provided to] viewers throughout the world,” which enable the construction of “imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects” (1999: 35). With websites filled with photos and news reports of Tibetan-organized political, social and cultural events all over the world, the Internet was a primary means by which Tibetans were able to imagine and identify themselves as part of a community outside of their local situation in Nepal, as members of a global community in ways their parents and grandparents never did or would.

In the passage below, we see Tsering Dolkar’s attitude about the liberties of living in the West—which would enable personal comfort and achievement, as well as opportunity to influence the national cause.

TD: Foreigners—Americans, Europeans countries, they are the only good support. If there are no tourists, how Tibetans will survive? The tourists are from the Western countries, yeah? Chinese tourists are not buying Tibetan [goods], because they are not interested in Tibetan things. So the Western people, these Americans, they are buying Tibetan things, doing sponsorship. Without these people Tibetans will not survive.

TD: They are preserving Tibetan culture in the western countries, Tibetans are.

SB: You think?

TD: Yes, surely! My brother told me... He is the Tibetan Youth Congress president, so he said Tibetans are doing festivals, they gathered, they’re wearing chuba. So they can collect money and give the money to the Tibetan government in Dharamsala, like this. In Nepal, we can’t survive our own life, so how can we help the Tibetan community?!...It’s very difficult. ... if there is festival, they come together. If

one Tibetan has difficulties they gather money and helping each other. Very good, yeah. So when Dalai Lama also used to visit America, and many countries. So when Dalai Lama came all Tibetans gathered, so Dalai Lama told them to preserve Tibetan culture, to be friendly each other, be honesty. This culture is to be honesty, friendly each other, love, compassion, *inaudible*. So, Tibetans are very much preserving Tibetan culture. When we search [www.tibetsearch.com](http://www.tibetsearch.com), so when we search this site...Kathmandu and Nepali people can't do *anything* for Tibet. When we look at this sight, New York, New Jersey, San Francisco, Washington—*these* Tibetan people are doing lots for Tibet. So it seems they are doing very good for Tibetans.

For Tsering Dolkar, the affluence and freedoms she imagines in the West enable westerners to be the ultimate benefactors of the Tibetan cause. These same elements of Western society make the United States a kind of utopia in which the Tibetans prosper as individuals, care for each other and foster traditional community, and fight for their national cause, not to mention receive visits from the Dalai Lama.

Simultaneously, there existed fears and anxieties about loss and lack of identity. Marriage with westerners, despite the support and opportunities it brought a family or individual, was regarded with suspicion. Pema Kelsang expressed fear about what would happen to Tibetans who lived and married outside of the community:

PK: Tibetan people, first of all, they have to be educated. Most of the Tibetan people who are living outside of the community, they don't know who is the Dalai Lama. Something like that. They don't know our culture. So they have to settle in the Tibetan community, and they will learn the language, and they will know about the political situation of Tibet.

SB: Which people are these?

PK: Outside, the people.

SB: Tibetans?

PK: Yeah, Tibetans. Mixing, marriage with Nepali people. Marriage, mixing the culture.

SB: Will this be a problem in the West?

PK: I think so, yeah. Who are born into Western, they don't know about Tibet. If they are Tibetan or not. We have to make them aware. Teach the Tibetan language, the Tibetan handwriting, like that...and the culture.

Pema Kelsang initially discussed the problem of mixing with Nepali society, but when I asked if this was possible in the United States as well, he answered affirmatively. Appadurai tells us that in our global world, Americanization may not seem threatening to Koreans who, instead, fear the closer and more looming threat of Japanization (1996: 32). In this case, in many ways Tibetan youth embraced American people, culture, and certainly financial support, fearing instead the threat of Chineseization and Nepalization. And yet they also seemed to object to the crossing of those most fraught boundaries of marriage and reproduction: ethnic and cultural mixing. For example, Chime Lhadon referred to her sponsors, whose photo was framed on the wall of the main room of the house, as her “second parents,” comparing their relationship to a biological one. However, she and her sister, along with Tsering Dolkar, expressed discomfort with the idea of Tibetan women marrying foreign men, creating an *actual* biological connection and mixing, which several young women from the settlement had done in previous years. Appadurai writes that “one man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison” (1996: 32). When one speculates about how the crossing of such boundaries may impact Tibetan identity—that further Americanization may come to be imagined as truly threatening—one is struck by the extent to which identification relies on relations to the “other” community.

### **“The Furnace”**

History of oppression cannot be forgotten as long as somewhere in the world “our community” remains threatened. This is only made more salient in an age of globalization and global communications, where the impact of oppression is not confined to our own lived experiences, but, as Appadurai tells us, is what we see on the nightly news, in foreign-language newspapers, and on the Internet (1996). These media open up a much wider array of events and people that come to be included in our definitions of who “we” are than was ever before possible. We see in the case of Tibetan refugees in Nepal that the global nature of the community contributes to a sense of agency that would not otherwise be possible.

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