Tibetan Diasporic Identity: An Ethnographic Study of Visual Communication

Kimberly Dukes’ Dissertation Proposal

The proposed ethnographic project will analyze the visible and pictorial manifestation of Tibetan exile cultural identity as it relates to process of social and political transformation. I will do this by analyzing the visual emblems of exile identity produced or used by the headquarters of a particular organization, the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), in Dharamsala, India, seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile. TYC is a high-profile group that often disagrees with the tactics of the state-in-exile at the same time as it supports the solidification of a national identity tied to, and dedicated to, the state without a nation. The TYC use visual signifiers of various Tibetan identities in the context of political protest and of continual emphasis on an “essential” Tibetan identity tied to particular political aims and cultural agendas. At the same time, historical and contemporary loyalties—religious, regional, ethnic, and class—divide exile identity at a time when the leadership and the community recognize the need to present a united identity.

The way Tibetans in TYC represent themselves visually (whether in media, spectacles, or everyday life) will reveal the complex and complicated interaction between aspects of various “Tibetan” identities—political, cultural, ethnic, national, and religious—in various spheres of use and intended audience, as well as how these representations relate to the lived experience of exiles during a prolonged period of political struggle.

I will use the theoretical approaches of semiotics and anthropology of visual communication to analyze the way the TYC visually presents a developing Tibetan
national identity. These visual aspects include not just pictorial elements like photographs, videos, flags, maps, or media productions (including pamphlets, newsletters, websites, protest leaflets and signs), but visual projections of identity consciousness that may be embodied in space, practices, or the use of clothing or objects.

Visual communication, including rituals, spectacles and visual signs, must be understood, both ethnographically and semiotically, as located within ideology; this is particularly so in the context of this research situation. Visual symbols of Tibet as nation function in political as well as religious ways, as they interrelate with other symbols of Tibetan autonomy. Images of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan flag, the Potala (traditional home of the Dalai Lama), and the map of Tibet occur in specific places and for specific reasons (Korom 1997). Even actions can visually project identity. In the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1989, the action of tossing the staple grain tsampa became a symbol of both Tibetan ethnic identity and support for the Dalai Lama in exile and was thus outlawed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Barnett 1994; Schwartz 1994: 172-3). Similarly, while I was in Lhasa this past summer, the government banned the burning of juniper incense on certain days because it interpreted the practice as support for the Dalai Lama.

Thus, the way multiple identities interact, overlap, or are called on by Tibetan exiles in a space of explicit reconstruction of the requirements of Tibetan-ness—especially the political requirements—remains to be untangled. How do TYC members visually represent, perform, or materialize a particular national identity in their media productions, protest and cultural events, and their everyday lives? More specifically, how do these representations reflect—or affect—changes in that same
identity during the more than forty years of exile? Looking at the larger questions of this grassroots organization and its role in creating and maintaining a national identity for the Tibetan diaspora in India raises subsidiary questions. To what extent, in what ways, and why are members reinforcing or contesting representations of national identity by the Tibetan exile government and by other community members? How do global issues and the importance of "marketing" Tibetan issues to different audiences (international, human rights, Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan exile) affect the aspects of identity that are emphasized and how they are deployed? Do people play down evidence of regional ethnicities, religious divisions, and past or present class differences among “Tibetans” in accordance with the new exile project? Does the way TYC members employ such markers change in various venues—for example, in interaction with Indian society, in situations which will be photographed or televised, informal meetings, and so on?

In the past 15 years, anthropologists and other scholars have begun to focus on nationalism, identity, and social movements, all issues vital to this dissertation research, which will specifically analyze their interrelationship through the way nationalism and identity are revealed visually or pictorially by a politically active grassroots organization. For the Tibetan exile community in India, forty years of refugee experience, politicization, and cultural shifts will have profoundly affected individuals’ understanding of their diasporic identity. Analyzing these changes through their visual or pictorial representation will add to the growing literature on the anthropology of visual communication, as well as enrich anthropological understanding of how visual communication about identity works in the context of a developing nationalism. This proposal also will interest anthropologists and other scholars interested in refugee and
diaspora studies, and in Tibet and its worldwide diaspora, particularly of the lay community.

**The Main Research Site and Background**

The Tibetan refugee situation began in 1959, when the Dalai Lama and supporters fled Lhasa in the wake of an uprising against the Chinese army, which had occupied the capital since the end of 1951. The Dalai Lama set up a Tibetan "government-in-exile" in India, where the majority of exiles reside today, and by 1960, the Dalai Lama and then-Indian Prime Minister Nehru agreed on resettlement projects to aid refugees. These included farming and industrial settlements as well as what became essentially Tibetan towns, like upper Dharamsala. In this "capital" of the international exile community, numerous state-related or –supported institutions exist, including the kashag (or cabinet), religious and arts institutions, a traditional medical school, a "national" library and archive, residential schools for children and teenagers, refugee housing, and orphanages.

After fleeing into exile, the Tibetan community competed with the Chinese government in publicizing their own accounts of the political history of Tibet. During the next few decades, the Dalai Lama, the government, and the community began constructing a new, “national” identity for Tibetans in exile. While the multiple differences in life experience, education, and social and economic status can create conflict and stress in the exile community (Korom 1997), this new group identity entailed a rejection of former allegiances to region and religious sect to emphasize a general ethnic solidarity. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, riots and protests in Tibet itself spurred a revitalization of political efforts aimed at independence orchestrated by the exile, with TYC one of the prominent actors.
Tibetan Buddhism remains one of the primary markers of Tibetan-ness in exile (although there are Muslims and Christians in the TAR, and the Bon religion also plays an important role in the diaspora (Schrempf 1997)). In reaction to the “displacedness” of extended exile, Tibetans in India reify ties to the actual landscape and experience of the homeland, as well as claims to an “essentialized” identity based on birth (Venturino 1997), both areas of tension for exiles born in India and unlikely ever to return to the homeland. Observers note multiple tensions embodied within the exile community, ranging from the inevitable accommodations to Indian host society, to interest in modernization, democratization, or Western rock music, as well as pre-1959 allegiances to region, religious sect, or class.

The Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), founded in Dharamsala thirty-one years ago, emphasizes the struggle for independence for all of Tibet--including regions outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in China--"even at the cost of one's life." The TYC has over 15,000 members around the world and 70 regional branches (with principal affiliates in New York and Switzerland). While the group focuses on international protests, especially hunger strikes and peace marches, it also attempts to solve or ameliorate the social and educational situations of refugees.

The TYC embodies considerable tensions representative of fractures within the exile as a whole, as scholars of the diaspora note in brief but tantalizing mentions (Palakshappa 1978; Nowak 1984; Saklani 1984; French 1991; Arakeri 1998). Since 1970, the organization may have played a formative role in the project of creating a national identity, through its cultural activities, political actions, and emphasis on certain activities and emblems of Tibetan identity. For example, the group has attempted to exert influence
on education for youth, political and cultural activities tied to education, and on careers chosen by young people willing to "sacrifice" themselves in the service of the Tibetan state in exile, whether as guerrilla fighters in the 1970s (French 1991: 191), or as ill-paid teachers in remote Tibetan-language schools in India (Nowak 1984).

While all members venerate the Dalai Lama, who shuns violence, some members reportedly advocate violence against China (Schwartz 1994: 7). The 4 prominent aims of members, to which they must agree in order to join, include: dedication to country and people (under the Dalai Lama's guidance); the promotion of "national unity and integrity" and the abolition of allegiances tied to religion, status or region; the promotion of Tibetan culture, traditions, and religion; and the struggle for independence.

These aims are profoundly different from the “traditional” Tibetan social order, but at the same time they are being used to manifest a public commitment to the continuing of Tibetan culture outside of Tibet. By pursuing these aims, TYC members may have had profound effects on how exiles, particularly youth, understand Tibetan identity. Previous practices of ascribed status have shifted in the diaspora and particularly in India; by working or volunteering for Tibetan state institutions, individuals can gain prestige, even if they have nomad or other low-status heritage (de Voe 1987). Since this kind of “sacrifice” has been one of the prominent projects of the TYC (Nowak 1984), the organization may have played a significant role in both emphasizing membership in a Tibetan state and in changing systems of social status.
Visual Elements of Tibetan Identity in Exile

While the media produced by TYC will probably prove the richest area for analysis, this analysis will depend on an understanding of visual communication of Tibetan identity in other spheres, from performance to protest to home life. From visiting Dharamasala and other Tibetan exile communities in Nepal and India, and from published resources on these communities, I am aware that multiple pictorial and visual elements expressing “Tibetan” or “Tibetan Buddhist” identity exist, and are used in various contexts.

Specific visual and embodied practices can mark various kinds of Tibetan identity. For example, round dances, performed throughout the year, mark a particular kind of homeland identity (Diehl 1997: 133). Tibetan theatre, traditional music and dance performances, and opera (often staged by the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts) also have their own requirements and traditions, which can be policed by the community to portray one particular, Lhasa-centred, vision of Tibetan-ness (cf Calkowski 1997; Diehl 1998).

The central lay practices of Tibetan Buddhism are themselves very physical—and they are one of the most distinctive visual elements of any Tibetan Buddhist community. These practices include the circumambulating of sacred sites and spaces, spinning of prayer wheels, and lengthy sessions of prostrations, and the scattering of paper rlung rta, or “windhorses,” which contain printed prayers.

Clothing or other style choices of community members also can signal different kinds of Tibetan identity. For example, both male and female hair style can signal historical regional allegiance, ascribed status, and occasion; it can demonstrate the degree
of faithfulness to homeland style or the degree of assimilation to or interest in Indian, Nepali, or Western style; it can be related to the amount of time spent in exile (for example, new refugees may be derided for their “Chinese” haircuts). Similarly, various kinds and degree of ethnic clothing send distinct messages, with Indian clothing adopted by many youth, or the Sinified clothing of more recent refugees contrasting against the traditional chubas and regional jewelry styles worn by some women.

Other items of material culture also function in various ways to symbolize Tibetan identity and particular aspects of it. Styles of architecture and items of home decoration are prominent markers of Tibetan-ness: for example, altars, the arrangement and types of furniture, certain types of rugs and how and where they are used. Similarly, door hangings emblazoned with auspicious symbols often function as markers of “Tibetan-ness,” to distinguish a Tibetan-owned restaurant, shop, or home from an Indian one. Butter lamps, prayer flags, and prayer wheels are used in religious practice. Some items of material culture that have a religious purpose—ritual daggers (phurpu), for example—may function more as emblems of identity for non-specialists than as elements used in everyday religious practice, and thus may be displayed in business or personal contexts (as well as sold to tourists as emblems of Tibetan identity—or as letter openers) (Klieger 1997: 66-67).

Pictorial elements presenting various facets of Tibetan exile identity include flags, maps or other representations of Tibetan land as nation, photographs of Tibetans in formal or informal contexts used in media or decoration, reproductions of photographs or artworks depicting contemporary or historical religious or national political figures, and religious thankga paintings.
Photographs will be one of the richest arenas for research, being both ubiquitous in the community and polysemic. Reproductions of photos of the Dalai Lama or other religious figures are displayed almost everywhere, in cafes, tea stalls, homes, and so on, sometimes alongside Tibetan flags and maps. Photos of human religious figures and reproductions of paintings of deities are also a prominent item of merchandise, sold in bookshops, souvenir stores, monastery stores, street stalls, and on the street itself.

Photographs of the Dalai Lama function in multiple ways in different spheres, as he is a "key symbol" (Ortner 1973) of state, nation, ethnicity and religion (Nowak 1984; Klieger 1992). In contrast, the photographs used by TYC involve lay and religious Tibetans, often in contexts of protest; for example, a recent edition of the group’s web magazine presents images of a monk setting himself on fire, participants in a prayer vigil lighting butter lamps, and protesters hoisting signs with slogans, maps or flags of Tibet.

Media productions of the TYC, past and present, include pamphlets, books, newsletters, websites, protest leaflets, and signs, which may occur at various venues throughout the town on an everyday basis, and/or be used at meetings or protests at embassies in New Delhi, parades, peace marches, hunger strikes, or political rallies. They also include educational materials used in TYC’s cultural and political campaigns in Tibetan-run schools. The TYC publishes a magazine (Rangzen, which can be translated as "independence" or, literally, "self-power" (Nowak 1984:4)), both in print and on-line, in which the organization presents news and commentaries on the political, economic, and cultural situation of Tibetans in the TAR as well as in exile. Rangzen contains photographs and even videos of events like prayer vigils, marches, or attempts at self-
immolation. In addition, the organization has published books, and members often contribute essays and editorials to exile journals.

In these multiple media venues, TYC members propagate particular views of exile identity. As is clear from its website and publicity for various protest campaigns, the organization cannily uses and manipulates tropes drawn from political, religious, human rights, or ecological discourses, shifting techniques to appeal to various audiences. TYC representations of Tibetan-ness will also reveal contestations of other representations of Tibetan-ness: by the state, by exiles outside India, by Western media or Buddhist converts, by China, and by India, all of whom have vested interests in particular interpretations of Tibetan identity, politics, and nationhood.

To enrich my general understanding of communication about exile identity, I also will monitor linguistic methods of communication of and about Tibetan-ness: conversations, public presentations, radio addresses, musical performances, print media (including newspapers, commentary, and fiction), and if possible, personal letters and/or writing. This will allow me to situate the same issues of competing and/or overlapping identities in a larger linguistic context.

Clearly, there are multiple visual and pictorial representations of various Tibetan identities used in daily, ceremonial, and public life by the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala. After an initial survey of these visual communications, I will focus on those most used by, or most significant to, TYC members, and attempt to relate their use to changing exile and individual identities. Photography and media will probably be one of the most significant aspects of the visual communication about Tibetan identity.
Review of Relevant Literature

Many visual anthropologists have focused on using photography or film/video as research technique or as a way of presenting ethnographic knowledge (De Heusch 1962 (1988); Collier Jr. 1967; Collier Jr. 1975; Hockings 1975; Heider 1976; Crawford and Turton 1992; Barbash and Taylor 1997) (Crawford and Simonsen 1991; Asch 1992; Sandall 1992; Elder 1995; MacDougall 1998; Ruby 2000). Nevertheless, numerous social scientists have demonstrated that the anthropology of visual communication need not center on film production about “Others” but can involve a more general theoretical interest in visual communication itself or in visible cultural evidence (Worth and Adair 1972; Worth 1982; Ginsburg 1991; Jhala 1993; Jhala 1995; Ginsburg 1998) (Becker 1982; Beeman 1993; Biella 1993; Bhabha and Burgin 1994; Mahon 2000), for example on the uses of photography by the communities they study (Becker 1974; Ruby 1981; Chalfen 1987; Halle 1993; Edensor 1998) (Musello 1980; Pinney 1997; Pink 2001) by anthropologists or mass media outlets (Lutz and Collins 1993; Edwards 1994). Interest in the field of visual anthropology is expanding: a flurry of books have been released recently, including Jay Ruby (Ruby 2000), Sarah Pink (Pink 2001), Anna Grimshaw (Grimshaw 2001), Marcus Banks (2001), as well as new work on methods of interpreting the visual (Emmison and Smith 2000). Sarah Pink, in particular, offers concrete suggestions for incorporating visual material in the process of ethnography that will be helpful in constructing my fieldwork practice.

A strong interest in the ethnographic understanding of various media, whether in production or reception, arose in the past twenty years, and accelerated during the 1990s (Intintoli 1984; Seiter, Borchers et al. 1989; Ang 1991; Crawford and Simonsen 1991;
Dickey 1993; Lutz and Collins 1993; Moores 1993; Naficy 1993; Spitulnik 1993; Abu-Lughod 1994; Crawford and Hafsteinsson 1995; Morley 1995; Ruby 1995; Wardlow 1996; Abu-Lughod 1997; Mankekar 1999; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod et al. in press), including dissertations from this department (Intintoli 1984; Lee 2000). Reviews of research on the anthropology of media demonstrate how useful an ethnographic approach to these topics can be, and the steps more recent researchers have taken to address gaps in the literature or theory. In 1993, Spitulnik recognized that much anthropological attention to the field of mass media remained dependent on textual analysis over understandings of the “‘everyday life’ of ...media representations, their contexts of production and circulation, and the practices and discourses of reception that envelop them (Spitulnik 1993: 301).” She also notes, “The crucial challenge in studying … alternative media forms (indigenous included) is to situate their production, use, interpretation, and circulation within the larger contexts of available media forms (306).”

Seven years later, Mahon notes that anthropologists interested in the work of cultural producers focus on “social practice, i.e. the ways in which people use these forms and technologies to construct, articulate, and disseminate ideologies about identity, community, difference, nation, and politics, and with their impact on social relations, social formation, and social meaning (2000: 469),” and demonstrates that research on such topics “offers visible evidence of the kinds of social issues and processes that concern the discipline” as a whole (2000: 467). My proposed research will contribute to this new interest in analyzing the lived experience of media.

In addition to the theory of anthropology of visual communication and particularly of the media, semiotics, “the science of the life of signs in society” (Saussure 1974), also
offers a sphere of theory within which to work, as well as a method and a vocabulary for analysis. Erik Schwimmer finds semiotics a “useful, almost indispensable method” partly because it works within differing theories of culture (Schwimmer 1977: 160). Additionally, a “social semiotics,” which pays more attention to the social context than mainstream semiotics, can illuminate the development of solidarity, resistance, and power through communication and the working of ideology in those same systems (Hodge and Kress 1988), all of which come into play in the sphere of TYC visual and linguistic messages.

While signs and codes signaling various aspects and uses of ethnic, political, or religious identity could be richly analyzed on their own, as an anthropologist I believe it is necessary to analyze them in the context of users’ own lived experience and histories. Drawing on the anthropology of communication (Hymes 1967), Worth argued that ethnography could contribute to the study of visual communication—an arena he viewed as just as vital as that of verbal or written modes, but which had been less studied. As Worth synthesized his call, “An ethnographic semiotic approach…would lead us to ask how actual people make meaning from specific signs in specific contexts” (Worth 1978: 16). This corresponds with the suggestion by Leeds-Hurwitz to extend semiotic analysis beyond “a single sign or code” to look at the “relationships between signs (in codes) and between codes (in cultures)” (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993: xvi; her italics), which will further illuminate the working of communicative messages about Tibetan identity by TYC members in various venues. Tomaselli offers some avenues for the semiotic analysis of visual representation, though he focuses emphasizes the analysis of film (Tomaselli 1996). In the context of this
research, then, the visual data to be analyzed semiotically extends beyond media to performance, protest, and the daily use of signs and symbols.

A rapidly growing body of research on Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora also will inform this research. Anthropologists and sociologists have published work on refugee communities in India (Conway 1975; Goldstein 1978; Miller 1978; Palakshappa 1978; Saklani 1984; Subba 1990; Cayley 1994; Calkowski 1997; Diehl 1997; Huber 1997; Korom 1997; Korom 1997; Methfessel 1997; Arakeri 1998; Diehl 1998) and elsewhere in the world (Ott-Marti 1976; Moran 1998; Mullen 1999; Gardner 2000) (McLagan 1996; McLagan 1996; McLagan 1997; McGranahan 2001).

One area of interest involves the relations Tibetans have with their host country, which are amicable in comparison with many other host-refugee experiences, for several reasons (Goldstein 1978; Palakshappa 1978; De Voe 1987), though there have been tensions (Penny-Dimri 1994). The interest in culture change, characteristic of much anthropological literature on displaced groups, is marked in work on Tibetan refugees by an interest in adaptation; this often focuses on how exile has changed aspects of "old Tibet" that were seen negatively, for example changes in ascribed status or the move towards democratizing the Tibetan government (both processes in which the TYC may have played an influential role), or lifestyle habits like perceived dirtiness (Palakshappa 1978). Many observers note the strength or maintenance of Tibetan "culture" in exile, citing patterns of dress and home décor, language and oral tradition, religious practices, games, the emphasis on raising children to be "Tibetan" (e.g., De Voe 1981), as well as the role of the government in encouraging this continuance of tradition (Diehl 1997), or
how traditional exchange networks or donor roles have adjusted but remain in practice (De Voe 1983; De Voe 1987).

While most of the research done on the diaspora has focused on trying to reconstruct a “traditional” past Tibetan culture, and ignored both politicization and lay issues in favor of a focus on religion. Very recently, anthropologists have begun to analyze the use of various political and cultural strategies by the exile (McLagan 1996a; McLagan 1996b; Huber 1997; McLagan 1997; Boyd 1999; McMillan 2001), and especially focusing on resistance in the TAR and the diaspora (Schwartz 1991; Barnett 1994; Norbu 1994; Schwartz 1994; Schwartz 1994; Shakya 1994; Sperling 1994; Schwartz 1999; McGranahan 2001). Scholars have examined the construction of "Tibetan" identity in exile (Nowak 1984; Saklani 1984; Klieger 1989; Klieger 1992; Klieger 1997) and in Tibet (Karmay 1994; Stoddard 1994; Epstein and Wenbin 1998; Germano 1998). Researchers also have recently begun to investigate politicization within Tibet itself, based both on fieldwork in Tibet and outside (Norbu 1994; Shakya 1994; McLagan 1996; McLagan 1996; Smith 1996; Goldstein and Kapstein 1998). Increasing interest in the development of Tibetan nationalism both before and after the Chinese occupation (Klieger 1992; Dreyfus 1994; Smith 1996; Keary 1999) is supported by strong histories of Tibet, only cursorily dealing with the diaspora (Shakabpa 1984; Goldstein 1989; Goldstein 1997; Shakya 1999). The recent interest by anthropologists and other scholars in analyzing nationalism and identity, and particularly politicization in the exile and the TAR, will both benefit my proposed research and benefit from it: as noted above, published research on the TYC is minimal, usually involving a few pages in a book-length work (Palakshappa 1978; Nowak 1984; Saklani 1984; French 1991;
Arakeri 1998), and as discussed below, there is little research on the use of visual symbols of identity in this community.

Research on visual aspects of Tibetan exile culture, much by anthropologists includes works on performance (Calkowski 1991; Calkowski 1997) (Diehl 1997) and on art (Kvaerne 1994; Harris 1997; Harris 1999) or the way artists and artisans are adapting their work in exile (Klieger 1989; Huber 1997; Klieger 1997; Korom 1997; McLagan 1997). Visual research on Tibetan topics otherwise tends to emphasize the imagined Tibet presented to or created by Western viewers (Bishop 1989; Bishop 1993; Lopez Jr. 1998; Dodin and Rather 2001) (Hansen 1996). The research on the use of media by Tibetans emphasizes political purposes and often deals with Tibetans in the TAR (Barnett 1994; Sperling 1994; Stoddard 1994; McLagan 1996), which thus will be helpful both in framing questions and in focusing my analysis.

**Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

I will use ethnographic field methods, including participant observation, intensive open-ended interviewing, life histories of significant members of the movement, archival research, and semiotic content analysis of media and events. To better understand the organization and its role in shaping exile identity, I will conduct oral historical research by interviewing founders and participants in the TYC, and employ archival and journalistic sources. I will make the use, interpretation, and changing meaning of visual emblems of various identities a focus of interviews, archival research, and observation.

I will collect data using several techniques. When possible, I will collect primary print or physical media itself, for example signs, pamphlets, banners, handwritten notes, and so on, produced during the period of fieldwork. I will also do historical library and
archive research at U.S. and Indian libraries, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, the TYC archives, and the offices of Tibetan news-and-opinion journals, in which TYC members have been prominent contributors. The combination of these sites should offer access to a wide range of media material. This material, and any other primary materials I am unable to take home, I will photocopy and/or scan.

I will use photography, audio recording, and digital video recording in addition to note-taking to record meetings, events, and daily life. The digital video record in particular will allow me to make research records of events with rich detail and context about the use of visual markers of identity. While these may include media, the digital video will allow better recording of visual projections of ethnic or political identity that are not static elements, such as ritual, movements, dances and singing, and use of space. Photography and video will also be useful in recording the way people use such markers in their everyday lives: for example, in restaurants, tea shops, monasteries, prayer halls, and inside and outside of houses. I will audio record events or lectures in cases where video recording is impractical or impossible, such as radio addresses.

In addition to using these photographs and recordings for my own archives, I will use them in structured interviews and informal conversations with past and present TYC members in a process of photo-elicitation (Collier Jr. and Collier 1986 (revised edition): 99-116; El Guindi 1998: 475-477). Using the visual or audio records to spark conversations and to serve as references, I will use these interviews to elicit information and context about the way people use and understand such markers, how the markers may have changed during the period of exile and the process of nation building, and
particularly how the individual experiences of TYC members as they became politicized affected how they use and understand these markers.

During the process of participant observation, I will attend, document, and analyze a series of important events related to the Tibetan nation in exile. Any calendar year abounds in opportunities for observing, participating in, and analyzing political and cultural events focused on, organized by, or participated in by TYC members. The Dharamsala branch also marks the annual events often held in Tibetan communities worldwide (see Timeline below for details). The TYC also organizes many one-time events, like hunger strikes, protests, peace marches, and other political activities, in addition to their educational and cultural programs at schools. Finally, my participant observation also will include attending group meetings, talks given at primary and secondary schools, public speeches, protests, peace marches, cultural spectacles, and so on. In addition, I will teach English on a volunteer basis with one of the programs serving new refugees, some of whom will be members of the TYC or will join the TYC.

A semiotic analysis of visual markers of Tibetan identity used by the group (particularly, but not exclusively, in media productions) will help identify what are the most meaningful aspects of Tibetan national identity in particular contexts, and how they are used to communicate meaning about identities, histories, and present allegiances.

Both in data collection and analysis, I will focus on the TYC’s use of visual or pictorial representations of Tibetan identities, and how members understand these representations in the context of both their individual experiences and their group experience of exile identity. The use of visual records of these representations (whether
my records or media samples) in interviews will represent the principal technique for collecting data on people’s understanding of these visual emblems in their daily lives.

Qualifications and Access

I anticipate being able to interact with TYC members in various venues, from home to political meetings. Regarding access, Tibetan exiles in the US, and Western scholars, have offered me introductions to friends and family who are TYC members and others in Dharmsala’s exile community. I acquired basic Tibetan language skills in a 2001 summer course at Tibet University in Lhasa (TAR, PRC) and basic literacy in a 2000 course at the University of Virginia. In addition, many (if not most) Tibetans in Dharamsala, and other Tibetan settlements in north India, speak English. I will volunteer as an English teacher for new refugees, which will allow me access to both long-term exiles and new refugees. I am familiar with the use of various technologies I intend to use in data collection: photocopier, scanner, camera, digital video camera, and the digital video editing process.

Timeline

I anticipate being in the field in India for 12 months, from August 2002 to August 2003. I will live in Dharamsala most of the year, but will travel with principal informants to participate in protests or other events if they occur in Delhi or other higher-profile locations. Throughout the fieldwork period, I will photograph, and if appropriate, videotape, TYC protests and projects, some of which will be connected to significant dates for the exile, including March 10 (Tibetan National Uprising Day), March 12 (Tibetan Women's Uprising Day), April 25 (birthday of the Panchen Lama), and May 23
(the signing of the 17 Point Agreement with China), Dalai Lama’s birthday (July 6),
October 20 (the protest against China’s 1962 attack on India, known as China's
Treacherous Day), and January 30, Gandhi’s birthday. As an example of what these
celebrations or protests may reveal about the use of visual signifiers of Tibetanness, the
Dalai Lama’s birthday will be an excellent opportunity to collect information about exile
identity and particularly the relationship between competing past identities and a “pan-
Tibetan” exile identity. I will record the celebrations and cultural events around this day,
as well as interview participants about the meanings of various visual and linguistic
elements of the productions. Similarly, October 20 will provide an opportunity to see if
and how the way TYC and community members present Tibetan identity changes on an
occasion that allies the exile with their host nation.

During the first three months of research, I will focus on making initial contacts,
doing preliminary interviews with TYC members, collecting material and visual data, and
doing basic archival research using English-language sources or translations. I will also
improve my language skills by taking Tibetan language lessons and acquiring a tutor.

During the fourth and fifth months of fieldwork, in addition to continuing to
collect visual and written data and attending meetings and events, I will begin more
intensive interviews with TYC members and leaders (past and present) to build a history
of the organization, particularly focusing on its intentions to create and adapt Tibetan
identity in exile, in the context of its struggle to regain the Tibetan homeland.

During the next two months of fieldwork, I will use photographs and
videorecordings, and accumulated information about the organization’s role in nation-
and identity-building, to stimulate discussions with TYC members about visual elements
of Tibetan identity in the course of the exile’s history. Additionally, I will continue with the process of participant observation in the activities of the TYC and the everyday life of the community. Finally, I will also pursue more archival research, using both English-language and Tibetan-language sources, using both photocopier and scanner to record images and text.

During the eighth and ninth months of fieldwork, I will continue the above processes, but also put the data I have collected into a more analytic framework, correlating the changes visible in projections of “Tibetan-ness” with the process of crafting a national, pan-Tibetan identity and what that has meant to the exiles involved in the process. During this period and the following month, I will also interview principal informants about my analysis and their interpretations of the same material.

The last two months of fieldwork, I will wrap up archival research and formal interviews. At this point, I will focus on asking interview participants about what and how visual or pictorial elements of Tibetan-ness mean for them as individuals and community and double-checking on their understandings of my analysis.

**Conclusion**

As part of the process of creating or fostering a national identity, the Tibetan exile community privileged specific elements of ethnic and religious identity and ignored or downplayed others. As an organization and as individuals, the TYC struggled to shape the agenda and content of Tibetan-ness during the past 30 years. This research will investigate the visual development and display of signs of Tibetan identity by the TYC, incorporating an analysis of the historical change of these signs as well as an
ethnographic understanding of how they are used and how they function for Tibetans in exile—that is, how they mean as well as what they mean. Doing an ethnography of the uses of particular visual communications by TYC members thus will provide an understanding of how people privilege certain aspects of their identities as Tibetans—whether political, ethnic, national, religious, or cultural, and how changing representations reveal changes in the identities themselves, during an extended period of refugee stress, politicization, and cultural change.

The time is appropriate for this proposed research, with growing academic concern with issues of refugees and diaspora. "Massive population displacements" often are typified as a twentieth century phenomenon (Colson 1987). Large numbers of people around the world, whether as migrants, workers, or refugees, have created a sense of "global migration crisis" (Loescher 1994). In particular, research is necessary on long-term refugees with no indication of an end to the refugee situation, as is true for the Tibetan diaspora: in 2001, the reported number of new young Tibetan refugees has doubled, with 1500 children under 13 arriving in India from Tibet in the first quarter of 2001 (AFP March 2, 2001).

Additionally, the next couple of years will be a particularly fruitful time for fieldwork looking at the internal politics of the Tibetan diasporic resistance movement as well as shifts in notions about cultural identity that may accompany the changes in political organization. The structure of the Tibetan state-in-exile is changing right now: the Dalai Lama is in the process of turning over his political responsibilities to an elected official, and it is possible that his political replacement will support the more aggressive methods favored by many members of the TYC.
One principal contribution to scholarship of the proposed research involves the filling of a gap in published history about the role of TYC in the last thirty years, in projecting and crafting exile Tibetan national identity and agendas. Because the TYC operates in the context of local, regional, and national politics that are reshaping Tibetan identity, it is a valuable site of research into the construction of that identity. Because TYC is a radical and contested organization with vocal and committed members, this work will also contribute to a further understanding of the fissures and tensions within the Tibetan exile as well as the ways TYC members and community members work together to achieve shared goals and to negotiate what it means to be Tibetan—in exile. Additionally, the research will provide new knowledge on the mediation of cultural and individual identities in exile by a grassroots political organization. Finally, in contrast to the wealth of research on Tibetan Buddhist religious orders and philosophy, this project will contribute to the understanding of the less-studied diasporic laity as well as the exile community as a whole.

Finally, as a graduate student of visual anthropology, I am interested in contributing to an anthropology of visual communication that extends beyond film. This dissertation will contribute to the literature on visual communication by analyzing how an exile group manipulates cultural self-representations in media production, public events, and everyday life. Analyzing the visual representations of Tibetan-ness used by the TYC will illuminate the connections between Tibetan-developed media and the solidification of a Tibetan identity in exile. However, in a larger sense, this research also will contribute to a larger debate within anthropology about indigenous media, especially regarding the
way communities depict, shift, and understand cultural identity through media, to satisfy or accommodate particular political, cultural, and personal agendas.
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