Etnografia. Praktyki, Teorie, Doświadczenia 2024, 10: 237–255
https://doi.org/10.26881/etno.2024.10.12

Katarzyna Byłów https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5725-9862
Adam Mickiewicz University

Rituals of a collective karmic project: Discipline, children's bodies and the "future seeds of Tibet"

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to highlight a specific aspect of contemporary Tibetan education in exile – rituals of a collective karmic project implemented in Tibetan residential schools in India. To this end, I focus ethnographically on the home and classroom educational efforts by the school staff, Home Mothers and teachers, through which children's bodies are inscribed within a collective karmic project and its related timeframe – one which re-scales individual lifetimes and consciousness and offers a glimpse of a radically different temporality. Such efforts strive to manipulate subtle consciousness *namshé* (rnam shes[1]), through imprints *pakcha* (bag chags), effected through positive and negative actions and carried from one lifetime to another, and as such to fashion the "future" that is always inherently nested within the present.

Engaged Buddhist philosopher Jessica Locke (2021) noted the centrality of karma to Buddhist psychology and explored practical ramifications of collective karma through an example of the abolitionist theory of transformative justice seen as a practice of collective karmic self-fashioning. David Loy (2019) referred to collective karma in his work on Buddhist responses to ecological crisis, war, and other social justice issues. In the Tibetan Buddhist context, Martin Mills

[1] To disambiguate Tibetan words, their pronunciation is provided in italics, followed by transliteration in parentheses, using the Wylie transliteration method (Wylie, Turrell 1959: 261–267). Translation and transliteration of Tibetan terms by the author is based on: (Goldstein 1984; 2001; Tashi 1999; Bell 1920).

analysed how collective karma affects Tibetan political imaginary by producing a specific view of political associations and rulership, where "notions of communal and shared karma imply moral solidarities and boundaries that have shaped Tibetan understandings of legitimate governance," and highlighted the composite nature of moral action within Tibetan Buddhist philosophy (2015: 191–193).

An analysis of guidance and education provided to children within the Tibetan boarding school system in exile highlights ideas related to the concept of karma as a collective project, where children are the "future seeds of Tibet" (Tib. ma 'ongs bod kyi son rtsa). In exploring bodily practices related to a collective karmic project in a contemporary Tibetan school in exile, my aim is to ethnographically theorize the radical alterity of temporal framework that such projects may evoke.

Karmic causation

In Tibetan Buddhism, karma is said to be the "most general overarching systems of ethical causation," a general law (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 224). It is said to produce happiness from good actions and unhappiness from bad ones (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 232). The Tibetan term for karma is *la* (W. las) or *la-kyu-dra* (W. las rgyu 'bras). The former term means action, deed and work, and by extension also: result, fruit, merit and karma. The longer expression incorporates two other words – *kyu* (W. rgyu) – cause or seed, and (W. 'bras) – result, outcome or fruit. The "karmic inter-relationship" (rten 'brel) combines together notions of social inter-connectedness, exchange and inheritance, as well as kingly and religious responsibility (Mills 2015: 190).

In terms of karma seen as "hypothetical story with a moral" (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 232), the actions that are karmically significant are either beneficial – leading to happiness (glossed by them as "virtues," Tib. dge ba), or detrimental – leading to unhappiness ("sins," Tib. sdig pa). The catalogue of beneficial acts includes abstaining from sin but also many diverse "formalities," i.e. "counting beads, circumambulation of holy sites, prostrations, spinning prayer wheels, erecting prayer flags, obtaining blessings, muttering prayers and sacred formulae, sponsoring ceremonies, dispensing charity and alms, and venerating Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha" (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 232). These are needed to counterbalance the innumerable unavoidable and unintentional sins committed during everyday existence (e.g. destruction of life in soil cultivation, suffering of domestic animals, suffering caused by production and transport of goods and people). All the deeds of the preceding lifetime are clearly reflected in the mirror of karma,[2] ensuring

[2] David Lichter and Lawrence Epstein (1983) evoke a description of the Dharmaraja's court where the white and black pebbles symbolising good and bad deeds of the deceased are measured on the scales. The result of weighing may influence the next rebirth, but the good and bad deeds do not cancel each other out. Rather, their karmic consequences will manifest themselves in future lifetimes.

that no tampering with the inexorable law of karma is possible (Dawa Drolma 2001: 41–42).

The causes bring all kinds of actions, and the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and medicine recognise the element of "creation of action or creative impulse" ('du byed kyi las). Following this creative impulse, positive and negative actions create an imprint – *pakcha* (bag chags) on the consciousness referred to as *namshé* (rnam shes) (Drakpa 1993: 84–85). *Namshé* is said to correspond to the subtle consciousness and the very essence of life (Drakpa 1993: 84–85), which accompanies the individuality through all its existence and plays an important role at the moments of a sentient being's death and conception. It is the last component to leave the dying body and the one that precedes the conception in the intermediate state (bar do) from which it is projected by the force of *karma* (las). Once positive and negative actions have been imprinted on that consciousness, it takes their imprint from one life to another (Drakpa 1993: 84–85).

The only way the karmic trajectory can be changed is through the dispelling of ignorance and the ensuing good conduct – through the doors of body, speech and mind. Correct conduct can be achieved through discipline (*chöpa*, W. spyod pa), meditative and tantric practice, guidance from the deities and their blessings (*chinlab*, W. byin rlabs). The blessings come in the form of empowered substances, such as food, drink and other substances used during ceremonies in the temple or touched by an enlightened being (e.g. a respected reincarnate lama). Indeed, people in the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) actively sought and shared the blessed red barley grains of *Nechung cha né* (W. Gnas chung phyag nas) from the temple of the Tibet's protective deity Gnas chung (Shen-yu 2010), and the medicinal *mani rilbu* pills from another guardian – Palden Lhamo. These could be ingested or worn as amulets, and most children in TCV wore blessed threads or plastic or metal containers encapsulating blessed substances. Toddlers in the Baby Home and TCV staff quarters tended to wear rather substantial bundles of these on thick silk or woollen strings hung over their shoulder and neck for safety. When sleeping, these bundles would be hung on the bedpost, near the child's head.

Tibetan Children's Villages

The campus where I did my long-term fieldwork – spanning a total of 17 months, from January 2013 to January 2014, then June through August 2014, and July through August 2016 – is located in the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. It was created just months after the first Tibetan refugees reached India in 1959 and apart from the school grounds, it now also includes a retirement home for school staff – teachers, carers, administrators. The origin of Tibetan Children's Villages can be traced to the first Nursery for Tibetan refugee children, run by the elder and then the younger sister of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, who himself took residence in the nearby McLeod Ganj. Over the years, the number of children had increased dramatically, and as the economic situation of Tibetans in India gradually

improved, education replaced foster-care as the primary mission of the institution transformed into a TCV network. Given its geographical and personal proximity to the Tibetan government-in-exile, it was the TCV as an institution that shaped the first ever Tibetan system and curriculum of universal education, derived from one of the oldest wisdom traditions in the world and crystallizing within a modern nation-state Asia, with its colonial heritage of Western-style schooling practices.

Mrs Jetsun Pema, the younger sister of HH the 14th Dalai Lama, who took over the management of the then Tibetan Nursery in mid-1960s, is a graduate of the prestigious Catholic mission Loreto schools in Kalimpong and Darjeeling in India. She also pursued further education in Switzerland (Jetsun Pema 1997). When made responsible for the expanding the Tibetan Nursery, Jetsun Pema-la was open to suggestions from overseas friends, whose help she solicited for nursing, funding, etc. The model of Children's Villages based on foster mothers running family homes was designed by SOS Kinderdorf in Austria in the aftermath of World War II. The first Children's Villages were set up in Austria (1949) and then France, Germany and Italy. They were introduced in Korea and India in 1963, at the time when the overflowing Tibetan nurseries urgently needed a more long-term policy. Among the volunteers who came to help were British nurses sent by the Save the Children Fund, Swiss Red Cross doctors, Indian nursing sisters, a volunteer teacher sent by Civil Service International (Ms Doris Murray) and other Europeans and Americans who contributed ideas about modern (as of 1960s) hygiene, nutrition and education (Narayan 1964; Murphy 1966; Chhophel 2009).[3] The ideas and rules enforced on the time and space organization of TCV Homes by the SCF nurses, described in their detailed reports, proved long-lasting. TCV Homes follow the seven day cycle, with specific weekdays (Wednesdays and Saturdays) designated for baths and clothes washing, procedures still based on the distinctive pattern of separation and sequencing (Byłów-Antkowiak 2017). Even though Mothers were said to have quite a lot of discretion as to the running of their individual Homes, the daily routine in *khyimtsang* showed a great deal of homogeneity.[4]

TCV kinship terminology

It is revealing to see Tibetan kinship system and terminology superimposed on a school's institutional structure. The term *pö khyim* (W. bod khyim), which can literally be translated as "Tibetan family," has been used consistently in Tibetan language publications to refer to Tibetan Children's Villages. Also, *tsang* (W. tshang, as in *khyimtsang*) means nest, household or family. *Mi tsang* are family, people

[3] Other sources include copies of reports of SCF nurses Miss Juliet Maskell and Miss Iris Betts (found in Gyen Phuntsok Namgyal's personal archive), and Jetsun Pema's 1968 *Report of the Tibetan Refugee Children's Nursery in Dharamsala 1964–1968* (found in Amnye Machen Tashi Tsering's personal archive).

[4] See also discussion of TCV schools in Marisol's Mercado Santiago's PhD thesis (2014) and a more recent PhD thesis by Thubten Tashi (2019).

of the household. *Khyim ming* is family name and *khyim rgyud* – family lineage. Within the Tibetan diaspora, where the overwhelming majority of children attend either schools managed by the Tibetan Children's Villages, the Tibetan Homes Foundation, or the Central Schools for Tibetans, this "family lineage" is often both salient and acknowledged.[5] The forms of address ubiquitous at Homes also reflect Tibetan kinship structures, where the age/experience seniority is the deciding factor. Children living in the same Home addressed each other as *acha* (older sister) and *chocho* (older brother) and *pu/pumo* (younger boy/girl) respectively. They called their Home Mother *amala* (mother), using the honorific particle *-la*, which can be spared when addressing older children. The Home Mother's husband was *pala*, honorific for "father," and their adult children were *acha* and *chocho*. Any visiting Home Mother was called *amala*, although other women were most often called *acha* (older sister). Visiting men that were not Home fathers were called *aku* (paternal uncle; the term *ashang* being reserved for maternal uncle). Very old people were *mola* and *po(po)la* – honorific for grandmother and grandfather. Teachers and senior staff, both men and women, were always addressed as *gyenla* – teacher (hon.). Monks and nuns of all ages were respectfully called *kusho-la* (hon.) and *ani-la* (hon.). All visiting older Tibetan girls and boys were *acha* and *chocho* (older sister, older brother), even if they were strangers (e.g. prefects from other Tibetan schools on a study visit in Upper TCV). *Amala* and *Pala* addressed Home children by their given names. In some Homes, *Amala* and *Pala* made a point of always adding the honorific particle *-la* to the names of all children, regardless of age. This was "talking *shesa*" – politely, and was considered more refined.[6]

Parents' advice and body as a locus of discipline

Lapcha (bslab bya) – "advice," and *chöpa* (spyod pa) – "conduct/discipline" are two Tibetan concepts that gradually emerged as salient analytic categories during my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in TCV.[7] They were frequently mentioned in my interactions and interviews with children, Home Parents, educators and teachers. In "homes," i.e. living quarters of the TCV residential schools, Home Parents are usually in charge of around 20–25 girls and boys aged 5–15. Some of these children have parents and relatives, but since for nine months of each year they live on the campus and away from their families, the TCV Home Parents tend to be largely responsible for their daily upbringing. An elderly couple of experienced

[5] For instance, a poster of a new Tibetan movie, pasted all over the Tibetan hub McLeod Ganj in the summer of 2014, listed "ex-CST Shimla" among the director's credentials.

[6] It was a custom identified with the Tibetan capital Lhasa, almost completely absent in e.g. Amdo (Dr Chok Tenzin Monlam, personal communication in 2013).

[7] Cf. Thubten Tashi's discussion of disciplinary practices, including the use of corporal punishment in Tibetan schools in exile (Tashi 2019).

and by then retired TCV Home Parents, when asked about the most challenging part of their job, told me:[8]

> Home Father: These children are the generation of future seeds of Tibet. So…
> Home Mother, interrupting: *Chöpa yakpo che tang lopchong yakpo che…* [Tib. They need to have good conduct/discipline and study well.] (…)
> Home Father: Discipline. *Chöpa* means discipline.
> Home Mother: Discipline and being good. (…) *Chöpa yakpo che, ke cha-she tang, dro tang…* [Tib. Good conduct/discipline, good speaking, good walking…].
> Home Father translates: To be able to speak, to be able to walk. In Tibetan there is a proverb: *sa tang dro tang te tang…* [Tib. how to eat, how to walk, how to sit…].
> Home Mother, finishes: *…dinte pama lapche.* [Tib. …this is the parents' advice].
> Home Father translates: …this is the main advice of good parents.

The discourse of propriety and self-discipline at Homes (in the form of *lap-cha* – advice), structured bodily practices focusing on the correct way of doing things – prayers, meals, cleaning or sleeping, organization of time and space that subjects the bodies to a seemingly relentless routine of chores, as well as embodied affiliation to classes, batches and bigger collective entities that manifest quite spectacularly during the annual school anniversary celebration, point to the body as a main channel for action in the formation of human beings as "future seeds of Tibet" in a collective karmic project, whereby history is primarily understood as actualisation of karmic potential – through imprints, patterning and habituation.

Body, voice and mind: The three "doors" of action within karmic causation

In the Tibetan Buddhist "science of healing,"[9] the body is considered to be one of the three channels for action, or "doors." During one of our casual lunchtime conversations in the TCV staff mess, I asked one of the senior teachers (and a former monk) why he thought it was important for people to come together and pray aloud. In fact, my question indirectly referred to the "door of voice" and that was what he decided to pick up on: "*Go-sum* – three doors. It is because things that come out of them – action – can be speech and thinking or attitude."[10] In Tibetan medicine, the origin, composition and function of the three doors of body, voice and mind are explained as follows:

---

[8] Interview with Upper TCV Home 22 retired Home Mother and her husband, 30th July 2014 – transcript of excerpts from audio recording.

[9] Sowa Rigpa (gso ba rig pa), one of Asia's four "great scholarly medical systems" (Kloos et al. 2020; see also: Craig, Gerke 2016).

[10] Conversation in Upper TCV staff mess, 23th July 2014 – recorded in field notes.

> The human body begins as an aggregate of humours and organic components based on the energy of the elements, while the "door" of the voice, not having been formed by the humours and organic components, exists directly on the base of the energy of the elements. (…) the body (…) is a physical support for the other two doors of voice and mind which depend upon it; the three doors of body, voice and mind exist in a relationship of reciprocal dependence. (Norbu 2008: 113)

In TCV Homes and schools – environments shaped by historically and geographically distinct agendas – the "door of body" is one of the main channels used to influence and regulate the "mind-stream" of children growing up in a Tibetan Children's Village as "future seeds of Tibet." During our lunchtime conversation with the school's monk teacher, I also asked about something that I thought would bring us to the topic of discipline:

> Researcher: *Gyen la* [Tib. honorific for "teacher"], what is the Tibetan word for "naughty"?
> Teacher: *Dri-nye-po*.
> [The teacher asks 5-year-old Yeshi, who is sitting with us at the table, eating her lunch, if she is *dri-nye-po* and she shakes her head "no."]
> Researcher: And *duk-cha*?
> Teacher: No, it is "bad," better not to use [it].

I found his explanation remarkable, as I had heard Home Mothers frequently use the term to describe both children and adults. The Tibetan phrase *dri-nye-po* (W. sgrig nyes po) consists of *dri* (W. sgrig) – "to arrange/put something in order, in line," "to queue," which is also used in sgrig khrims – (monastic order) "discipline," and sgrig lam – "rule" (lit. orderly path); the second part, *nye–po*, is the adjectival form of *nye-pa* (W. nyes pa) – "sin, crime, wrongdoing, guilt." "Naughty" – *dri nye-po* – then could literally be translated as "wrong/sinful arrangement." In the interview with the retired Home parents (cited above), the English term "naughty" was translated by the couple as – *dukcha* (W. sdug chag) and *chöpa nyepo* (W. spyod pa nyes po). The Home Mother consistently used the term *chöpa* (Tib. conduct, behaviour), which she and her husband also translated as "discipline" – something leading one to having a good mind and to being a valuable person.

Tibetan dictionaries allow both terms to form a collocation *chöpa dukcha* (W. spyod pa sdug chag) – "terrible behaviour." As noted above, discipline manifested itself in the right way of eating, sitting, walking and talking and was thought to have a direct impact on the person's disposition and their having a good "mind," revealing an overarching notion of propriety and self-discipline that is expected of a human being, and that needs to be channelled through "action" accomplished through and by the body. Specific "actions" attained through voice and body were explained by one of the most senior staff members and the head of the Home Mother Training Centre, elaborating on the effectiveness of daily prayers and religious instruction in TCV Homes:

> Mothers receive religious education during training. They have a choice of prayers. It is not compulsory to recite some and not others. If a Mother knows about a particular prayer and it is part of her practice, she will teach that to children. (…) There are three stages,[11] if the children learn about it now, through hearing from Mothers and others, and then repeat it daily. Even though they do not understand the concepts, later they will understand it and practice.[12]

According to the Buddhist theory of learning, to which I was consistently referred during my fieldwork in TCV, the repeated thinking and concentration on a given "truth" constitutes the final stage of a process leading to an inner subjective experience of the "truth" in question. The daily bodily and verbal practices, such as body posture during prayer and offerings, prostrations in front of the deities on the Home altar, joint mantra and text recitation,[13] thus eventually lead to an inner subjective experience of the practice's meaning and, over time, to its fruition, i.e. the desired results. Indeed, both TCV Homes and school were sites of such purposeful "action" channelled through the "door of body."

Daily routine and a collective karmic project

Extended interviews with Home Mothers and my Home survey of the Upper TCV campus showed a consistent pattern of space and time organization to which children's bodies were subject at Homes. Each morning children were sweeping their Home's entire surface and its adjacent concrete courtyard, using short sweeping brooms that required bending, crouching or squatting. The morning prayer at Homes was short and involved joint recitation or incantation of a prayer or instruction chosen by the Home Mother. The children knew it by heart and the recitation was fast and fluent. All meals were taken in the Home's multi-purpose hall, with low and narrow wooden tables and benches arranged in a U-shape along the walls. The sitting arrangement was pre-established following the seniority principle, and food was served by Amala, helped by kids on "kitchen duty." After breakfast, children put on their school uniforms – the same sets worn by girls and boys, except on Wednesdays, when students wore "traditional" gendered Tibetan dress (with long-sleeved coat for boys and wrapped *chupa* dress for girls). Before leaving Home, Mothers inspected the children's appearance – the uniform, hair, hands, nails. At 6:30 the kids were expected to report in one of the two school halls for morning school prayer and by 7.00 am start a 1,5-hour self-study period in their classrooms. The school assemblies, separate for each Section,

---

[11] Three stages in the Tibetan Buddhist theory of learning: hearing from another; testing the revealed piece of knowledge to decide if it is valid; and, finally, repeated meditation or contemplation upon it to make it one's own.

[12] Conversation with Mrs Kalsang Sharling-la, MTC, July 2014 – recorded in fieldnotes.

[13] Tibetan Buddhist mantras are composed of syllables that can at best be related to Sanskrit and Pali words and meanings, and cannot be directly interpreted in vernacular Tibetan.

brought the pupils together in the school yards at 8:30 am. The classes started at 9.00 am and continued until 3.00 pm (Infant and Junior Section) and 4.00 pm (Middle and Senior Section). Back at their Home, children washed their clothes, had baths (younger children bathed in the courtyard following specific sequenced procedure), cleaned the bathrooms and helped in the kitchen on specific days of the week, usually working in teams of two. A team would be sent to the main kitchen store for provisions, older boys or girls were responsible for exchanging the empty gas cylinders, while a team of younger children would take the trash bin to the recycling point. After dinner, kids had another self-study period and their day finished between 8.00 and 11.00 pm – according to their age.

Home was thus the locus of body-related practices, involving prayers and offerings, food preparation and communal eating, baths, cleaning, studying and sleeping routines. The net of relations extended from Home to the centres of campus life – village office, carpenters' workshop, village storeroom and dispensary; to other Homes – through relatives and friends; to four school Sections; and, through relatives and sponsors – to the wider community beyond school "bounds." At the same time, Home needed to be maintained, through prayers, cleaning, repairs and daily routine in a structured effort at disciplining both the environment and the bodies. According to the Home Mothers' lore, it is the mother's love [W. ma-yi brtse bar],[14] compassionate and selfless, that makes such structured disciplining of 'the door of body' possible. Discipline – *chöpa* (conduct), enforced out of compassionate selfless concern with the consequences of the (harmful) actions of the children's bodies, voices or minds, is an action with a karmic perspective in mind.

TCV Home Mothers

Due to TCV's geographical and historical location in the Indian modern nation-state, the Home Mother as an "institution" is necessarily also related to the Indian "modern" ideal of an enlightened motherhood.[15] In one of our conversations, the Head of the TCV Mother Training Centre quoted the school president, Jetsun Pema-la: "We should train all Tibetan women. Mother is a pillar of society." Perhaps as a realisation of this idea, TCV adopted a policy of training Home Mothers through regular workshops[16] and devising a formal year-long training curriculum for aspiring Home Mothers. Notably, the beginning section of the Mother Training

[14] Cf. religious verse by Rikya Rinpoche (2010: 13).

[15] Nilanjana Chatterjee and Nancy Riley, discussing the history and rationale of fertility politics in late colonial and post-colonial India, link the Indian enlightened motherhood ideal to a "total package of modernity": "Reason and agency, planning, male familial responsibility, female literacy, higher age at marriage, an absence of son preference, and perception of children as costs or investments are all presented as aspects of a total package of modernity that is directly indexed through material prosperity" (2001: 835).

[16] For instance, a series of two day workshops "Save Food, Hate Waste," organized by the Mother Training Centre in August 2013.

Centre Handbook (TCV 2010), a reference material for a year-long Home Mother training course, focuses on religious instruction at Homes (pp. 1–17) – including texts of suggested prayers and interpretation of basic Buddhist precepts, explanation and procedure to follow in daily prayers, water offering, butter lamp offering and prostrations. These are followed by etiquette relating to common meals and the use of honorific language – politeness (pp. 18–21); the role of *amala* as the child's "first teacher" (p. 24); sections on hygiene: regular baths, hair combing, appropriate, clean clothing and bed sheets, importance of physical exercise, cleaning the Home compound and visits to the school dispensary; nutrition: proper storage and preparation of food, food waste management, "functions of food" (p. 72) and nutritional value of different foodstuffs, the role of vitamins and possible effects of vitamin deficiencies, junk food; and childcare (p. 89): parenting methods and stages of human development (infant – child – adolescent), counselling – with a specific focus on physical abuse. References listed (without dates) on the last page of the MTC Handbook consist of Tibetan and Indian sources, including *Nutrition and Dietetics* by Dr Shubhanni A Joshi, *Text book of home science* by Premlata Mullick, *Developmental psychology* by Dr Vatsyayan and *Modern child psychology* by Tarachand.

"The future seeds of Tibet" as a karmic project

While the Indian population control and parenting policy had been shown to be rooted in the "modern" ideas of population as a resource and family household as part and parcel of the state management apparatus (Chatterjee, Riley 2001), the shift that might have occurred in the perception of children as investment within the Tibetan diaspora could well stem from a very different rationale. Since TCV kids were the "future seeds of Tibet," given the imagery of the seed (W. son rtsa) in Buddhist philosophy, careful parenting and upbringing may not necessarily focus on the society's organizational framework, but involve a specific re-scaling, emerging more visibly in the context of TCV schools than in TCV Homes.

Since detailed description of the school's formal organization, including layout, period schedules, classroom and teachers' room etiquette is beyond the scope of this paper, I will focus on the distinct features that will help contextualize the meaning of "future seeds of Tibet" as a karmic project. The TCV student body's organization into classes, sections, thematically-focused streams – each with its territory and time-share of school facilities (tuck shop, canteen, football and basketball grounds), as well as into informal though well-established alumni "batches," encourages a kind of separation and affiliation I mentioned earlier (see also: Bear 1994).

Within the campus, superimposed on 42 Homes, there were four Houses (named after Tibetan ancient kings) taking part in the annual inter-House competition. While Houses offered a re-scaled potential for affiliation, the daily school prayers and assemblies – separate for each Section – imposed yet another sense of structure and different-order formation. The students formed rows

of Classes and rectangles of Sections, supervised by section prefects – all orderly and self-disciplined. The most spectacular manifestation of such discipline was the calestenic "offering" (W. slob phrug rnams nas lus rtsam gzhigs 'bul zhu rgyu) during the annual school anniversary celebrations, when the Middle and Senior Sections came together to present a meticulously rehearsed Swedish gymnastics[17] formation of 600 people in synchronized movement:

> All students of the Middle and Senior Sections, except for Class XI, assemble in the soccer ground to practice marching and pattern formation routine before the TCV anniversary. First, all kids stand in a grid and do a moves routine standing. The oldest PE teacher is beating the drum on the balcony of the Principal's office, overseeing the soccer ground. Two other PE teachers (men) – from the Middle and Junior Sections – are on the ground among students. They carry notepads and move kids around to make them stand in straight lines or form correct shapes. There are white complex lines drawn with white powder on the ground – letters and shapes for orientation.[18]

Each morning the older students practised three consecutive, meticulously arranged formations: "We salute our martyrs," a pair of scales, and "Spread love and compassion." Such daily morning practice took weeks before the anniversary celebrations.

Elsewhere (Byłów-Antkowiak 2015; 2017), I showed the body to be an important vehicle and channel of inner subjective experience equated to "wisdom" in Tibetan dialectical debate classes (see also: Lempert 2012). However, the effort focusing on bodies in the environment of TCV Homes and school sections suggested a re-scaling of the karmic causality, tying individual karmic projects of TCV children to a collective karmic project of the Tibetan exile diaspora.

The diasporic karmic project

The event of exile brought Tibetan society, its elites and commoners, to face the modernity of the newly independent India. Early accounts of Tibetans coming to India often stress the lethal effect of higher temperatures and humidity of the Indian valleys and plains, echoing the colonial imagery of the tropics, and the resulting requirement of separation. Over time, there emerged the discourse of "pure Tibetan" lifestyle and language, of "ethnic" endogamy and the rhetoric of "cultural genocide" and "cultural survival" started to permeate Tibetan exile politics and spill into the school environment through political speeches (referred to as *lapcha* – "advice" – or, using the honorific form, *kalop* [bka' slob]) by the official guests at school events and celebrations. Importantly, in exile, school

[17] Cf. Pehr Henrik Ling's idea of "Swedish" gymnastics for, e.g., schools, workplaces and the military – group exercises having aesthetic, pedagogic, military and medical goals.

[18] A 6:30 am calisthenics practice, 14th October 2013 – recorded in fieldnotes.

children have become carriers of history that may, through them, be fashioned and controlled in specific, un-tensed ways. The Tibetan Buddhist mind stream imagery provides an important context:

> In its rejection of the notion of self, Buddhism is radical. (…) Buddhism does not consider the root cause of our problems to be an external agent of this life, but rather an internal agent developed over many lifetimes – the habitual tendencies of our own mind. Parenting and environment, of course, play a significant role in making us the people we are today, but Buddhism looks further (Tsering 2006: 2–3).

The timescale at play here is thus much longer than an individual life – the mind stream of any given person flows through a lineage of reincarnations, passing through spaces and times, and bodies, collecting mental imprints, bound in the samsaric circle of countless births and deaths. The seed imagery invokes the causes of phenomena, e.g. of mind and body, as explained to me by the learned TCV teacher and monk Geshe Aten-la:

> Seeds… We can say causes are seeds. The seed of a banana cannot produce an apple. That is why the cause of mind must be mind, not something that has very different properties, something solid. We humans – we come from our mother, the seed of the body is the parent gene, but the parent gene cannot produce both body and mind. That is why the seed of mind must be mind – previous mind.[19]

Tibetan theories of lineage (rgyud) allow for continuity that is not directly predicated on material substance and yet can be traced through material "incarnations." Since personhood is attached to mind, as the continuing aspect, and not to the body – the transitory vessel, TCV children are persons that continue through time, through re-incarnation.[20] This, in turn, begs the question about the kind of history such persons have, what kind of history a collective of *nang-mi* (Tib. lit. inside-people – Tibetan Buddhists) share, how it may manifest itself in their daily lives – both at present and in the future. In this context, the education and schooling projects of the Tibetan diaspora in fact stand out as the spheres where the future of Tibet may be negotiated.

History as karmic causation

The *Tibetan reader VI*, used during history periods in Class VI in the TCV's Middle Section, may serve as an example. The textbook is a compilation of stories about Tibetan kings (rgyal) and their empires in the context of religion (chos – path),

[19] Interview with Geshe Aten-la, Upper TCV Senior Section, 11th October 2013 – transcript from audio recording.

[20] I would like to thank Professor Mario Aguilar at St Andrews University's Divinity School for bringing this to my attention.

combined with the Buddhist (nang chos – insider's path) way of the mind (rigs lam).[21] Part of the textbook expounded on Buddhist teaching, expressed through the life story of Buddha Shakyamuni, which should not be surprising, considering the Tibetan concept of religious and political system of rule – *chos nyitrel*. Indeed, the TCV children today learn Tibetan history as shaped by the process of state unification under the 5th Dalai Lama, through which faith, the philosophical system and the way of life in the context of Buddhism in Asia was established as a political structure, resulting in an inextricable unity of religion and politics.[22] The anthropologist and Tibetan studies scholar Martin Mills argues that "notions of communal and shared karma imply moral solidarities and boundaries that have shaped Tibetan understandings of legitimate governance" (2015: 191).

In terms of the temporal framework such "history" invoked, it is important to note that people across incarnations maintain personal connections, which was often used to explain particular happenings: a meeting, mutual attraction and friendship, and kinship ties in the current lifetime (the baby is said to have had karmic connections with her parents if she was able to be born through their union; see: Brown et al. 2008; Mills 2015). The accumulation of karmic merit and demerit could also be seen in the present. During my fieldwork, a series of bad events occasioned prayers for "luck," but also, primarily, revealed a default on the part of those involved. When a dangerous fire broke out in one of the retired staff quarters, apparently due to a faulty use of a gas cylinder, shortly before a major conflict in one of the school sections, which was then followed by the passing away of one of retired staff, people looked for signs of "inauspiciousness." A Tibetan friend, staff member, told me that according to the Tibetan calendar it was to be a bad month, very inauspicious, a fact that found confirmation in the "scandal," the fire, and the untimely death. The demerit had to be countered, and as a counter measure, all TCV staff in all the TCV schools were expected to attend collective prayers. Prayer sessions spun over several days, and were held in the afternoon, after work. Students did their part in the morning and evening. The number and length of required sessions was calculated to cover the prescribed "15 lakh of mantras" (15 × 100,000). When asked what occasioned the need for such collective effort, the school staff members explained: "Because so many bad things happened recently here."

At a personal level, recent health issues, sometimes accompanied by other personal problems – money problems, malicious gossip, falling out with a friend – would spark a similar impulse. A trusted lama's advice would be sought and the suggested mantras, prayers, services and empowerments arranged. A Tibetan friend performing a complex set of rituals over a number of weeks due to health problems explained that her aim was to "clear" the future. At the same time, sacred

[21] Cf. W. rgyal rabs chos 'byung – royal genealogical works and works of combined nature devoted to the exposition of history and religion (see e.g. Vostrikov 1994; Sørensen 1994).

[22] Prof. Mario Aguilar, CSRP Seminar, School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, October 2014. For detailed discussions of the nature of state and authority, see: (Mills 2013; 2015). For a discussion of Tibetan historiography, see: (Sørensen 1994).

substances (pills, grains, scrolls, amulets) and prayers performed by lamas could protect people from spirit attacks (e.g. an unwanted possession by a spirit fended off with several grains of *Nechung chag ne*,[23] or spirit voices at Home exorcised by a prayer by HH the Dalai Lama[24]). The school temple housed deities of the Tibetan monastic pantheon – the enlightened teacher Guru Padmasambhava, the protectors Nechung (W. Gnas chung; the deity was sheltered from view by a muslin veil), the fierce Palden Lhamo, the wisdom deity Manjushri, Buddha Sakyamuni, the compassionate Avalokiteśvara and the multi-eyed goddess Tārā. The nature of the intervention of these divinities in the human world has been elucidated by Stephan Beyer (2013: 64) in his erudite *Magic and ritual in Tibet: The cult of Tārā*, where he noted the impersonal quality of Tibetan deities, including Tārā, who was also ever present in lives of TCV inhabitants:

> Yet in their [Tibetan Buddhists] devotion lies one of the basic paradoxes of the Tibetan religion: in spite of her close touch with the lives of her people, Tārā shares in the essential nature of the deities of the monastic cult. She, too, is basically alien to the human experience, ultimately "other," without personality, appearing and dispensing her miraculous favors as unapproachable and impersonal light. She, too, is a cosmic force which may be manipulated by an expert in her ritual or may be directed to one's own benefit by the recitation of her mantra, the sonic reverberation of her power.

Expert manipulation of these cosmic forces has indeed been sought by both school authorities, e.g. through annual divination held for the school, or the annual teaching and empowerment sessions by high Buddhist lamas, and privately by the campus residents, through ceremonies commissioned for residential Homes and staff quarters. Prayers for "luck" could also have a pre-emptive effect. The school authorities consult the Main Temple monks on an annual basis and ask for divination for the year,[25] making sure all the necessary steps are taken to grant the well-being of students and staff and the smooth running of the institution, in an attempt to see the future through the present – to see what prayers need to be done *now*.

In their discussion of efforts to reconcile the doctrine of karma and supernaturalism manifested in Tibetan daily life, Lichter and Epstein (1983) offer a persuasive explanation based on the distinction between *kyu* (W. rgyu) – karmic causes extending across lifetimes, and *kyen* (W. rkyen) – actions that involve supernatural causation, limited to the present lifetime. The two classes of actions are said to belong to two different but analogous "systems of causal concepts" (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 240), prompting further distinctions between, e.g., the concepts of *sonam* (W. bsod nams) – "the accumulated karmic merit of a soul's career,"

[23] Multiple accounts of a specific event that occurred in the main temple in McLeod Ganj, recorded in fieldnotes, August 2014.

[24] Informal interview with senior children living in a TCV Home, fieldnotes October 2013.

[25] Senior Section Head and teachers, personal communication.

and *lung ta* (W. rlung rta) – "the state of a person's worldly luck." It is the *lung ta*[26] that seems to be targeted by the rituals, though the overarching pedagogic practice based on the conceptualisation of proper discipline seems to be oriented towards karmic causes and effects (rgyu 'bras) and karmic merit (bsod nams):

> *Rlung-rta* is said to be either high or low, unlike *bsod-nams* which can accumulate (*bsags)* or be exhausted (*skam-pa,* literally "dry up"). This idiom for *rlung-rta* is not doubt related to the physical forms the thing takes, such as small flags or scraps of paper imprinted with prayers and mystical formulae set to fly high above the settlements or cast upon the mountain breezes in hopes that they will be carried as high as possible – thereby elevating one's luck. (…) *Rlung-rta* can be forecast year by year and can undergo cyclic alterations, unlike *bsod-nams,* which is linear and cumulative. Like *bsod-nams*, it summarizes all the events and prospects of a particular career at a particular time. Very often the difference between *bsod nams* and *rlung-rta* can be and is ignored, but at other times it can be quite important (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 240).

Lichter and Epstein conducted their ethnographic research in Tsum (northern Nepal, 1970s) and in the diasporic context of Tibetan refugees living in India. They noted the distinction people made between the laity's Buddhism (W. 'jigs rten pa'i chos – sponsor's path) and clergy's Buddhism (W. chos-pa'i chos – religious practitioner's path), and the insistence on learning karmic ethics in the former (Lichter, Epstein 1983: 224).

Conclusions: Temporal alterity of a collective karmic project

Nancy Munn (1992: 93), writing about anthropological grasp of temporality, noted: "When time is a focus, it may be subject to oversimplified, single-stranded descriptions or typifications, rather than to a theoretical examination of basic sociocultural processes through which temporality is constructed." Matt Hodges (2008: 400) pointed to the "spatialization of time through riverine imagery" and the "tacit unspecified temporal ontology" that rests on the metaphors of "flow" or "flux." In their introduction to *Ethnographies of historicity*, Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2005: 263) challenged the tacit assumption of "fluid time" and the standard acceptance of history as both a factual representation of the past and a universal category. Hodges (2008: 402) also remarked that "fluid time" tends to be inherent in current theoretical models as "the (chiefly metaphorical) motor facilitating the ongoing reproduction and modification of social life," one which also constitutes "a constituent component of many varied forms of social analysis" that seek to employ "historical," "processual" or "political economic" approaches. The ethnographic

[26] This theme was further developed by Giovanni da Col (2007), who wrote about Tibetan economy of merit and fortune and the resulting "evenemental perception," where perspectives are also points of view on one's karmic continuum – a view from some*when*.

material presented in this paper indeed poses a challenge to conceptualisations of time that rely on "process, flow or flux," which hardly resonate with the ethnographic categories of "doors," "karma," "seeds," "imprints" and "history" in TCV. It contributes to other ethnographically-informed conceptualisations of Tibetan "history," e.g. as "made" through arrested and released stories (McGranahan 2005; 2010) or through *termas* (gter ma, treasures) – revealed when time is ripe (Stevenson 2015; Gyatso 1986; 1993; Tulku 1994; Wheeler 2015). In terms of a collective karmic project, the TCV time seems to rest on notions of Tibetan Buddhist impermanence, which "happens" in un-tensed present, where "history" emerges out of a continuum of time within the system of karmic causality.

To conclude, I would like to posit that un-tensed history as taught in a Tibetan school through discipline imposed on the bodies reveals a collective karmic project and a concerted effort to "purify" the "future." It is important to understand that in exile politics, talking of school children as of "future seeds of Tibet" refers to a diasporic collective karmic project based on specific understanding of temporality, karmic ethics and karmic causation alike.

Drawing on the notion of mind imprints, patterning or habituation, and the imagery of the seed (*sonrtsa*), coming "alive" and bearing fruit in the right circumstances, I wished to highlight how the making of "history" is both inscribed on the bodies of TCV inhabitants through daily bodily practices (*chöpa*) and effected through performance of divinations and rituals for "luck." Moreover, Tibetan history as taught in a diasporic schooling system is conceptualised and presented in terms of a collective karmic project that involves seeds planted long ago that brought about particular present ("past") and seeds to be planted now to produce/clear the desired present in the next incarnations ("future"). Once the past and the future are tied through karma, we can also think of the "doors of body, voice and mind" as ones through which future is actualised in the present – which makes Tibetan education and schooling, as they emerged in exile, the very spheres of life that enable negotiation of the future of Tibet within the Tibetan diaspora.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and generous comments which have led to a significant improvement of the quality and clarity of this paper. I also wish to thank the editors of *Etnografia* for their excellent work and patience. As always, my deepest gratitude goes to the residents and former residents of the Tibetan Children's Village, both children and adults, who have agreed to make space for me in their lives for the duration of the ethnographic fieldwork and beyond.

References

Bear, L. (1994). Miscegenations of modernity: Constructing European respectability and race in the Indian railway colony, 1857–1931. *Women's History Review*, 3(4), 531–548.

Bell, C.A. (1920). *English-Tibetan colloquial dictionary*. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.

Beyer, S. (2013). *Magic and ritual in Tibet: The cult of Tārā*. Motilal – Delhi – Borehamwood: Motilal Banarsidass.

Brown, A.M., Farwell, E., Nyerongsha, D. (2008). *Tibetan art of parenting: From before conception through early childhood*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Byłów-Antkowiak, K. (2015). Droga umysłu we współczesnym szkolnictwie tybetańskim na uchodźstwie. In: T. Buliński, M. Rakoczy (eds.), *Communicare. Almanach antropologiczny*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Byłów-Antkowiak, K. (2017). *"Others before self": Tibetan pedagogy and childrearing in a Tibetan children's village in the Indian Himalaya*. Doctoral dissertation, University of St Andrews.

Chatterjee, N., Riley, N.E. (2001). Planning an Indian modernity: The gendered politics of fertility control. *Signs*, 26(3), 811–845.

Chhophel, N. (2009). *A short autobiographical account of Norbu Chhophel (b. 1939): Witness of a bitter sweet samsaric life (mthong myong mi tshe'i lo rgyus mngar skyur bro ldan)*. Dharamshala: Amnye Machen Institute.

Col, G. da. (2007). The view from somewhen: Events, bodies and the perspective of fortune around Khawa Karpo, a Tibetan sacred mountain in Yunnan Province. *Inner Asia*, 9(2), 215–235.

Craig, S.R., Gerke, B. (2016). Naming and forgetting: Sowa Rigpa and the territory of Asian medical systems. *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, 3(2), 87–122.

Dawa Drolma, D. (2001). *Delog: Journey to realms beyond death*. Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing.

Drakpa, K.L. (1993). *Roar of the fearless lion (rgyu dang'bras bu'i theg pa mchog gi gnas lugs zab mo'i don rnam par nges pa rje jo nang pa chen po'i ring lugs' jigs med gdong lnga'i nga ro)*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Goldstein, M.C. (1984). *English-Tibetan dictionary of modern Tibetan*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Goldstein, M.C. (2001). *The new Tibetan-English dictionary of modern Tibetan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gyatso, J. (1986). Signs, memory and history: A tantric Buddhist theory of scriptural transmission. *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 9(2), 7–36.

Gyatso, J. (1993). The logic of legitimation in the Tibetan treasure tradition. *History of Religions*, 33(2), 97–134.

Hirsch, E., Stewart, C. (2005). Introduction: Ethnographies of historicity. In: "Ethnographies of historicity," special issue of *History and Anthropology*, 16(3), 261–274.

Hodges, M. (2008). Rethinking time's arrow: Bergson, Deleuze and the anthropology of time. *Anthropological Theory*, 8(4), 399– 429.

Jetsun Pema. (1997). *Tibet, my story: An autobiography*. Shaftesbury: Element.

Kloos, S., Madhavan, H., Tidwell, T., Blaikie, C., Cuomu, M. (2020). The transnational Sowa Rigpa industry in Asia: New perspectives on an emerging economy. *Social Science & Medicine*, 245, 112617.

Lempert, M. (2012). Interaction rescaled: How monastic debate became a diasporic pedagogy. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 43(2), 138–156.

Lichter, D., Epstein, L. (1983). Irony in Tibetan notions of the good life. In: C.F. Keyes, E.V. Daniel (eds.), *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (pp. 223–259). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Locke, J. (2021). In it together: Theorizing collective karma through transformative justice. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 35(4), 305–322.
Loy, D. (2019). *Ecodharma: Buddhist teachings for the ecological crisis*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
Mills, M.A. (2013). *Identity, ritual and state in Tibetan Buddhism: The foundations of authority in Gelukpa monasticism*. London – New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
Mills, M.A. (2015). The perils of exchange: Karma, kingship and templecraft in Tibet. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 24, 189–209.
McGranahan, C. (2005). Truth, fear, and lies: Exile politics and arrested histories of the Tibetan resistance. *Cultural Anthropology*, 20(4), 570–600.
McGranahan, C. (2010). *Arrested histories: Tibet, the CIA, and memories of a forgotten war*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Mercado Santiago, M. (2014). *Culturally responsive engineering education: A case study of a pre--college introductory engineering course at Tibetan Children's Village School of Selakui*. Open Access Dissertations. docs.lib.purdue.edu/open_access_dissertations/334 [access: 1.07.2025].
Munn, N. (1992). The cultural anthropology of time: A critical essay. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, 93–123.
Murphy, D. (1966). *Tibetan foothold*. London: Pan Books Ltd.
Narayan, S. (ed.). (1964). *The story of the education of Tibetan refugee children in India*. New Delhi: Tibetan Schools Society.
Norbu, N. (2008). *Birth and life and death according to Tibetan medicine and the Dzogchen teachings (Skye zhing 'tsho la 'chi ba)*. Arcidosso: Shang Shung Institute.
Rikya Rinpoche. (2010). *Advice on repaying the kindness of parents*. Zamatok Library.
Shen-Yu, L. (2010). Pehar: A Historical Survey. *Revue d'études tibétaines*, 3(19), 5–26.
Sørensen, P. (1994). *Tibetan Buddhist historiography: The mirror illuminating the royal genealogies*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
Stevenson, M. (2015). Time travel in Tibet: Tantra, terma, and tulku. In: J. Powers (ed.), *The Buddhist world* (pp. 121–137). London: Routledge.
Tashi, P. (1999). *Tibetan-English dictionary (Bod dbyin tshig mdsod)*. Gansu: Gansu Nationalities Press.
Tashi, T. (2019). *A case study of discipline practices: Perceptions of administrators, teachers, and foster parents in Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) schools in India*. CGU Theses & Dissertations. scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/346.
TCV. (2010). *Phru gur gches skyong dgos pa'i lam ston lag deb*. Dharamsala: TCV Head Office.
Tsering, T. (2006). *Buddhist psychology: The foundation of Buddhist thought*, vol. 3. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
Tulku, T. (1994). *Hidden teachings of Tibet: An explanation of the terma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
Vostrikov, A.I. (1994). *Tibetan historical literature*. Oxon: RoutledgeCurzon.
Wheeler, M. (2015). Keeping the faith alive: The Tertön as mythological innovator in the Tibetan treasure tradition. *Expositions*, 9(1), 1–18.
Wylie, T. (1959). A standard system of Tibetan transcription. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 22, 261–267.

SUMMARY

Rituals of a collective karmic project:
Discipline, children's bodies and the "future seeds of Tibet"

Based on long-term fieldwork in a Tibetan Children's Village in the foothills of the Indian Himalaya, this paper is an ethnographically informed exploration of home and classroom educational practices that situate children's bodies within a collective karmic project and the related temporal perspectives. Rituals of a collective karmic project that are the focus of this paper involve practices that are grounded in efforts to manipulate subtle consciousness (rnam shes), through imprints (bag chags) effected through positive and negative actions and carried from one lifetime to another, as recognized by Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and medicine – and, perhaps more subtly, by the contemporary Tibetan school curriculum and organization. The paper seeks to illuminate the radical alterity of the temporal framework at play within contemporary Tibetan schools, manifesting in, e.g., Tibetan history curriculum and school rituals to ensure "luck."

Keywords: Tibetan, school, curriculum, ritual, luck