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The Nechung Oracle and the Construction of Identity in the Tibetan Diaspora

Since the mid-17th century until 1959, the Tibetan government routinely consulted an oracle known as the Nechung Oracle. The Tibetan government in exile, located in Dharamsala, India, continues to practice oracular consultation within the diaspora. When possessed by a deity, the Nechung Oracle is believed to give advice regarding political questions. In 2017 a member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile lambasted this practice, provoking a mass protest against him. This article discusses the status of oracles in the diaspora, especially the Nechung Oracle. While local oracles have almost disappeared outside Tibet itself, high-status oracles are extremely valued in the diaspora. Based on a recent survey made by the author, this article discusses why this is so. One conclusion is that the Dalai Lama's endorsement of the Nechung Oracle makes it an important "tradition," which together with other cultural elements is crucial for identity formation in the Tibetan diaspora. Such a selective process leads to an "essentialist" view of Tibetan culture. A second conclusion is that a vocal minority among diasporic Tibetans regard the Nechung Oracle as no longer relevant, being incompatible with democratic ideals.

Keywords: Nechung Oracle—spirit possession—Tibetan diaspora—tradition—identity formation—essentialism

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Scholars have long studied oracular practices inside and outside Tibet. Many have also been interested in whether the Tibetan oracles, characterized by spirit possession, can be linked to the concept of shamanism, and also whether they are a pre-Buddhist or Buddhist phenomenon. However, these are questions that will not be discussed in this article. Instead, I will discuss what oracles signify to the Tibetans in the global diaspora[1] today, focusing in particular on the Nechung Oracle, who takes his name from the monastery of Nechung (*gNas chung*) in which he resides.

After providing a brief history of the relationship between the Nechung Oracle and the Dalai Lama, I will discuss divergent views on oracles based on findings from ethnographic and historical sources, as well as an online survey I conducted, and I will suggest why many Tibetans in the diaspora have lost touch with local oracular practice. The second part of my article will emphasize how the Nechung Oracle has become an element of Tibetan diasporic identity building. Today, the Nechung Oracle has a dual function in the Tibetan community: one is that of oracular practice in the form of ritualistic consultation, the other being its symbolic meaning to Tibetans for their identity building. Hence, apart from being part of a religious belief system, the Nechung Oracle is also one of several cultural elements that mold the Tibetan diasporic identity. To analyze this process, I will use the concepts of tradition and ethnicity in order to see how Tibetans in the diaspora have developed a strong consciousness of what they regard as their traditional culture, selecting certain cultural elements, among them the Nechung Oracle, to create what might be called a "neo-Tibetan identity": a homogeneous ethnic Tibetan national identity based on what Tibetans believe is a continuation of the old Tibet. Thus, while the Dalai Lama is regarded as the "political and spiritual leader of Tibet," according to my survey many Tibetans also maintain that the Nechung Oracle is the "State Oracle of Tibet." Finally, I shall discuss how Tibetans in the diaspora use coercive essentialism in maintaining this identity.

The turning point of the status of the Nechung Oracle in the Tibetan diaspora took place during a meeting on September 20, 2017, when Tenpa Yarphel, a member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile (*Bod mi mang spyi 'thus lhan tshogs*), not only lambasted the practice of the Tibetan government in exile, known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA),[2] of consulting the Nechung Oracle but also mimicked the contorted voice of the possessed oracle. This was not the first time he had spoken in

the Tibetan parliament on this topic, as a year earlier he had expressed similar views. In 2016, contesting the practice of having recourse to a state oracle, he said,

> Nechung is a state oracle [*gzhung 'brel sku rten*]. . . . I wonder what sort of "state" this refers to? Does it mean the state oracle consulted by the Ganden Phodrang government in former times, implying that it [the Ganden Phodrang government] is still functioning at present, or does it refer to the government in exile? Somehow, we need to make a clear distinction between these two governments. The Nechung Oracle and the deity of Nechung are not relevant to every Tibetan. I, for instance, have nothing to do with them. Every [Tibetan] Buddhist tradition has its own oracles. Invoking the deities as a justification for government is not proper. (Tibet TV 2017, author's translation)

This sparked passionate opposition from many diasporic Tibetans in locations such as India, New York, and Toronto, and especially from older or middle-aged women. However, he was not the first to speak out against the practice of the oracle in the diaspora, as will be shown in the following paragraphs.

One might ask why a member of parliament, who is moreover a monk, would condemn the practice of consulting the Nechung Oracle by the Tibetan government in exile based in Dharamsala, India. What is the Nechung Oracle's official status? Why did many Tibetans protest against Tenpa Yarphel? And are there other Tibetans who share Tenpa Yarphel's opinion? To answer these questions, one needs to understand the historical and cultural context of the Nechung Oracle, as well as the views of Tibetans today.

This article is based primarily on a survey that I made in April and October 2020. The questions I put to my survey respondents—who will remain anonymous in this article—dealt with their belief in oracles in general, and the Nechung Oracle in particular, as well as the reasons for the importance of the Nechung Oracle and their reaction to Tenpa Yarphel's comments on the Nechung Oracle. The majority of the respondents filled in an online questionnaire, while the remainder were visited by research assistants in India who obtained answers to the same questionnaire in person. The questionnaire was returned by a total of 68 respondents aged 14 to 84. For the purpose of analysis, I have divided them according to the criteria of gender, age, place of residence, and occupation. Out of the 68 respondents, 33 are men and 30 women, with five respondents not providing information about gender. I have divided them into three age groups: 35 and below, 36 to 50, and 51 and above.

Geographically, there are five respondents from Western Europe and four from North America, with the remainder, 59, being from India, including two from Nepal; of the respondents in India, 12 are from settlements.[3] My respondents come from a wide range of backgrounds, including students, health workers, scholars, teachers, NGO employees, a hairdresser, a photographer, housewives, farmers, an ex–Indian Army officer, a yoga instructor, and a monk. In addition to the survey, I have also made use of a few interviews I conducted during a short fieldtrip to India from December 2019 to January 2020. Although the total number of respondents is limited, the distinctions made according to sex, age, and location, and not least the wide range of occupations, make it possible to establish the existence of certain patterns.

Tibetan oracular tradition

In this article, the term "oracle" will be used to refer to a person who acts as the medium of a deity at certain moments, and whose status is permanent whether or not she or he is in a state of trance. The term will also be used to refer to the institution of the oracle as an ongoing tradition.

According to traditional Tibetan tripartite cosmology, the world is constituted of three levels: the heavenly realm, the intermediate world, and the underground regions. Rolf Alfred Stein quotes a Tibetan verse: "Tuṣita land of gods, Jambudvīpa land of men, Anavatapta land of *nāgas*,[4] these are the three kinds of land" (1972, 197). Thus, at the top level we find the gods; in the middle zone the world of humans, animals, and various spirits; and below the surface of the earth the abode of nonhuman beings called *lu* (*klu*).[5] However, as Giuseppe Tucci points out, these boundaries are not firmly fixed (1984, 167).

As for the gods, lay people as well as clerics consider that,

> To protect the Buddhist religion and its institutions against adversaries, as well as to preserve the integrity of its teachings, is a task assigned . . . to an important group of deities, best known under the name *chos skyong*. (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 3)

Some of the "protectors of the Dharma" (*chökyong*, *chos skyong*), or simply "protectors" (*sungma*, *srung ma*), may at certain times take possession of a medium through whom they can speak and thus become involved in mundane issues (ibid., 409; Diemberger 2005, 130). Among these are the gods of the Nechung Oracle, Pehar (*Pe har*) and his emissary Dorje Drakden (*rDo rje drag ldan*).[6] In accordance with their duties, the *sungma* are generally depicted as fierce, brandishing weapons and crushing human as well as supernatural enemies under their feet (ibid., 3–4).

Among Tibetans, oracular possession almost always proceeds in the same way irrespective of the status of the oracle. As John V. Bellezza describes, oracular possession is

> marked by radical changes in speech and comportment. Typically, possession occurs after the necessary invocations and offerings have been made to various gods. . . . the *lha-pa* [mediums] commonly exhibit profuse perspiration, signs of great physical strain, extraordinary strength, seizures, foaming at the mouth, and disappearance of the irises in the back of the head. (2005, 7)

One may distinguish two main categories of oracle. On the one hand there are high-ranking, institutionalized mediums, known as *kuten* (*sku rten*, "physical bases [for the deity]") (Dalai Lama 1990, 232; Diemberger 2005, 127) and also known as *chöjé* (*chos rje*, "Lord of Dharma"). On the other hand, at a local level oracles are known by non-honorific titles such as *pawo* (*dpa' bo*, "hero"), *pamo* (*dpa' mo*, "heroine"), *lhapa* (*lha pa*, "god-person"), or, more explicitly, *lhabab* (*lha 'bab*, "[medium] on whom gods descend") or *lhaka* (*lha bka'*, "[medium of] god's speech") (Diemberger 2005, 127; Bellezza 2005, 4).

The status and function of oracles mainly depends on the status of the deity. Oracles of lower status are consulted for the health problems not just of humans but

also of livestock, for conflict resolution, for private as well as communal decision-making, and for weather forecasting; they are also consulted to bring good luck and give protection, or for exorcising evil spirits (Havnevik 2002, 261; Berglie 1976; Diemberger 2005, 115, 121, 157; Belleza 2005, 1). High-status oracles also prophesize the reincarnation of high-ranking Tibetan lamas and are consulted in connection with political decision-making. According to Hildegard Diemberger the local oracle is often possessed by the territorial deities who inhabit nearby mountains, rocks, lakes, or springs, and when this geographical context is severed, for instance by migration, "the reference of the broader landscape is recreated by the recitation of narratives" (2005, 130, 121).[7]

Unlike Ioan Lewis's (1971) well-known theory of peripheral versus central spirit possession, claiming that the former is a female while the latter is a male domain (paraphrased in Diemberger 2005, 145), Hildegard Diemberger states that in the Tibetan context, both low- and high-status oracles can be of either sex and come from any social background (ibid., 141). Although this dichotomized classification of spirit possession, with low-status oracles who are mostly women referred to by non-honorific terms on the one hand, and high-status oracles who are mostly men referred to by honorific terms on the other, might seem to support Lewis's theory, a careful analysis of the Tibetan oracles shows that status hierarchies are fluid and are established through "a field of social negotiation" (Diemberger 2005, 145–46). Oracles originally belonging to a lower level can be recognized as belonging to a higher level irrespective of sex. Similarly, regional recognition of status differs (ibid.).[8]

Thus, there are both male and female state oracles in the Tibetan exile community today, chiefly the ones that were consulted by the Lhasa government prior to the uprising in 1959, namely the Nechung Oracle, the Gadong (*dGa' gdong*) Oracle, and the female oracle of the Tsering Chenga (*Tshe ring mched lnga*, "Five Sisters of Long Life") goddesses (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 176–81; Diemberger 2005, 155). Of these three, the Nechung Oracle is of particular importance to Tibetans in the diaspora, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs. In the 1990s the Dalai Lama also officially recognized two laywomen, Namsel Donma and Kelsang Dolma, as high-ranking mediums (Sidky 2011, 86–87). Moreover, during the interregnum period after the passing away of the former Nechung Oracle (1984) and the installing of the present one (1987), the CTA consulted a female oracle (Nair 2010, 6).

The Nechung Oracle and the Dalai Lama

Thupten Ngodup (b. 1957) is the current Nechung Oracle, and the 14th oracle in the line. When not in a state of possession, he is a monk, albeit of high status. He is the medium of the deity Dorje Drakden, "The Renowned Thunderbolt," the emanation or emissary of Pehar.[9] The latter deity was, at least until the mid-17th century, believed to be the deity who spoke through the oracle (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 125).[10] The tradition of the Tibetan government consulting the Nechung Oracle goes back to the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82) (ibid., 449).

Popular Tibetan beliefs concerning the Nechung Oracle are similar to what is written in the *Nechung Karchag*, an inscription preserved inside the Nechung

Monastery in Lhasa and composed partly by the Fifth Dalai Lama and partly by the subsequent regent Sangye Gyatso (*Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1643–1705),[11] translated into English by Christopher Bell (2016). It states that Pehar was installed in Samye (*bSam yas*) monastery during the reign of King Trisong Detsen (*Khri srong lde btsan*, 742–97 CE) in order to protect the newly founded monastery. The narrative goes on to say that the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, who played a crucial role in establishing Samye monastery as the first Buddhist monastery on the Tibetan Plateau, subdued Pehar and bound him with an oath to protect Buddhism in Tibet (Karmay 2014, 27). It is further believed that the deity was later transferred to Nechung Monastery in Lhasa and hence was called the "Nechung deity."[12]

After the Tibetan exodus to India in 1959, the Nechung Monastery was re-established in 1984 in Dharamsala, in the Himalayan foothills of Himachal Pradesh, just below the headquarters of the CTA. The deity is believed to reside there. Although the Nechung Oracle is not mentioned in the charter of the Tibetan government in exile, it is still recognized as the official "State Oracle of the Central Tibetan Administration" (Central Tibetan Administration 2019).

The Kashag, "Council of Ministers," is responsible for consulting the Nechung Oracle on behalf of the CTA on a regular basis as well as on special occasions. During an oracular session, a monk from the Nechung Monastery writes down the oracle's message spoken in trance and passes it on to the Department of Religion and Culture (*Chos rig lhan khang*), with the Department arranging the rituals and prayers as advised by the oracle. Moreover, the Department is also responsible for looking after the needs of the state oracles (all of them referred to as *kuten*), including their monthly honorarium.

Conforming to the tradition of the Ganden Phodrang government in Lhasa, the Nechung Oracle is still consulted twice a year by the CTA—once in winter, on the tenth day of the first month according to the Tibetan lunar calendar, and once in summer, around the fifth day of the fifth Tibetan month. The Dalai Lama also consults him seven or eight times a year. Previously, it was necessary to seek the permission of the Dalai Lama before consulting the Nechung Oracle; however, since 2011 the Kashag can consult the Nechung Oracle on its own initiative. An official consultation with the CTA is usually not made public. Tibetan NGOs or monasteries can also ask for a consultation, which are regarded as private.[13]

According to the *Nechung Karchag*, the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the oracle goes back to the Second Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso (*dGe 'dun rgya mthso*, 1475–1542) (Bell 2016, 187). The fact that the Nechung Oracle played a significant role in the search for the reincarnation of not only the present Dalai Lama[14] but also in that of the Seventh[15] (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 449–50) and the Thirteenth, and also in identifying the genuine reincarnation of the Sixth Dalai Lama (van Schaik 2011, 135), is of great importance to Tibetans.

In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama emphasizes the importance of the Nechung Oracle for Tibetans, saying that "the responsibility of Nechung and the responsibility of Dalai Lama towards Tibet are the same, though we act in different ways"; he points out that his task of leadership is peaceful, while the oracle's role as the protector and defender is wrathful (1990, 234). An example of the importance of the Nechung

Oracle in modern Tibetan history is the events in 1949, when the present Dalai Lama was fourteen years old. The Nechung Oracle, asked about the danger looming from China, responded with an action rather than by speaking. Looking toward the east, he bent his neck fifteen times, ignoring the weight of the heavy headdress, leaving no one in doubt that the danger was coming from China (ibid.). Furthermore, 14 out of my 68 respondents as well as three other informants recounted the historical narrative of March 1959, in which the oracle played an important role by saving the life of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The Nechung Oracle insisted that the Dalai Lama should escape and even drew a map showing the route to India (Dalai Lama 1990, 149). According to the Dalai Lama himself, the deity also told those present that once the Nechung Oracle had recovered from the possession, the Dalai Lama should leave immediately toward the south and predicted that no harm would happen on the way (Avedon 1986, 216–17).[16] The Dalai Lama immediately left and shortly after, about one hundred thousand Tibetans followed him into exile in 1959. This and similar narratives resonate deeply among Tibetans in exile; they have been imprinted on the minds of Tibetans like myself, who were born in exile, by Martin Scorsese's 1997 film *Kundun*.

The controversy concerning the Nechung Oracle

Criticism of oracles is not a new phenomenon. Gendun Choephel (1903–51), who is regarded as the first Tibetan modern intellectual and revered as one of Tibet's greatest modern poets, was fiercely critical of the Nechung Oracle in a poem that begins,

> Hey! After I had gone away
> Some nonsense-talking lama
> Said that Nechung, king of deeds,
> Did not let me stay because I was too proud.
> If he is a protector who purifies,
> How could he permit those impure monks to stay? . . .
> There is no purpose in four-fanged king Nechung
> To banish to who knows where
> Those who study and ponder the Victor's (Buddha's) teachings
> Braving hardships of heat, cold, and fatigue. . . .
> But when the king above (Nechung) looks at them, there is no difference.
>
> (Lopez Jr. 2009, 65)

"Four-fanged" refers to the Nechung Oracle, who is depicted having a fierce mouth with four fangs; in general, all the deities who descend on oracles have this appearance. Gendun Choephel was notorious among the monks in Central Tibet for openly questioning the status of the monastic system and its ideology. His words "after I had gone away" refer to the fact that he left Tibet for India in 1936 and later also traveled to Sri Lanka, where he was greatly influenced by Theravāda Buddhist monks.

Likewise, referring to his fieldwork in the early 1950s, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975) wrote that although most Tibetans firmly believe the prophecies of the "oracle priests," there were, especially among the educated, some who "regard oracles if not as imposters, then at least as strange pathologic cases" (ibid., 440).

In the 2006 documentary film by David Cherniack *The Oracle: Reflection on Self*, Jamyang Norbu, a Tibetan writer in exile, affirmed that in "old Tibet" oracles were openly criticized and booed in public for incorrect predictions. Invoking the historical instance of the British invasion of 1904, he says,

> Seven hundred Tibetans in one day were massacred![17] He [the oracle] said Tibetans were not to worry as the heavenly armies would back up the militia and that he would be there to lead the heavenly armies. . . . seven hundred Tibetans in the militia were slaughtered and people avoid responsibility by asking that oracle.

In the contemporary Tibetan exile community, criticism of oracles is not limited to verbal communication but also takes the form of anonymous posting of memes in social media ridiculing them (*The New Yak Times* 2016).

Unlike others who have spoken out against the Nechung Oracle, Tenpa Yarphel was condemned by hundreds of Tibetans around the world because the 2017 parliamentary session was broadcast live by Tibet TV, a news channel owned by the CTA. A group of Tibetans in India, mainly consisting of women waving pieces of black cloth at him, protested his statements by shouting slogans such as, "We totally oppose you!" (*mtha' gcig tu ngo rgol yod*), "Disgraceful!" (*zhabs 'dren red*), and "It is shameful that you are a monk" (*na bza' dmar po gyon nas zhabs 'dren red*). They aimed further protests at those who accompanied him, shouting "All those who support him go against His Holiness the Dalai Lama!" (*kho la rgyab skyor byed mkhan tshang ma rgyal ba rin po che la ngo rgol byed mkhan red*) (Lhak Sam 2018a). The waving of black cloth at Tenpa Yarphel was a way of demonizing him, as in traditional Tibetan belief the black signifies demons and even pollution (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 307). Demonizing nonconformists comes from the idea that they are people who create disharmony among the "unified" Tibetans in the diaspora, just as demons might do.

Similarly, Tibetans in Toronto and New York organized protests against Tenpa Yarphel. In Toronto, Tibetans held a poster-sized photo of the Dalai Lama, together with placards saying, "Tenpa Yarphel. We are demanding your resignation from Tibetan Member of Parliament," "We are not protesting against our government, CTA," "Stop disrespecting State Oracle," and "Stop causing fraction in Tibetan community [*sic*]" (Lhak Sam 2018b). A middle-aged woman, Karma Sonam, stated that they did not want Tenpa Yarphel to come to the Tibetan community in Toronto because he was a person who spoke against the Dalai Lama (ibid., my translation).

Apart from these protests, how widely do Tenpa Yarphel's views resonate in the Tibetan diasporic community? In my survey, 13 respondents were not aware of Tenpa Yarphel's 2017 parliamentary speech, while nine were aware of it but remained neutral; three did not comment at all. This leaves 43 people who had taken a standpoint with regard to Tenpa Yarphel, of whom 13 agreed with him. The remaining 30 respondents, comprising a considerable majority, disagreed with him and for the most part severely criticized him. However, out of 68 respondents, 13 made a point of referring to the right to expression in a democratic system. Among the 30 who disagreed with him, five said he had the right to expression; likewise, five of the 13 who agreed with him pointed out that he was exercising his right to expression. Three who remained neutral about the incident did refer to the right

to expression; for instance, one of them wrote, "Any opinion can be expressed in a democratic system," while an 82-year-old man wrote, "I am not surprised because the world is changing, and Tibetan society is also changing."

As stated, there were 13 respondents who agreed with Tenpa Yarphel, but reservations were expressed in some cases. For instance, three respondents wrote that they "partially" agreed, and others felt that he could have expressed his views in a better way. One of them wrote, "he has a point but he should have respected people's sentiments." Among those who favored him without reservation, one wrote, "If CTA consults the Nechung Oracle what is the use of Parliament?" Another respondent wrote, "I am all for him. Get rid of the Nechung [*sic*]." Hence, Tenpa Yarphel himself and the statements of a number of my respondents exemplify a small but vocal minority in the diasporic community. These are mainly young people, although a few older Tibetans do not accept the political role of the Nechung Oracle.

Generally speaking, however, those in the majority group were equally, if not more, vocal in speaking out against Tenpa Yarphel. Thus, one of them said, "This is not the way an MP should speak about oracles, especially of the Nechung. I was annoyed when I heard about him saying that, and him being a monk as well." Some said that he brought the entire Tibetan monastic community into disrepute, or that he created religious disharmony and hence was unqualified for the position of MP. Another wrote, "He is a Kagyu Lama, maybe he believes in the Kagyu oracle," insinuating that since Tenpa Yarphel did not belong to the dominant Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, he would not be loyal to the Nechung Oracle. Two respondents even expressed the opinion that he might be paid by the Chinese. No less than six respondents said that his statements hurt the sentiments of the majority of Tibetans and that he had no right to do that; thus, one respondent wrote that, "He may not believe in it [the Oracle], but he should respect the sentiments of those who do."

In other words, the survey shows that those who criticize Tenpa Yarphel and support the CTA's practice of consulting the Nechung Oracle form a solid majority; hence, it is not surprising that many Tibetans protested in public.

Why is the Nechung Oracle questioned or not questioned?

Of my 68 respondents, 52 of them replied that they believed in the Nechung Oracle and 12 that they did not, while four remained neutral. There were many reasons why respondents stated they believed in the Nechung Oracle. Forty-two believed that the Nechung Oracle is not only the personal protector of the Dalai Lama but also the "protector of Tibet," and thus of all Tibetans, while 12 cherished the Oracle as "traditional culture." Four said that since the Dalai Lama believes in the Nechung Oracle, they do, too; one, referring to the Dalai Lama, said he had faith in the Oracle because "My root guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) has much experience of them [oracles]."

A 51-year-old ex-army officer from the Bylakuppe Tibetan settlement in Karnataka, India said that when he was in service, any major decision as far as the Tibetan personnel were concerned was made after consulting the Nechung Oracle. Others made similar statements, such as, "The Nechung Oracle has historical and sentimental importance to the Tibetans as the State Oracle," and "Having such a

unique culture is an advantage for our future." Six respondents who believed in the Nechung Oracle said they did so because they were Buddhists, and one of them, a 24-year-old woman, even said "As long as the Buddha dharma continues to prevail in the world, consulting oracular tradition will be relevant to our society." Fourteen respondents, referring to the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet in 1959, believed that the Oracle's pronouncements were reliable, while only three said that the Nechung Oracle had not helped Tibetans in the past.

According to my survey, there were ten respondents who neither believed in the Nechung Oracle nor in oracles of any kind. They gave as their reasons that oracular practice was "superstitious," "outdated," "irrational," and "a mockery of democracy." One of my respondents wrote, "I think it's a psychological issue with the people and their brain." In addition, there were eight who were not sure of their belief in oracles in general, modifying their belief with words like "somewhat," "do not know," "a bit skeptical," and so on.

In my survey there were 14 respondents who questioned the practice of consulting the Nechung Oracle on political matters, although some of them accepted consultation of oracles in private matters. A 37-year-old Tibetan working as a legal researcher wrote that people can consult oracles on a personal level, "but allowing consultation at the state level makes a mockery of our democracy and of secularism."

Another young Tibetan man who believes in the reality of oracular possession and who has witnessed his uncle consulting a local oracle for medical reasons, nevertheless wrote, "It is absolutely ridiculous for a government to consult an oracle, and if it does, what is the use of democracy?" These sentiments are shared by a number of Tibetans, especially in the age group of 35 and below, who believe that consulting the Nechung Oracle on political matters is "obsolete."

Among the respondents who were against the CTA consulting the Nechung Oracle, there was some variation according to age group. Of 46 Tibetans below the age of 35, 11 were against while two were neutral; from the age group of 36 to 50, only one out of five was against; and among the 17 respondents in the age group 51 and above, only one was against and two were neutral. Hence the survey shows that the oldest age group is overwhelmingly in favor of the Nechung Oracle, while the youngest is much more divided, although people who are against the Nechung Oracle are still a minority. Overall, a clear majority views oracular practice favorably.

The decline of local oracles

With regard to oracles in general, the number of respondents who have faith in them was 49, almost the same as for the Nechung Oracle; however, there was a certain amount of overlap with belief in the Nechung Oracle. At least 13 respondents referred to the Nechung Oracle instead of local oracles when I asked about oracles in general, with others modifying their belief in oracles, for instance replying that, "There are a few true oracles; however, I think many are fake."

Out of 68 respondents, 45 have never consulted any local oracle, while 23 have or have seen their family and friends do so. While this may seem to constitute a substantial minority, younger Tibetans sometimes confuse local oracles and the

state oracle or even deities like Palden Lhamo (*dPal ldan lha mo*), an important female protective deity. Some of my informants as well as respondents mentioned the names of local oracles who were old or who had already passed away.

A large majority, 52 respondents, said that they were not aware of any local oracle in their community, with only 12 being aware of such oracles. Of these 12, four live in Dharamsala, one in Kollegal Tibetan settlement, and two elsewhere in India (without indicating a specific location). There was one each in London, Switzerland, Canada, and New York, while one indicated no location. According to my informants and respondents, the Tibetan settlements in Bylakuppe, Mundgod, Darjeeling, and Ravangla, India have no local oracles. Compared to belief in the Nechung Oracle, there has been a significant decrease over time in the consultation of local oracles among Tibetans in the diaspora when faced with illness or other problems. My survey shows that more and more Tibetans, irrespective of age, no longer consult local oracles.

However, I am not implying that Tibetans no longer rely on other kinds of supernatural guidance. For instance, two of my respondents also stated that they had never consulted local oracles but would like to if they had the chance. Moreover, the sister of one of my informants, living in the Tibetan settlement in Mundgod in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, was believed to be possessed by a malignant spirit known as a *söndré* (*gson 'dre*). Her family approached an elderly monk from a Kagyu monastery who performed some simple rituals, but this did not help her, so as a last resort they took her to a *baba*, a Muslim ritualist. There was no question of looking for a Tibetan *lhabab*.

One of my respondents from Bylakuppe Tibetan settlement wrote that he had consulted a female local oracle from Ladakh in the settlement, and two other respondents from the same settlement said they had heard about her. He underwent the oracular healing method called *jib*, meaning "sucking":

> When I told her that I have a problem in my stomach she held my stomach and bit it. Later, I saw a teeth's mark (he laughed). It was like a hot iron, so I had to scream. She then took out a black and red thing that looked like a liver in a glass bowl half-filled with water. . . . I couldn't say that she was bluffing. Later when I shared this experience with friends in Ladakh, they told me that it is a fake healing.

One of my respondents, a 31-year-old man, had consulted a local oracle with his family; he thought the experience was scary:

> The person possessed held the sword up and after chanting some mantra stabbed the patient and then covered the spot up with a red cloth. However, once the cloth was removed there was no wound and the patient seemed to be a little relieved.

It was also interesting that a man who now lives in North America said that he contacts oracles in Dharamsala and that a consultation costs $100. In spite of these examples, the question arises as to why local oracles are no longer consulted in the diaspora to any great extent. Several interrelated factors could be pointed to as providing possible explanations.

Modern healthcare

In traditional Tibetan society, the oracles provided what Arthur Kleinman (1980) calls a "healthcare system." Diemberger points out that the most frequently posed questions to the deity primarily concern health problems; in many inaccessible areas inside Tibet there is no modern healthcare system, so oracles remain the first, even the only, person to turn to when faced with health problems (Diemberger 2005, 120). Per-Arne Berglie (1976) also commented that the main activity of the Tibetan "spirit-mediums" was curing illness. It must be kept in mind, however, that Berglie described the situation in a Tibetan refugee camp in Nepal decades ago, namely during 1970 and 1971, which actually resonates with the some of the respondents who said that they had heard of local oracles when they were children in the 1970s.

Modern healthcare systems as well as the availability of Tibetan traditional medicine in almost all the Tibetans settlements in India and Nepal have surely affected the tradition of consulting oracles. In my survey, a few Tibetans in the diaspora who still consult local oracles asserted that they generally do so only when they have problems in choosing the right hospital for medical treatment or sometimes when choosing a college for their studies or the right country to emigrate to. A young man said that this has been an established practice in his family:

> When my aunt got sick with dengue in the city of Anand, Gujarat, my uncle consulted a Lama oracle from Tibet via WeChat and the oracle advised him to change the hospital. Out of the three hospital names he provided, the oracle chose one and my family followed the instruction. As soon as my aunt was shifted to the chosen hospital, the doctor immediately diagnosed the illness and she got better within days.

With regard to illness, therefore, in the Tibetan diaspora there seems to be a shift in the function of oracles—if an oracle is consulted at all—from curing illness to the less crucial role of helping people to choose the right hospital.

Modern education

Another reason for the decline of local oracles is the well-organized modern education system in the exile community. Berglie wrote that, "the hereditary transmission of the office was very important—a long line of *pawo* in the family was taken as a guarantee of the trustworthiness of performing" (1976, 88). This is where the advent of modern education has reduced the practice, because it is unlikely that children of the first generation of exile oracles will carry on the tradition. Two of my informants stated that they had friends whose parents were *pawo* or *lhabab*, but their friends had not continued the tradition. Likewise, two of my respondents, who are 25- and 30-year-old women, wrote that their grandfather and great-uncle, respectively, were local oracles. Both respondents were skeptical about the relevance of the oracles in today's society. One of my respondents, who is a doctor, wrote that she would not consult oracles. She explained,

> They were useful in the days when Tibetans were a largely illiterate and uneducated society, and oracles were people Tibetans went to when they had important decisions to make, or didn't know what to do in a dilemma. I believe that we make

our own destiny, and we shouldn't consult an oracle for decisions but weigh up the risks and benefits ourselves using our own brains.

The primacy of monasticism

The promotion and development of scholastic and intellectual skills that give priority to meditational and philosophical study is a dominant trend in the large monastic establishments in the diaspora. From a Buddhist perspective, the minor or local deities, and hence also local oracles, are deemed to be of a "low stature, belonging to the worldly sphere, and still involved in the mundane issues" (Diemberger 2005). With the ascendancy of these monasteries, traditional village monasteries that are still found in Sikkim, Ladakh, and some parts of Nepal play only a minor role in the diasporic community. Could this mean that beliefs regarding illness caused by *lu* or malignant spirits such *dré* (*'dre*) and *dü* (*bdud*) are also disappearing? If so, with the healthcare system and modern education, there is no longer a place for local oracles, and so oracular practices are marginalized. However, Tibetans still go to monasteries for supernatural guidance in the form of divination (*mo*) or for astrological prognostication.

Although the phenomenon of possession is very similar in the case of local as well as high-status oracles, with the virtual disappearance of local oracles and the criticism of the Nechung Oracle, one might have expected that faith in the Nechung Oracle would also have declined in the diaspora, but this does not seem to be the case—in fact, a few high-status oracles, including the Nechung Oracle, have survived and are thriving in a new political environment. This is the opposite of what Diemberger describes in her study of female oracles inside Tibet, where local oracles survived after the 1959 exodus and the Cultural Revolution, but high-status oracles disappeared (2005, 119).

It is time to take a closer look at why high-status oracles, and above all the Nechung Oracle, have survived in the diaspora. As already noted, for the majority of Tibetans, the Nechung Oracle is very significant. Thus, they believe that the practice of the Nechung Oracle should be continued for various reasons. Of the many reasons given by my respondents, two stand out: firstly, as already noted, the role played by the Nechung Oracle during the events of 1959 in which the Nechung Oracle is perceived to have ensured the Dalai Lama's life by advising him to escape to India—hence, the Nechung Oracle is the protector of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans; and secondly, the importance of the Nechung Oracle to Tibetan traditional culture and thus in maintaining Tibetan identity.

The Nechung Oracle as "tradition"

The tradition of consulting the Nechung Oracle by the Lhasa-based Tibetan government is a historical fact, although whether this practice was recognized in all parts of pre-1959 Tibet is far from certain; nor does the Nechung Oracle seem to have been known as "the Oracle of Tibet" before 1959. This seems to be the main reason why Tenpa Yarphel argued against the legitimacy of the Nechung Oracle, questioning

how the tradition of the pre-1959 Lhasa-based government of consulting the oracle could be relevant for all Tibetans.

Although the Nechung Oracle was originally associated with the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, since the seventeenth century it has been associated primarily with the dominant Gelugpa school. Nebesky-Wojkowitz writes that it is within the Gelugpa school that Pehar has been assigned to the main place among "the worldly protector deities," while the deity occupies a rather inferior position in other schools. Thus, a Nyingma source classifies some of the most important protective deities into nine groups, Pehar being placed not in the first but in the fifth rank (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 94).

However, in the diaspora the Nechung Oracle is important because, as already pointed out, he is believed to be the oracle of the Dalai Lama and hence of Tibet. Of my respondents, 20 pointed out that consulting the Nechung Oracle is an "ancient tradition of Tibet" or "The Nechung Oracle is part of our culture and identity." One of them emphasized,

> I think there is no harm in following traditions dating back thousands of years, and if the Oracle does give reliable advice then it should be relevant. I think there are a majority of Tibetans who believe in it and His Holiness still seeks its advice now and then, so I think we shouldn't be questioning its relevance.

Hence, there is a shift underway from the Nechung Oracle as a Lhasa-centric institution to a pan-Tibetan one. What we are witnessing in the Tibetan community in exile is a process that is moving toward defining Tibetan identity as a homogenous culture and tradition. Because of its historical background, the Nechung Oracle is a politically important "tradition" for Tibetans in the diaspora. Thus, even if some do not believe in the efficacy of consulting the Oracle, my survey shows that many Tibetans believe it is a part of their "ancient tradition" or "part of our long tradition," and that it should be appreciated as such. One of my respondents said, "I personally appreciate the Nechung oracle in more of a traditional, cultural way rather than as a means of decision-making."

Thus, in the view of these respondents the Nechung Oracle is a tradition that has been handed down unchanged from the past. This understanding of "tradition" is, however, questionable. The American folklorist Elliott Oring writes that tradition "involves the notion of transferring or transmitting and has been applied to the act of handing over or handing down as well as to those objects that are handed over or handed down" (Oring 2012, 221). However, he also emphasizes that tradition should not only be seen as a mere product but also as a process that he calls "cultural reproduction"—"the means by which culture is reproduced in transmission and repetition" (ibid., 223). He further states that,

> Things from the past are altered. . . . Continuity and stability depend on what people preserve for good or ill, consciously and unconsciously – of the thought and behavior of the past. (ibid., 225)

This way of regarding "tradition" can be applied to the Nechung Oracle, for there is no doubt that, at least for a majority in the diaspora community, it has "unconsciously or consciously" become a pan-Tibetan tradition and hence must be preserved. The

change here is in its symbolic meanings. As mentioned, the majority of Tibetans—whether they believe in the Oracle or not—agree that the Nechung Oracle is of great significance for Tibetans. Thus, what was once the oracle of the Gelug school and the Ganden Phodrang government is today understood by many Tibetans to be a pan-Tibetan oracle: the State Oracle of Tibet.

Neo-Tibetan identity and the politics of Tibetan culture

The position of the Dalai Lama as the supreme spiritual (and traditionally also political) leader of all Tibetans without doubt constitutes a crucial element of "Tibetan traditional culture" in the diaspora. Hence, loyalty toward the Dalai Lama plays a key role in molding a unified Tibetan national identity (Anand 2000, 282; Korom 1997, 4). As we have seen, the reason why Tibetans attacked Tenpa Yarphel was the fact that the Dalai Lama has a close relationship with the Nechung Oracle.

A powerful indication of the paramount importance of the Dalai Lama in the diaspora is the fact that his photo adorns every home, restaurant, cafe, and shop; it protects vehicles and is found prominently displayed in every monastery irrespective of school of Buddhism (including monasteries belonging to the Bön religion, whose followers do not usually regard themselves as Buddhists). However, Clare Harris, a British professor of visual anthropology, states that displaying the Dalai Lama's picture prior to 1959 was a practice restricted to the Gelug school (Harris 1999, 80).[18]

In other words, the Dalai Lama as well as the Nechung Oracle have spanned the boundaries separating the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, in the absence of the Dalai Lama, in 2016 the 17th Karmapa, head of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, presided over a ritual possession of the Nechung Oracle in the Tsuklagkhang (Main Temple) in Dharamsala, an unprecedented event (Bhangzoed 2016).

According to the Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya, this change in the perception of past practices or traditions in the diaspora is a "manipulation of symbols" (1993). Over time there certainly has been a shift of emphasis in the diaspora away from regional cultural elements toward a symbolic pan-Tibetan culture. In this connection, the CTA has surely played a significant role in constructing these new narratives. However, I suggest that this has only been possible because some cultural elements have been given center stage or been imbued with new symbolic meaning by diasporic Tibetans in general in the belief that a unified national identity is a precondition for the attainment of a free Tibet. This is also emphasized by Steven Venturino, who argues that in the case of Tibetans, exile is not perceived as a permanent condition but as a basis for attaining their ultimate goal—"to reclaim a geographical homeland" (Venturino 1997, 99).

It is therefore apparent that a homogenous Tibetan identity is being created to achieve a political goal in accordance with Max Weber's statement that "it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity" (quoted in Jenkins 2008, 10). Having been placed in one single ethnic category of *pöpa* or "Tibetans" (*bod pa*, from *Bod*, "Tibet"), the majority of Tibetans in the diaspora now strive to define a "shared culture" and thereby create

a unified Tibetan community, even though they originate from different regions of the Tibetan plateau. Tibetans also seem to have adopted "romantic images of Tibet as homogenous, peaceful, and most recently, in harmony with nature" (Korom 1997, 3).

Fredrik Barth argues that, "The critical focus of investigation . . . becomes that ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1969, 15). Hence, according to Barth a "shared culture" is "best understood as generated in and by processes of ethnic boundary maintenance, rather than the other way around" (paraphrased by Jenkins 2008, 13). However, in the case of the Tibetan diasporic community, a shared culture is the crucial element in creating social boundaries, as geographical boundaries on the ground—namely, in Tibet—are beyond their control and therefore imaginary.

In fact, the shared culture assists in reinforcing their social as well as imagined territorial boundary, distinguishing them above all from the Chinese. As Don Handelman argues, both culture "and the ethnic boundary mutually modify but support one another" (1977, 200). Thus, the protests against Tenpa Yarphel are generated by the feeling that he has transgressed the boundaries of a shared culture, of which the tradition of the Nechung Oracle is a significant element.

Together with a few other cultural elements such as the national flag, the national anthem, the Tibetan language (especially the dialect of Central Tibet), and above all the Dalai Lama as the spiritual and political leader of all Tibetans, the Nechung Oracle has become one of the markers of what may be called a "neo-Tibetan" identity in the diaspora. This way of forming a Tibetan identity is an expression of an essentialist line of thinking inasmuch as selected cultural elements are taken as being inherent to the Tibetan identity, and hence "authentic." Venturino has pointed out that such essentialist claims are constructed in the Tibetan diaspora "as a *means* to a particular political end—national independence for some, genuine cultural autonomy for others" (1997, 103).

Regina Bendix argues that "The most powerful modern political movement, nationalism, builds on the essentialist notions inherent in authenticity" (1997, 7). In this process, Tibetans in the diaspora, committed to preserving this "authentic culture" for the future of Tibet, seem to be moving toward what might be called "coercive essentialism." Thus, aggressive protests are triggered when anyone in the community questions established identity markers and thus fails to abide by the dominant norms. This pattern has become commonplace in the diaspora in recent years, and is, I suggest, an indirect result of what is happening inside Tibet, where assimilation to the dominant Chinese culture has led to the disappearance of certain elements of Tibetan culture. Consequently, preserving this culture is perceived as crucial by diasporic Tibetans in order to retain their ethnic identity (Dolma 2017, 20).

Conclusion

To the majority of diasporic Tibetans, the Nechung Oracle is an important element of their identity. Therefore, today the Nechung Oracle has not only a ritualistic but also a symbolic importance, as explained by a 64-year-old woman: "The Nechung Oracle is so important. As a Tibetan on the one hand, and secondly, as we are Buddhist; besides

we are the people who follow the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama." The force of the dominant group was so powerful that in 2018 Tenpa Yarphel felt compelled to write an open letter that was disseminated through social media; while not retracting the views expressed in parliament the year before, he nevertheless struck a conciliatory note in the letter, writing:

> Therefore, I am requesting from the bottom of my heart that people on the two sides should think about the common root issue of Tibet, so as to have a more open mind and tolerance; to put behind us the conflicts and protests that happened during His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Birthday celebration in New York; and to stop spreading letters and activities and hateful speech, which are harming the unity of Tibet. (Author's translation)

Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers argue that people become aware of their culture and start to "repair" their culture when they are "losing or fear they will lose their cultural distinctiveness" (2000, 4). This, I would argue, is precisely what is happening in the Tibetan diaspora. The coercive essentialist view adopted by many Tibetans is a means, in their view, to preserve their culture, perceived as being in danger of disappearing both inside and outside Tibet. For the majority of Tibetans in the diaspora, their shared culture is perceived as ensuring their identity and their distinctiveness from the Chinese, and thus, in the long term, their claim to their lost homeland.

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Notes

1. This article is strictly about Tibetans in the diaspora, who fled Tibet after the Dalai Lama did so in 1959, and whose descendants are now living in India, Nepal, and in other countries around the world. It considers those Tibetans who are registered by the Central Tibetan Administration in India. The study does not, however, consider people from Spiti and Ladakh, India nor from Mustang, Solu Khumbu, and so on in Nepal as a part of the diaspora, as they have lived in their present locations for more than a thousand years, even while sharing Tibetan culture and religion.

2. In 1642 the Fifth Dalai Lama became the head of a religious state with its seat in Lhasa, ruling a territory that roughly corresponded to the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). He established the Tibetan state, the government of which, based in Lhasa, was known as the Ganden Phodrang (*dGa' ldan pho brang*). At the same time, he was the spiritual head of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, which had a large and influential network of monasteries in almost every part of the Tibetan Plateau. Successive Dalai Lamas thereafter remained head of that state until 1959. After the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama, and subsequently thousands of Tibetans, went into exile, initially into India and Nepal, and later to other parts of the world. In India, the Tibetan government in exile was formed, headed by the Dalai Lama, and in more recent years has become officially known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The CTA claims to represent Tibetans inside and outside Tibet. It provides schools and health services and organizes cultural activities and economic development projects for the Tibetan community in exile. The Dalai Lama formally relinquished his political leadership in 2011.

3. The number of respondents living in settlements may seem low because young Tibetans tend to shift to cities or towns to find jobs and education.

4. The *nāga*s being aquatic beings, their "land," in this case, is a lake, namely, Anavatapta.

5. Note that Stein uses Sanskrit terms for the three levels, rather than Tibetan. *Tuṣita* is one of the many Buddhist heavenly worlds; *Jambudvīpa* is the southern continent of the four continents believed to surround the central mountain of Sumeru, the center of the world in Buddhist cosmology; and Anavatapta is a lake close to Mount Kailasha in western Tibet, sacred to Hindus and Buddhists alike. The *lu* are believed to be spirits who live under the ground or are connected with bodies of water. They appear in the form of, or are associated with, snakes and spiders (see Schrempf 2015, 486). As is the case with other spirits, they can cause disease and other problems if irritated by humans, for example through pollution.

6. However, these divisions are not regarded as a rigid system, because by the power of the merit they acquired by protecting Buddhism, the deities from the lower group tend to move beyond *saṃsāra*, thus becoming *'jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma.*

7. Place is not of great importance for spirit mediums in the diaspora. For example, one of my respondents from a Tibetan settlement said that a local oracle was called from Ladakh to perform rituals. If place were important, the Tibetans would have gone to Ladakh and not the other way around. As for the high-status Nechung Oracle, the location has been shifted from Lhasa in Tibet to Dharamsala in India without its status being diminished at all.

8. In the context of Nepal, Gellner points to a similar condition of flexibility that he calls "peripheral" or "half way central cults." Moreover, he stresses that the peripheral cults are dominated by women, not because of a decline in women's position but as the result of women taking advantage of an *improvement* in their status and opportunities (1994, 29).

9. Referring to Longdöl Lama (*Klong rdol bla ma*) (1719–94), Nebesky-Wojkowitz states that Dorje Drakden "is one of the most important figures in the retinue of Pehar, since he is believed to occupy the position of a 'chief minister' of the *sku lnga* group" (1975, 124–25), translated as "Five Sovereign Spirits" by Christopher Bell (2016, 146).

10. According to the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Karmay 2014) and the *Nechung Karchak* (Bell 2016), it was the deity Pehar who spoke through the Nechung Oracle. Nebesky-Wojkowitz mentions that there was a popular belief among Tibetans that Pehar would soon

become a *'jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma*, meaning "a protector who has transcended the round of rebirths," and that accordingly he was more and more reluctant to speak through the Nechung Oracle (1975, 125). Scholars have chosen different ways of describing the relationship between deities who are believed to possess the medium. Sidky (2011, 80) states that Dorje Drakden is an emanation of Pehar, whereas Havnevik (2002, 266) writes that Pehar and Dorje Drakden are distinct deities and that both of them can possess the medium.

11. The regent is someone who is appointed to function as a temporary head of state after the Dalai Lama has passed away and until the new one is found.

12. For further information on these two deities, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975) and Bell (2016). On various versions of the story of how Pehar was brought to Lhasa, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975, 104–6). I have not been able to ascertain the exact founding date of the Nechung Monastery. However, it was renovated in 1682 during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Bell 2016, 106).

13. Email correspondence, August 27, 2020, from the former minister of religion and culture (*chos rig bka' blon*), Karma Gelek Yuthok.

14. After the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933, his body remained seated facing the south. However, it was later noticed that his head had turned toward the east. The Nechung Oracle was consulted, and he threw his white scarf toward the rising sun (Harrer 1981, 298). Thus, the Nechung Oracle was involved in the identification of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was born in Amdo, to the east of Central Tibet.

15. The Nechung Oracle declared that the successor of the Sixth Dalai Lama had been born in Lithang in eastern Tibet, where he was eventually found and duly enthroned in Lhasa.

16. According to Goldstein, the answer as to whether the Dalai Lama should come to power "lay in appeal to an authority above the regent; either the Dalai Lama, or the protective deities and oracles." The Tibetan government chose the latter, and through the Nechung Oracle the center of power was shifted to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was just fifteen years old at the time (Goldstein 1991, 701).

17. In 1903 Lord Curzon, the viceroy of British India, organized a military expedition to Tibet consisting of 2,500 soldiers, led by Francis Younghusband. After a couple of engagements, and one in which several hundred Tibetans were killed by British Maxim guns (then used for the first time in war), the British forces reached Lhasa in 1904. This is the "massacre" to which Jamyang Norbu referred. On the so-called "Younghusband expedition," see Sam van Schaik (2011, 169–79); Shakabpa (1984, 205–20); Fleming (1986); and Mehra (2005).

18. Clare Harris maintains that the custom of having the Dalai Lama's icon prominently displayed in public and private is "a result of [the] host culture of India but also of ideological battles fought in the visual field during the 1960s and 1970s in Chinese-controlled Tibet" (1999, 82).

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