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Tibetan Folk Opera: *Lhamo* in Contemporary Cultural Politics

Syed Jamil Ahmed

Lhamo, the popular folk opera of Tibet is a genre in which the contested politics of the Tibetan diaspora and the People's Republic of China are displayed. This essay notes the practice of the art by the Tibetan refugee community in India and beyond, where it evokes nostalgia for a lost existence and the struggle for a return to the Tibetan Buddhist homeland. Meanwhile the art has been redeveloped in the People's Republic of China in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and used to support Chinese claims to Tibet. Lhamo presents a case study of a particular art and how it can be articulated to different political and economic ends.

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This essay is an examination of cultural politics activated by contemporary *lhamo*, a folk opera of Tibet that has been used quite differently by the Tibetans in exile and the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC). The Tibetan diaspora has used it in their assertion of "Tibetan identity" and resistance against the Sinicization policy of the PRC in Tibet. The PRC has taken up the same performance in order to convince the world that it "emancipated" the Tibetans. This essay will provide insight into the particular genre and its historical transformations since 1960 and raise larger issues of the arts as cultural

signifiers in contested political contexts. While my fieldwork has largely been with the Tibetan community in India, I have sought to partially balance the presentation by researching the PRC viewpoints as well.

For the purpose of this essay, “culture” will be primarily understood as “the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 27). It is “neither the ‘authentic’ practice of the ‘people’ nor simply a means of ‘manipulation’ by capitalism, but the site of active local struggle, everyday and everywhere” (Chen 1996: 312). Thus situated, this essay engages in an examination of “cultural politics” as “the ‘play’ between power and culture” (Hall 1996: 288) that decenters politics and recenters culture in a manner that “culture is pervasively politicized on every front and every ground” (Chen 1996: 312).

In cultural politics, political actors strategically articulate cultural practices to obtain desired political ends. In such cases, “articulation” as a concept may be understood with a double meaning that Hall refers to in an interview: (1) “To utter, to speak forth” that carries the sense of expressing; and (2) to connect different and distinct elements through a specific linkage to make a unity, where the linkage is forged under specific historical conditions (Grossberg 1996: 141). Mobilizing the second meaning of articulation, this essay accepts the notion that a text, cultural symbol, or cultural form “is always capable of being de-articulated and rearticulated; it is a site of struggle” (Grossberg 1996: 158).

The examination of *lhamo* is framed in terms of the following questions: How is *lhamo* activated as a site of struggle between the diasporic community (Tibetans) and the occupiers/liberators (PRC)? How is power “anchored” in a performance so that it may be mobilized for resistance as well as domination? Finally, how is a “play” as performance articulated as a “play” between power and culture? The engagement with the issues presented in this essay progresses in five stages. The first is *lhamo* as performed by the Tibetan diaspora at McLeod Ganj (in India); the second examines the meaning of *lhamo* performance in the articulated field of the diaspora; the third analyzes religious implications of *lahmo*; and the fourth shows “tradition” as a reinvention by participants on both sides. The final part of the essay sums up the findings.

***Lhamo* at McLeod Ganj**

Since 1959, when the Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa in disguise and crossed into India for asylum, it is estimated that over a hundred thousand Tibetans have followed him.¹ Refusing to be erased by the

PRC, one of the means that the exiled Tibetans chose to resist was their performing arts. Hence, the first institution that the Dalai Lama established at the seat of his government-in-exile at McLeod Ganj (Upper Dharamsala) was the Tibetan Dance and Drama Society, now called the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts or TIPA (TIPA 1998). McLeod Ganj, fondly called Little Lhasa by the exiled Tibetans, hosts the Sho-tōn or the annual Opera Festival, which features *lhamo* by TIPA and other companies from Tibetan settlements in India and Nepal.

The Opera Festival is held in a celebratory atmosphere on TIPA premises with a variety of stalls selling Tibetan food, beverage, and handicrafts. Tibetan families in colorful “traditional” dress bring their picnic lunches and drinks. Men cluster in groups or lounge about, women pick up the latest gossip while sitting on rugs, and children move around playfully. Even the monks appear a little more care-free in the mundane world they are desperate to renounce. International tourists with their cameras and backpacks are eager not to miss the authentic “Tibetanness.” All around, there is an ambience of “old Tibet,” perhaps even a waft of nostalgia.

The performance space is a large circle in the TIPA courtyard. The spectators sit all around it on the ground and on the first floor verandas of adjoining buildings. On top of the performance space is spread a giant white canopy, appliquéd with auspicious symbols, to shade performers and spectators. Two musicians, a drummer (playing a *nga*, a double-headed frame drum mounted on a long wooden handle) and a player of a hemispherical cymbal (*bubchen*) sit opposite a passage that connects to the changing room. A property table beside the canopy’s center pole serves as an altar with an image of Thangton Gyalpo (the fabled founder of *lhamo*), a branch of juniper, and an offering bowl of *tsampa* (roast barley flour, the staple food in Tibet). The chorus, when not singing, stands in a half-circle along the circumference of the circle (on both sides of the passage). The narrator, when required to speak, stands in the center.

Costumes are colorful. Ordinary Tibetan men are dressed in traditional *chuba* (an outer robe with long sleeves, reaching up to the ground), *oncho* (an inner garment with long sleeves), sheepskin breeches, and colorful appliquéd boots of felt and leather. Women are dressed in *chuba* reaching the ankles and a fine array of jewelry (with additional devices such as a striped cape and a row of pink flowers on the head to indicate royal birth). Most of the characters are non-masked and freely interact with the masked characters, who include hunters, the old couple (often parents of the heroine), animals, and evil humans. Minimal props and scenic elements are used. It is a pleasure to see a boat presented with the help of a wide skirt with appliquéd

patterns of waves, fish, and ducks, held at waist-level by two boatmen at opposite ends. The oarsmen paddle across the performance space with oars pressed against invisible water. (See Figure 1.) A Tibetan king sporting a brocade robe and a hat goes hunting on a hobby-horse, made of papier-mâché and cloth over a wicker frame. Court scenes have the king with his sceptre sitting on the two-leveled platform by the center pole, while his retinue (dressed in gold robes, broad red-tasseled or round yellow hats with a large earring in the left ear) stand respectfully at a distance. An evil queen stands on a chair and looks through a tube when she wishes to survey the whole kingdom from the roof of her palace. Battle scenes are playful, with a handful of performers, and beheading is no more than “sawing” a wooden sword on the neck. Characters undertaking a long journey simply move in a circle around the performance space. These devices clearly situate *thamo* in the domain of the poetic and the presentational, with a style replete with “magic tale elements” (Attisani 1996: 134).

The performance begins with a series of introductory rites by the *ngon-pas* (hunters), the *gyallu* (old men), and the *ache thamo* chorus (also known as the *ringas* or the fairies)². (See Figures 2 and 3.) The seven male *ngon-pas*, in large, bearded masks of dark blue color, con-



FIGURE 1. A cloth becomes a boat in a performance of Chaksampa, the San Francisco based Tibetan *thamo* troupe (Photo: David Huang. See <<http://poeticdream.com/gallery.php?gid=294&offset=100>>)

secrete the performance space with their ritual dance. The two male *gyallu* in yellow hats sing in praise of Thangton Gyalpo and offer their respect to the Dalai Lama before engaging in witty wordplay and competitive dance with the *ngon-pas*. The *ache lhamo*, female performers wearing crowns and with two fans over their ears, sing and dance in praise of Thangton Gyalpo and the gods. Subsequently, they serve as a chorus or enact the roles of nymphs and goddesses.

The opera begins with the narrator (*shung shangkan*), who gives a plot synopsis prior to each scene in classical Tibetan. Although such Tibetan is hardly understood, it matters little since the story is well known. The characters enter dancing, and they usually sing their lines,



FIGURE 2. The masked hunter (*ngo pas*) in a Chak-sampa performance. (Photo: David Huang)

except for the comic characters, who speak in prose. The last notes of each *namthar* (important solo song) are echoed by most of the characters on stage, which creates a haunting impression. Although only two musicians provide rhythm, the manner of playing the drum and the cymbals effectively produces varying moods. The dance is based on tradition and the steps indicate the character type. The apparent carelessness of the dancers belies strict choreography and years of practice. Characters exit dancing, and the *ache lhamo* chorus fills the interlude. If a performance needs to be shortened, the narrator simply recites the intervening action.

The performance ends with rites (*bkra-sis*). The first of these pays respect to the central characters. Then, as the performers form a circle and file past the dignitaries, they are presented with ceremonial white silk scarves (*khatas*) and gifts of money, tea, butter, and dried meat. Juniper and incense are burnt and each performer is served a



FIGURE 3. A female role (*ache lhamo*) in a performance by the Chaksampa troupe. (Photo: David Huang)

handful of *tsampa* flour. They raise their hands thrice to a rising musical crescendo and then throw the flour in the air as a prayer is sung wishing well-being to all forms of life.

The *lhamo* repertory consists of eight traditional plots: *Pema Woeber*, *Prince Norsang*, *Sukyi Nyima*, *Gyelsa Bhelsa*, *Drowa Sangmo*, *Nangsa Woebum*, *Chungpo Dhonyoe Dhondup*, and *Drimey Kunden* (TIPA 1998).³ All of these are named after the central characters of the play, except *Gyelsa Bhelsa* (literally, “Chinese Princess, Nepalese Princess”) and *Chungpo Dhonyoe Dhondup*, (literally, “Brothers Dhonyoe Dhondup”). (See Ross 1995 for synopses.) These operas present significant historical events and the lives of saintly figures. Since the stories are improvised in performance, no definitive texts of these operas exist. Each opera blends major human sentiments, with emphasis on comedy and pathos. Improvised jokes, slapstick, and satire address social problems.

(De/Re)Articulating the Diasporic Field

Lhamo, claimed by some to be “the oldest living theatre in the world” (Attisani 1996: 128), is performed not only by TIPA at McLeod Ganj during the annual Opera Festival, but also in the PRC, by other exiled Tibetan communities in India and Nepal, and even by Tibetan troupes visiting Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world. Judging by the reaction of spectators during the performance I watched, as well as reports on numerous foreign tours by *lhamo* troupes, there can be little doubt that the performance exerts profound impact on spectators. I will show how the traditional story of *Drimey Kundun*, the Tibetan version of the widespread *Vessantara Jātaka* (one of the stories of the former lives of the Buddha), is currently used by the TIPA artists to represent the diaspora’s political and cultural predicament.

The story tells of young Prince Drimey Kunden, son of King Sayong Drakpa of Beta in northern India, who is uncommonly wise, exceptionally benevolent, and unusually kind-hearted. Moved by human suffering, he distributes all his possessions unhesitatingly. In order to turn him back to the world of desire and pleasure, he is married to Mande Sangmo, a beautiful girl of humble origin. However, his acts of munificence continue after marriage, with the support of his wife. Meanwhile, an evil king of the neighboring kingdom, who is an enemy of Beta, contrives to appropriate a wish-fulfilling gem King Sayong Drakpa possesses by sending an old Brahmin to the prince. He succeeds in his mission by a fabricated tale of poverty. When the loss of the jewel is discovered, the king is horrified, fearing impending loss of power to his sworn enemy, and banishes the prince to the Demon Kingdom for twelve years. Mande Sangmo follows Drimey Kunden with their children, although the prince tries hard to dissuade her.

On the way, the prince parts with all provisions, even his chil-

dren, giving them to poor Brahmin beggars. The gods Indra and Brahma disguised as Brahmins now ask for Mande Sangmo to test the prince. Tearfully, he parts with his wife, but the gods reveal their identity and return Mande Sangmo. Finally, the royal couple arrives in the Demon Kingdom. The Prince implores the savage demons to acquire tranquility for the peace of mind of Mande Sangmo, and they agree. Drimey Kunden and Mande Sangmo devote their time to meditation. After ten years, Mande Sangmo urges Drimey Kunden to prepare for their return journey, but the prince is unwilling. When the stipulated period of exile is over, the couple set upon their return journey. On the way, a blind Brahmin begs to be given the prince's eyes. To the utter horror of his wife, he complies by gouging them out with his own hands. When they reach the boundary of their native kingdom, an official entourage receives the prince and his wife. He prays to the gods for a pair of new eyes, and his wish is granted. The evil king appears with the wish-fulfilling gem and begs forgiveness. Then the Brahmins, who had taken his children, appear and offer them back to the prince. When he reaches the palace, the king begs forgiveness and declares Drimey Kunden as the prince regent. Under his rule, the kingdom prospers and eventually the prince and Mande Sangmo attain nirvana.

TIPA's performance of *Drimey Kunden* is generated to a large extent by articulating the performance to the diasporic field into which it is incorporated. A diaspora, Brah (1996: 182) observes, implies a paradox contained in the image of a journey—not casual or temporary sojourns—and that of settling down or “putting ‘roots’ elsewhere.” The image of the journey is evoked with painful elegance by the exiled Tibetan poet Tenzin Tsundue in his *Crossing the Border*, which describes the agonizing experience of crossing Tibet-India border by a fugitive Tibetan family.

Creeping in the nights, hiding in the days,
 we reached the snow mountains after twenty nights. [. . .]
 In the middle of the white killing fields,
 a heap of frozen corpses
 set our weakening spirit trembling. [. . .]
 Then, one night, my daughter complained about a burning foot.
 She stumbled and rose again on her frost-bitten leg. [. . .]
 By the next day both her legs were severed.
 Gripped by deaths all around,
 I was a helpless mother.
 “Amala, save my brothers,
 I shall rest here for a while.”
 Till I could no longer see her fading figure,
 till I could no longer hear her fainting wails,

I kept looking back in tears and agony. [. . .]
 Long after in exile, I can still see her
 waving her frost-bitten hands to me. [. . .]
 Every night I light a lamp for her,
 and her brothers join me in prayer. (TibetNet 2001)

Like numerous Tibetan families and even the Dalai Lama himself, Drimey Kunden is forced to seek exile. His journey from his homeland to the Demon Kingdom is replete with painful acts of parting, starkly evoking images of the *Crossing the Border*. During his exile, the prince is content in his meditation—so much so that he appears to have planted his roots in the Demon Kingdom. A similar condition resonates in Tsundue’s *Exile House*, which captures ‘the growing of roots’ in bleak diasporic condition:

Our tiled roof dripped
 and the four walls threatened to fall apart
 but we were to go home soon. We grew papayas
 in front of our house, [. . .]
 beans sprouted and
 climbed down the vines,
 money plants crept in through the window,
 our house seems to have grown roots, [. . .]. (TibetNet 2001)

The paradox of the journey and of putting roots elsewhere that is so central to diaspora is anchored indelibly to the notion of “a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where dispersion occurs” (Brah 1996: 181). But—Where is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin.’ On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall [. . .] all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (Brah 1996: 192)

Thus “home” for a diaspora is both-and-neither “origin” and “relocation.” As Tsundue says, “I am in India, but my heart goes to Tibet. Living between exile and dreamland, I am neither here nor there. My life has become poetry” (Phayul.com 2003).

These testimonies indicate that a regular feature of diasporic positioning is perhaps not so much a matter of contradictions “of and between location and dislocation,” as Brah (1996: 204) argues, but more of ambivalence heightened by the fact that diasporas are situated in the “third space” of the margins (Brah 1996: 182). The “third space”

is characteristically unfixed and in-between. The legal status of most exiled Tibetans in India is stateless. No one (except for the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa⁴) is granted official asylum. The Tibetans are not even refugees by law (Baral 2003) and are severely restricted in owning property.

Similarly, the Demon Kingdom, which is infested with spiteful beasts and is the location where Drimey Kunden and Mande Sangmo live for twelve years, is unfixed and in-between. The malicious demons agree to dwell here in tranquility only for the peace of mind of the princess. But the royal couple does not belong to this “third space.” They retain their royal distinctions since the narrative continues to refer to them as the prince and the princess. More importantly, they are separated from their children; hence the “third space” emphasizes incompleteness and liminality. Their condition of ambivalence is heightened by Mande Sangmo’s urge to return, but Drimey Kunden’s wish to remain longer. In this sense, “home” for the exiled royal couple is both-and-neither “origin” and “relocation.” *Drimey Kunden* actually operates as a cultural symbol of the Tibetan diaspora and produces a powerful effect on the third vector—“The goal of returning back to homeland” (Anand 2000: 275). However, as Tsundue’s “Exile House” has shown, the goal appears to be a hopeless dream.

Contemporary cultural criticism and diasporic discourses often refer to the notion of “return” as a “myth” (Al-Rasheed 1994: 199 ff) and “nostalgia” (Anand 2000: 277). Anand shows that the older generation of Tibetans yearns for the homeland of their memory, the land that they left behind, whereas later generations yearn for the nostalgic homeland that they never saw, a utopia. “This nostalgia for a particular space is complemented by nostalgia for a particular time. It is not contemporary Tibet, but pre-1959 Tibet, frozen in time, which defines the longing” (Anand 2000: 277). Argued thus, “return” is problematic because reconfiguration and transformation of “original” institutions and modes of signification have already taken place in a relocated “home.” For example, documentary filmmaker Tenzing Sonam’s work talks of Lhasa and the Potala Palace as the “Mecca” of which each exile dreams, but when he finally sees this symbol of Tibetan identity, he is starkly alienated: “In the distance, the Potala Palace looms like a somber shipwreck beached on the shores of an alien city” (Sonam 2000). Hence, when the exiled presume that they will eventually return, “The questions met with en route consistently breach the boundaries of such an itinerary” (Chambers 1995: 2). Sonam’s phantasmal homecoming is a stark reminder that those “who are diasporized irrevocably,” [...] cannot go back through the eye of the needle” (Hall 1995: 11).

Academics may characterize the notion of “return” as “myth”

and “nostalgia,” but as Mouncer (2000) observes, “Asylum seekers and refugees are not so easily enticed” and they “refuse to collaborate with them and insist on the validity of their aspirations.”

Drimey Kunden articulates Beta to a memory of Tibet and the prince’s return to their dreamed return, which resonates the web of connotations created by the ambivalence of “home” as both-and-neither “origin” and “elocation” and the paradox of journey and putting “roots” elsewhere. This in turn intensifies the yearning for Tibet. Thus *Drimey Kunden* insists on the validity of the third vector. Keeping alive the hope of return, intensifying it with urgency, and insisting on its validity, the performance succeeds in maintaining the vision of “Free Tibet” as a common cause. Most importantly, the articulation ceases to operate solely on the conceptual plane but is actually experienced in the lived experience of the spectatorial experience. Here lies the effectiveness of *Drimey Kunden* as a tool of resistance. Nevertheless, the third vector—the goal of returning back to the homeland—forces open fissures from where rises the issue of phantasmal homecoming: what if one *actually* returns “home?”

One will not fail to note that what happens *after* the prince does return is glossed over: the king begs forgiveness, declares Drimey Kunden prince regent under whom the kingdom prospers, until Drimey Kunden and Mande Sangmo attain nirvana. In another version translated by Marion Duncan (1967), the aging father grants the prince the throne but Drimey Kunden hands over the kingship to his sons and retires with his wife into a life of meditation leading to their nirvana. The key political question is: after his return, can Drimey Kunden continue to be the Buddhist ideal which was also the cause of his exile, and still reign as a king? More precisely, if the Dalai Lama is reinstated at Lhasa, will he be able to exert the same political authority that was vested on him before the Chinese invasion?

While a literal interpretation of the play as a metaphor of the Tibetan political resolution is extreme, for clearer understanding of the mythologizing that is occurring in TIPA’s presentation, I wish to briefly discuss some of the political and ideological changes that have been caused by the diaspora. These changes clarify the fictive nature of the resolution and highlight problematic aspects of this moving performance and its cultural politics.

Transformations within the Tibetan diaspora have been significant. Gone is the feudal and in its place the Tibetan government-in-exile is democratic, elected every five years by a popular electoral-college voting systems. In 2002, the Tibetan diaspora “had its first direct election [. . .] for a prime minister as a step toward forming a government that could function separately from the Dalai Lama” (Bhattachacha-

rya 2003). The head of state is still the Dalai Lama, but he is assisted by a council of ministers (elected by a legislative body known as the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, consisting of forty-six members) and independent commissions. The constitution of the government-in-exile even has provisions that "in the highest interests of the Tibetan Administration, and the Tibetan people," the Council of Regency (elected by the Tibetan Assembly) may take over the executive functions of the Dalai Lama if a two-thirds majority of the Tibetan Assembly deems such an action necessary (Government of Tibet in Exile 1991). If the Dalai Lama returns, it will be to a politically transformed Tibet.

Perhaps the most notable transformation that occurred in the consciousness of the diaspora is the emergence of Tibetan national identity. During his brief phantasmal homecoming, one of Sonam's cousins commented, "He is Tibetan but he looks like an Indian." To the merriment of their relatives, Sonam replied, "I guess I've lived so long in India that I've become an Indian myself!" But deep inside, he is aware of the irony "that in exile, [he has] had the freedom to develop and express [his] identity as a Tibetan more completely than [his] relatives" (Sonam 2000).

Sonam's claim needs to be questioned for its problematic theoretical underpinnings. Facing his cousins who live in Tibet, Sonam's diasporic identity had slipped. He, more than his cousins needs to claim, contest, defend, and fight over his identity. Ironically, Sonam's claim to his identity as a "more complete Tibetan" has been possible *because* of Chinese occupation.

Contemporary expressions of Tibetanness is [*sic*] [. . .] more a product of the processes of modernization, colonialism and displacement, than some historical nation. [. . .] Had it not been for factors including Chinese colonial rule, the forces of modernity, the salience of nation-states in the international community, and the experience of exile, Tibetanness could have taken radically different form. (Anand 2000: 274)

Although the journey that leads to the formation of the diaspora is invariably associated with migratory experience of trauma, "Diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure" (Brah 1996: 193). This occurs not only because the experience of the first generation is invariably different from subsequent generations, but also because negotiating in relocated "home" under starkly different socio-cultural and politico-economic frameworks necessitates transformation of "origi-

nal” institutions and modes of signification. Thus, if Drimey Kundan returns, it will be with a very different outlook than the one carried out of the country when the exile began.

TIPA’s performance of *Drimey Kunden* leaves these areas of political change and altered consciousness uninterrogated. Though it attempts to assert that the pre-exile status can simply be reinstated, the assertion is quite unconvincing because the question is glossed over in essentialist terms. If and when diasporic Tibetans do return, it will not be to a Tibet “frozen in time.” By articulating this ambiguous terrain, the “third space” of the margins of the diasporic, the *lhamo* opera *Drimey Kunden* dissolves in the problematic and uncharted shadows of “a place of in-betweenness” (Spivak 1994:79).

Articulating Religion

As a cultural symbol of the Tibetan diaspora, *Drimey Kunden* operates as an effective tool of resistance by successfully mobilizing the notion of Tibetan national identity. In order to achieve this, the kingdom of Beta, the Demon Kingdom, and all the characters are articulated with a primordial past and a homogenized Buddhism. This actually is the Tibetan government-in-exile’s ideological strategy of promoting its cause. “Of all the bonds which defined Tibetans as a people and as a nation [before Chinese occupation],” declares a government white paper, “Religion was undoubtedly the strongest.” The paper equates Buddhism directly with Tibetan identity and argues, “Buddhist folklore and teachings regulated the people’s lives, festivals, holidays, work ethics, family chores as well as national issues” (Government of Tibet in Exile 1996). As Hall explains in an interview with Grossberg (Grossberg 1996: 142), “Religion has no necessary political connection” but is “bound up in particular ways, wired up very directly as the cultural and ideological underpinning of a particular structure of power.” In Tibetan social formation, “Religion has become the *valorized* ideological domain, the domain into which all the different cultural strands are obliged to enter, no political movement in [this] society can become popular without negotiating the religious terrain” (Grossberg 1996: 143). The Tibetan government-in-exile can successfully mobilize this ideological strategy because it has the Dalai Lama as its head and various Buddhist sects backing it.

Promoting a homogenized Buddhism may be a necessary ideological strategy for the Tibetan government-in-exile but as Anand (2000: 272) argues, spatial distribution, economic differentiations, regional and sectarian backgrounds, and generational gaps unequivocally show that “a unified, homogenous Tibetan-in-exile identity is more of a rhetorical device.”

The articulation of *Drimey Kunden* with a homogenized Buddhism is made possible by dearticulation from the history of the introduction of Buddhism from South Asia to Tibet in the eighth century, its struggle against the indigenous animist-shamanistic religion of Bon and its subsequent expulsion from Tibet in the ninth century, its “Second Advancement” and consolidation from the tenth to twelfth centuries, and the history of struggle within the Buddhist sects from the thirteenth century onward.

The articulation of the Beta is made with “Greater Tibet” comprised of the “Three Provinces”: U-Tsang (central Tibet, now the Tibet Autonomous Region), Kham, and Amdo (east and northeast Tibet, respectively, now part of the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gangsu, and Yunan). This is made possible only by dearticulation of the opera from medieval history, which shows that “the political control of the Dalai Lama did not exceed beyond U-Tsang [. . .], while Kham and Amdo [. . .] were ruled by various small principalities with often overlapping influence” (Anand 2000: 274). As Norbu (2004) acknowledges, “The ‘Three Provinces of Tibet’ [is] a post-1959 political construct.”

The post-1959 political construction of Tibet is important to bear in mind because, according to Chinese statistics, the demographic composition of Tibet for 1959 was 20% for U-Tsang, 53% for Kham, and 27% for Amdo. However, more than two-thirds of the Tibetan diaspora is from U-Tsang, about a quarter is from Kham, and only a small minority is from Amdo (Anand 2000: 272 and n. 5). Hence, the Tibetan-in-exile identity is actually more of a representation of U-Tsang. It is ironic that TIPA attempts to construct homogenous Tibetan-in-exile identity with a form of performance that is, according to Norbu (a past director of TIPA), “Frankly Lhasa-centric.”

All the main characters are invariably depicted in the costumes of the Lhasa aristocracy. Even the eponymous heroine of Nangsa, who is unquestionably from Gyantse in Tsang province, is always shown wearing the headdress and jewellery of a Lhasa, and not a Tsang, aristocratic lady. [. . .] Mutikpa or heretics (actually members of a Hindu sect in the original story) in Pema Woebar are nonchalantly represented as Tibetan Muslims with their dranyen lutes and typical exclamations “Khuda Kasam, Bhai-la” (I swear by Allah, O brother). People from Amdo are completely ignored in the opera. (Norbu 2004)

It is also noteworthy that TIPA makes no attempt to dearticulate notions of patriarchy inscribed in *Drimey Kunden*, particularly in the representation of Mande Sangmo as a devoted wife and a loving

mother who stakes no claim to munificence, but faithfully follows her husband to nirvana.

It is ironic that in the cultural politics of the Tibetan diaspora, the government-in-exile will represent Tibetan national identity as “fixed,” which in the last instance is a construction and “imagining” because diasporic identity has to negotiate the “third space.” What is noteworthy is that the government-in-exile chooses to “fix” Tibetan identity in terms of (neo)orientalist representation of a primordial past, a homogenized Buddhism, and patriarchy. Anand (2000: 271) may have a valid point in arguing that “the Tibetan diaspora [. . .] have [sic] invested heavily in such (neo)orientalist representation strategies for their own tactical purposes.” For many politically naïve foreigners, the appeal to exoticism is an important selling point in getting them to understand why Tibet ought to be free. The representation of the Tibetan identity in *Drimey Kunden* in effect furthers the hegemony of the Tibetan government-in-exile, in that it operates as a “process of creating and maintaining consensus or co-coordinating interests” (Slack 1996: 114). To someone watching *Drimey Kunden* in Lhasa fifty years ago, the articulated fields would arguably have been remarkably different from that performed at Little Lhasa today. Political actors belonging to the same social formation that has mobilized the opera for resistance would have done it for articulating Buddhist ideals that served the dominant classes and their hegemony. Hence what serves as a tool of resistance today may have been one of domination at an earlier point. These shifting positions of *lhamo* in the social field foreground the potential of cultural politics as subversive, yet transient, “well-intentioned” strategies are actually camouflaged articulations that conceal hegemonic designs.

Articulating Tradition

The cultural politics of the Tibetan government-in-exile has been mobilized to “preserve” their unique “tradition.” “In an address to TIPA in 1979, the Dalai Lama reaffirmed the importance of Tibetan performing arts in order to preserve a culture now in danger of extinction” (TIPA 1998). The threat is seen to arise primarily from the PRC’s policy in Tibet.

The occupation of Tibet by the communist Chinese has rendered the preservation of this art almost impossible. Lhamo (opera) represents a special part of the Tibetan identity and as a result, the Sinicisation policy in Tibet has been directed very strongly at it. So that today the genuine traditions of Tibetan opera are dead in Tibet. Beijing-sponsored performing groups in Tibet do present some Operas in and out-

side the country but unfortunately, the performances are Chinese versions of Tibetan opera. (TIPA 1998)

“Preservation” of tradition is deemed important also because, “In exile, the younger generations are exposed more to western rock and roll than traditional music.” Hence it is feared that, “The rich heritage of Tibet will soon vanish unless a concentrated effort to maintain [it] is made” (TIPA 1998). In pursuance of their avowed policy of “preservation,” TIPA has been organizing the annual Opera Festival at its home in McLeod Ganj.

TIPA’s policy needs to be seen in the context of the PRC’s cultural politics. Immediately after the unsuccessful uprising of 1959, the Chinese authorities attempted to dearticulate the feudal-Buddhist “inverted consciousness of the world” inscribed in the *lhamo* performances. Traces of such attempts may be seen in a documentary film by the visiting left-wing British journalist Stuart Gelder in 1961, which displays a portrait of Mao Zedong on the property table where Thangton Gyalpo is usually placed (Stuart and Roma Gelder 1964, cited in Norbu 2004). (Ironically, Tibetans must have interpreted the replacement of Thangton Gyalpo by Mao Zedong as the Chinese re-articulation of Mao Zedong as a Buddhist deity!) These early attempts must have been quite unsuccessful because during the Cultural Revolution, the PRC completely banned *lhamo* and popularized revolutionary operas such as *The White Haired Girl* (*Baimao nü*) instead (Norbu 2004).

From the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping’s liberalization policies were put in effect, the PRC changed its strategy. *Lhamo* was now appropriated and Sinified. Vocal conventions drawn from the *jingju* (Beijing opera) and classical European opera (introduced by the Russians to China) were promoted. *Lhamo* texts were rewritten in order to articulate their “meaning” with the PRC’s version of Marxism and Tibetan history. In the *lhamo* opera *The Chinese Princess and the Nepalese Princess* (*Gyasa Bhelsa*), which recounts the ingenuity employed by Tibetan King Songsten Gampo (620–649) and his minister Gar Tongtsen in arranging the king’s marriages to Princess Lhachik Tritsun from Nepal and Princess Wencheng from (Tang) China, all events related to the Nepalese princess were erased and the opera was renamed *Princess Wencheng*. A short synopsis from Wang Yao’s version as printed in *Tales from Tibetan Opera* (1986: 24–42) will clarify how this rewriting by the PRC meant to credit China with the introduction of Buddhism and economic development to Tibet.

Prince Songsten Gampo (Srongb-stan Sam-po) sends his minister Gar (Mgar) Tongtsen to the Tang court where he vies with representatives from India and Persia for the hand of the emperor’s daugh-

ter. The Tang emperor says for Tibet to win the princess, he would need assurance that the Tibetan ruler would adopt Buddhism's "ten good acts" and build Buddhist halls. The emperor is surprised when the Tibetan minister gives him letters already sent by his monarch proving that Tibet has anticipated these conditions and intends to carry them out.

The emperor sets up additional tests, including one in which the minister must pick the princess out of a group of three hundred beautiful women. When the minister recognizes her, it seems the princess must go. She is fearful, but the minister sings a song that shows the similarity between the two lands: "Peace prevails in the good land;/ People enjoy happiness," so the Princess realizes that "There is not much difference between Tibet and our Tang kingdom" (Yao 1986: 38). Taking the statue of the Buddha, artifacts, food, silks, patterns, and cures for diseases, she goes to Tibet with a farewell admonition from her Chinese father: "Handle matters fairly, speak peacefully, treat all persons alike, love your subjects, respect the Tibetan prince, never overstep rules and regulations." As she leaves, the emperor tells the minister, "If my darling praises and spreads Buddhism in Tibet, you'll perform boundless beneficence. This will be your religious merit" (Yao 1986: 40–41).

The narrative is meant to reinforce the PRC contention that China is the culture bringer and Tibet has historically been the receiving party. The introduction to Yao's synopsis quotes the *New Annals of Tang Dynasy* (Yao 1986: 618–907) report that when the prince met the princess, "He felt timid and bashful at the sight of the splendid Chinese costumes and ornaments" and soon built a citadel palace to honor her, sending brothers and sons of nobles to the Tang Imperial Academy to study the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History*, and began programs of translation (Yao 1986: 15).

This PRC version of *Princess Wencheng* opportunistically writes out Nepal as an important path of Buddhism. It hews to current PRC political strategies that emphasize the Chinese influence on Tibet as being crucial. In this narrative Buddhism, book learning, good administration, and other benefits flow to Tibet from the Chinese center.

Nangsa Woebum, based on a popular legend of the life and miraculous deeds of a young woman by the same name, is even more explicit in attacking the Tibetan order of the past as an abuse of power. After Nangsa's marriage with a feudal lord, he suspects her of an illicit relationship and beats her to death. However, she returns to the world of the living and resolves to devote herself completely to Dharma. Accordingly, she joins a monastery as a nun. However, her husband pursues her and arrives at the monastery with a large army. In the ensuing bat-

tle, Nangsa displays her magic power by rising to the sky as a magnificent rainbow. Her husband is overawed, asks for forgiveness, and devotes his life to Dharma.

The Chinese director of the Tibet Opera Troupe, Hu Jin'an changed the story to one of class conflict. Nangsa returns from the dead to denounce her husband and in-laws in the approved Communist 'struggle' manner (*thab 'dzings*). Then brandishing a large broadsword she proceeds to murder them one by one. The acting and dancing style was also speeded up and 'modernised' [so] that it seemed to be a deliberate parody of a Tibetan opera. (Norbu 2004)

Of late, the PRC appears to have given up attempting to rearticulate *lhamo* with its version of Marxism. It has realized, belatedly, that its ideological struggle against the feudal-Buddhist "inverted consciousness of the world" in Tibet is against the "lines of tendential force." The PRC is now attempting to re-articulate the operas with Beijing's policy of "freedom" and "economic prosperity." In an article published in the *China Daily* on May 26, 2003, the Chinese authorities proudly announced that twenty-eight residents of Qomolang Village in Doilungdeqen County have re-established a Tibetan Opera troupe that was invited to perform during major festivals in Lhasa. The report acknowledges that the troupe "once popular throughout the region, disbanded years ago when hard times hit"—obviously referring to post-1959 events. The reason behind its re-establishment, according to the report, is improvement in living standards. "As our standard of living improves, we are demanding a richer cultural life," the report quotes the village head Gaisang Nyima as saying. The report does not fail to mention the sad story of the childhood of a sixty-five-year-old woman named Cangjue (once famous as the only female master artist of the village troupe before it disbanded) and how her face clouded and her eyes turned bitter when she talked about the past. "As a toddler, I followed my parents around, performing for meagre returns. My stomach was often filled with nothing. I joined the village troupe and gradually won fame as a good performer. We used to perform in Lhasa and neighbouring areas in summer. When winter came, we had to trek to Nepal and India. The trips were hard" (China Internet Information Center 2004a). There can be no mistaking the intended message: Tibetans suffered immensely in the past under Dalai Lama's theocratic state, but now in the People's Republic of China they are economically prosperous, and have leisure time and freedom to pursue the arts of their choice. Similarly, "Tibetan Opera Troupes and Schools of the Xigaze Area," written by Rema Xika and published in *China Tibet Magazine* (China Tibet Information Center 2004b), sets out to convince the reader that "authentic" tradition exists only in Tibet under the PRC.

Lobsang Samten, the artistic director of TIPA, does not believe in the PRC's rhetoric. "I saw one of these 'Tibetan' performances once but it played like a Chinese drama with monkey kings or something. It was totally different." The Tibetan government-in-exile has slammed these PRC-sponsored "masquerading performances" as "calculated cultural genocide." The arts, it says, "have fallen victim to the systematic and wholesale perversion by Communist China bent on using them as vehicles for Communist propaganda and a buttress for racist and pseudo-historical claims" (World Tibet Network News 1999). When one gets to see for oneself even a glimpse of these PRC-sponsored "masquerading performances" (such as the "Tibetan Opera" video clip posted by China Tibet Information Center [2004c]) one receives a distinct impression that it is reminiscent of Beijing opera in gestures and movement patterns, but the accusation of "calculated cultural genocide" does appear a little melodramatic. More worrisome is the impression that the PRC appears bent on effortful artistic perfection—clinical aestheticization—to the point that the "folk theatre" loses its rough edges, its effortlessness and casual air, and hence its vitality and charm.

The training provided to performers in the Lhasa Art School is eclectic, as Dacudab Duoji and Xiaozhaxi Ciren clarified in a 1987 interview. Movement includes training in Western ballet, Tibetan folk dance, Beijing opera dance, and *lhamo* movement over a period of five years. Vocal training includes *jingju* as well as *lhamo*-style singing. Given this mixed training, which combines demanding professionalism and very different genres, the resulting performances are quite different from TIPA style presentation. (Foley and Karter 1988: 135–136).

The PRC may be accused of unleashing "calculated cultural genocide" on "traditional" performances to suit their hegemonic ends, but how valid is the claim of the Tibetan government-in-exile that it is "preserving" tradition? In a revealing article titled "The Wandering Goddess: Sustaining the Spirit of Ache Lhamo in the Exile Tibetan Capital," Jamyang Norbu, a past director of TIPA, shows that adherence to tradition has rarely been the practice of the Tibetan diaspora. In the second half of the 1960s, when the Tibetan Music, Dance, and Drama Society (the precursor to TIPA) first revived *lhamo*, the director had made small changes in costuming, music, and dance. Although the performances were enthusiastically received, the changes must have been striking because the purists criticized the director (Norbu 2004). During Norbu's directorship (1981–1985), formal acting classes based on non-Tibetan performance tradition were added to the training routine at TIPA, although "Traditionally, only singing lessons had been a part of the performer's curriculum." One of the examples of improvement in the production value of the performance that Norbu mentions is scripted and rehearsed comic scenes, although

“in the old days [these] would be broad, often repetitious and generally unrehearsed.” Under the directorship of a young Tibetan performer/instructor recently arrived from Tibet, and trained by the Chinese, “Actors performed with the exaggerated stylized gestures—rolling of eyes, raising of eyebrows, etc.—characteristic of Chinese theatre” (Norbu 2004).

It was not only in acting, says Norbu, but “In nearly every aspect of Tibetan opera, in the staging, musical accompaniment, costumes, choreography, comedy and production values, [that TIPA under Norbu’s directorship] made definite improvements over traditional staging of the opera.” For example, overriding the “un-stated but quite firm rule that no musical instrument other than a drum and a cymbal be used during an opera performance,” Norbu introduced three drums together with matching cymbals to complement them (Norbu 2004). The two-tiered low platform that one sees in TIPA performances is a nontraditional element and was introduced during Norbu’s directorship “for some spatial variation in the positioning and movement of actors.” Another major change was made in terms of participation of women. Although women were not allowed to perform in the official performances of the Opera Festival at Norbulinka (the Dalai Lama’s summer retreat at the outskirts of Lhasa) before 1959, they do so now in all the groups that participate in the festival at McLeod Ganj.⁵ Under Norbu’s guidance, TIPA even started working on the construction of a small, Greek-style open-air amphitheatre on the hillside behind TIPA premises, where he envisioned performance of *lhamo* operas. Unfortunately, in Norbu’s words, “This was one experiment that was not too successful” (Norbu 2004).

These changes were inevitable because there never was a “unified *lhamo* tradition” to emulate. Besides variations of regional companies, all with “their own repertoires and their unique tradition of performing” (TIPA 2002), there are at least three distinct schools of *lhamo*: Kyimulunga, Gyangara, and Chungba.⁶ In the early 1980s, when TIPA decided to revive *Prince Norsang* (one of the “traditionally” accepted operas based on the *Sudhana Jātaka*), the school it chose to follow was the Gyangara. The problem was, “not a single member of the Gyangara Company had made it to exile” (Norbu 2004). And so, the entire production was reconstructed from fragmented memory and under the guidance of an informal committee.

Gradually a performing script was put together. Getting people to remember the melodies for the songs was harder. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle from the memories of various people. Kungo Liushar, the retired foreign minister, contributed the tunes to some

arias. My mother, Lodi Lhawang, knew the *ghop-sol* (*go-gsol*) arias sung by Prince Norsang's mother, the queen, [and so she contributed some. And] Chab-dam Ugen [a great opera fan, particularly of the Gyangara school] contributed the bulk of the melodies, information and memories for this revival of Norsang. (Norbu 2004)

Norbu even wrote a completely new opera for TIPA. Called *Chaksam* (The Iron Bridge), the opera was based on "the legendary account of how Tibetan opera had been started by the great sage Thangtong Gyalpo" (Norbu 2004). Melodies from other opera arias were adapted to the new lyrics of the new opera. Later, TIPA produced another new opera on the life of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa.

Tampering with "tradition" is more blatant in TIPA's international tours since performances are often held in proscenium theatres. During its first international tour of the United States, Europe, Australia, and Singapore in 1975, "The Drama Society performed an abbreviated two-hour performance of *Pema Woobar*." In 1986, when TIPA was preparing for another international tour, a Frenchman with some theatrical background was appointed to direct the *lhamo* opera *Sukyi Nyima*. According to Norbu,

A number of bizarre changes were made in the production. For instance, at the end of the opera when the celestial nymph finally meets her long estranged husband, the king, the couple were made to go into a romantic clinch, à la "Gone With the Wind" in complete contravention not only of Tibetan opera conventions, but also of normal Tibetan behavior in public. Certain Tibet experts in the audience were reported to have raised loud protests. (Norbu 2004)

In this contest between the Chinese government and the Tibetan government-in-exile with *lhamo* as the site of active local struggle, "What counts as tradition and what does not is highly contestable" (Anand 2000: 278).

Consider the fact that there are some striking parallels in the mode of operation of the two contenders. Whereas the PRC reconstructed *The Chinese Princess and the Nepalese Princess* and *Nangsa Woebum*, the TIPA reconstructed *Prince Norsang* and invented *Chaksam* and *Milarepa*. Whereas the PRC inducted vocal conventions of Beijing and classical European opera, TIPA inducted non-Tibetan acting techniques (including those of the Chinese theatre) and scripted comic scenes. Because "the category of tradition [is] itself dependent upon the category of the modern" (Anand 2000: 279), the "tradition" is a modern construction. Nevertheless, TIPA has staked its claim of "preserving traditional culture"—a claim that is acknowledged in European and

American metropolitan centers as authentic if the numerous international tours made by TIPA is a valid indicator. The success of *lhamo* lies in its effective articulation of Tibet as a land of spirituality, fantasy, and magic tale elements, “As a Shangri-La on the verge of extinction: a semi-colony with its unique culture destroyed by the Chinese” (Anand 2000: 271).

TIPA’s claim of preserving the tradition of *lhamo* is based on an assumed existence of the “original” *lhamo*. However, historical development of the opera does not support the claim. According to popular tradition, *lhamo* originated in the fourteenth century when the scholar-saint Thangton Gyalpo devised the theatrical form as a vehicle for popular entertainment and a means of raising funds for building 108 iron-link-chain suspension bridges. The scholar-saint would play drum and cymbals as seven women sang and danced. Gradually, other dances were incorporated as *lhamo* developed into a form in which the performers “portrayed hunters, headmen and goddesses, and with drums and cymbal accompaniment, alternated songs and jests and perhaps narrated stories” (Snyder 1980: 28). Vestiges of these proto-*lhamo* performances may have given rise to the three segments of the introductory rite (*ngon-pas*, *gyallu*, and *ache lhamo*) seen today.

A fresco painted in the Potala Palace in Lhasa sometime between 1653 and 1705 (Yao 1986: 88) and textual references crediting the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) for designing new masks and costumes for the *ngon-pas* (Snyder 1979: 28) indicate that by the second half of the seventeenth century, *lhamo* had developed further. By that time, narratives must have already been incorporated into *lhamo* performances because the accepted opinion is that the earliest operas such as *Prince Norsang* were composed in the sixteenth century (Dorjee 1984: 22). We must remember that the texts were orally composed and hence there could never have been an “authentically” fixed text. The repertoire of texts continued to evolve and grow even in the twentieth century. *Thepa Tenpa*, performed only by the monks of Meru Monastery, was composed in the early twentieth century, and such experiments continue as TIPA’s operas discussed above show.

Lhamo’s link with the Shotōn festival, according to TIPA, goes back to the latter part of the nineteenth century, when it was established in Drepung Monastery, situated near Lhasa, as a celebration that marked the end of the annual summer retreat of the monks (World Tibet Network News 2002). It is popularly believed that the festival was instituted at the monastery because the monks were too religious and well behaved. The demon of Shun Mountain that overlooked the monastery was so incensed at the situation that he caused serious trouble. To hoodwink the demon, the monks devised the festival, to which all

the citizens of Lhasa were invited. The merry-making at the festival made the demon believe that the monks had their human frailties as well, and so he stopped bothering them (Snyder 1979: 29). This myth of origin of the festival may have been fabricated to hide that *lhamo* performances were introduced in monasteries to defuse tension arising among the monks due to grueling monastic discipline.

Numerous references from the period of the thirteenth Dalai Lama (1875–1933) indicate that by early twentieth century, the Opera Festival at Lhasa had reached the stage of development by which it is popularly remembered today. By this time, the festival was moved to Norbulinka, the Dalai Lama's summer retreat at the outskirts of Lhasa, and was held in late August or September.⁷ Today at McLeod Ganj, the festival is held between March and May. The shift obviously suits the tourist season, since it rains ceaselessly from July to September.

The brief exposition of the historical process of the evolution of *lhamo* demonstrates that “authentic” *lhamo* exists only in imagination.

The entire project of preserving a culture and civilization is theoretically problematic since it considers culture as something that can be identified, mapped, practised and preserved. Such a conceptualisation of culture essentialises and naturalises what is socially and politically constructed and contested. Cultural identities, far from being eternally fixed in some essential past, are actually subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Tibetan culture is as much a process as it is a product of particular historical processes. (Anand 2000: 278)

The necessity for imagining the “original” and “preserving traditional culture” has been a very effective hegemonic strategy in the cultural politics of the Tibetan government-in-exile. By responding to market forces generated out of tremendous growth in tourist industry and interest in “ethnic” commodities, the Tibetan government has invested heavily on the commodification of Tibetan cultural processes and artifacts. Today, exhibitions of “authentic” Tibetan sacred art, *thangka* paintings, bronzes, and sand mandalas are common in major cities of Europe and the United States. *Lhamo*, Tantric dances, and sacred monastic music are easily available, recorded or live, to international audiences. Consequently, the Tibetan economy has made substantial gains.

More importantly, this artistic program has contributed to support of the Free Tibet Movement. Thus, the Tibetan government-in-exile has in fact reappropriated the process of commodification as a strategy of resistance. Faced with limited choice in mustering support for their cause and struggling against the overwhelming force that the

PRC exerts by virtue of the market that it offers, one cannot but admire the Tibetans for their ingenuity. Forced thus on the slippery ground of constructing an emblematic representation of an inimitable culture that originates in Tibet and at the same time burdened with the responsibility of “preserving authentic tradition,” TIPA is trapped within its own image: it is forever condemned to be “authentic” and yet haunted by the fear of being proved “fake”—in which case its market would be lost and with it, an effective tool of resistance would be lost as well.

Meanwhile the PRC has used the form in a similar, if less successful mode. A PRC troupe toured the United States in 1987, as the PRC was emerging from the repressive cultural policies of the Cultural Revolution and Tibetan arts were being supported by the liberalizing government. The tour was meant to discount the charge that Tibetan arts were suppressed by the PRC; artists were being trained to more professional levels and making a living to boot. Other tours have carried the same message. An August 2004 tour to Thailand featured demonstrations of *lhamo*-style dance and other entertainments. Videos shown prior to the show lauded the social and economic development in Tibet since 1959 and preached the PRC line that Tibet has been a subsidiary of China from time immemorial. Free tickets were dispensed through local banks and the event was held in the national stadium in Bangkok. The choice of Thailand, a strongly Buddhist country, for this message of glorious support of Tibetan arts by the PRC, showed that the PRC continues to play catch-up with TIPA’s strategic use of arts on the international scene.

Meanwhile, *lhamo* continues to be the site of ideological struggle. In recent times, hostility has been rising between the Tibetan government-in-exile and the PRC on the question of “authenticity” of the performances by the exiled artists and those from Tibet under the PRC. An ingenious strategy adopted by the PRC is to dearticulate the “authenticity” of TIPA’s performance simply by sending a troupe from Tibet with a different version of the same performance. Both the performances may be equally “authentic,” but, as in the case of Sonam’s meeting his cousins during his phantasmal homecoming, the Chinese-Tibetan version may consider the diasporic version as a “Tibetan who looks like an Indian,” while the latter may consider the former as one disempowered to be “truly” Tibetan.

Play(ing) of Culture and Power: Whither Resistance?

This examination has attempted to demonstrate that *lhamo* is “the semantic space, the field of signs and practices,” in which two formations of political actors, the Tibetan government-in-exile and the

PRC, seek to “construct and represent themselves” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 27). The performance is activated as a site of struggle between the diasporic community and the occupiers/liberators by articulation of at least three social fields, namely the diasporic conditioning, “identity,” and “tradition.” It is by this means that power is anchored in the *lhamo* and is mobilized for resistance as well as domination.

The “play” between culture and power—as the examination of *Drimey Kunden* and the PRC plots in particular and *lhamo* in general shows—is primarily between the two formations of political actors. In attempting to bring about what each believes to be a “social transformation,” both are engaged in a struggle for power and have resorted to strategic actions that operate with nonagentive and agentive faces. The nonagentive face is hegemony, which is “power embodied in the taken for granted form of everyday life,” whereas the agentive face is ideology, “The conscious texts or contents of power” (Berezin 1994: 102).

The strategic actions and negotiations are entangled in a multi-axial web extending into the disparate formations of Tibetans (segregated by place, economy, gender and generational differentiations, regional and sectarian backgrounds). The web also entangles Western governmental and nongovernmental supporters with heterogeneous motivations (such as belief in Buddhism, concern for human rights, opposition to Communism, etc.). The success of the Tibetan government-in-exile is built primarily on the effective articulation of “identity” and “tradition”—difficult as it is from marginal status and with the world’s largest potential market as adversary. However, that should not detract our attention from the fact that the Tibetan government-in-exile has resorted to hegemonic strategies in the articulation of “tradition” and “identity.” The success is also built on the fact that the strategy is based on the “lines of tendential force.”

This is not to argue that *lhamo* exists merely as a propaganda tool hijacked by the political actors of the two formations. Rather, it is to suggest that like any other performance, *lhamo* exists neither as “the ‘authentic’ practice of people nor simply a means of ‘manipulation’ by” the political actors, “but as the site of active local struggle, everyday and everywhere” (Chen 1996: 312).

Having argued as above, it is nevertheless necessary to recognize a “third” vector in the “play” between culture and power. If we accept the validity of the argument placed by reception studies that “different groups of spectators [. . .] undergo different experiences during a theatrical performance” (Martin and Sauter 1995: 29), then it is also important to insist with Zagorski (cited in Martin and Sauter 1995: 27)

that “who reacts when, how and upon what” constitute equally valid determinants of meaning.

This examination is only partial, in that what has been constructed and produced in this essay is underpinned by the subject position of the author: that I am a male, a theatre practitioner-turned-academic teaching at a university theatre department with occasional forays into the world of performance, a nonpractising Muslim by birth, and a citizen of Bangladesh (usually represented by the world media as a poverty-stricken country that is exhibiting increasing religious intolerance). I am in no way “objective” or “impartial” and am complicit in the play of culture and power as a producer of “knowledge.” I am the third vector in the space of signifying practice, actively engaged in the “play” between culture and power. As you read this essay, it is attempting to interpellate you and (hopefully) you are either joining partially or fully with this production of “knowledge.” You may even be rejecting the production of “knowledge” that this essay generates and indeed constitute another vector. Be that as it may, there is no way from overlooking the manner in which a cultural production is articulated for political action, as this essay demonstrates.

NOTES

1. Beginning in 1950 the People’s Republic of China worked toward incorporation of Tibet and end of what they termed “feudal serfdom under the despotic political-religious rule of lamas and nobles” (China Internet Information Center 1998). Their “liberation” cost 87,000 Tibetan lives in military action alone (Gyatso 1990: 148). Currently, Tibetans in exile are concentrated in India (93,400), Nepal (20,000), Bhutan (1,500), the United States (3,000), Switzerland (2,000), Canada (560), Australia and New Zealand (120), Scandinavia (90), and Japan (40) (Government of Tibet in Exile 2001).

2. As Lobsang Dorjee (1984: 19) explains, “The term *Achi* comes from the Tsang province where the women are called *Achi*. The term *Lhamo* is an expression for the beauty of the girl.”

3. Both Snyder (1980) and Ross (1995) speak of nine operas. However, Ross discusses eight plus one composed in early twentieth century. Snyder names nine names as they are known in Tibetan. Eight of these are common to Ross and the ninth is *Ras chung rdo rje grags pa'i rnam thar*. On the other hand, *A Collection of Eight Main Tibetan Opera Routines* (Tibetan People’s Publishing House, Lhasa, 1989) lists eight major scripts of Tibetan opera. These are *Princess Wen Cheng*, *Maiden Nagndsa*, *Prince Drmed Kundan*, *Maiden Drowa Sangmo*, *Maiden Subkyi Nyima*, *Brothers Donyo and Dondrup*, *Padma Obar*, and *Prince Norsang* (China Tibet Information Center 2004a).

4. The Karmapa (literally, “Activity of all Buddhas”) is the head of the Kagyu School (one of four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism) and is one of the three most important and revered lamas.

5. Although women have been associated with *lhamo* right from its initiation, as the popular tradition of the origin of *lhamo* discussed below shows, they were not allowed to perform in the Opera Festival.

6. Of these, the Kyimulunga is popular and slick, and the exponents are renowned for their satire; the Gyangara style is sophisticated, “classic,” and appreciated by the connoisseurs; and the Chungba is considered “rustic” and expressing liking for exponents of this school is frowned upon as bad taste (Norbu 1972: 9).

7. Recalling the performances he had seen in Lhasa before Chinese invasion, Richardson (1996: 20) observes humorously that “God Save the King” was played at the beginning of the Shotōn festival as a salute to the Dalai Lama. In one such occasion, the officers of the British Mission at Lhasa “jumped to their feet to the surprise and amusement of the audience.”

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