

Seeking Dhasa; Finding Lhasa: Liminality and Narrative in the Tibetan Refugee Capital of Dharamsala

By Harmony Sigantor

Abstract

This article explores the role of narrative and narrativity in stabilising identity in an exile setting, read here as a way to avert what Bjørn Thomassen calls the ‘danger’ inherent to liminality. It does this by analysing the shape and visualscape of the little Himalayan town of Dharamsala, which serves as the secular and religious ‘capital’ of Tibetan exile. It attempts to decode the narratives which allow ‘Dhasa’, as Dharamsala is colloquially known, to cohere and correspond to its metonymically aspirational other – Lhasa, the capital of old Tibet. There can be read in this act of assonant naming the beginnings of a narrative geared towards generating nostalgia for a lost homeland, alluding to the possibility of its reclamation and restitution in exile. This article explores how this narrative is evidence of the fact that it is in indeterminacy; in liminality in other words, that the ‘structuration’ that Thomassen proposes, becomes possible at all. Even as it alludes to the impossibility of transplanting cultures whole, the article also examines closely the Foucauldian notion of ‘trace residue’ inherent to ruptures in prior epistemes, treating this idea as central to creating new-‘old’ orientations for this refugee community in exile. Following Thomassen and Szokolczai, liminality is here treated as a concept applicable to time as well as place; individuals as well as communities, and social ‘events’ or changes of immense magnitude. It is this notion of liminality that the article proposes has to be a central concept in any exploration of exile groups which have to live in the spaces between the shorn identity markers of the past – rooted as these must be in a lost homeland – and the present, where they must be iterated or manufactured anew.

Keywords: Tibet, Exile, Identity, Permanent Liminality, Narrative, Structuration



Campaigns Director, SFT-India, Jyotsna Sara George. Dharamsala, 2015. Photo: Harmony Siganporia

Following the Oxford Dictionary, Students for a Free Tibet (SFT)¹ merchandise tells us that ‘Dharamsala’, which comes from the Sanskrit roots for Dharma (virtue) and ‘Shala/Sala’ (house/abode of) means “a building devoted to religious or charitable purposes; a rest house for travelers”. More pertinent to this exploration is the second meaning proffered by my ‘source’, that ubiquitous artefact of late-capitalism we know as the ‘T-shirt’, here held on display by the Campaigns Director of SFT India, Tibet activist Jyotsna Sara George: Dharamsala is a “hill town in Himachal Pradesh, India, now home to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile community.” This paper seeks to locate Dharamsala within the wider geography – sacred and secular – of Tibetan exile, and read the community it is home to using the lens of liminality, making a case for the centrality of this concept in any

exploration of exile groups which, by definition, (seek to or) live in the spaces between the shorn identity markers of the past – rooted as these must be in a lost homeland – and the present, where they must be iterated anew.

This article, following Victor Turner, Bjørn Thomassen and Arpad Szakolczai², reads liminality as a concept applicable to time as well as place; individuals as well as communities, and social ‘events’ or changes of immense magnitude, such as the move from a society premised on theocracy to democracy, for example. As Szakolczai holds, the concept of liminality served to invoke a situation in which, in order to facilitate a “passing through” during a rite of passage, “ritually and temporarily all limits were removed. As a consequence, the very structure of society was temporarily suspended” (Szakolczai 2009:1-2). But what happens if ‘passing through’ becomes the end-point, for the rite of passage is not resolved in the form of a concrete conclusion to the process which has begun? Thomassen develops and extends the work of Van Gennep and Turner, and attempts to apply it to the understanding of entire communities and societies in states of transition, suggesting that it is “in the hyper-reality of...liminality, (that) structuration takes place,” (Thomassen 2009: 1); that it is in and from the ‘in-between’ or threshold that the possibility of structure and meaning-making arises anew. I read Thomassen’s idea of ‘structuration’ as alluding to the set of possibilities which become available in and through liminality, which will determine the shape of things to come, for it is precisely in this moment of suspension of epistemes past, that present and future tenses, identities and societies may begin to be constituted. This article proposes that one of the ways in which this process becomes possible is through collective acts of narrativising, and engaging with narrativity. In this, it approaches narrativity as constituting what anthropologist Geoffrey White refers to as “the semiotic and social processes that produce cultural understanding,” (White 1991: 13) through shared spheres of meaning-making evinced in a given culture’s representational practices, because “narratives of shared experience and history do not simply represent identities and emotions, they constitute them” (White 1991:13).

Setting the Stage: the (re)birth of Tibet in Exile

In 1959, following a failed uprising in Lhasa, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, made his way to life in exile, in India. Alongside him, and each year since his departure, thousands of Tibetans came to India, fleeing the persecution they were subjected to in their homeland in the wake of its occupation by Chinese forces. Today, several decades after this first important movement across borders, or first “passage”, in terms that cohere with the concept of liminality stemming from rites of passage³ (Szakolczai 2009: 1), there exists in India a thriving Tibetan community-in-exile, 90,000+ strong⁴. The nerve-point of this community is the town referred to above, alternatively known as McLeod Ganj (the settlement on ‘top’ of the hill) and Dharamsala (the lower town, but also the generic name used for the

entire area in question). Dharamsala has, since 1960, served as both the official residence of His Holiness, and the headquarters of the community's Government-in-Exile (formally known as the Central Tibetan Administration or CTA). The area that houses the CTA, located in 'middle' Dharamsala, between McLeod Ganj and the lower town, is known as Gangchen Kyishong (or 'Gangkyi', to local residents). Translated from Tibetan, Gangchen Kyishong stands for "The Happy Valley from the Land of Snow" (Odelys 2010: 85), with the 'Land of Snow' being a commonplace metaphor for Tibet. For these reasons, Dharamsala has become a charged signifier, standing as it does for the community's capital in exile; spiritual, owing to the presence of the Dalai Lama, and secular, owing to the presence of the now democratically elected administration (the cabinet or *kashag*) in Gangkyi. Incidentally, the road that leads down to Gangkyi from the Tsuglagkhang Complex (the residence and temple of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama) was renamed 'Potala Road' in 2015, to mark the Dalai Lama's 80th birth year celebrations. This is charged symbolism indeed, for the name evokes His Holiness's lost home: the famed Potala Palace, which was the chief residence of the Dalai Lama prior to his entering exile in India.

The Tibetan refugee community has organized itself into 'settlements', which span the length of the Indian subcontinent and run further East into Nepal. These settlements look to Dharamsala for guidance and leadership, whether this pertains to the running of their larger affairs, their dealings with local Indian government bodies, or matters related to the community's efforts to inculcate and perpetuate a distinct social, religious and cultural Tibetan identity in exile. In other words, they look to the CTA in Dharamsala to provide structural integrity – a blue-print based on which these 'scattered' settlements can attempt to negotiate their Indian home/setting without losing what it is that the community itself identifies as making/keeping them Tibetan. The irony here is that while Registration Certificates – one of the handful of 'official' documents made available to Tibetan exiles in India – denote the nationality of their holders as Tibetan, no country in the world acknowledges the corollary to this recognition: the existence of a nation from which this nationality can derive meaning – a free Tibet. This paradox lies at the heart of the argument for reading this exile community as one inhabiting – and in some ways perpetuating – what, building on Turner, Szakolczai identifies as 'permanent' liminality. This, as Szakolczai posits, means that Turner "recognised the possibility that in exceptional cases 'transition [can] become a permanent condition', leading to a paradoxical, almost contradictory 'institutionalisation of liminality'" (Szakolczai 2001: 4).

Known locally as 'little Lhasa', in its very name, Dharamsala serves an important mnemonic function in the articulation of a moral orientation for the geography of exile, even as it attempts to be two places at once: what it was prior to a 'passage' brought a community here (before it became the base of the community



*En route to the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA), Jogibara Road. Dharamsala, 2015.
Photo by Harmony Siganporia.*

in exile), and what it became by serving as a resting place for Tibetan refugees, who had been forced into such transformative displacement. There can be read in this act of naming the beginnings of a narrative geared towards generating nostalgia for a lost homeland – perhaps even more crucially, alluding to the possibility of its reclamation and restitution in exile – and it is this narrative which informs the shape Dharamsala has, since 1960, taken. This narrative is evidence of the fact that it is in indeterminacy; in liminality in other words, that what Thomassen calls ‘structuration’ indeed becomes possible.

To go a step further, it is possible to read the ‘structuration’ process as itself emanating from narrative in the first place, if, as Paul Cobley suggests, narrative is the ordering and mediating principle crucial to our ways of seeing, knowing, and understanding what it means to be human. He suggests that “the tendency to storify” rests at the heart of the human impulse to engage in communicative acts, even as it generates processes of meaning-making (Cobley 2001: 2). Paul Ricoeur adds to our understanding of narrative the concept of temporality, holding that narrative is what mediates the human relation with time (Cobley 2001: 17), an idea that takes on a certain poignancy when introduced into the framework of loss which underscores what it means to live life in exile. We are – and become – the stories we tell, and it would stand to reason therefore that nowhere does the power of ‘story’ become more vital than in the space/time of liminality. Narrative thus serves to mitigate what Thomassen calls the “dangerous or problematic aspects of liminality” (Thomassen 2009: 11), and it is this aspect we address next.

The Narratives Underscoring Dharamsala

Like so many Indian towns in the Himalayan region, buildings and constructions in Dharamsala cock a snook at gravity, treating it more as a guideline than an absolute: this is visible in the way they seem to defy it by clinging magically – or perhaps on the promise of hope, prayer, and karma accrued besides – to the barest sliver of mountainside. The defining principle, were one to attempt to decipher it from the vantage point of the town ‘square’ (which is not a square at all, but an interstice, a liminal space which affords access to potentially everything the town offers) appears to be the possibility of performing ‘kora’, the Buddhist practice of circumambulation, primarily undertaken around sacred sites or objects; natural and man-made⁵. It can be read as an act offering obeisance, as well as recourse to meditative practice, allowing its practitioners to focus simultaneously inward as well as out. It is a constitutive element of any Buddhist pilgrimage. The word kora – and the idea it signifies – takes on more pertinence in the context of its juxtaposition with the meaning of ‘Dharamsala’ explored above, for a ‘dharamsala’ is a place of rest, not a final destination, typically dotting the route of a pilgrimage, offering sustenance and shelter; precisely what the town offers the Tibetan refugee community in exile. It is possible to walk – perform a ‘kora’ – around the stupa which has been converted into a full-blown temple right in the heart of the main square, giving onto each of the two main roads which emerge from it, and around which the town has grown: Temple Road, and Jogibara Road. Continuing down along Temple Road from the main square, it becomes possible to perform a kora around the hill on which the Tsuglagkhang complex itself rests. Some of the other (smaller) monasteries and nunneries which dot the hillside between the Tsuglagkhang and Jogibara Road afford the same possibility. One walks to engage with the environment, and let it engage back: a kora can be, as poet and Tibet activist Tenzin Tsundue shows

in an early collection of poems and stories, both a metaphorical as well as literal coming “full circle”⁶ (Tsendue 2004: 24). Adding to this, in a personal interview in 2015, journalist and long-time Dharamsala resident Tenzin Gaphel explained to me that performing a kora is as much about seeing as being seen: it can be a solitary exercise, but performing a kora, especially around the hill which houses the Tsuglagkhang Complex, is where/when most people, old and young alike, meet and exchange news, making this a site which fulfils needs both spiritual as well as social. A kora may be many things, but it is not purposeless: in its ability to provide a location for the ‘practice’ of reaffirming one’s religious and social identity, it serves as a mitigating factor that allows and fosters the emplacement of identity markers, in development of the potential for ‘structuration’ inherent to liminality discussed above.

The town square located just above the main bus depot which services the region faces the two main streets that run through McLeod Ganj. To the left, the road forks again, leading on one side up Bhagsu Road, home to a well known Shiva Temple, several restaurants, shops, and the Tibetan Resettlement Office. On the other, it snakes upwards past the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), and further to the enclave known as Dharamkot. TIPA was the first institution established by the Dalai Lama upon entering exile, and it is charged with documenting, preserving and perpetuating all that is today, in sum, understood as comprising Tibetan culture. From making musical instruments to learning and compiling folk melodies and dances from the various regions of historical Tibet, and hosting Tibetan Opera (Lhamo) festivals besides, TIPA is an organisation charged with a heavy mandate. Its artistes travel around the world performing Lhamo and other forms of Tibetan music and dance, primarily to underscore their difference from the competing Chinese-Tibetan cultural troupes who attempt to lay claim to depicting and iterating Tibetanness in their own practice and performance. This contestation ties in to the narrative of preservation – the utopian notion that identity can be ‘preserved’ because culture is a sum of artefacts and practices. In interview after interview⁷ with TIPA performers and administrators past and present, I encounter the same argument: following His Holiness and the CTA’s stance that China systematically continues to destroy all that was once the Tibetan way of life, it is primarily in exile that this phoenix must rise again. This attitude suggests that it is only in exile (India) that it is ‘still’ possible to be truly Tibetan (Siganporia 2016). After the wanton destruction evidenced in the desecration of thousands of monasteries and resulting in innumerable deaths⁸ following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the 1950s, the attempt of the CTA has been to “preserve our identity and language by practicing our culture and traditions,” in exile – a mandate they believe can be fulfilled by every Tibetan refugee, “irrespective of gender, age and education, whether lay or monk/nun”⁹ (CTA 2003: 6). Lhamo performed by Chinese-Tibetan groups has come to be Sinicised, shot with inflections and tonality alien to Tibetan opera, but directly traceable back to Beijing¹⁰. Even the Potala palace and Lhasa itself, from

recent reports, have come to be little more than tourist destinations for mainland Chinese visitors (Tibet Watch 2014), shorn of symbolic significance as the erstwhile residence of the Dalai Lama (with the attendant connotative implication of serving as the focal point of Tibetan Buddhism itself). It is this memory of Lhasa that Dharamsala seeks to physically embody, existing as it does in and across the India (present)/Tibet (past; pre-1950) binary. Every such negotiation is an attempt to mitigate what happens when exile threatens to become the end-point and not a pause in a longer narrative which concludes in the 'end' of liminality with, in this instance, a return or reclamation of the homeland on the other side of this long and hazardous rite. In the absence of an end which can be foreseen, the 'mimicry', to adapt a concept from Bhabha (1994), of structures and markers which held identities in place in 'prior' or older societal rubrics, serves to govern against the dangers of the liminal moment. This idea speaks to what Foucault identifies as the 'trace residue' that is left after paradigm-altering ruptures, because in liminality one starts from a suspension of previous structure; not the annihilation of the very memory of its existence. This definition of 'rupture' allies with Foucault's notion of discontinuity, which he explains as being that moment of transition which forces a "redistribution of the [prior] episteme" (Foucault 1970: 345). This refers to the process which makes it so that alongside the 'new' rules of any discursive field – which would necessarily redefine boundaries and iterations of knowledge and identity as they come into being in the present moment – a rupture must also necessarily take cognizance of the significant continuities with the past which are its legacy.

That identity is fractured, non-contiguous, polyphonic and plural¹¹ is a position which would run counter to a refugee community's bid to 'preserve' and re-create what has been lost: the bid is to read identity as a *fait accompli* instead of as a process, because only then can the loss of a homeland be mitigated, for what is lost may be painstakingly rebuilt and repossessed even in exile. Examples of this manifest across the visualscape of Dharamsala and are to be deciphered in the act of 'naming' that anchors meaning, which, in semiotic terms, is what Roland Barthes identifies as being one of the two possible roles played by any linguistic code (Barthes 1977: 155-157). Every building, every restaurant, guest-house, office is named for an 'other'; perhaps one left behind in Tibet. This is why the Shambhala Cafe rubs shoulders with the Snow Lion Hotel, Tibet Tours and Travels, Dolma Ling Nunnery, Takten House, Potala Road, Oser's Second-Hand Electronics Shop, Dawa's iPhone Service Centre, Lhodrak Menthang Hostel, and literally scores of yoga and 'wellness' centres offering courses and spiritual retreats or workshops. What is also ubiquitous is Tibetan prayer flags: there is not one car or taxi (many even owned by local Indians) which is not bedecked with them; not one home or hillside left bare.

Conclusion

For long years, Tibet and Tibetans have had to bear the burden of a crippling utopian narrative thrust upon them by the ‘West’: the linking of Tibet with Shangri-La. Donald Lopez goes as far as suggesting that this narrative has been a prison Tibetans seem unable to escape from (Magnusson 2002: 195). This is primarily because at its heart, this narrative is not about a utopia which belongs to Tibetans: it is “merely a reflection of the Western Self” (Magnusson 2002: 196). Peter Bishop was among the early scholars to pick up on this leitmotif which runs through numerous accounts about Tibet by Western explorers and researchers, and in his attempt to outline what Tibet means to the ‘Western’ imagination, he posits that it has undergone a change from a “geographically grounded place to a placeless utopia, an alternative society, and as a criticism directed at modern society,” (Magnusson 2002: 196) itself. After 1959, once the community had entered exile, this ‘myth’ had to be expanded, Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya argues, to include displacement (the birth of an exile community) and narratives of Chinese destruction and repression (Magnusson 2002: 198). This gives moral legitimacy to the claim forwarded by the Dalai Lama and successive (exile) Tibetan Administrations, that their articulation of Tibetan-ness is ‘truer’ than anything available in Tibet (diminished as it is into denoting merely the Tibet Autonomous Region or TAR) today.

This idea reinforces the impetus behind the phenomena of narrativising and naming explored in this article, and goes a way towards establishing what it is that holds Dharamsala purposively together: if it is to be the repository and keeper of the flame of Tibetan Culture which may no longer be found or practiced in Tibet today, it needs necessarily to mimic the form and functions of the other capital (Lhasa) it has inherited its mantle from. In its staggered three-fold lay-out; lower (largely ‘Indian’) Dharamsala, giving up into Gangkyi which is the seat of the secular (the Administrative complex), and further into McLeod Ganj proper on top of the hill, home to His Holiness and therefore the sacred centre of Tibetan life in exile, Dharamsala defines what it means to be a liminal space, positioned as it is between the past and present/Tibet-India binary here explored.

Read in the light of Thomassen’s premise that ‘structuration’ takes place in and from liminal positions, Dharamsala’s almost schizophrenic quest to become its other (Lhasa, here standing in metonymic relation with all that is Tibet and Tibetan), and thus straddling worlds, times, and the contested construct we know as ‘nation’, yields up the utopian/ narratives which inform its shape and form. Cautioning again that liminality is “pure danger” without the final stage of reintegration configured into a rite of passage, Thomassen proceeds to post the following pertinent questions, particularly of large societies or communities where the “social drama” they are living through appears to have no foregone conclusion: “how is the liminal period dealt with, and how (if at all) is it ended?... who will become the “carriers” of the new world-view that is eventually institutionalized?” (Thomassen 2009: 19). This

article proposes that the beginnings of an answer to the first of these questions is to be found in studying the recourse a community takes, in moments of transition and suspension of prior epistemes, to the act of generating narratives which allow for the processes of meaning-making to continue: these narratives inform the shape of the community to come, and serve as emplacement mechanisms for identity at the collective or 'group' level in times of extreme societal upheaval and instability.

The second question can perhaps be answered by modifying its central proposition: adding 'where' (location, symbolic and physical) and 'what' (practices, artefacts) to the "who" it places as the carriers of new world-views, room can be negotiated for the exploration of cultural practices which have either survived translation into exile or have organically emerged from this location, where erstwhile nomadic and pastoral people sing of revolution, their diction, language, and style tested in this singing of new tunes. This is how in seeking Dhasa one finds oneself confronted inevitably with an ephemeral but no less real for it, vision of Lhasa.

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Notes

¹ *Students for a Free Tibet (SFT)* is one of the largest international NGOs which works with the community in exile. See <https://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/> for details on the organization and its mandate.

² Referring to, in particular, Thomassen's 'The Uses and Meaning of Liminality' and Szakolczai's 'Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events', both of which appear in the special issue on Liminality published by the journal *International Political Anthropology* in 2009.

³ Szakolczai, explaining Van Gennep's concept of the structure of rites of passage world over suggests that "It starts with the rites of separation, continues with the middle, and central, phase, the "passage" itself, involving a genuine performance or trial, and ends with the rites of re-aggregation, celebrating the successful completion of the transition," (2009: 1).

⁴ A survey by the Planning Commission, Central Tibetan Administration in India, titled 'Demographic Survey of Tibetans in Exile-2009' cites the total number of Tibetans living outside Tibet as being 1,27,935. Of this number, 94,203 people live in India. For details, see the following *Hindustan Times* newspaper article: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NorthIndia/127935-Tibetans-living-outside-Tibet-Tibetan-survey/Article1-634405.aspx>

⁵ See Toni Huber (1997) and Keith Dowman (1998) for more on the decoding of this practice which is central to the understanding and performance of Tibetan Buddhism.

⁶ The very title of Tsundue's collection 'Kora' (2004) refers to the act and practice of performing kora, even as it explores the theme of coming full-circle in a short story which sees the past and present of the Tibetan struggle come together in the form of a dialogue between a young Tibetan refugee and an older Tibetan revolutionary.

⁷ I forward this claim on the basis of several personal interviews with renowned TIPA artists such as Choekyi Tethong-la, and the former (and present) directors of TIPA all through 2014 and 2015.

⁸ The CTA document 'Tibet: Proving Truth From Facts' (1993) pegs this number (from starvation during famines, violence, and other indirect causes of the occupation) at approximately 1.2 million Tibetans.

⁹ This report is analysed and quoted at length in Stephanie Roemer's *The Tibetan Government-in-Exile: Politics at Large* (2008: 67).

¹⁰ Personal Interview with Choekyi Tethong-la in March, 2014.

¹¹ Or 'hybrid', as Homi Bhabha and several post-colonial and post-structural theorists would hold. See Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, especially "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1994: 145) for an exploration of these themes.

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