Tibetan Fears and Indian Foes: Fears of Cultural Extinction and Antagonism as Discursive Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the discursive construction of ‘Indian foes’ manifests Tibetan fears of cultural extinction in exile. Diasporic Tibetans’ object of fear is not the Indian ‘other’ per se but the possibility of turning into this other. The ethnography presented shows that Tibetans build trust-relationships with Indians in their itinerant trade. Yet they present negative trade experiences as ‘proof’ in the construction of Indian moral inferiority. This process of differentiation, based on antagonistic moral representations, upholds Tibetan identity boundaries. The paper further draws a comparison between “arrested histories” (McGranahan 2005), muted violence, and this discursive omission of positive relationships.

After their flight from Tibet in the late 1950s, Tibetans arriving in India found themselves as alien ‘refugees’ in a foreign environment. Of the first tens of thousands of Tibetans who came to India, the vast majority had been farmers and relying on livestock and agriculture in Tibet. Apart from a suddenly dominant Indian cultural and linguistic environment and other markers of social differences, such as homelessness and poverty, the absence of economic opportunities which accorded to their knowledge discriminated the Tibetans from the start. Therefore, their first economic foothold was working on road construction sites in the northern states of India, where up to 21,000 Tibetan refugees were employed by the Government of India in just under a hundred sites. Although the Indians thought of them as physically suited to work in the higher altitude and mountainous terrain (Kharat 2003:288), many of the Tibetans working in harsh conditions died of diseases or in landslides.

In the early 1960s, many Tibetan settlements were founded and gave housing and some social and cultural stability to Tibetans in India. Nearly at the same time, the first Ti-
betans started to take up petty business, selling sweaters as street hawkers instead of working in such low-level and labour-intensive occupations as road construction and logging. To the extent that trade became more important, the need to immerse themselves in the surrounding Indian cultural world grew for Tibetans: because a hawker’s biggest asset is the ability to connect with his or her potential customers, they learned the local languages and with them an immense context of wider Indian cultural references.

Since then, Tibetan itinerant trading with sweaters during the winter months has developed as an economic activity to presently become the main source of income in the diaspora. The majority of households in the settlement in Northern India where I did my fieldwork had at least one member active in the trade. It involves buying sweaters from Indian wholesale merchants in the industrial city of Ludhiana in the Punjab in October, and reselling them in one of the hundreds of trade destinations between Bombay and Calcutta until the end of February. During this time, a number of relationships and interactions play out between the Tibetan traders and Indians, and Tibetans realize kinds of connectedness with Indians in these interrelations. Tibetans in India also engage with local popular culture: elsewhere, I discuss the importance of Indian television and film in the creation of a Tibetan diasporic historicity and for romantic aspirations of love-marriage among Tibetan youths (Lau, in press). Yet, Tibetans insist on dichotomising practices of exclusion in the form of negative moral evaluation and discourses of antagonism. Stressing difference in this way enables Tibetans to be ‘in India but not of it’: Indians are represented as radically ‘other’, and provide a backdrop for the construction of Tibetan diasporic identity.

This paper has three parts. In the first part, I will show that Tibetans use elements from their itinerant trade in India as ‘proof’ in this discursive devaluation of Indians, although the actual trade experience contains many positive relationships. In the second part, I will argue that such superseding discourse manifests Tibetan fears of cultural extinction. Finally, I will place this argument alongside a discussion of “arrested histories” of Tibetan resistance (McGranahan 2005) and muted diasporic violence in the Tibetan representation-al climate of non-violence. These latter elements highlight the complexities of Tibetan diasporic identity: the regional Tibetan Khampa identity is characterised by a proudly violent warrior ethos, whereas the pan-Tibetan refugee identity created in exile places exclusive emphasis on a Buddhist ethos of non-violence. While fears of damaging the Tibetan “nation” and other negative consequences may encourage social and political limits in terms of such representations, I will argue that pervasive fears of cultural extinction, unmediated by Tibetan political factions, lead to the discursive strategy of antagonistic differentiation from Indians.
Stereotypical descriptions of Indians—the example of trade relations

Relationships based on trust have dynamically developed between Tibetan traders and Indians – both on the level of individual cycles of trading seasons, where traders often establish friendly relationships with customers, and over decades on the group level, where the “Tibiti sweater wallahs” have become a named economic group in local economies, and part of the sweater economy operating from Ludhiana. Significantly, the wholesale merchants providing the sweaters at times give Tibetan traders as much as half their stock on credit. Both sides stress “trust” as the deciding factor in this relationship, and Tibetan traders were at pains to point out how both honoured their end of the bargain. This trust is not any less morally significant for being based on commercial interaction, since economic relationships also are moral in nature (e.g. Bloch and Parry 1989, Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). On the markets, friendly and trusting relationships are established with long-term customers, who keep returning to the same sweater sellers year after year. During my fieldwork on a market in Rajasthan, I witnessed invitations to weddings and celebrations of the Muslim festival of Eid, a friendly visit by Tibetan traders to an Indian customer’s house, as well as a Tibetan trader who became the ‘brother’ of an Indian woman through the local ritual of raksha bandhan, in which an armband tied around the wrist establishes a fictive sibling relationship between two individuals. All these relationships present positively valued relationships for the Tibetan traders I accompanied.

The fact that languages are shared also matters here: most Tibetans in India are fluent in Hindi, and traders often speak other Indian languages local to their trading markets. But Tibetan competencies are not confined to the linguistic. Unsurprisingly, they also have real insight into Indian cultural worlds – since the original wave of migration happened nearly 50 years ago most of them were born in India, and have many years of trading experience with Indians. My informants who traded in Rajasthan were, for example, able to explain such cultural details as the Muslim and Hindu ritual calendar or local Marwari customs to me, and also to sing the odd Indian pop-song together with customers. The Indian medium of television, highly popular with Tibetans, also plays a central part in the creation of this knowledge.

Yet, Tibetans in Northern India very rarely had a good word to say about Indians, who were routinely described as “bad” people. Similar narrative elements often accompanied such discourse about the badness of Indians. They were depicted as cowardly and always ganging up on individuals in situations of physical conflict; and described as fanatical and easily brainwashed. Indian men, especially young men, were said to be at times offensive to Tibetan girls. Indian officials were invariably described as corrupted. And, very often, negative characterisations of Indians were embellished and backed up empirically, so to speak, through elements relating to Tibetan experiences of trade with Indians. Descriptions of Indians as a group would often refer to the trade for ‘proof’ of negative evaluations and antagonistic relationships. They evoked images of Indian thieves, of rude and stingy cus-
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tomers (“Indians are so tight-fisted, they never give you what you ask for on the market”), and of greedy merchants who made their money by the Tibetan traders’ hard work (“We are the kuli of the merchants”) – often ending in the ubiquitous sentence: “rgya gar gyi khong tsho rab sduk chags yod” [These Indians, they are very bad]. All of these narratives and statements strongly evaluate Indians negatively in a moral sense, condensed in the Tibetan idiom of “sduk chags” [badness].

What is especially noteworthy here is the way in which negative evaluations supersede the existing positive and trust-based relationships in discourse about Indians. Certainly, some Indian thieves did exist, and interactions with Indian customers, for example, could get heated as a fair amount of hard-nosed bargaining ensued on the market. But I argue that such descriptions of Indians as morally inferior and “bad” by Tibetan exiles serves the purpose of stereotyping, and that this is one of the discursive processes through which a strong sense of difference is created. This differentiation is of course only made sharper through being so ethically charged.

Maryon McDonald (1993) has argued that in the process of stereotyping, those elements that are at the centre of a social group’s self-definition provide the discursive genres through which difference is created at the borders of social groups. In this case, we can see how moral devaluation of Indians may be rooted in the centrality of the moral element in Tibetan Buddhist and refugee constructions of Tibetan identities. I suggest that the antagonism contained in this discourse, in which Indians are turned into ‘foes’, can be understood as a discursive strategy for differentiation. I use the term strategy not in the sense of an always conscious, planned and directed activity, but in the sense of a process that provides solutions to problems within a certain context without necessarily being steered by explicit motivations of individuals. This sense is closer to, for example, talking about ‘adaptive strategies’ of populations in ecological settings, which are often also neither conscious nor explicit, yet effective. In the following, I will explore how, in the particular setting of the Tibetan diaspora, fear is a very important factor for antagonistic discourse vis-à-vis the Indian environment.

The Tibetan fear of cultural extinction

Tibetan elders as well as youths voiced their sense of a loss of cultural knowledge in the younger generations of Tibetans—the latter often gave expression to their own sense of a growing gap in Tibetan cultural, religious and linguistic knowledge. They told me that they often did not know anymore what their grandparents knew as a matter of course, and understood this to be a sign of threatening cultural extinction. Because Tibetans in Tibet itself are understood by exile Tibetans to not be able to practice their culture and religion freely, they place the onus of cultural preservation on themselves. In a private discussion, a key young informant of mine once expressed the publicly highly contentious view to me that
the Tibetan diaspora in India would not be allowed to return to Tibet in the future. At any rate, he said, he could not imagine a return for himself, having grown up in India and not knowing Tibet at all. He reported with some despondency that he feared that Tibetans in India would disappear in India, by “becoming Indians”. Another close informant of mine, a Tibetan lady with four children between the ages of 2 and 18, told me: “My worst fear is for my children to marry Indians and become Indian.” Although only an infinitesimal percentage of Tibetans in India marry Indians because of the tacit understanding which strongly discourages such intermarriage, “becoming Indian” was decidedly portrayed as the worst thing that could happen by many of my Tibetan informants.

Tibetans in India, then, have a particular object of fear: not the Indian other per se, but the possibility of turning into that other. The antagonistic construction of ‘Indian foes’ through discourse manifests Tibetan fears of cultural extinction in exile. This fear is best understood as an emotive context rather than an emotional experience. The latter is an experiential part of the former, but does not contain its pervasiveness. Occasions when my informants voiced fears of their group identity ‘disappearing’ in India were salient points of expression of this emotive context which accompanies their lives in exile, and finds expression in discourse. The object of fear, namely ‘turning into Indians’, is avoided through the construction of difference and the discursive emphasis on antagonistic relationships I have discussed above.

This emphasis simultaneously means that the existing positive relationships are de-emphasised: while examples of negative Indian behaviour during the trade season are used in discourse to underscore Indian moral “badness”, the positive relationships and interaction with Indians which also develop are largely omitted from discourse. In the following section, I will discuss two other kinds of discursive omission which occur in the Tibetan diaspora.

Violence, fear and historical arrest in the Tibetan diaspora

Most Tibetans with whom I did fieldwork in India are of Khampa descent. Kham is a region in eastern Tibet that is notorious for its martial and warlike culture, and Khampa are widely described as “the Tibetan warriors” in exile. Their belligerence is understood to be “in their blood”, and feuds and raids are said to have been commonplace in the past. Moreover, I was often told that the Dalai Lama was heroically escorted out of Tibet by Khampa soldiers who provided the Tibetan resistance to invading Chinese forces. The Tibetans are no strangers to violence, neither historically in conflicts between themselves, nor in the recent history of diaspora in India. Although the amount and intensity of violent conflict has largely abated in recent years, many middle aged Tibetans still rather casually admit to having been involved in fights with Indians as well as Tibetans in the decades after arrival. “We Khampa are like Bin Laden, you know!!”, one man told me fiercely in an inebriated
state, before he shrugged his shoulders and more amicably noted: “But the Dalai Lama has told us to be peaceful … so we are peaceful.”

This last statement contains a field of tension I wish to explore in this analysis. It suggests that the element of violence is, in some sense, an aspect at the centre of some Tibetan self-definitions, together with or somewhere beneath Buddhist notions of non-violence. This would seem to be underlined by Tibetan myths in which Buddhist agents such as the sage Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet, needed to tame and subdue a violent Tibetan nature. Yet, my informants did not elaborate on the topic of past violence: it is something that is not talked about much among Tibetans in the diaspora. The warrior ethic notwithstanding, acts of violence are now mostly viewed with some condemnation, and the image of peaceful Buddhists—personified by the Dalai Lama himself—prevails.

Carole McGranahan has recently argued that the current representational climate in the Tibetan diaspora has led to what she calls “arrested histories” of Khampa resistance against the Chinese invasion of Tibet (2005). McGranahan defines historical arrest as “a practice in which pasts that clash with official ways of explaining nation, community and identity are arrested” (Ibid: 575). She argues that the halting of such histories in the present to be told at another time is a conscious, albeit not always explicitly marked act. McGranahan relates the arrest of Tibetan resistance histories to fear when she writes that:

this practice is directed specifically at histories that challenge dominant versions of the nation. These challenges trigger fear in individual and collective registers, as well as in karmic, social, and political ones: fears that Tibet will not be regained, that the diasporic community will split, harm will come to the Dalai Lama or Tibet, one might be excommunicated from the community or given a “bad name,” or harmful actions in this life [...] will negatively affect one’s next life. The social and political limits encouraged by such fears work on renegade pasts in tandem with “delayed” time. (McGranahan 2005: 576)

In her argument, the state-like Central Tibetan Administration of the Dalai Lama relocates and refunctions memory in the creation of “official history” while arresting “potentially disruptive histories” through social sanctions such as censure and excommunication (Ibid). Ultimately, the practice McGranahan describes is part of the creation of a homogenized “Tibetan refugee” identity which stresses a non-violent Buddhist ethos, in spite of existing regional affiliations such as the Khampa identity with its war-like ethos.

Both the “arrested histories” of the Khampa resistance and violence in the diaspora, then, are not talked about often or openly by Tibetans in India today. But the way in which violence is muted in the diaspora is different from McGranahan’s “historical arrest” in important ways: McGranahan invokes an element of conscious delay when she points out that resistance histories are in some sense positive histories for Tibetans in the diaspora to be told in the future, and indeed that there are processes of rapprochement with Tibetan mainstream historical representation (Ibid: passim). By contrast, violence in the interac-
tion between Tibetans and Indians, as well as between Tibetan factions in the diasporic past and present, is more generally disapproved of. Its representation and narration is thus not merely “delayed” but rather muted. Furthermore, the censured events are not discrete acts of localised Khampa resistance in the past in Tibet, but wide-spread and at times ongoing enmities stemming from diasporic social problems in India (see Penny-Dimri 1994). The censuring agency involved is here not that of the centralised Tibetan administration (the quasi-“state”) acting against renegade Khampa organisations, but that of the Tibetan population in India generally. In sum, although the discursive arrest of Khampa histories of resistance is in part based on the globally recognised representations of Tibetans as non-violent Buddhists, it is significantly structured by the particular conflicts between Khampa regional and central Tibetan affiliations, which are themselves rooted in Tibetan politico-history (see e.g. Coleman 2002, Kapstein 1998: 145, McGranahan 2002 and 2005, McKay 2003: 29-30, Schwieger 2002, Wenbin 2002: 66-67).

Conclusion, and a few words in favour of a theoretical debate of fear

If we compare the three practices of “historical arrest” of Khampa resistance stories, the muting of diasporic violence, and the omission of positive relationships with Indians, we find that the muting of violence depends less on ‘internal’ Tibetan political and historical factors than the historical arrest described by McGranahan. It would therefore appear to be closer to the wide-spread negative evaluation of Indians by diasporic Tibetans, of which this is also true. However, the latter does not accord with the dominant representations of Tibetans as compassionate Buddhists that at least in part inform the former two. What, then, is the common factor in these three very different kinds of discursive omission in the Tibetan diaspora?

In all of the three comparators, fear is an important aspect of the discursive climate that determines what isn’t told. As McGranahan points out, fears of harming Tibet, the Tibetan cause, or one’s own trajectory as a Tibetan are raised by challenges to the dominant representations of Tibetan “nation” in the diaspora (2005: 576; cited above). Yet, “becoming Indian” is the most direct threat to Tibet, the Tibetan cause and the Tibetan nation as imagined in the diaspora. The consequences of this threat pertain to the basic distinction of being Tibetan as opposed to being non-Tibetan. Although Tibetan diasporic institutions are crucial to the very construction of this as a threat, its daily experience for Tibetans in the diaspora is not as dependent on or mediated by social actors as, for instance, the threats involved in Tibetan political infighting. Instead, the fears engendered by this particular threat are woven into the fabric of Tibetan diasporic life in India. I have demonstrated that they find pervasive expression in the discursive strategy of antagonism with Indians, exemplified in my informants’ morally charged discourse about trade.
In this article, I have shown that ethnographic descriptions of Indo-Tibetan relationships, informed by the particular social contexts of the Tibetan diaspora in India, enable us to understand the importance of the Indian social environment for the formation of Tibetan identity within this setting. By contrast to the focus on exclusively Tibetan social and cultural practice still prevalent in the existing anthropological literature, my analysis has thus also demonstrated that the presence of India as a contradictory ‘present home’ is of crucial importance for an understanding of Tibetans in India (see Lau 2007).

Finally, I have framed fear in this article as an emotive context of the Tibetan diasporic experience that is expressed in, but not limited to, emotional experience. To do so addresses one of the challenging questions an anthropology of fear must face: where is fear, during moments when it is not felt? To say that it disappears when it is not experiential, and needs to be created anew when it is, doesn’t explain the coherence and continuity of the contexts of fear we all know. To speak of fear only as an emotion would also represent an analytical overextension, because emotions do have limited durations in our continuous daily lives. Framing fear as an emotive context that lingers on, however, makes it possible to think of it as tying into social practices such as the creation of different types of discourse, and still brings the emotional into focus.
Notes

2. This article is based on fieldwork with Tibetans in the diaspora in India, carried out from March 2004 until July 2005. It developed out of a paper presented to the panel “Imagined Communities: Policies of Inclusion and Exclusion” at the Fear Symposium of the CASCA conference, 12 May 2007, in Toronto, Canada. Research was supported by a Dissertation Research Grant of the Wenner-Gren Foundation; a Research Studentship of the Economic and Social Research Council, UK; a Reginal Smith Studentship of King’s College, Cambridge; a Cambridge European Trust Bursary; a Wyse Trust Grant of Trinity College, Cambridge; and a Ling Roth Scholarship of the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University. I am grateful for the comments provided by the anonymous external review.

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