

The Semiotics and Semantics of Learning a *Lhamo* Literacy
A Tradition? Or Just Alliteration?

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***Author's Notes:**

My research attempts to be a continuation and expansion upon the small corpus of scholarship on this topic. In places, my work reflects recapitulation. In others, perhaps the confusion that accompanies the many inconsistencies that lie embedded in the publications on *Lhamo* that exist in English. Hopefully in other spots, however, some ideas will seem fresh. Regardless, many of the specific semantics of *Lhamo*, of which my fieldwork is related, remain largely unattended to by the Western pen. Because my work is undoubtedly peppered with misunderstandings and inaccuracies (the severity of which I sincerely hope to be mostly an exaggeration), this paper is therefore meant as merely a suggestion for the direction of future study. The assertions I make are by all means subject to investigation and refutation—it would be an honor for me to offer as much.

About transliterations: Some of the scholarship I encountered used the Wylie system of transliteration. This system was developed based around Tibetan spelling. Because I did not feel confident using this system, I did not adapt all of my transliterations into Wylie. As a result, there are some phonetic inconsistencies. I attempted to use the most common transliterations of all the Tibetan words that I have included—which has resulted in a combination of Wylie and a sounding-out method. However, the words in the sections “Transliteration Time: Semantics of Song” and “Transliteration Time 2: Semantics of Movement” are entirely of my own creation. I must apologize in advance if there is any confusion.

I would also like to say, as a lesson that no one need learn again, when working with The Tibetan Institute for the Performing Arts, it is very important to discuss the terms of compensation/donation immediately with the director, in order to avoid coming across as an insensitive, opportunistic imbecile.

The Semiotics and Semantics of Learning a *Lhamo* Literacy

A Tradition? Or Just Alliteration?

“During the Second World War, Winston Churchill’s finance minister said Britain should cut arts funding to support the war effort. Churchill’s response: ‘Then what are we fighting for?’” (Young).

As Churchill’s question articulates, society without art is as meaningless as the words on this page would be to a man without eyes. Society relies on the artistic systems that define and challenge the terms around which a community is based. As perhaps the single-most, important factor in the formation of cultural identity, the arts depend on society for its existence just as much as society depends on the arts for contextualization and legitimacy.

Perhaps then, this reasoning helps explain why in the 50th year of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the exiled Tibetan community’s tenuous existence is still fighting with resilient tenacity for the autonomy of not only their state, but of their artistic heritage as well. For if nothing else, what is art but not the very pick plucking at our heartstrings?

This paper will focus on the Tibetan performing art of *Lhamo*, Tibetan opera. It will seek to identify and dissect the complex components of this cultural legacy, with the aim of developing a kind of *Lhamo* literacy. By detailing the specific characteristics and categories of the song, dance, and visual aesthetics of *Lhamo*, the hope is to augment proficiency in a kind of symbolic—but also literal—language of *Lhamo*. Integral to the understanding of *Lhamo* as a politically and geographically displaced art form will be my

discussion of The Tibetan Institute for the Performing Arts (TIPA), which plays the primary role as maintainer and self-proclaimed preserver of the “tradition” of *Lhamo* in exile. Finally, this paper will seek to decode what “traditional” *Lhamo* means in exile, and specifically to TIPA, and how this perception sheds light on the size of the opportunities available for its counterpoint, change.

RECAP: SHORT HISTORY OF EXILE

In 1959, the Communist Chinese army invaded Tibet and assumed political control over the area by force. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, both the religious and political leader of Tibet, fled to India where he established the Tibetan government in exile. Since that time, the Dalai Lama initiated a new form of governing system—from something analogous to monarchical rule to a democracy. The Tibetan parliament has been instrumental in maintaining the infrastructure of the numerous Tibetan settlements that have sprung up in exile. The success of this infrastructure lies largely in the quality and abundance of various institutions, primarily designed to teach and preserve features of Tibetan life that existed pre-1950.

For instance, the Norbulinka Institute is an establishment dedicated to preserving traditional, Tibetan, fine arts. Norbulinka artists create Thankas (hand painted wall hangings of the Buddha or Buddhist deities), appliqué scenes (also of Buddha, deities or historical/religio-historical scenes), and iron work (with subject matter in the same vein). Another extremely significant institution is the Men-Tsee-Kang, the center for Tibetan medicine, an archaic and highly developed field of study. An extraordinary amount of monasteries have also been built, providing tribute to the thousands of monasteries

destroyed in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution. And last, but not least, The Tibetan Institute for the Performing Arts (TIPA) was created mainly to preserve *Lhamo*, as well as folk song and dance.

Considering the way Tibetan culture is viewed now in exile, perhaps it is surprising to note that Tibet was not particularly unified as a nation before the Chinese occupation. The vast and treacherous landscape, that had few roads to speak of, was difficult to traverse. A significant part of the population lived a nomadic lifestyle. The overall lack of modernization—in the form of communication technology—also meant that the Dalai Lama’s government was in not very much in effect outside the capitol city of Lhasa. Furthermore, the three regions of Tibet—Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang—had more cohesion internally than to one another. Borders were undefined and fluid. There was no sense of nation in the way statehood is contemporarily referred (Gould and Tidwell).

Given this background, that Tibetans in exile have become so patriotic and committed to preserving a “Tibetan” way of life is note-worthy and perhaps ironic, since historically speaking, Tibetan identity was never exactly cohesive or standardized. Of course, strong commonalties existed in Tibet, and form the foundation of the Tibetan identity projected in exile. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism is a major connecting thread that connected the peoples from the three regions. From my observations, I found that a large majority of exiled Tibetans identify strongly with Buddhist philosophy as a definitive characteristic of their Tibetan identity, whether or not they are diligent practitioners. According to Tsering Shakya in his essay, “Whither the Tsampa Eaters,” “...the element which defines Tibetan-speakers is their shared belief that

Buddhism defines them...the very sense of being Tibetan is fused with the Buddhist identity” (2).

However, the goal and implementation of Tibetan cultural preservation, says Shakya, is a bifurcated defense of “faith” and “flag” —even though the notion of a national identity is still a relatively new concept. In exile, TIPA seems to have adopted this lens particularly in the urgency with which they describe the role *Lhamo* plays as a source for Tibetan cultural identity. In other words, preservation of the arts is a major facet of a larger concern dedicated to preserving a sense of country. For TIPA, the stakes include, but in their eyes, transcend a need to retain certain religious ideology. Ultimately, *Lhamo* is expressed as a “uniquely” (TIPA brochure) Tibetan art form, a crucial stitch in the hastily sewn, but fiercely defended, patchwork quilt that is the nation of Tibet.

ART SCHOOL: ON TIPA

In order to begin understanding *Lhamo* as it exists in exile, it is important to appreciate the institute responsible for sustaining, performing and teaching it: TIPA. Originally known as The Tibetan Music, Dance, and Drama Society and based in Kalimpong, India, TIPA was founded in 1959 under the auspices of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (Tsering 43). TIPA came into being only four months after His Holiness’ arrival in India, an indication of the value that has been placed on the organization since its inception. In 1960, TIPA moved to its current home in McCleod Ganj, India (Tibet Government in Exile Website). According to the TIPA website, the institute regards itself as “the premiere exile institute entrusted with the responsibility of preserving and

promoting Tibet's unique tradition of performing arts" (TIPA website). More specifically, says director Jamyang Dorjee, TIPA's focus on *Lhamo* is two-fold: to share and add *Lhamo* to the international, cultural community and maintain the art for younger generations to understand and appreciate" (Tibet Bulletin 18).

HISTORY OF LHAMO: BRIDGES AND BOONS

The first form of *Lhamo* evolved from travelling bards called *lama mani*, who presented stories on illustrated scrolls. *Lama manis* told either *jataka* tales about the past lives of the Buddha or stories about historical, preeminent Tibetan Buddhists. Thangtong Gyalpo (c. 1385), the infamous, engineering monk—known for creating Tibet's first bridges in the early fifteenth century—is attributed with the founding of *Ache Lhamo*. By incorporating individuals to act out the tales, he revolutionized the Tibetan dramatic form. Although the first *Lhamo* troupes were all men, the name *Lhamo* means "goddess," and was named after a group of seven, naturally gifted, beautiful sisters that Thangtong Gyalpo is said to have taught to perform with him (Foley and Karter 131). Composing "operatic arias, usually based on the religious adages of the *lama mani*," (Ross 12) he travelled around with the sisters who sang the songs while he accompanied them with drums and cymbals. Eventually, the texts were written down and lineage begun—one that continues to flourish today. Now, Thangtong Gyalpo's legacy continues most actively on the *Lhamo* stage, both in the singers' *namthars* and the alter constructed in the center of the performance space in his honor.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: RITUALS OF LHAMO

The stage purification ritual at the start of every *Lhamo* is linked to Thangtong Gyalpo's own religious background, who, in the style of the *lama mani*, is said to have begun every performance with the recitation of the mantra "om mani padme hum" (Gen Samten-la, Interview 4).

In each *Lhamo*, the *ngongpas*, hunters, symbolizing the manifestation of Chana Dorjee (Vajrapani Buddha), perform the stage purification. One of the main objectives of this ritual is to give praise to the Tibetan land. The *ngongpas* speak of the *lu* spirits of the earth, a vestige of the shamanistic, Bon tradition that preceded the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. The dark blue hue of the *ngongpa* mask refers to the tan skin of the main character in the *Prince Norsang* (the oldest of the eight, traditional *Lhamo*), a fisherman named Pangen Zimba, off of whom the *ngongpas* are based. His skin was permanently tan from the years he had spent out in the sun. The color also represents the Vajrapana Buddha, Akshobhya, buddha of wisdom. Blue symbolizes the transformative property of turning anger to "mirror-like wisdom" (Religionfacts.com.)

The *ngongpas* perform a dance called *dön*. According to Ross' research, *Dön* includes the rites of "Earth Purification" (in honor of the environment), "Taming of the Earth" (to assure a secure stage), "Ritual of Origin," and "The Auspicious Rites," in which the *ngongpas* sing, "This is the song of the hunters and will inspire you towards the holy Dharma" (Ross 14). This spirited dance involves moving swiftly from one leg to the other, while swinging a stick around in circles with the right hand. The left hand has more moderate wrist choreography, which is accentuated by the long white

sleeve that hangs over the hand. The big movement is inspired by vultures and alludes to their wide wingspan.¹

The seven *ngongpa* dancers move around in a circle, dancing in unison. The choreography is accompanied by cymbals, drums, and the melody of their own voices. The amount of sound produced by the *ngongpas* is impressive indeed, considering the masks covering their faces. When the *dön* finishes, everyone on stage—including the *ngongpas* and the female chorus of *rignas* (fairies), who represent *dakinis* or goddesses, face the alter and make prostrations all at the same time.

Two characters, known as the *gyallu*, are the second featured participants of the opening rituals. The *gyallu*, which means head of the household, are older, male, disciplinarian figures. They play a comedic role, acting as foil to the sprightly *ngongpas*. The *gyallu* also sing praises dedicated to Thangtong Gyalpo (Ross 14).

Following the *gyallu*, the focus shifts to the *dakinis*. They wear crowns of the Five Dayana Buddhas, similarly to the *gyallu*, offer auspicious praises to Thangtong Gyalpo (Ross 15). Originally, the stage purification was purely the *dakinis'* domain, but the *ngongpas* have since eclipsed their role (Gen Samten-la, Interview 1). Their movement revolves around graceful rotations of the wrist. With seamless agility, they circle their arms towards themselves, leading with the heel of the hand. Following this, they alternate moving each wrist in a more intricate, circular pattern on the right and left side many times. This order repeats several times. In an interview, Gen Samten-la notes that the movement is inspired by acts of religious devotion. The circling of the hands

¹ Vultures are the most important birds in Tibetan tradition because of their role in sky burial.

refers to the act of *kora*, or circumambulation around a sacred religious site or space (Gen Samten-la, Interview 4). In *Lhamo* festivals, like the *Shoton* festival in Spring, the lay population will perform their version of this ritualistic behavior as well, by circling the areas holding high officials and monks in an effort to gain positive, karmic merit (Ross 22).

At the end of a *Lhamo*, actors are offered khatas and the chorus performs one more group dance in unison. They then walk around the circumference of the stage offering their thanks to the audience.

THE SEMIOTICS OF COUTURE: COSTUMES

Apart from the dress of the *ngongpas*, costumes are largely based on 16th and 17th century aristocratic attire, providing insight into formal, ancient Tibetan, society. In *Lhamo*, the kings and princes dress in dragon patterned brocade and robes. The attendants to the monarchs wear long, gold chubas (traditional Tibetan dress), and red or yellow tasseled hats. They are also often adorned with a five-inch long gold and turquoise earring that hangs only from the left ear. The queens or princesses may be identified by their apron-like cape worn on the back and a crown of pink flowers. The villains, who are often female characters played by men, tend to wear masks (mostly to communicate their negative tendencies as explicitly as possible to the audience, and perhaps also for the actors to conceal their sex.)

Perhaps ironically, the most emblematic costume in *Lhamo* is probably that which has its own distinctive style: the dress of the *ngongpas*. The *ngongpa* outfit is meant, as mentioned previously, to resemble that of a traditional Tibetan fisherman,

in accordance with Pangen Zimba from *Prince Norsang*. The jewel designs on the vertical beam above the mask reference the wish-fulfilling gem Pangen Zimba received from an undersea princess. In the opera, Pangnen Zimba protects the gem by wrapping it up in his long hair on the top of his head. In emulation, the jewels on the mask now lie on the vertical crown of the mask. One may also notice the symbol of the half crescent and dot on the top of the mask, which one may recognize as part of the Tibetan sign for “om.” The tasseled ropes that hang down the side of the *ngongpa* allude to fishing nets of a fisherman. The current costume and mask of the *ngongpas* are believed to have been conceived by the 5th Dalai Lama on the basis of a dream (Ross 18). Originally, both the beard and the mask of the *ngongpa* were white in deference to Thangtong Gyalpo, who is said to have lived to 125 years of age! (Gen Samten-la, Interview 1). The beard that remains is still representative of the opera’s founder.

Similar to the way in which symbolism is vested in the mask of the *ngongpa*, the color of a mask in *Lhamo* often signifies certain character traits. For instance, a black mask indicates villainy; green represents Green Tara and is often worn by maternal figures; yellow, symbolizing prosperity and long-life, is usually the color of hermits or saints; and red is typically the dress of kings or ministers, standing for power.

TRACKS OF THE TAPE: CHARACTERISTICS OF SONG

In addition to costume, a character’s identity may also be defined by the melody that he or she sings, since each protagonist has his or her own. Every role has its respective melody, which is employed in almost every kind of scenario. For

instance, some characters may have slight variations to their basic song, informed by a particularly intense emotional situation. Although the melodic line is standardized in *Lhamo*, the solo singer may choose his or her key. Because the accompaniment is made up of only cymbals and drums, the singer has full autonomy in deciding upon what pitch to start. However, this freedom does require foresight as to the development of the melodic line. Cognizance of the rises and falls of the *namthar* are crucial so that singer can stay within his/her range.

One of the most important and obvious traits of *Lhamo* lies in the call and response musical interaction that takes place between the main characters and the chorus standing on the periphery of the stage. The chorus' "response" is a secondary reiteration to the main singer's own line and commentary. The "response" is supplementary in nature. The time that the chorus' response provides thus enables the protagonist to draw in enough air for the next verse.

At the end of every verse, there are what Gen Samten-la calls, five types of "vibrations," or syllables. The pattern becomes recognizable quickly, since the chorus will always repeat it. Though difficult to convey through transliteration alone, the "vibrations," sounded-out, look something like: *hey-ay-ay-ah-(ng)ay*. The *ay-ah* transition is the most important in creating a sense of movement in the line, notes Gen Samten-la, since it is the largest interval in the phrase. The final *(ng)ay* is sung on the same note as the *ah*. A singer demonstrates prowess by the speed at which he or she can produce the syllables. However, there is no formal, dictated pace; the tempo must depend on the singer's agility. These syllables also help illustrate the kinds of accents that punctuate *namthars*, which stand in contrast to

the smooth, lyrical feel of folk songs. Gen Samten-la explains the sounds by using the Tibetan phrase “*deen koo(k)*,” which means bending of the vocal chords (Gen Samten-la, Interview 1).

Based on both exterior and participant observation, the progressions between these five “vibrations,” as well as many notes in Tibetan opera, involve sounds resembling guttural stops, specifically “palatal stop consonants.” The “stop” happens when the breath precipitously halts before releasing in a burst of air and sound. A “palatal stop consonant” refers to a guttural stop that occurs in the back of the throat by the tongue coinciding with the soft palate, blocking airflow (Ramey).

In an informal coaching session with two of TIPPA’s junior artists, Dawa-la and Yangdol-la, I learned that there are eight different physical locations that inform the production of consonants, which the students learn to understand proper diction and to develop a deeper conception of pronunciation. Going through the alphabet, Dawa-la and Yangdol-la explained where each letter is made. For instance, letters are formed through exercise of the teeth, mouth, soft palate, neck, nose, lips, stomach, and tongue. Fittingly, they explained that the high-toned, nasalized, fourth letter “nga,” which also means “I,” is associated with the nose. The last letter in the alphabet, “ah” requires movement from the diaphragm, and accordingly, is affiliated with the stomach (Interview 5).

To most fully appreciate *Lhamo* on the simplest level, however, one must focus on the words says Gen Samten-la. Because the words of *Lhamo* are non-colloquial and spoken in a somewhat antiquated, “high” language, communication—especially to the younger generations—poses challenges for performers in this day

and age (Gen Samten-la, Interview 1). The lyrics of the *namthars* (opera songs) contain the essence of the story and are the place from which true profundity may be derived. Gen Samten-la even goes so far as to say that understanding the text at the deepest level is almost like taking an initiation from a high lama. He muses that perhaps one of the reasons *Lhamo* has always been so popular with monks is because of the rich meaning they perceive in the main themes.²

“AH-LEY” SAID THE HEAD ROLL: COMMUNICATING THROUGH MOVEMENT

In addition, to costume and song, movement also contributes a kind of unspoken *Lhamo* language. In the same way that Western ballet includes moves and gestures that indicate certain occasions or personality characteristics, so too does *Lhamo* demand a kind of semiotic awareness—especially for the cultural outsider.

Similar to the manner in which beauty is often expressed in classical ballet, the physical aesthetics of a female character in *Lhamo* are made clear by costume, physique, and facial features, but also especially by the elegance of her movement. Sugkyi Nyima, for instance, is characterized by the graceful gentility of her dancing. In contrast, the choreography of the witch maid Yama, who caters to the malevolent desires of the jealous Ringyen Bumo, is made to fit her mercurial, slanderous nature. Yama’s steps are fast moving and highly rhythmic, infused with several strings of moving turns, which help convey a sense of volatility.

² It is important, however, to make the distinction between *Cham*, a tantric, monastic performance tradition that is used as an advanced meditative technique, and *Lhamo*, a lay performing arts tradition. The spectator is not looking for a direct blessing in *Lhamo* as he or she might in *Cham*. The interpretive depth of *Lhamo* depends on the individual’s effort and/or ability to seek it.

Lhamo body language also contributes a very specific kind of vocabulary that is helpful in the pursuit of operatic literacy. When a king or honorable older male roll their head around to the front from one side to another, they are saying “hello,” or “I understand.” When lowlier people want to indicate the same message—typically to a character of higher status—they will bow deeply with their hands and palms facing upwards. (This action still has resonance in contemporary life as well, in which greetings are often performed by bowing the head and pressing one’s palms together.)

When a character wants to demonstrate that they see another character from far away, he or she will dance a step in which the hand circles up to the forehead—as if to shade the eye—in patterns of two on both sides. In one of the opening scenes of *Sugkyi Nyima*, the audience watches as Sugkyi Nyima goes to the stream to draw water. Though adorned with a flower crown and other exquisite accessories, Sugkyi Nyima demonstrates the beauty of her figure through stylized movement on the riverbed. She circles her arms so that they come to rest on her hips, and then alternates her shoulders up and down. She repeats this pattern several times. To most modern eyes, the demonstration is markedly unostentatious. (In fact, I had to ask one of the TIPA students for an explanation of the movement since the intention was so subtly manifested.)

When actors must convey powerful emotions through song, they must not in any way let the sentiment hinder the production of sound. In moments of sadness, for instance, the singer cannot allow him or herself to cry or even pretend cry if it affects the continuity of the aria. From the *Lhamo* perspective, emotionality must never pervert the voice (Gen Samten-la, Interview 2). Thus, different kinds of

physical behavior must be adopted to convey sentiments. In sadness, the body can express dejection or misery through hollowing out one's frame and resting one's head in one's hand.

PEDEGOGY: SINGING TECHNIQUES

In addition to possessing a tremendous amount of natural talent and potential, there are other certain criteria that must be met in order to accurately present the *Lhamo* style of singing. For instance, the sound must be very high pitched, for both males and females. Similarly to Western opera, the voice must have vibrato, which is a very quick and slight fluctuation in pitch that helps the singer phonate as accurately on a note as possible.

Due to the length and volume of the *namthars*, capacity for long, sustained breath is essential. Students learn to breathe by using pressure from the stomach—or what, most likely, is referred to as the diaphragm in Western opera. Gen Samten-la adds, “power comes from stomach, but control comes from throat” (Gen Samten-la, Interview 3). Training breath control is one of the most important parts of studying *Lhamo*, since it connects directly to vocal projection. This being said, in the classroom the teachers request students to use a small, controlled, somewhat subdued inside voice in order to avoid vocal overuse. Nonetheless, performances will always call for large unbridled sounds.

In addition to volume though, the sheer length of operas demand excellent vocal endurance, acquired primarily through proper breathing techniques that facilitate the sound and power of the voice without straining the vocal chords. A training

method developed in Tibet that TIPA continues to employ today calls for students to practice singing behind waterfalls (Gen Samten-la , Interview 3). As Ellen Pearlman explains, “Learning to project against the thunderous sound of tons of falling water build up lung strength and stamina” (Pearlman 152). Students are also encouraged to sing in the open air. Perched on the side of a mountain, TIPA provides an excellent practice venue.

Gen Samten-la admits, however, that most of the qualities necessary for *Lhamo* come in the form of natural gifts and cannot be taught. For instance, tenors are more organically suited for *Lhamo* than say a bass or baritone because the style of Tibetan opera demands high voice types. In contrast to the more nasalized Chinese sound, or classical India in which the breath is “shaped through activity of the mouth” (Ross 45), the high timber that classifies the *Lhamo* voice depends on breath moving through the throat. Vowels tend to move from a closed throat “ahng” or “ng” to a released and open “ay.” This style makes natural dynamics between loud and soft. The sound should also fit with the character the singer is playing. For instance, in addition to singing in a slow, controlled way, a king’s voice should be slightly deeper (Ross 45.)

TRANSLITERATION TIME: THE SEMANTICS OF SONG

There are several different types of song in *Lhamo*. A *gdang-ring* is a long verse, most often sung by kings, aristocracy, and the *gyallu*. The word *gdang* means melody, and the word *ring* means long. Accordingly a *gdang-thung* is a short verse, (*thung* translates to short). *Gdang-thungs* are not character specific, though typically

more in the domain of smaller characters. Nevertheless, sometimes a main character will sing a *gdang-thung* as well. A *gdang-log* is a slight variation on a full *namthar*. In Western music theory, a *gdang-log* might be analogous to the A prime (A') section of a piece of music, in that it is similar to the first melody of a song (or in this case, a particular *namthar*) called A, but with a couple major differences. Though *gdang log* may seem similar to the call and response pattern that punctuates an individual's aria, the difference is that a *gdang log* is an autonomously acting thought or phrase that includes responses from the chorus but is still governed by one main solo singer. *Gdang-log* may occur if one character must sing two *namthars* back to back in order to diversify the main melody and keep the audience engaged. Sometimes the chorus will also sing their own version of a *gdang-log*. These *gdang-logs* are based on a main character's *namthar*, and are sung after performing a folk dance as an interlude to encourage a better transition back to the story.

Some categories of melodies have specific names as well. For instance, smaller characters that do not have their own, individual melodies associated with their respective roles will sing a *kue-dang*. *Kue-dangs* exist in most operas, and are the domain of characters such as boatmen and animals (as in tigers or elephants). A *skyo-glu* is the name for a sad melody. Regardless of character, the same melody is always used to express sadness.

Tibetan opera songs may also be broken down into certain styles. For example, a *shayma namthar* is a style that mixes the *Lhamo* kind of singing (*namthar*) with folk melodies (*shay*). The kind of *shayma namthar* that comes from Kham in East Tibet is referred to as a *luma namthar*. "Lu" is a type of high-pitched

melody that originated in Kham, and first introduced in the opera *Prince Norsang*. Lastly, *shuma namthar* denotes the style of the narrator specific to that in Gyasa Belsa. *Shuma namthar* has a speak-singing, patter-like quality. (Gen Samten-la, Interview 3 and 4)

TRANSLITERATION TIME, 2: SEMANTICS OF MOVEMENT

Similarly to these categories and styles of song, certain choreography has been catalogued and named as well. For instance, *dön/dun tap* is what Gen Samten-la describes as movement for “entering the stage” (Gen Samten-la, Interview 3, Interview 4). “*Tap*” is the word meaning “to dance.” As this step develops, the tempo increases from slow to fast. One also sees this type of movement, or a comparable variation, whenever Dawa Sengey and his entourage begin to move towards a new locale. The right arm travels across the body over three steps. On the third step, the right leg lifts off the ground so that it is slightly hooked in front of the body. In the subsequent four steps, the right arm sweeps back away from the body, incorporating a roll of the wrist to the outside. The arm movement corresponds to the leg again, as it ends with the right leg slightly off the ground once more. Lamas, rinpoches, or aristocratic characters move slower, and also incorporate slow moving turns in both directions. The *dön tap* of older characters, such as the elderly couple that visits Drangsong in the beginning of *Sugkyi Nyima* also have a slower, more rhythmic pace and less fluid movement than the younger characters. They end their step in a similar fashion to that of the lamas. Age is often additionally illustrated with the inclusion of canes, and/or mock wheezing and coughing in order to indicate fragile fitness.

Pang-ling is a formal greeting that is performed as a kind of non-verbal “hello.” The movement, composed of rhythmically dancing a pattern that moves downstage and then upstage (or first towards and then away from those being greeted on stage) three times, ending by bringing hands up in a prayer position to indicate respect, and then letting them fall gracefully down. *Pay-ghol* is the name for the female version of the salutation, which is also repeated three times. The term for the salutation of slower characters is called *cham boh*. *Kor chen*, big, round movement that involves moving in full circles indicates travel. Although the movement is slightly different for males and females, every type of character employs *kor chen*. *Tayl tap* is slow movement reserved for the chorus. *Gyok tap* is a faster style of movement that corresponds with *gdang-log* in singing. The most exciting move to watch is called *par-chen*, known as barrel turns in Western dance terminology. Initiating the movement towards the back, this acrobatic step is a kind of rotating leap in which the dancer extends his arms outwards and spots the ground. *Par-chen* is used to indicate long and fast travelling and often performed by male, secondary characters such as hunters. *Shay* is the folk-inspired dance of the chorus that accompanies *shayma namthars*. (Gen-Samten-la, Interview 3)

There are also certain conventions surrounding these formalized movements. For example, when characters enter the stage, they must first present themselves to the audience before initiating any choreography.

In practically all movement, *Lhamo* choreography accentuates movement in the wrist. There is a kind of seamless grace in the hands, especially in the female performers, that creates an illusion that is looks as smooth as water and as

ephemeral as air. This illusion is successful, in part, due to a rolling movement in the wrists that is articulated down to the rest of the joints in the hand as well. By using the full rotation, flex and point of the wrist, the hand moves seemingly effortlessly through space.

CASE STUDY: SUGKYI NYIMA—A STUDY OF THEATRICALS

VERBOSE SYNOPSIS:

³There is some academic contention regarding the origin of the *Sugkyi Nyima*. The *Lhamo* was originally known as *Shakuntala*, a legendary Indian drama by the author Kalidas. Scholarship has yet to assert the translator with any conviction. However, it is believed that the translation began around the 8th Century and was completed around the 11th Century.

The story of *Sugkyi Nyima* is one of humor, deception, loss and renewal. After the purification rituals that initiate the opera, the tale begins with the Buddhist hermit Drangsong. He lives alone in the forest meditating. One night he experiences a wet dream and the next day he goes to a stream to wash his sheets. A deer nearby drinks from the stream and becomes pregnant. Drangsong is kind to the deer, which soon gives birth to a beautiful maiden named Sugkyi Nyima. In the nearby kingdom, an elderly king

³ The following synopsis is based off of the 2002 abridged performance of Sugkyi Nyima at and TIPA. Some of the details from the TIPA performance are inconsistent with the story provided by Wang Yao in his book, *Tales from Tibetan Opera*. However, due Norbu Tsering (past director of TIPA)'s seemingly candid descriptions of the care with which opera stories were gathered and re-assembled in his book in exile (in his book, *Ache Lhamo Is My Life*), there is evidence that this particular summary honors the opera as it was performed in Tibet before 1959. Nevertheless, this disparity should be noted and justifies further investigation of the matter than is able to be presented here.

passes on the throne to his oldest son, Dawa Sengey. Travelling outside his palace one day, Dawa Sengey encounters an enchanting young woman named Ringden Bumo. She seduces him with her good looks and he takes her home to be his queen.

Unfortunately, Ringden Bumo's beauty is purely external, for soon after at the palace, Ringden Bumo demonstrates behavior that indicates perverse pleasure at the killing of animals. One day she sends a hunter off to kill a boar that she had spotted running through the palace gardens. The hunter follows the boar into the woods where he encounters Sugkyi Nyima. He wonders if she is a goddess. Awed, he takes King Dawa Sengey to come meet her. The King is similarly overcome and immediately proposes. Drangsong gives Sugkyi Nyima his blessing (happy, as author Wang Yao writes, because Sugkyi Nyima will now have a great opportunity to spread the teachings of Buddhism (Yao, 106)), and a charmed pearl necklace to ward off harm and ensure prosperity.

Everyone in the kingdom is soon impressed with Sugkyi Nyima's kind heart and generous nature—that is except for the envious Ringden Bumo, who conspires with a roguish witch woman named Yama against the new queen. Yama soon succeeds in tricking Sugkyi Nyima into letting her borrow the necklace, in which she then replaces with a fake version. This move enables Yama to frame Sugkyi Nyima with the murder of her baby prince, which in turn incites Dawa Sengey's wrath. Despite the warnings King Sengey receives from his sagacious, parrot advisor, he banishes Sugkyi Nyima from the kingdom.

Sugkyi Nyima suffers great hardships, but is ultimately protected by the strength and purity of her Buddhist practices. Eventually, she becomes a nun, who quickly gains

esteem for her wise teachings. One day Yama and Ringden Bumo go to her to confess their sins. Dawa Sengey who has also come, overhears the two deceitful women and realizes Sugkyi Nyima's innocence. He pulls out his sword in fury, but Sugkyi Nyima intercedes on the two women's behalf, betraying her true identity. Dawa Sengey pleads for forgiveness. Sugkyi Nyima accepts King Sengey's entreaties and returns back to the castle. Sugkyi Nyima soon after gives birth to another baby boy. The opera ends depicting reconciliation and happiness at last.

DRAMATIC CHARACTERISTICS: LACK OF REALISM

The complete lack of realism in *Lhamo* theatrics is made immediately apparent by the lack of scenery, but intensifies as the action opera progresses. For instance, when the actors go to a stream, they simply move to another location on the stage where they mime movements like scooping up water to drink or to store. TIPA helps clarify the mimed movement by adding pre-recorded sounds of rushing water (and perhaps demonstrating the benefits of modern, technological devices). Animal characters are adult actors dressed in full-bodied suits, though with their human faces typically obscured by a paper-machê-like animal head. In *Sugkyi Nyima*, the king's advisor is actually a human-size, bright green parrot.⁴ When two characters need to cross a river, they do so by slipping into the middle of a two-sided sheet painted with the top half

⁴ The bird type may seem surprising—as parrots are indigenous to warm climates. The character may have a historical connection to Tibet's relationship with the Silk Road, or perhaps is a reference to Tibet's Indian neighbors. Either way, the parrot is likely meant to indicate the lavishness of the royal family—a household with the means of possessing rare, exotic inhabitants.

resembling a boat, and the bottom half depicting an underwater scene. Here again, TIPA will use sounds of rushing water to be played over the action. In *Sugkyi Nyima*, when king Dawa Sengey leaves the palace, he does so on a rather ingeniously designed hobby-horse contraption. The apparatus has a hole, where a saddle would be placed, which the king fits into so that his legs form the front legs of the horse. The “body” of the horse is made from two cloth sheets hanging down on poles that are bolstered by, in this example, two of the king’s attendants.

This absence of anything naturalistic is not especially distracting, however, since the stories are rather fanciful themselves. Perhaps one of the rare exceptions though, occurs towards the end of the *Sugkyi Nyima* when the wicked witch, Yama, enacts the strangling of the “baby son of King Dawa Sengey and Sugkyi Nyima to death. Here, even the lack of realism fails to fully temper the horror induced by the crime. Although the baby is quite obviously a doll, the scene is still alarming in the brutality of the act alone.

DRAMATIC CHARACTERISTICS, 2: SATIRE

Satirical comedy is a commonly used technique found in almost all Tibetan operas. Satirical segments are, in fact, and the only quality of Lhamo performance that may be explicitly defined by improvisation. Common themes include monasticism, unpopular politicians, and even religious figures (Ross 35).

This being said, satire in *Lhamo* is often, from a sociological point of view, self-reflective. In *Sugkyi Nyima*, for instance, there is a scene in which King Dawa Sengey consults the state oracle for advice about his romantic interests, in apparent parody of

the behavior by the real figure of the same name. In the recent TIPA version, there is a silly, slapstick-esque exchange between the oracle and the oracle's scribe, who plays a kind of hunchbacked fool. The oracle makes screeches and monkey-like yelps (perhaps in caricature of the oracle from real life), while the scribe struggles in vain to understand the message. The scribe writes down inane "predictions" as in "snow in winter and monsoon in summer" and "summer take care of iron, winter take care of clay, always take care of mouth—don't make trouble. Don't speak!" (Gen Samten-la, Interview 4). Both actors' antics succeed spectacularly in mocking the real oracle's esoteric language of hisses and stutters. The slapstick comes in especially when the actor playing the oracle goes over to hit the scribe with his sword—supposedly in the middle of his trance—when the scribe miswrites a quotation. Comically, the monkey shrieks of the trance get louder and angrier at the same time.

In addition to making fun of the kind of oracles that claim profundity in baseless assertions, such mockery is also a very serious reminder not to (and criticism of those who do) accept ideas and phenomena on blind faith. Significantly, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy places great importance on critical analysis and debate in order to prevent exactly such a conclusion from arising. Students and teachers yank and tangle concepts in order to find any weak seams. It is thus interesting—though perhaps not surprising—to find a similar message embedded in *Lhamo's* moments of comedy.

ON ETHICAL ILLUMINATIONS

In expounding the definition of *Lhamo* on its website, TIPA also illustrates its perspective on the purpose and worth of the art; TIPA explains that *Lhamo* originated as

a method for communicating moral stories based in Buddhist philosophy to the lay population. The endings of *Lhamo* always involve characters being punished or rewarded in accordance with his or her merit. The moral is always similar: as Joanna Ross puts it, “the good triumphs and the evil succumbs” (13, *Lhamo: Opera from the Roof of the World*). Despite the complexities laden within the *shung*—or main plot—by the end of the opera, this main point is always made didactically clear. One may conjecture whether the retribution that the deserving characters will undoubtedly receive correlates to an over simplified, folk way of explaining the cause-and-effect theory of karma.

Consistent with many kinds of folk artistry, *Lhamo* may also help shed light on certain social and community values that were in place at the time at which they were created. For instance, the story of *Sugkyi Nyima* first establishes Ringyen Bumo as an evil character by indicating the pleasure she takes in the killing of animals. From a sociological point of view, it is interesting to consider how easily this character trait communicates iniquity to the audience. The message that Ringyen Bumo’s attribute is meant to relate certainly conforms to the Buddhist notion of respect and compassion for all sentient beings. Undeniably, this sentiment cannot pretend to be exclusively Buddhist, and it might be a bit reductionistic to assume all Tibetans uphold these values in solely a Buddhist framework (or hold them at all), but it does point to the idea that the Tibetan community would have been very familiar with these kinds of ethics. What this hypothesis indicates is that the way of perceiving the world and one’s place in it as indicated in *Sugkyi Nyima* corresponds to principles of respect and honor towards all

sentient beings—principles also emphasized in Buddhist philosophy—that may shed light on the direction moral values tended to sway in historical Tibet.

THE CRUX OF THE MATTER: TRADITION VERSUS CHANGE

As mentioned previously, TIPA's self-proclaimed, primary function is to preserve traditional performing arts. Given that this focus is retrospective in nature, one may wonder whether TIPA has made room for any progress or change within the context of their own cultural heritage. In order to address this question, it is important to first consider change in light of its foil, tradition. What does it mean to call something traditional? How does TIPA perceive the definition? And how might TIPA's conception be affected by its existence as an institution in exile?

Based on the fact that one of the Dalai Lama's first moves in exile was to establish a performing arts institute in order to keep *Lhamo*—a cultural art form singular to the people who call themselves Tibetan—from dying out, the very moment that TIPA came into being the moment every memory from Tibet before the Chinese invasion became the standard for defining Tibetan identity. This standard has undoubtedly informed the government's notion of "traditional." The governmentally sponsored TIPA, and the tenacity behind its dedication to the conservation of *Lhamo*, reflects the preciousness of these memories. In the same way that Tibet, as defined in modern terms of nationhood, came into being to oppose Chinese claims, so too has the concept of "traditional" arisen as a defense against the threat of cultural distortion. Authenticity, as a categorization in exile, seems to be gauged according to the extent to which something has been untouched, unaffected, or undefiled by the Chinese Communist government.

Half quoting Dibyesh Anand, Bangladeshi scholar, Syed Jamil Ahmed writes, “Because ‘the category of tradition [is] itself dependent upon the category of the modern’ (Anand, 279), the ‘tradition’ is a modern construction” (Ahmed, 169). In deference to and continuation of this line of thought, one may hypothesize that “traditional,” as it is referenced in exile, is an artificial construct created by the Tibetan government to both articulate and contrast life as it was before 1959 to the way it is now under Chinese occupation. In order to substantiate this argument, however, some further contextualization is necessary.

LHAMO TROUPES AND REGIONALITIES IN HISTORICAL TIBET

Given that there were various *Lhamo* troupes in Tibet, whose different regional ties and backgrounds invariably lead to a diversity of performance styles, the notion of using “traditional” as a political strategy warrants attention and vindicates investigation. In the short essay, “Lhamo: The Opera of Tibet,” Jamyang Norbu, former director of TIPA, discusses some of the regional differences among the three major *Lhamo* troupes in Tibet. He recalls the *Kyimulunga* as being popular and clever, famous for their satirical wit; *Gyangara* was considered the most refined and “classic”; and *Chungba* was unsophisticated and gauche (Norbu, 9).

Tsering also mentions that different regional troupes had different specialties; in other words, not all the *Lhamo* troupes performed all eight operas. Thus, one of the problems that TIPA has faced (and still faces) is not having access to all the techniques and styles of the various *Lhamo* troupes that existed in Tibet before 1959. Writer Jamyang Norbu comments on the unbalanced number of Tibetans from U-Tsang in exile,

which corresponds to the fact that most of the *Lhamo* that has been remembered and taught at TIPA is overwhelmingly Lhasian. For instance, though *Lhamo* costumes were modeled after the dress of the aristocracy, the aristocratic dress varied by region in the same way that traditional dress (i.e. everyday chupas) did and still do. Unfortunately, these regionalisms were lost along with the individuals who never escaped—or never succeeded in their escape—from Tibet. As a result, the costumes in exile almost exclusively represent the aristocratic dress from Lhasa (Ahmed 162).

UNIFORMITY, COHESION....CONTROL

However, there are certainly some uniform characteristics that have transcended style idiosyncrasies, and therefore enabled *Lhamo* to exist as a formalized art form. For instance, the plotlines of the eight historical operas have all stayed respectively the same throughout the centuries, even though *Lhamo* was mainly kept alive via oral transmission. The troupes that performed at Norbulinka, the Dalai Lama's summer residence, were upheld to a particular standard of textual accuracy that conformed to the records housed in the office of the treasury, says Norbu Tsering (former *Lhamo* master at TIPA). It is unclear, however, if (and if so, how) melodies and movement were kept in record in a comparable fashion, or rather maintained through a process of oral transmission. Irrespective of method, Tsering notes the effectiveness of the end result, recalling, "If there were two companies performing the same opera story, the only difference regarded the skills and precision of the performance, besides the different dialects used" (Tsering 16). Gen Samten-la says that there was a prerequisite

examination on all the lyrics before performers could even play at Norbulinka.

Furthermore, errors that were made in performance were penalized (Gen Samten-la, Interview 1).

This history of performance preservation is particularly interesting in light of its ironic resonance with the regulations on free speech currently employed by the PRC in Tibet. These governmentally enforced rules of performance from historical Tibet seem in some ways diametrically opposed to the standard of free speech now enjoyed in exile. Considering such a political legacy of control, one may wonder if (and if so, how much) the exiled, Tibetan population feels comfortable flexing this relatively recently acquired liberty. One may wonder if there is still societal pressure—in addition to political pressure—to stick to certain, established patterns. This theory seems to match that proposed by Ahmed, who argues that the categorization of “traditional” is a hegemonic tactic utilized by the Tibetan government in exile as a kind of “cultural politics” (Ahmed, 171). After all, in such a small population, dissension will always make a splash as well as a scare, one that threatens the national image of strength and stability.

CULTURE WAR: MINORITY ART IN ENEMY HANDS

Nevertheless, even if, as Ahmed muses, Tibetans in exile are manufacturing tradition somewhat synthetically, they may not necessarily warrant condemnation either. One could their behavior a product of intimidation and insecurity. After all, Tibet’s status as the underdog is not totally an exaggeration. In a country like China that controls everything from the educational system to the mass media, dissention in modern Tibet

is risky to the point of dangerous. By creating a culturally unified front, the Tibetans are perhaps attempting to make *Lhamo* more resistant to the politically motivated modifications that have begun to take place by the Chinese in Tibet—where if criticism was voiced it could be tried as a crime.

Perhaps the most immediately striking example of Chinese imposed change on *Lhamo* is a symbolic one. In the years immediately preceding the invasion, *Lhamo* troupes were forced to replace the picture of Thangtong Gyalpo with Mao Zedong on the performance alter (Ahmed, 164).

More recently, the style of singing, specifically the way in which sound is produced, has also seen alteration in Chinese-occupied Tibet. The Chinese style, which is higher pitched, more nasalized and more piercing has been incorporated into *Lhamo* performance. In contrast, *namthars* sung solely in the Tibetan style sound meatier, with richer tones enhanced by strong breath control and projection. Ahmed's research helps contextualize this evolution, for he found that vocal training in the Lhasa Art School includes both *Jingju* and *Lhamo*-style. The movement training is different in the Lhasa Art School as well, in fact. According to Dacudab Duoji and Xiaozhaxi Ciren in a 1987 interview, students take classes in "Western ballet, Tibetan folk dance, Beijing opera dance, and *Lhamo* movement" (Ahmed, 167).

However, the most drastic alterations that have taken place post occupation have been mostly targeted at the *shungs* (storylines). In the 1980s, during Deng Xiaoping's "liberalization policies," China refocused the plot of *Gyasa Bhelsa*. The original historical opera is about the famous Dharma king, Songsten Gampo

(approximately 600- 649 A.C.E.), and the clever ingenuity he employs in the process of arranging marriages with the Chinese Princess, Princess Wencheng, and Princess Lhachik Tritsun from Nepal. The PRC version completely excludes the Nepalese princess. They emphasize Princess Wencheng's role in bringing Buddhism—which they correlate with all culture and class—to Tibet (Ahmed 164). In this culturally imperialistic version, Princess Wencheng is portrayed in terms reminiscent of early Western, missionary accounts of individuals seeking to tame the so-called savages native to any exotic (non-Western) terrain. The PRC also attributed Princess Wencheng with facilitating economic growth. As Ahmed writes, “The narrative is meant to reinforce the PRC contention that China is the culture bringer and Tibet has historically been the receiving party” (Ahmed, 165).

In addition, Gen Samten-la, as well as various contemporary books and articles on Tibetan opera, have noted that the *Nangsa Woebum* has also been subject to major plot adjustments inside Tibet. In the original story, Nangsa Woebum's husband, a tyrannical feudal lord, beats her to death. She is reincarnated, however, and devotes her next life to the Dharma. The opera ends with her dazzling her former husband by become a rainbow in the sky before his eyes. After asking for forgiveness, he reorients his life around following the Dharmic path as well. However, the Chinese version changed the end to make the story into one of “class struggle” says Norbu Tsering, who was forced to perform in the original adaptation of this story shortly after the Chinese invasion (Tsering 58). In this account, Nangsa returns to the world vindictively, murdering her husband and in-laws.

The difference between the old and new—Tibetan versus Chinese—version of this *Lhamo* is as severe as it is absurd. Especially according to TIPA’s director Jamyang Dorejee in an interview with the *Tibet Bulletin*, who expresses the belief that *Lhamo* is a conveyer of ethical lessons (Tsering 12), then one may appreciate how offensive the acts of retributive justice in the Chinese flavored version may be. Ross addresses the alteration as well, saying the Chinese edition is “a story of oppression of women by feudal landlords, and an example of the way life was before the ‘great liberation’ of Tibet by the ‘Motherland’” (Ross 5). The Chinese fail to recognize that exchanging one kind of oppression for another hardly merits the term, “great liberation.” Although it does appear to be true to an extent that Tibet was a feudal, patriarchal society, the pervasiveness and the intensity of such a ruling system are somewhat vague.

“HISTORY AS PROPAGANDA”

The steps the Chinese have taken in *Lhamo* to paint a certain kind of historical narrative are actually emblematic of a far more pervasive political project (and problem), the crux of which is perhaps symbolized in the hazy facts regarding Tibet’s, ancient feudal society. In his book titled, *History as Propaganda*, John Powers asserts that both the PRC *as well as* the Tibetan Government in Exile have begun to use history as a means to buttress politically contentious allegations. According to Powers, even Western scholars who expressly try to arrive at a kind of outsider’s objectivity are unavoidably affected by their own biases or political sympathies (Powers 128).⁵ Because

⁵ It must be noted that this paper undoubtedly falls victim to such phenomena as well—it would be simply self-indulgent to thing otherwise.

Lhamo is such an archaic and obvious cultural form, it seems only natural that it would be the rope upon which the tug of war of cultural politics would take place. In scholarship alone, the PRC vehemently expounds the idea that Tibet was an utterly backward, feudal society for most of its existence (despite the fact that they also claim, as shown in *Princess Wencheng*, that China brought culture and civility to Tibet during the reign of the Dharma kings). Unsurprisingly then, *Lhamo* proves to be yet another avenue for exercising this claim.

At the same time, the exiled Tibetans tend to overly romanticize their own background as well, often endorsing the fallacy of Tibet as a kind of Shangri-la. Powers believes both sides of the debate present overly simplistic views of pre-Chinese, Tibetan society. He believes the situation was far more complicated than what even the median of the two represents. However, he does not hypothesize anything more substantive on the issue (Powers 126-130). The complexities that Powers identifies in the representation of history significantly problematize the entire enterprise of understanding “tradition” as it is currently understood in contemporary Tibetan exile. The purpose for incorporating Powers’ arguments here is just to point out that the layers surrounding this issue are as intricate as they are vast.

One may wonder if TIPA is even aware of what seems to be its imprecise—or perhaps just overly-simplified— notion of “tradition” as anything related to Tibet prior to 1959. After all, there is a new generation of exiled Tibetans who have never even been to Tibet. Certainly it is worth questioning whether this lack of first hand experience has pushed TIPA and TIPA’s performers, for instance, towards a kind of blind, more

desperate adherence to the idea of “tradition” as has already been proposed. From the way TIPA’s brochure and website refers to itself as a kind of cultural preserver, such a conclusion would hardly seem illegitimate. However, certain artistic evolutions have—and continue—to take place at TIPA, although the conservatism applied to such change reflects a strong, and almost submissive, loyalty to what TIPA considers “tradition.”

LHAMO AND CHANGE: SLOWLY, SLOWLY

The concept of change in Tibetan Opera is undoubtedly affected by the profoundly insular nature of historical Tibet. The harsh climate of the Tibetan plateau in large part dictated the lack of intercultural, artistic exchange for most of Tibet’s past. However, Tibet’s socio-political introversion has led to the following conundrum: On the one hand, *Lhamo* is rich and deeply developed performing art, which owes a great deal to the fact that it has been the primary high art for so long. On the other hand, without any significant amount of artistic dialogue with other societies, Tibetans are extremely wary of change—as if it prescribes only loss while excluding any potential for gain. Even if trepidation towards artistic growth—particularly in *Lhamo*—exists more staunchly in rhetoric than in practice, Tibet’s frangible, exiled status has certainly problematized the issue.

The safest, and most unabashedly pursued route of change follows that of dramatic technique. Gen Samten-la, one of the most learned *Lhamo* teachers in exile, discusses ways in which he has begun working with his students to enhance their acting skills. He emphasizes the importance of listening to the words of the *namthars*, saying a

performance should convey understanding and connection to the lyrics in order to maximally engage the audience members.⁶ Gen Samten-la explains that historically, actors would just stand and sing. They wouldn't make any gestures at all. But now, he says, "we tell our students to present!" (Gen Samten-la, Interview 2) Though students learn predominately through imitation, they are eventually encouraged to add their own personal flare to performance, giving them the mark of true professionalism.

Gen Samten-la notes that TIPA has pioneered these efforts in exile. For instance, though there are smaller *Lhamo* troupes residing in India that gather with TIPA during the annual *Shoton* festival in McCleod Ganj, they remain fixed in the more anachronistic style of standing still and singing expressionlessly. Gen Samten-la adds that the qualities of *Lhamo* open to development (or modernization, as it might also be deemed), include body language, gestures, facial expressions, and timing. Timing in love relationships, he notes, is of particular importance. However, he explicitly cautions against adjusting the style of singing, the style of music, the storylines, the costumes, the masks, or the lyrics (Gen Samten-la, Interview 2). These areas of preservation probably correspond to what Gen Samten-la would place in the realm of "tradition" as well. After all, Gen Samten-la's heedfulness may have a reactionary base, following in the example of his institution; when he first mentioned PRC's propagandist reworking of *Ngansa Woebum*, he recalled being appalled by other changes he has witnessed by the Chinese as well. For instance,

⁶ Interestingly enough, this pedagogical approach is extremely consistent with the Stanislavsky method of acting that I have encountered in my own theatrical training!

in a Chinese influenced *Lhamo* that Gen Samten-la saw once, there were fifty *ngongpas* instead of seven!

Based on Gen Samten-la's explanations, it seems as if adaptation and advancement in the art of *Lhamo* is deemed acceptable by Tibetans as long as it is oriented around a style that originated in pre-1959 Tibet. In other words, change is permitted as long as it does not encroach upon the accepted terms of "tradition." Accordingly, Gen Samten-la seems to view his instruction in acting as a method for enhancement, not metamorphosis.

So far, Jamyang Norbu has proven to be the most liberal and influential in testing the limits of TIPA's sense of "tradition." Though he has not been on faculty for many years now, when in office, Norbu wrote the story and lyrics to a new opera for TIPA entitled *Chaksam* (The Iron Bridge). The opera is about the founding of *Lhamo* by Thangtong Gyalpo. However, though Norbu introduced new words, he used melodies from pre-existing operas for his score. (Ahmed, 169) Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, TIPA wrote—but not composed—another opera about the infamous yogi adept, Milarepa (Ahmed, 169). In other words, TIPA seems to legitimize development that conforms to the qualities of the *Lhamo* standard that TIPA itself played a role in defining.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Thus, TIPA's position on itself, as an institution dedicated to "preserving traditional Tibetan performing arts" (TIPA brochure) necessarily includes some ambiguities and inconsistencies. Perhaps the problem with TIPA calling *Lhamo* "traditional" is that it

labels something static that is, in fact, simply not so. Dibyesh Anand eloquently states the point:

The entire project of preserving a culture and civilization is theoretically problematic since it considers culture as something that can be identified, mapped, practiced and preserved. Such a conceptualization 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.” (Ahmed, 171, quoting Anand, 278).

The fact is, “traditional” is a fundamentally a subjective term that is *misused* objectively. It relies on a historical definition, one which due to the confounding political prejudices that are most often involved in Tibetan history, one that is still somewhat illusive in ascertaining. The extent to which politics are inextricably intertwined with the arts would make conjecturing what *Lhamo* would look like untouched by political propaganda practically academically irresponsible. However, it is fair to say that *Lhamo* has an immensely rich heritage that is integral to a community fighting to buoy itself above the turbulent waves of economic disparity and international apathy. Even as the demarcations of authenticity become more and more ill-defined, propagandist measures notwithstanding, *Lhamo* is still a kind of literacy that deserves to be honored, shared, and learned.

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