

# The Forgotten Dead: Representations of the Past in the Tibetan Refugee Community in India

Lydia Aran

**Abstract:** The Jewish Holocaust, which has become the epitome of the modern-age genocide, has been widely commemorated, mainly through memorials to its victims, and has become the foundational experience in defining the identity of the Jewish people. Recent work on aspects of cultural genocide in Tibet reinforced my impression<sup>1</sup> that the way the Tibetans relate to their national catastrophe and weave it into their memory of the past and their vision of the future is very different from the response of the Jews or the Armenians to their national tragedies. This paper sums up the findings of a preliminary investigation into the ways the Tibetans in diaspora reconstruct their recent past and an attempt to explain them. I am focusing above all on the Dalai Lama, undoubtedly the main agent in shaping the Tibetan representations of the past and their deployment in the reconstruction of his people's shattered identity and their struggle for survival. While strategic and instrumental considerations play an important part in the Dalai Lama's actions and rhetoric, I hope to have shown that traditional cultural codes have had a crucial influence on his choice of what and how to remember, what to forget and how to deploy selected representations in interaction with his multiple audiences in what he sees as the best interests of the Tibetan people.

## I

Tibet is a huge, landlocked, sparsely populated country in Central Asia, bordered by massive mountain ranges containing the world's highest peaks<sup>2</sup>. The northern part of the country is arid and almost uninhabitable except by nomads. The central and south Tibet contain wide and fertile valleys, which have been the home of Tibetan civilization for over a thousand years. Due to its remoteness, physical inaccessibility, dramatic landscapes and unique religious civilization, Tibet has for long stimulated Western imagination and even now its image often reflects a mythologized and romanticized rather than a realistic version of its society and culture (Bishop, 1989 and 1993; Lopez, 1998; Schell, 2000; Dodin and Rather, 2001). From the seventh to the mid-ninth century Tibet was a powerful kingdom during which time Buddhism was brought from India, Indian script was adapted to the Tibetan language, and the first monastery in Tibet was founded by Indian masters, laying foundations of the unique Tibetan Buddhist civilization. Since mid-seventeenth century, Tibet has been ruled by a succession of Dalai Lamas<sup>3</sup>, religious-political leaders, inheriting the office by reincarnation, a line of which the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, now in exile in India, is the latest link. The traditional Tibetan regime is often described as theocracy, but, in contrast to other theocracies in which the ruling clergy competes for power with other sectors, in traditional Tibet, politics and religion were indivisible in principle and their unity was seen as part of the Tibetan national identity. Following its submission to the Mongols in thirteenth century, Tibet's status vis-a-vis China has varied at different times and in any case cannot be unambiguously defined in terms of modern political concepts. Though at times de-facto independent, for most of the time Tibet was linked to China by formal tributary relations, characterized by symbolic and ceremonial rather than political subordination<sup>4</sup>. It was only in the eighteenth century, when rivalry with England and Russia increased Tibet's strategic importance to China, that it tightened its control of Tibet, annexing some of its eastern provinces, supervising its foreign relations and interfering in its domestic affairs, including the appointment of the Dalai Lama<sup>5</sup>. There is no doubt, however, that whatever its legal status vis-a-vis China, Tibet has always had its

own territory, language, a unique system of government, and its own church, which for centuries exerted influence on the beliefs of its neighbors, including China. Tibet has its own unique civilization, whose roots are derived from India, one of whose religions, the Buddhism, it adopted and preserved in a creative blend with indigenous beliefs and customs. Racially and ethnically Tibetans are of non-Chinese (i.e. non-Han) stock, and they differ from the Chinese in looks, customs, temperament, dress, food and way of life. Tibetan culture, including a rich literature, arts and architecture, has been until recently only superficially affected by China.

With the fall of China's imperial regime in 1911, Tibet became de-facto independent for forty years. In 1950, following the Communist victory and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded ("liberated" in Chinese terms) Tibet, and in 1951 the Dalai Lama and his government signed away Tibet's independence in exchange for the Chinese formal undertaking to preserve its religion and traditional government. For a few years the Chinese honored the agreement and the Tibetan elites, including the Dalai Lama, cooperated with them. However, revolts which broke out in East Tibet reached Lhasa in 1959, where a popular uprising ended with the Dalai Lama's flight to India and replacement of the old regime by a military provincial government, directed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1965 the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) has been set up on the territory formerly under direct rule by the Dalai Lama's government.

Tibet is not just a country, it is a civilization. Unlike modern civilizations, in which religion is only one component of culture, Tibetan Buddhism prescribes conduct and provides meaning in every area, including politics. It is a powerful religious-cultural-ideological system that provides not only a set of beliefs and practices but, above all, a comprehensive vision of life that orders and makes sense of experience. The grass-root Tibetan resistance to Chinese occupation had less to do with the question of legal or political independence than with the threat to the basic codes, which have regulated their lives for centuries. Armed with their commitment to their religion and culture, which, among other things, made them immune to material inducements, the Tibetans have resolutely resisted the Chinese efforts to make them into atheist communist Chinese - and paid the price.

The 1950 invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet caused a massive loss of life, imprisonment, torture and deportation of the Tibetan people, as well as almost total destruction of the infrastructure of the Tibetan religious and cultural life. During the peak years of the Cultural Revolution, (1966-76), 90-95 percent of the Tibetan cultural heritage was destroyed and hundreds of thousands of monks, nuns and laymen murdered, tortured, humiliated and driven to suicide by Red Guard gangs. According to the Dalai Lama's Government estimate, **1,207,487** men, women and children, i.e. about 20 percent of Tibetan population worldwide<sup>6</sup>, lost their lives as a direct result of the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet. 173,138 are reported to have died in prisons and labor camps; 156,758 were executed; 343,151 died of starvation during the two famines of 1959-62 and 1968-72; 92,731 died as a result of torture; 91,002 committed suicide; and 432,707 were killed in battle. These figures, calculated on the basis of testimonies by survivors, cannot be independently verified and are contested by the Chinese authorities. Yet there can be no doubt that at least hundreds of thousands Tibetans died by execution, man-made famine, torture, imprisonment and forced labor under lethal conditions, and that the Tibetan people have been exposed for decades to massive and egregious suffering at the hands of the Chinese.

I have maintained elsewhere (Aran, in press) that the Tibetan case cannot be unambiguously classified as genocide because the Chinese policies and actions in Tibet, brutal and murderous as they were, were not motivated by the intention to physically exterminate the Tibetan people. (Katz, 1994, Ch.4; Charny, 1999, pp.5-6). Atrocities inflicted on them were rather a spin-off of a “cultural genocide” (Katz, 1994, Ch.4), a coercive strategy intended to obliterate the Tibetan distinctive religious-cultural identity, with the aim to integrate Tibet within the unitary Chinese state. In other words, the massive loss of life and the suffering of the Tibetans at the hands of the Chinese were the result of measures taken to break the Tibetan resistance to have their ancient civilization erased and replaced by new and alien one<sup>7</sup>. However, should a forced annihilation of a nation’s identity, without an intention to physically destroy the group, be defined as genocide, then the Tibetan case would qualify for that definition.

## II

How do the Tibetans in diaspora deal with the materials of their tragedy? How do they relate to their losses and present them to the world? How do they reconstruct them in their memory, weave them into their historic narrative and use them in reformulating their cultural identity? Which components of the past do they stress, mythologize or forget and why? And what do they do about commemorating their dead, their lost freedom, the shattered landscape of their spiritual and ritual life?.

In order to find at least partial answers to these questions, I have examined books, statements, articles, interviews and public addresses by the Dalai Lama, available in English (the Dalai Lama, 1962; 1982; 1990; 1995; Tenzin Gyatso (the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama) 1995; Shiromany, 1996); scholarly and investigative reports and analyses of various aspects of life in the Tibetan Diaspora, including an anthropological study of education in the Tibetan refugee community in India ( Stoddard, 1985 and 1994; Novak, 1984; Strom, 1994 and 1997; Huber, 1997; Kliegler, 1997); a sample of Tibetan refugee community English-language press<sup>8</sup>; a small sample of post-1959 Tibetan literature outside Tibet, and a few informal interviews. In the material examined, I found an overwhelming stress on cultural-religious, rather than human losses; few direct or explicit references to murder, torture and inhuman treatment of innocent people, and an unemotional and subdued tone characterizing these rare references. I found the motif of death and suffering absent from the repertoire of foundational experiences deployed in the reconstruction of the shattered Tibetan identity; and that the self-image of “the new Tibetan”, promoted by the Dalai Lama and the educational system in the Tibetan refugee community, is that of a custodian of the Tibetan cultural identity, not a carrier of the memory of its destruction; almost no memorials or monuments to the dead; few commemorative events and only laconic and unemotional references to the dead on the agenda of those events. I found no mention of vengeance, signs of hate or desire to punish the Chinese in any of Dalai Lama’s official statements, addresses, interviews and books. Research, translation and publication institutions in the refugee community produce mainly religious texts and books devoted to dissemination of Buddhism in the West, but only few texts documenting the massive loss of life and narrating the human tragedy suffered by the Tibetan people under invasion and occupation; few translations into Tibetan of world literature on science, art or general knowledge (much less than what is produced inside Tibet), and no critical historiography (Stoddard, 1994; Huber, 1997). I also found little mention of commemorative events, memorial assemblies, and – until 1998 – monuments to the dead<sup>9</sup>. Novak’s study of education in the Tibetan refugee community in India does not mention a single item devoted to the memory of those who

perished under occupation in educational programs on any level. The new textbooks (an innovation in the Tibetan educational system) have been carefully designed to promote pan-Tibetan unity, to preserve the memory of the Tibetan landscape, wildlife, astrological animals and various traditional concepts, but do not mention the dead. Extra-curricular activities include religion, culture, history, prayers, sports and celebration of Buddhist holy days, imbued with political awareness, students' newspaper, crafts, compulsory garden, kitchen and cleaning chores, but no memory of the dead. Children's writing shows intense nationalism, faith in Dalai Lama's leadership, in Buddhism and the distinctiveness of the Tibetan culture, as well as preoccupation with the question of identity, but their parents and grandparents who perished a generation earlier have no place in it. This holds also for the small sample of post-1959 Tibetan literature, published outside TAR, that I could examine.

I am focusing on the Dalai Lama because, though not everybody shares his views, his voice is unquestionably the most authoritative among all Tibetan refugees. The Dalai Lama's exalted status among his people rests not on the merits of his performance, which is sometimes severely criticized (though never directly), but on his being the symbol of their identity, especially their special relationship with the compassionate aspect of buddhahood (Chenrezig<sup>10</sup>), which the Dalai Lama not just represents, but of which he is a living manifestation. Even though, during the forty years of exposure to and interaction with the West, he came to formulate his thinking in terms of contemporary Western concerns, which had not been part of the Tibetan discourse in the past, such as independence, nationalism, human rights, ecology and democracy, he still remains not only what anthropologists call the "summarizing symbol" (Ortner, 1973) of "tibetanness", but the very embodiment of the Tibetan national and cultural identity in the eyes of most of his compatriots and the rest of the world. Indeed, manifestations of cultural borrowing in Dalai Lama's presentation of Buddhism to the Western world, in his rhetoric as a statesman, his experimentation with education, and the new museum, opened in Dharamsala in 1998 on his initiative, should be seen as an authentic expression of today's Tibetan Diaspora culture, its complexity, its problems, ambiguities and dilemmas. Flanked on one side by what his critics call "reverse orientalism", i.e. excessive accommodation of the Tibetans' own image of their history and their culture to the expectations of their Western sympathizers and supporters, and by unbending traditionalism on the other side, the Dalai Lama's rhetoric, his school system and the new museum, represent the very arena on which the traditional Tibetan and the modern Western cultures meet and negotiate the exchange of their cultural resources in the process of constructing their collective memory and their new identity. The Dalai Lama is undoubtedly the most influential actor on this arena, the leading agent in shaping the Tibetan representations of their past and their deployment in what he sees as the best interests of the Tibetan nation<sup>11</sup>.

Most of the Dalai Lama's books, articles, speeches and interviews deal, above all, with elucidation of various aspects of Buddhism, and with discussion of religious, spiritual and other matters of universal concern, such as ecology, human relations, universal human rights, relations between religions and between religion and science and similar subjects. It seems that, unlike foreign writers on modern Tibet, who tend to underscore the issue of human suffering inflicted on the Tibetan people by the occupying power, the Dalai Lama seems to de-emphasize it<sup>12</sup>, concentrating on an effort to preserve the traditional timeless cultural legacy, through cultivation of such traditional institutions as monasticism. On the international scene, he works toward this end by promoting Buddhism (albeit in its modernized, science-compatible version) as part of the universal cultural discourse, and having the mythologized version of the Tibetan culture accepted as a universal asset and precious gift to the endangered Western spirituality. He complements this effort by

projecting current Western concerns, such as environmentalism, human rights and democracy, as constitutive of the Tibetan identity (Lopez, 1994; Huber,1997).

In a collection of over forty of Dalai Lama's speeches, interviews and articles (Shiromany, 1996), I found four references to the death toll of the Tibetans. In an article in New York Times in 1985, he says:

“It is now over thirty years since Communist China forcefully occupied Tibet. In this period, our religion and culture has been destroyed and the people of Tibet have suffered tremendous physical and economic deprivation. But the greatest loss of all has been the loss of our people's freedom... To date, from information gathered over decades of research, it is estimated that some 6,254 monasteries have been destroyed in Tibet. *In addition* (emphasis L.A.), at least 1.2 million Tibetans have died as a direct result of the brutal occupation of our country by the Chinese (Shiromany, 1996, p.72) .

This is followed by a long description of the material exploitation of the country and its colonization by Chinese settlers. Another reference to the loss of life under the occupation is in an interview in Switzerland, by The Guardian Weekly, 1985. In answer to a question about reported relaxation of Chinese policies in Tibet, the Dalai Lama says:

“In Tibet itself, in the interior of the country, famine no longer exists and this is good news. During the two previous decades a good many people died of starvation or ill-treatment, victims of executions and extremely painful living conditions. Corroborative reports show that 1.2 million of Tibet's 6 million population have disappeared. Compared with that period, things are certainly better today” (Shiromany, 1996, p.80)

In nine addresses on the occasion of the anniversary of the 1959 Lhasa Uprising, as well as in his statements to the press on the occasion of his birthdays<sup>13</sup>, the Dalai Lama mentions the dead by an almost standard laconic formula, viz., “Finally, I wish to pay homage to the brave men and women of Tibet, who have died for the cause of our freedom. I pray also for our compatriots who are enduring mental and physical suffering in Chinese prisons” (Shiromany, 1996,p.355; H.H.the Dalai Lama, 1955, pp. 3,54,84,168,180,204,243)

In yet another press release on the occasion of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Dalai Lama refers to the past in the following sentence:

“In recent times, unspeakable misfortune has overtaken my country, Tibet, because of which more than one hundred thousand Tibetans including myself have had to flee our homeland and live in exile”(Shiromany,1996,p.365)

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech the Dalai Lama refers to the past as follows: “The suffering of our people in the past forty years of occupation is well documented” (H.H.the Dalai Lama,1995,p.66). In his ten-page long Nobel Prize lecture at Oslo University in December 1989, the Dalai Lama makes the following laconic references to the death toll in Tibet:

“The suffering of our people in the past forty years of occupation is well documented” (the Dalai Lama,1995, p.66) “More than one sixth of Tibet's

population of six million died as a direct result of the Chinese invasion and occupation” (the Dalai Lama, 1995, p.77)

In his long Nobel Evening Address, the Dalai Lama speaks of compassion, violence, anger, bees and smiles, but does not mention at all the loss of life under occupation. He announces his decision to divide the Nobel Prize money between the following causes: those facing starvation in various parts of the world; leprosy programs in India; world peace projects; and the establishment of a Tibetan Foundation for Universal Responsibility, devoted to the promotion of the cause of communication between religion and science, human rights, democratic freedoms, non-violence and conservation of “Mother Earth”. Conspicuously absent are any commemorative projects, memorials, or research projects on contemporary Tibetan history. There is no sign of a reflexive thought on the meaning of the tragedy, its critical moral evaluation, or a lesson to be learned from it. Even allowing for the festive and in principle non-political nature of the occasion, his reticence with regard to the loss of life and suffering of his people is striking<sup>14</sup>.

The memory of the dead is not a part of the Dalai Lama’s presentation of the past.

But memory – though part of history – has its own history too. The trajectory of the Tibetan memory of their martyrdom in Dalai Lama’s writings shows a rather clear pattern. In his first book, *My Land and My People*, published in 1962<sup>15</sup>, the Dalai Lama makes a much more extensive and expressive reference to the loss of life and the martyrdom of his people than at any time after that. In this book he cites the findings of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), who investigated the events by interrogating Tibetan refugees and who, in the Dalai Lama’s own words, “brought to light more horrors than even I had heard of”. According to the ICJ report,

“Tens of thousands of people have been killed, not only in military actions, but individually and deliberately. They have been killed without trial, on suspicion of opposing communism, of hoarding money, or simply because of their position, or for no reason at all. But mainly and fundamentally, they were killed because they would not renounce their religion. They have not only been shot but beaten to death, crucified, burned alive, drowned, vivisected, starved, strangled, hanged, scalded, buried alive, disemboweled and beheaded. The killings have been done in public. The victims’ fellow villagers and friends and neighbors have been made to watch them, and eye witnesses described them to the commission. Men and women have been slowly killed while their own families were forced to watch, and small children have even been forced to shoot their parents. Lamas have been especially prosecuted. The Chinese tried to humiliate them, especially the elderly and most respected, before they tortured them, by harnessing them to ploughs, riding them like horses, whipping and beating them, and other methods too evil to mention. And while they were slowly putting them to death, they taunted them with their religion, calling on them to perform miracles to save themselves from pain and death. (International Committee of Jurists, 1959 and 1960).

The report goes on describing in detail the brutal killings, torture, imprisonment, deportation and humiliation of monks and peasants and the destruction of monasteries and homes, accusing the Chinese of genocide, i.e. intention to destroy in whole or in part a national, religious, or ethnic group as such, in this case, the Buddhists of Tibet. (International Committee of Jurist Report, 1959 & 1960).<sup>16</sup>

**Comment [7.11]:** find Eli Wiesel or Peres, Rabin & Arafat speeches

This was, to the best of my knowledge, the last (and only) time that the Dalai Lama refers at length, in detail and in a not-entirely-detached tone, to the Chinese atrocities in Tibet. But note: he is quoting a report by an international commission. The discrepancy between the terms and the tone of the commission's and the Dalai Lama's own articulation of the Tibetan tragedy is striking and intriguing.

### III

It was the great French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, who pointed out that memory, even individual memory, is socially determined. Since the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 1992), more than half a century ago, it has become a truism that a group's memory of its past is not a replica of past events, but is, at any given time, a product of a social process of reconstruction, affected by the dominant ideas of the time and the group's present needs. Each group member contributes to it, though the weight of different contributions is not equal. Some individuals and social groups have a greater impact than others on the selection of issues to be remembered and those to be put away, and on the construction of meaning of the events selected or those doomed to oblivion, as well as on their role in the present.

Much has been written about manipulation of collective memory by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, and on the role of the state versus groups in civic societies in this context (Winter & Sivan, eds., 1999). But the Tibetan refugee community in India is neither a state nor a civic society, or a group within it. Its regime is neither totalitarian nor truly democratic<sup>17</sup>. It exists as a "deterritorialized" (Appadurai, 1981), entity, a guest on the Indian soil, an autonomous, self-governing community<sup>18</sup>, oriented neither toward ultimate absorption in its host society, nor setting itself up as a distinctive minority within it, but devoted entirely to the preservation of its own cultural uniqueness. It is caught in endless internal contradictions and dilemmas. For instance, its mission as a custodian of an ancient civilization under threat of extinction calls for measures which clash with the task of maintaining a viable community and its effectiveness as the spokesman for the occupied Tibet. The image of its leadership as fit to replace the Chinese administration of Tibet demands cultivation of democratic institutions, whereas the effective authority of the present leader rests entirely on his traditional legitimacy as the embodiment of an aspect of the Buddha. Though Tibetans are in some ways unique, many of their problems, created by uprooting, national trauma and the need for reconstruction of a damaged identity, are shared by other refugee and expatriate groups in today's world.

In the following I shall address two questions posed by our findings, namely, why did the destruction of culture rather than loss of life become the major issue in the Tibetan discourse on their recent tragedy? And what explains the Dalai Lama's reticence to dwell on matters of history in general and memory of the dead in particular?

The most obvious reason to prioritize the issue of the preservation of the cultural legacy, above all religion, is that the Dalai Lama correctly sees the imminent threat to the survival of the Tibetan nation not in physical extermination but in the loss of its national identity, which has always been rooted primarily in its religious and cultural rather than political distinctiveness. He also assumes that religion and culture of Tibet could still be saved by (a) replicating in the Diaspora the traditional cultural infrastructure, above all, monasteries (whose names, architecture and ambiance recreate the sacred geography of Tibet); (b) by achieving a world-wide recognition of Tibetan Buddhist culture as a universal asset.

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetans have always been interested primarily in their religion and culture rather than their political status. I have already noted that after the invasion, there was almost no resistance to the Chinese rule so long as the Tibetans were free to practice their religion and continue their traditional way of life, and the authority of the Dalai Lama was not interfered with. Moreover, the emphasis on culture and religion has been a strategic choice by the Dalai Lama in order to avoid contentious political issues in his interaction with his three main audiences: the Chinese, the West and his own community. It is my contention that underlying the Dalai Lama's choices in reconstructing his people's past and its strategic deployment were both political interests and cultural conditioning.

Reconstruction of the past is invariably replete with dilemmas and the Tibetan case is no exception. "Difficult past" is a term coined by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991, p. 376) in the context of the Americans' dilemma of reconciling their loving memory of the killed with their aversion to the memory of the Viet Nam war itself, or the Israelis facing a similar dilemma when remembering the Lebanon war of 1982. The concept is useful also in other cases, such as Germany, which is under pressure to remember its victims during World War II, but hates to face its Nazi past, or the Japanese remembering their losses and their heroes but embarrassed by the memory of the inhumanity of their invasion of China and elsewhere (Buruma, 1994; Olick & Levy, 1997; Schwartz, 1991; Winter & Sivan, 1999). But it is not only perpetrators who have a difficult past. Victims too may have to exercise caution when choosing options in assimilating past events. In his The Texture of Memory (1993), James Young shows how different Jewish communities made different choices in remembering the nature of their pre-Shoah Jewish past. There is much in his own and his country's past the Dalai Lama is likely to consider difficult and would be glad to forget<sup>19</sup>. Like in other cases, in the Tibetan case there is also a "usable past" (Roskies, 1998), which he and other memory weavers would like to make the best of<sup>20</sup>.

Comment [7.82]:

Like all his decisions, the choice between different versions of the past requires of the Dalai Lama to keep in mind at least three target audiences, each with its own highly conditioned expectations. The Chinese, on the one hand an enemy, responsible for the terrible suffering of the Tibetan people and their near extinction as a distinct national and cultural group, but on the other hand, a people whom he refuses to hate<sup>21</sup>, and with whom he will ultimately have to negotiate a settlement. After all, compromise and mutual accommodation have been the name of the game of Sino-Tibetan politics for centuries, and the Dalai Lama knows that it is above all the Chinese with whom the Tibetans will have to work out their future. Then, there is the Western world. The Dalai Lama has had no success in changing the position of governments on the question of Tibet's status vis-a-vis China. However, his "presentation of self" to borrow Goffman's famous phrase, has been crucial in mobilizing popular support in the liberal West. His claim to spiritual leadership and moral authority outside the Buddhist world rests, above all, on his commitment to universality, inherent in his being a representative of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, which makes Buddhism relevant to the whole world through its emphasis on compassion for all and the aspiration to save all human beings. Beyond this, a dose of historic amnesia, and a degree of collusion with his Western admirers and disciples in cultivating the mainly West-created Shangri-La myth and the image of Tibetan wisdom as a panacea for contemporary Western ills, have proven an effective strategy in enlisting popular interest and support. Finally, there is the refugee community itself, divided on many issues, of which events of the recent past are among the most controversial<sup>22</sup>. Survey of publications, including those by circles critical of Dalai Lama's policies, shows that there is a lot of political bickering and factional rivalry there, but the Tibetan catastrophe and the massive loss of life do not seem to have set in motion a significant process of reflexive reevaluation or reinterpretation of the painful events of the recent history. There seems to be little soul-searching, discussion of lessons to be learned or

conclusions to be drawn from the recent tragedy. None of such questions seem to be a part of the Tibetan public discourse (Strom, 1997).

The Dalai Lama's choice of religion and culture rather than politics and history as the materials for the construction of his people's collective memory serves, among other, as a strategic option, enabling him to deal with these "difficult" and "usable" pasts, as well as the rather difficult present, while avoiding the divisive and stressing the consensual issues. The manipulative use of the past in structuring their collective memory is especially evident in the Tibetan exiles' choice of events to commemorate. Admittedly, the choice has not been easy. Commemorating defeats is difficult in any case, especially if, unlike the Jews, the victims of the catastrophe prefer not to commemorate it by grieving for their dead<sup>23</sup>. But there is yet another reason that made the choice difficult. I have suggested elsewhere (Aran, in press) that one of the reasons for world's indifference to the suffering of the Tibetan people may have been - ironically - its long duration. The murderous events there had been going on for over two decades (1956-1978), with religious persecution and flagrant violation of human rights continuing, with impunity, to this day. Unlike other cases of mass murder, the massive loss of life and almost total destruction of the cultural infrastructure of Tibet has lacked a climax necessary to reduce it to a specific "event" separate from the texture of ordinary life. Its fuzzy temporal and spatial contours defy attempt to contain it "within a frame". It lacks a peak event, a specific date or name of the "killing fields" like Auschwitz, Ponary, the Warsaw ghetto or Babi Yaar, to hang on to as a metonym for what had been happening there for a couple of decades. All this not only decreased the power of the Tibetan tragedy to command attention and mobilize support, but it also posed a problem for the Tibetans' own choice of the event to commemorate. They ultimately chose two: the anniversary of the Lhasa uprising in 1959, and the Dalai Lama's birthday (Novak, 1984, p.151). But note: the first is celebrated not by a reenactment of the events of the uprising, the drama of the Dalai Lama's escape from his besieged summer residence, or the tragic aftermath of these. It is celebrated by a reenactment of the two "positive" episodes salvaged from the 1959 catastrophe: (a) the formal proclamation by the Dalai Lama of a provisional Tibetan government on an overnight stop on his flight to India, and (b) his arrival in India on March 31, 1959. In other words: events signifying the beginning of the new era. The narrative has been purged of the events between 1950 and 1959. It may be significant in this context, that in the refugees' parlance, "the tragedy" invariably refers not to the terrible suffering of their own and their fathers' generation, decimated by execution, starvation and torture, but to the fate of the refugees themselves (Novak, 1984, p.11 n.27). The other occasion celebrated throughout the Tibetan communities, is the Dalai Lama's birthday, not as a biographical detail of a leader's life, but as an *illud-tempus*, a homage to the holder of sacred power, the repository of ultimate values, and the "summarizing symbol" of "tibetanness" (Novak, 1984, pp.22-36).

## IV

I have discussed several considerations affecting the Dalai Lama's choice of what to remember, what to commemorate and what to forget. They were strategic choices made

with a view to avoid burning bridges leading to a possible settlement with China, to maintain the good will and support of the international community<sup>24</sup>, and to promote unity within the Tibetan community. However Dalai Lama's choices are not only, as the constructionists would have it (Mead 1964;) a matter of interests and the strategic needs of the present. The impact of the present on remembering the past is not unlimited (Schwartz, 1991). The social construction of a collective memory is part of a political-cultural process, in which past and present interact and, as Olick and Levi (1997) phrased it, "are mutually constitutive". But the past is there not only as a passive bunch of events to be manipulated by "history agents" according to their and the society's present moods and needs. The past imposes itself on the present also through the power of tradition. The Tibetan case illustrates the power of traditional codes to mould attitudes and to affect representations of the past.

The power of cultural codes (or "the mythical"), has been pointed out by Edward Shils already in 1981. It is very much in evidence in the collective memory construction by the Tibetan diaspora leaders, even though the impact of these codes on their motivation may not be necessarily direct.

To understand how cultural tradition interacts with the present in the Tibetan refugee leadership's perception of their people's recent history, we have to make a brief excursus into the cultural legacy which has nurtured their values and attitudes. The first thing it will teach us is that the Dalai Lama prefers teaching compassion and talking about future generations rather than delve into history and remember the dead, above all, simply because he is a Tibetan and to do so is entirely within the Tibetan cultural tradition. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetans have always perceived themselves as a civilization rather than a political entity in a modern sense of the term. I have already noted that after the invasion, there was almost no resistance to the Chinese rule so long as the Tibetans were free to practice their religion and continue their traditional way of life, and the authority of the Dalai Lama was not interfered with. Even later, resistance to Chinese occupation had less to do with the question of Tibet's legal or political status than with the threat to the basic codes which have regulated their lives for centuries. These codes were part of a very powerful religious system which provides not only a set of beliefs and practices but also a comprehensive vision of life that orders experience and prescribes conduct, including politics. Moreover, we may be reminded that writing history is not something to be taken for granted. Even the Jews, for whom remembering the past is a religious duty, have abandoned history writing after exile and thus Jewish historiography disappeared for centuries, replaced by the study of the sacred text of the Torah (Yerushalmi, 1989). There was practically no Indian historiography until the colonial time. Like the exilic Jews, the Indians were concerned with the eternal – not the passing (Momigliano, 1990 and 1994). Tibet inherited the Indian tradition, including Buddhism. Traditional Tibetan history has consisted of hagiography and a record of Buddhist events. It ignored the usual materials of history, such as conquests, defeats, invasions and victories, unless significant in the context of Buddhism. It is only recently, under the occupation, that Tibetans became interested in secular history. Characteristically, one of the pioneers of secular Tibetan historiography, the Amdowan monk-historian, Gendun Choepel, realized the vital necessity of secular history not for its own sake but to boost Tibetan nationalism, destroyed, according to him, by Buddhism (Stoddard, 1985).

I propose that the Dalai Lama's training as a Tibetan-Buddhist monk conditions the style of his rhetoric and his presentation of self and his country, and underlies even his instrumental and strategic policy decisions. Thus, for instance, his conciliatory tone in referring to the Chinese and his restraint in referring to their crimes against the Tibetan people expresses not

only his political decision to keep the negotiation venue open, but also reflects his belief in the futility of anger and his life-long training in converting hostility into kindness, as well as a hope born of the Buddhist belief in the human potential for change. Similarly, the Dalai Lama's puzzling omission of Tibetan causes from his humanitarian-causes-agenda to be supported by the Nobel Prize money, may be seen not only as a conscious effort to project himself as a universal spiritual leader, but also as a reflection of his genuine conviction that - as the embodiment of universal compassion – he must not privilege Tibetan suffering at the expense of others<sup>25</sup>.

The main cultural variables at the base of the Dalai Lama's decisions on what to include or omit in the presentation of his people's past and in restructuring their identity are the Buddhist conceptions of time, of memory, and of the relative and fleeting nature of the phenomenal life. In contrast to the Jewish tradition, in which remembrance of the past is a deeply ingrained ritualized imperative, time is linear and events are seen as unrepeatable and irreversible (Yerushalmi, 1989, pp.40-42)<sup>26</sup>, the Indian-Buddhist conception of time is basically cyclical rather than linear, which robs events and lives of their uniqueness and is consequently concerned less with the record of events than with exemplary models and recurrent paradigmatic episodes. In a cosmic perspective, everything repeats itself and the mundane linear time is not a feature of reality but a construction of human mind, in which everything is provisional and relative (Balshev, 1993; Pande, 1993; Majumdar, 1961). This conception of time not only determines the individual's attitude to life, but it also produces a traditional view of its nature and mode of operation. Above all, it devalues preoccupation with history and works against investing resources in remembrance and commemoration of past events.

I would not like to be misunderstood. Buddhists mourn and remember their dead just as anybody else. Relatives, friends and neighbors of the people who perished under occupation in Tibet responded positively to the invitation to come to the new museum in Dharamsala and inscribe their names on a memorial. Hundreds of thousands names have already been inscribed<sup>27</sup>. But it was not their initiative. The Tibetan cultural codes do not require such a project.

In her comparison of the Jewish response to the Holocaust with the Chinese response to their terrible losses in the Cultural Revolution, Sheng-Mei Ma (1987) suggests that whereas the Jews tend to see their Holocaust in metaphysical terms, as an extra-historical event, this attitude seems to the Chinese foreign and inexplicable. For them, the Cultural Revolution is just one of the many violent waves in the ceaseless tides of Chinese civilization and Mao just one of the historical villains who people China's long history. I'm not sure to what extent this observation is relevant to the Tibetan attitude to their history, but if so, it might shed additional light on the Tibetan Refugee Community tendency toward restraint in their response to their tragedy.

## V

The Tibetans often refer to the survival of the Jewish nation after 2000 years of dispersal, due to the Jews' stubborn adherence to their religious-cultural tradition, as a source of encouragement to them. It might be instructive therefore to see the Tibetan case with reference not only to the Jewish response to the Holocaust, but also to their response to yet another of their many catastrophes: the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second

Temple in the first century CE<sup>28</sup>. Following that disaster, the exiled Jews have given up their temple with its priests, its rituals and animal sacrifices, and replaced them with alternative ways to practice and to innovate, appropriate to their new circumstances: the “minyan”<sup>29</sup>, the synagogue, the rabbi, the philosopher, the Talmud<sup>30</sup>, the family. They made their religion “portable” carrying it with them wherever they went. On leaving their ancestral land, the Jews have, so to say, stepped out of history, turning the Jerusalem Temple Mount into a metonym for the lost link with The Place, and longing for it into a symbol of the common Jewish identity.

The Tibetans, on the other hand, saw their best chance for the survival of their identity, threatened with extinction by the Chinese assimilatory policies, in the preservation of their religious tradition intact, except for such changes as were necessary for gaining outside support and for the diffusion of Buddhism in the outside world. In contrast to the Jews, they went into exile with their high priest, and, under his leadership, have channeled their energy not into inventing means to make their religion viable under the new circumstances, but into replicating in the Diaspora their ancient religious infrastructure, rituals and institutions. One may say that the Tibetan refugees settled in India with the Potala<sup>31</sup> on their backs. The few modern institutions, such as secular education or the Tibetan Museum, do not indicate a tendency to modify the cultural tradition, indeed, they are often a necessary concession to the effort precisely to preserve it intact. The Dalai Lama has been successful in “universalizing” Buddhism by presenting it to the West in a Western idiom and by engaging in a dialogue with scientists, intellectuals and religious thinkers, putting Buddhism on the map of the universal intellectual discourse. The influence of all this on the Tibetan Buddhism as practiced by the Tibetans seems to have been so far negligible.

It is ironic that many Jews and Christians turn to Buddhism in search of spirituality unencumbered by the constraints of institutional infrastructure, when, in fact, Tibetan Buddhism within the Tibetan community has remained heavily dependent on the traditional religious infrastructure, the main pillar of which is the monastery<sup>32</sup>.

It is too early to speculate on the future of the Tibetan national and cultural identity. We still have no time perspective. It took the Jews many generations in the Diaspora and more than one calamity<sup>33</sup> to change, while the Tibetan exile is now only just over one generation old. Moreover, traditions and religion in particular tend to emphasize coherence and continuity and only infrequently openly admit change. It takes time to change and even more time to acknowledge it.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Initially formed through contact with Tibetan refugees in Nepal during my three-year long stay there.

<sup>2</sup> The area of what is at present the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is about 1.3 million square kilometers. The area claimed by the Tibetans as theirs North-East and East of TAR (Amdo and Kham), now incorporated as "autonomous prefectures" and "autonomous districts" of the PRC covers another 1.2 square kilometers. Thus, the total area claimed by the Tibetans as "Greater Tibet" (Cholka Sum) is about 2.5 million sq.km, which is more than 25 percent of all PRC territory (9.6 million sq.km.) The Tibetan population of TAR is about 2 million; the total Tibetan population is 6 million by the Tibetan and less than 5 million by the Chinese sources.

<sup>3</sup> The title Dalai Lama derives from a Mongolian expression meaning "teacher whose wisdom is great as an ocean". It was conferred on the head of the dominant Tibetan monastic order (Gelugpa) by the Mongol prince Altan Khan in 1578. The fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) was the first to consolidate his rule over all Tibet.

<sup>4</sup> The Tibetan head lama served as spiritual teacher at the Mongol court in exchange for military protection. This arrangement was continued during the Mongol and later the Manchu rule of China (1244-1368 and 1644-1911 respectively).

<sup>5</sup> The selection of the Dalai Lama had been closely watched by the Imperial Colonial Office since 1661, but there had been no direct interference before 1793. Since the Dalai Lama held unquestioned authority for the Tibetan people, manipulation of his selection has remained an important tool of domination of Tibet even by the atheist communist Chinese regime. ( Crossley, 1999, p.329).

<sup>6</sup> As reported in: Tibet: the Facts: A Report Prepared by the Scientific Buddhist Association for the UN Commission on Human Rights, Dharamsala, 1990,p.279. The figures were obtained by interviewing Tibetan refugees in India. The Chinese called the Tibetan figures preposterous, claiming that Tibet's whole population at the time was only a little over one million. They conceal the fact that this latter figure refers only to Central Tibet, whereas the Tibetan data refer to all Tibetan areas in the PRC, which even by Chinese statistics were over 4 million (*Beijing Review*, 4 April, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> This policy has been fully consistent both with China's traditional frontier-country-assimilation ideology and the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist nationalities doctrine. Both assumed that weaker neighbors should be "assisted" – if necessary by force – to undergo transformation, which will ultimately make them voluntarily choose to unite with China because of the cultural and economic advantages of doing so. The atrocities in Tibet – like the massive murder of China's own citizens – were, quite unlike the Nazi targeting of the Jews, the unplanned consequences of these policies (Fairbank, 1985, p.11)

<sup>8</sup> The Tibet Journal and the Tibetan Bulletin, published by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), sponsored by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA), Dharamsala, and the more independent and politically oriented Tibetan Review, published in New Delhi.

<sup>9</sup> This finding is supported by M. McLagan's findings in her study on the "Tibetan Year" events in New York in 1992, including Tibetans' own frustration about the disproportionate emphasis on Buddhism and the exclusively Buddhist definition of tibetanness. (McLagan, 1997 pp.69-87).

<sup>10</sup> Better known under his Sanskrit name as bodhisattva Avalokitesvara .

<sup>11</sup> Some critics, Tibetan and foreign, question the wisdom of focusing public attention on the refugee problem, thus "stealing the show" from the situation in Tibet. Others disapprove of what they see as the Dalai Lama's excessive involvement with celebrities and his failure to gain political support.

<sup>12</sup> In the opening page of the catalogue of the new Tibet Museum in Dharamsala, devoted to documentation of his people's cultural and religious life prior to its destruction by a brutal force at the cost of hundreds of thousands lives, he refers to the agony of the Tibetan people as "the suffering brought by the changing times" (Catalog of the Tibet Museum, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> the two events commemorated in the Tibetan refugee community

<sup>14</sup> In a striking contrast to the Dalai Lama's speech, Eli Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1986, devoted most of his lecture to a reflective reassessment of the Shoah and the memory of its victims.

<sup>15</sup> Republished in 1985

<sup>16</sup> The objectivity of this report has been challenged by several writers, among others Tom Grunfeld (1981 and 1987; Chris Mullin (Greene and Mullin, 1978) and Robert Barnett (Dodin and Rather, 2001, pp.269-316, esp. p.p. 283 and 310. n.41).

<sup>17</sup> despite some formal democratic institutions

<sup>18</sup> The Tibetan community in India counts about 100,000 people; about 30.000 more are dispersed over the world.

<sup>19</sup> Among the most embarrassing is the issue of the Tibetan resistance, which the Dalai Lama opposed; his and his government's formal acceptance of Tibet's status as part of China in 1951; and his and the Tibetan elite's collaboration with the Chinese in the nine years prior to the 1959 uprising. It has done irreparable damage to the status of Tibet among nations and in international law.

<sup>20</sup> Like, for instance, the memory of poor but serene existence, and a non-material civilization guided by spiritual wisdom, often referred to as the Shangri-la myth.

<sup>21</sup> Above all, as a Buddhist; but the Dalai Lama's autobiographical writing also indicates a certain admiration and respect for the Chinese and their achievements.

<sup>22</sup> See note 19

<sup>23</sup> Although a memorial to the dead has been set up in the new Tibet Museum in Dharamsala in 1998, it seems to be a concession to a contemporary convention, a case of cultural borrowing rather than an expression of a genuine need. The rhetoric surrounding the opening of the museum is not a reliable indication of such a need, considering the heavy involvement of foreign advisers and planners in the project. Jews, on the other hand, whose history has been full of catastrophes, have become experts in commemorating them mainly as metaphors deployed for didactic purposes, occasions for soul-searching and repentance. They have also created a special literary genre of "Lamentations" (Minz, 1984, pp.17-48; Ezrahi, 1978, pp.133-149). The emphasis on remembrance of the dead in all Holocaust commemoration projects is self-evident.

<sup>24</sup> The Dalai Lama's success in diffusion of Buddhism in the West has been instrumental in increasing the numbers of supporters of pro-Tibet campaigns and of the refugee community.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication from a friend – a highly educated Tibetan monk.

<sup>26</sup> Although Yerushalmi warns us that Jews related to historical time in more than one dimension, sometimes merging verticality with circularity, they were far from the "eternal-return" perception of the Hindus. Historical events of the biblical time – even if experienced cyclically- were seen as unique and irreversible.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication from Ms. Debby Hershman, curatorial adviser to the Tibet Museum, Dharamsala, India.

28. I am grateful to Professor Benny Shanon for suggesting the comparison.
29. The quorum of ten men for prayer.
30. The body of Jewish civil and ceremonial laws created in the Diaspora.
31. The Dalai Lama's official residence in Lhasa and the seat of the Tibetan government since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
32. Unlike Christian monasticism, in which monks opt out from the community, leaving it to the clergy to provide it with religious services, there is no professional clergy in Buddhism and monks remain an integral part of the laymen's religious practice. Apart from conducting religious services and supplying ritual expertise, they function as "field of merit" for laymen. First of all, giving is a very important Buddhist virtue, so the monks confer merit on laymen by the mere acceptance of their gifts. Donors also gain merit by enabling the monks to devote themselves to an ideal Buddhist schedule, impossible for the laymen to maintain. No wonder then that Tibetan historians perceived the destruction of the economic basis of Tibetan monasticism as the most significant event in their recent history.
33. See Yerushalmi, 1989, for a masterful exposition of changes in Jewish historical memory after their expulsion from Spain in 15<sup>th</sup> century.

