Evolving Stages: Duty and Fate in the Construction of Tibetan Tradition

Divya Chandramouli

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Evolving Stages

Duty and Fate in the Construction of Tibetan Tradition

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SIT Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples
Spring 2013
Evolving Stages: Duty and Fate in the Construction of Tibetan Tradition

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Abstract:

In this paper, I discuss themes of preservation, adaptation, and the construction of tradition in the context of Tibetan performing arts. I chose to explore these issues by looking specifically at a play composed by His Holiness the current Karmapa, based on the life of Milarepa, one of the most revered yogis of Tibetan Buddhism. This play is unique in the sense that many of its aspects stem directly from traditional Tibetan opera, or lhamo, yet the ways in which it was presented and the reasons why it was presented this way diverge considerably from “tradition.”

I conducted my research in Dharamsala, a hill station in northern India which serves as the seat for the Tibetan government-in-exile, and houses a large Tibetan refugee population. I conversed with artists and administrators at TIPA, asking them how they, as an institution and as individuals, find the balance between preserving the ‘traditional’ art form and adapting newer techniques and ideas from other cultures and art forms. In my conversations, various questions arose: what is important to preserve, and why? What changes are made within the art form, and again, why? I discovered during this research that preservation itself is a process of construction, that in attempting to preserve ‘tradition,’ communities consciously facilitate an evolving culture that constitutes what is important to them at that very specific moment in time.

A second trajectory I followed in my research was that my informants’ experiences working so closely with such a ‘high lama,’ as one of the artists called His Holiness the Karmapa. How did having this play be composed and directed by such a renowned religious leader shape their experiences as artists? I discovered here, that in the context of the play, my informants accommodated their identities as refugees and as artists in a larger framework of duty and fate. They recognized the importance of their roles as members of TIPA, seeing it as their service, or duty, for the cause of Tibet. But importantly, they also saw their experiences as privileges earned through positive karmic forces and deeds done in past lives. Ultimately, their presence at TIPA had a purpose, encompassing more than simply their individual careers.
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Introduction

In many societies, music and the arts constitute a means of identity-expression and an embodiment of the community’s culture. The ways in which a group of people produce, consume, and ‘preserve’ an art form can reveal a whole range of information about that society, including the values it wishes to propagate through the arts, the different roles the artists play in that society, and the extent to which the arts are seen as a vehicle for identity-construction. With all this in mind, I knew from the beginning of the semester that I wanted to focus on music, or the performing arts, within Tibetan communities-in-exile for my independent research. Growing up in the U.S, and having been exposed to South Indian classical music from a young age, I understood how the arts can function in a diasporic community – as a reminder of the homeland, and as a means to preserve the traditions of this homeland. I wanted to see whether there are comparable correlations in Tibetan society, that is, whether music, specifically classical music, echoes similar sentiments of home and encourages a similar spiritual transcendence.

Throughout the semester however, during conversations with our faculty advisor and academic director, I began to realize that like all cultural phenomena, the arts of every society have followed unique socio-political-historical trajectories, and this in turn has determined the way these arts are presented and engaged with in their respective societies. No doubt the history that has defined the “classical arts” in South India is very different from the history that has shaped the performing arts in Old Tibet, and their reconstruction in Tibetan communities-in-exile after 1959. Rather than look for corollaries with an art form I was already familiar with, I decided that I would explore Tibetan performing arts in and of themselves. Our faculty advisor, Hubert la, was kind enough to direct my attention towards a play composed by His Holiness the current Karmapa just three years ago. The story for this production was based on the life of Milarepa, one of the most revered yogis of Tibetan Buddhism and the key propagator of the Kagyu school of Buddhism. It was performed during Losar in 2010, by artists from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, in the auspicious city of Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained self-realization. This production, described as being more of a play by the artists involved, correlates most directly with the art form of lhamo, or traditional Tibetan opera. The uniqueness of this play, in the sense that it was produced by a Rinpoche, and in that it straddles traditional opera and modern Tibetan theatre, provided me with an interesting lens for my research.

I conducted my research in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, a vibrant hill station which serves as the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile, and consequently houses a significant Tibetan refugee population. I carried out my ethnographic work at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts with two main trajectories in mind. I wanted to converse with members of TIPA who were involved in the Karmapa’s production to explore first, their perceptions of preservation and adaptation in the context of Tibetan performing arts, as well as

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1 1959: The People’s Republic of China invaded Tibet, claiming it as part of the mainland in a process of “liberation.” This is also the year that the massive and continuing trans-Himalayan exodus of Tibetans from their homeland began (Diehl 2002: 64).

2 The Tibetan New Year
the ways in which they achieve a balance between these two, both as an Institute and as individuals. In discussing preservation, I wanted to see what was worth preserving and why, and what was consciously being changed over the years, and why. This trajectory led me to the discovery that the act of preserving a ‘traditional’ art form is, in itself, a process of constructing a tradition relevant and relatable for the community in that specific moment of time. As Keila Diehl surmises in *Echoes of Dharamsala*:

> While the preservation and transmission of traditional Tibetan culture is crucial psychologically, politically, and historically, it is worthwhile seeing what happens to these processes when “tradition” and “culture” are rethought and understood to be the consequences, as well as the origins, of contemporary lifestyles, aesthetic forms, values, and ideas (269).

The second trajectory of my research involved the artists’ experiences working with such a renowned Rinpoche. How did it feel to be directed by the Karmapa? How did his involvement in the production impact and shape their roles as Tibetan artists? I realized here that the context of the play, within the genre of performing arts, facilitated an interesting rhetoric of duty and fate in the minds and words of my informants. The artists’ and administrator’s involvement in the Karmapa’s production highlighted their responsibilities and their blessings, as they had the fortune of working with such a distinguished member of the Kagyu school of Buddhism, but the production also placed them in the act of constructing or creating a slightly different art form in itself. At least from my perspective, focusing on conceptions of preservation and adaptation through the context of the Milarepa play was useful, as it invariably allowed my informants the opportunity to think about and discuss tradition and its supposed counterpart, modernity.

I had the fortune of conversing with several very insightful individuals at TIPA during my time in Dharamsala. First, I met with Samten Dhondup, the opera instructor at TIPA who played the character of Milarepa’s father in the production. Then, I spoke with Ten Lhaksa, TIPA’s Secretary, who was involved in the production’s logistics, including lighting and sound. Next followed Ms. Dawa Bhuti, a student at TIPA since 2004, who played one of the minor roles in the production. Finally, I interviewed Sonam Phuntsok, the senior opera instructor at TIPA, as well as an artist widely acknowledged as one of the best opera singers in the Tibetan community-in-exile. He played the character of Marpa, Milarepa’s guru, in the production. My conversations with our program coordinator, Tenzin la, in the beginning of our research period, also greatly helped direct my understanding of TIPA, Tibetan performing arts, and issues of cultural evolution. In the following paper, I draw from all these conversations, my own observations, as well as academic publications on Tibetan performing arts and music in the Tibetan exile community. Ultimately, this is a presentation on the evolution of Tibetan performing arts, specifically lhamo, through the eyes of artists involved in the Karmapa’s Milarepa production. I hope that this exploration of the play begins to answer questions on tradition, preservation, and development in the context of Tibetan performing arts, as well as highlight the performers’ sense of duty and fate in their roles as Tibetan artists-in-exile.

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3 For the transcribed interviews, please turn to the appendices.

4 Not all of my informants were artists, or performers in the Milarepa production; Lhaksam la, the Secretary of TIPA, was involved in the logistics of the production, while Tenzin la comes from a family
Lhamo: “The Tree of Tibetan Culture”

As the Karmapa’s production correlates most directly with traditional Tibetan opera, or lhamo, in this section of the paper, I will provide a brief background of the art form, as well as a more detailed discussion of its presentations in Old Tibet.

History

It is acknowledged by scholars and lay Tibetans alike that music and the arts have been a very significant aspect of Tibetan culture and daily life for at least several centuries. As Sonam la described, “Wherever you see Tibetans gathering, there is music. Everyone can sing, everyone can dance.” In Old Tibet, music was very much a part of daily activities, in the sense that, Tibetans sang “specific songs on such joyous occasions as the celebration of a wedding, the drinking of beer, or the courting of a girl; but also on less germane moments when ploughing, harvesting, threshing, building a house, begging, throwing dice, telling riddles, doing one’s accounts, making political criticisms, or preparing for battle” (Norbu 1986: 1). The performing arts existed both in the informal and formal spheres of Tibetan public life. By informal performances, I mean those not necessarily arranged beforehand according to a set schedule, and for a distinguished audience, but taking place rather among more impromptu community gatherings. Samten la highlighted the communal aspects of these performances, saying, “In Old Tibet, the performing arts…the Tibetan opera itself was like a theatre group. Theatre was like daily life. Like, if you gathered in my house, all the people would gather, they would all know the songs. We dance together, it’s not like entertainment where people just watch. Kids, when growing up and watching their parents dance, now when they’re older, they know the steps.” The important distinction here is that the audience and the performers were not necessarily separate. In other words, the opera troupes that toured Tibet at certain seasons of the year were, with the exception of a company from Lhasa, mainly recruited from the tillers of the soil. When their tour finished they returned to work in the fields (Norbu 1986: 2).

The performing arts were essential to Tibetan culture, not only as one of the sole forms of entertainment, but also as a method of moral and spiritual instruction, as the stories that were presented were lined with morals, being drawn from Buddhist scriptures and popular folklore⁵ (Norbu 1986: 2). Notably, the performing arts were a platform for social criticism as well; a substantial amount of improvisation was incorporated into the play, so that artists could voice popular opinions on politics, social issues, and even religion. As Samten la mentioned, “In these operas, there can be a lot of improvisation which is not related to the story. It’ll be related to the current period. You’re telling a story of 20th century, and in the improvisation you’ll find these days what’s happening – sometimes they’ll talk about politicians, sometimes they’ll talk about health issues, sometimes about human rights.”

heavily involved in Tibetan music, and with TIPA. Still, I will collectively refer to my informants as artists or performers, in the hope that it will facilitate a smoother read.

⁵ It is perhaps because of lhamo’s importance in Tibetan culture that His Holiness the Dalai Lama refers to it as the “tree of Tibetan culture,” underlining the absolute necessity for institutions like TIPA to preserve it (Sonam Phuntsok, 4/22/13).
Of the various genres of performing arts, lhamo, or traditional Tibetan opera, is perhaps the most popular in Tibetan culture. In popular folklore, the origins of lhamo are traced back to Thangtong Gyalpo, a fourteenth century saint and scholar, who is accredited with founding this art form. It is believed that after completing his monastic studies, Thangtong Gyalpo was travelling to Lhasa along the banks of the Kyichu River, when he encountered a man carrying a bow and arrow. Thangtong borrowed the bow, and shot an arrow high into the sky, and it “plunged into the depths of the mighty river” (Ross 1995: 11). He took this as a sign that he should build bridges over the main rivers of Tibet, in order to propagate Buddhism or the dharma, to all the regions of Tibet, for the benefit of sentient beings. Many sponsors provided him with finance, mules, and manpower, but the bridges that Thangtong Gyalpo initially built repeatedly collapsed. Determined to find his own source of funds, he gathered from his workforce “seven beautiful sisters gifted in the arts of song and dance. The resourceful Gyalpo composed operatic arias, usually based on the religious adages of the lama mani (itinerant religious story-tellers) and trained these women to perform” (Ross 1995: 12). This newly created troupe, after a lot of practice, travelled around the villages of Tibet, appealing for funds. Thanks to the sisters’ beautiful voices and Gyalpo’s adept accompaniment, they were able to obtain the needed finances to complete their build-bridging project. Upon seeing the sisters perform, it is said that onlookers gasped in wonder, “oh, the goddesses (lhamo) themselves are dancing!” And this is the story of how traditional Tibetan opera was founded.

The Art Form

By the 19th century, lhamo was popular among most of the regions of Tibet, with each of the major districts having its own amateur opera troupe. These troupes performed for their respective villages during festivals, communal celebrations and other special occasions. At this point in time, performers were not professional actors or musicians; as we discussed earlier, they were often “monks and lay people who had a personal love for the opera” (Ross 1995: 27). Interestingly, women never performed lhamo, especially if monks were members of the audience, as this was considered “indecorous” (also interestingly, the main villains of most opera pieces are female characters) (Ross 1995: 27). Men performed the female roles found in the opera stories. Although the participants may not have been professionally recruited to perform, the art form had developed a definite structure, with specific characters, costumes, and symbolism appearing in every opera piece.

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6 In Lhamo: Roof of the World, Joanna Ross describes lhamo as “the classical secular theatre of Tibet.” I’m not sure I understand the full meaning of “secular” in this context (apart from maybe non-monastic), since lhamo carried strong religious and spiritual themes, and was a significant aspect of the festivals hosted annually by monasteries in Old Tibet.

7 This theory is up for debate, however, as there are no explicit references to his founding a dramatic tradition in his biography (Norbu 1986: 96).

8 At some point, the performing arts became so well-incorporated into Tibetan culture that they were considered one of the five “major sciences of Tibet”: technology, healing, communication, logic, and Buddhist canon. Within the science of communication, there exist the five minor sciences, one of which was “zlos-gar,” or the performing arts. And finally, there are believed to be five “limbs of the performing arts,” which are: memorized texts, comedy and improvisation, costume, dance, and music (Ross 1995: 29).
Some of the characters that traditionally appear in every lhamo are the ngonpas, gyallu, and the ache lhamo. The seven ngonpas, dressed in dark blue bearded masks adorned with buttons, crowns encrusted with jewels, brightly striped jackets, black trousers, and knee-length tassels. The character of the ngonpa is derived from a story where seven brothers, manifested by Goddess Tara, danced acrobatically to thwart demons from destroying Thangtong Gyalpo’s bridges. The ngonpas’ costumes are vested with symbolism: for example, the beards are in deference to Thangtong Gyalpo himself, who is believed to have lived until a very old age; the dark blue color symbolizes Vajrapani, or the “god of war,” and his face consumed by anger; the jewels on the crowns refer to the opera story, “Prince Norsang,” which is believed to be the oldest lhamo piece. The dance performed by ngonpas is known as “don,” wherein they perform rites of “Earth purification,” “Earth-taming,” and “Ritual of Origin.” The gyallu appear on stage dressed in long loose robes and tall hats; the story behind these characters is that during one of Thangtong Gyalpo’s fund-raising performers, several elder members of the audience became so excited that they started to dance along with the performers. These elderly community members were referred to as ‘gyallu,’ or “head-of-household.” On stage, they sometimes act as disciplinarians, to ensure that the ngonpas perform their roles properly, and they also serve as a humorous foil to the ngonpas, “with whom they exchange witty repartees and dance competitively” (Ross 1995: 14). The ache lhamo, with ache meaning “sister” in Tibetan, wear elaborate crowns and the traditional chuba and apron with a multi-colored striped fabric. Traditionally, men would play the roles of the ache lhamo, singing auspicious praises to Thangtong Gyalpo and the gods. It is interesting that the narrative basis for these characters stems from the founding story of lhamo, with Thangtong Gyalpo being the central, most highly revealed figure. The presence of these characters on stage perhaps reinforces the importance of Thangtong Gyalpo’s contribution to the performing arts, and most notably, to Tibetan cultures itself. Apart from the aforementioned characters, another important performer is the narrator, shung shangken, who appears dressed on stage in the costume of a government minister. He provides a rapid synopsis of the story in classical Tibetan – most people can’t understand it, but they know the story anyway. The main duty of the narrator is to provide a summary for each scene, as well as explain the entrance and exit of important characters. In Old Tibet, the dialogues for all the characters were seldom written down in script format; rather, they were passed down from the opera instructor to the student visually and orally. Storytelling, therefore, was an important means of education and communication, as most people in Old Tibet could not read or write (Ross 1995: 29).

As far as the costumes are concerned, the finer garments were donated to the ten major regional lhamo troupes of Tibet, and then to the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, by the Tibetan government and individual sponsors. Generally, the costumes look almost exactly the same as they did before the Occupation, with even ‘minor’ changes, like the width of the apron, as we saw from my conversation with Samten la, being discouraged and avoided. The masks that lhamo performers wear also carry important symbolic significances, specifically

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9 These characters appear in the opening act of the lhamo.
10 Earth Purification: the ngonpas sing in praise of the beautiful views and surrounding natural environment; Taming of the Earth: to ensure the stage is smooth and firm; Ritual of Origin: they sing of coming from three realms – the upper realm of the gods, the lower realm of the nagas, and the middle realm of Yumar Gyajin (Ross 1995: 14).
because of their various colors: yellow represents good, worn mainly by hermits and saints, red represents the king and his ruling power, green is worn by peace-loving people, black signifies violence, and dark red stands for royalty and malevolence (Ross 1995: 35). In context of the performers’ movements, lhamo dancing is strictly choreographed in the sense that there are certain styles of dancing that have to be performed by certain characters in specific situations. There are seven main styles of dancing: “dheltup, a slow dance, gyoktup, a fast dance, gyupten gorwa, moving backwards in a circular direction, shandur gorwa, literally the movement a bird makes when it is chased, hopping on one leg with arms outstretched, chakphul deygor respectful movements made three times with the arms, in deference to someone of greater standing than the character, and pukchen, acrobatically twirling in circles” (Ross 1995: 35). The musical accompaniment in lhamo performances, consisting of the nga, or a hand-held drum, and a bubchen, a cymbal, is essential, as it helps to mark the end of each scene and provide for a smoother transition between the different segments of the story. Traditionally, opera performances often lasted anywhere from one to three days. As Lhaksam la, the Secretary of TIPA, mentioned:

Traditionally, lhamo is a one-day event. But I’ve heard from elders that there have been lhamos that lasted one whole week. It depends on the researcher who writes the script. If you look at the stories, most of them are from the Buddhist canon. So whoever is more eloquent, or has done more research, he can make the performance longer. There’s the story of Prince Norsang, I’ve heard an unabridged version can take a whole week to perform.

Evidently, lhamo performances constituted an event that the entire community invested itself in and was involved in. Though performances at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts have been shortened to several hours, they remain eagerly-awaited and enthusiastically-attended occasions by the Tibetan community in exile. As we will see later with His Holiness the Karmapa’s production, many aspects of traditional lhamo, such as the particular characters involved, are no longer present, but other aspects, like the extent to which the elaboration of the story depends on the director, and the stories stemming from cherished Tibetan Buddhist history, remain the same.
A Balancing Act: Preservation and Adaptation

The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA)

When China invaded Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama fled to Dharamsala, India, along with thousands of Tibetan refugees. As the spiritual and political leader of Tibetans in exile and those still in Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama quickly turned his attention to keeping the Tibetan people unified through the Chinese occupation, and maintaining their identity as one people. His efforts involved, most importantly, the preservation of Tibetan culture and traditions, including music, dance and drama. For this purpose, His Holiness founded the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, originally called the Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society, in Mcleod Ganj, Dharamsala, to facilitate the preservation of traditional Tibetan performing arts. The responsibilities of TIPA are three-fold: “to preserve the Tibetan performing arts for the Tibetan community by training professional performers; to present these traditions to others; and to train arts teachers for the Tibetan k-12 schools throughout the South Asian diaspora” (Diehl 2002: 69). Alongside training for several major tours and performances each year, especially the Shoton Festival\textsuperscript{11}, many of TIPA’s artists continue their careers as musicians and actors in schools catering to Tibetan refugee children. In the words of Sonam Phuntsok, senior opera instructor at TIPA:

Every Tibetan school in exile has a music and dance teacher. Kids from 5 to 6, in the schools, will know traditional folk songs. This is where we send our artists, to the Tibetan schools. Some professionals, we keep them here. Even from a young age, the kids in the schools learn everything. So when they grow up, if they want to become professional musicians, they can come to TIPA. This is a very useful system, because from childhood, you know your national anthem, festival songs, folk dances from different regions of Tibet. This is one thing His Holiness did very well.

\textsuperscript{11} The Shoton Festival, which took place in the end of summer in Old Tibet, was the annual opera festival. In the following passage, Lhaksam la describes how the festival originated: “In Tibet, it happens at the end of summer because, most of the monasteries have this schedule, where the monks would finish a month-long retreat called yerne (summer retreat session). So they have a lot vows during that time, and at the end of that retreat, every monastery would hold some festivities for the successful completion of the retreat. At that time, this [Drupu] monastery, they used to invite opera troupes to the monastery, to perform for the general public. Every year, it grew in numbers – the number of opera performers coming to take part in this festival. And later, the venue was shifted to Norbulingka, the summer palace. So the festival grew from that one monastery. And then later, it became sort of an official calendar, where government officials, His Holiness, would gather and watch.”
Members of the Tibetan administration have invested so many resources into maintaining such an institution because it helps current and future generations remember the art forms as they were performed in Old Tibet; this is especially important in a community whose traditions are being actively threatened and even destroyed in the homeland. In other words, since 1959, one of the primary concerns of the exiled Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugee community has specifically been to preserve the “rich cultural heritage of Tibet,” because this rich cultural heritage, warped continually by Chinese occupation, no longer exists in Tibet, in ways familiar to the first generation of Tibetans to flee Tibet (Diehl 2002: 64). While challenging the disappearance of Tibetan culture in the homeland under Chinese rule, the preservation of linguistic, religious, and artistic knowledge, through both documentation and education, has also been facilitated in order to counter the disappearance of exiled Tibetans into their host societies. In the context of the performing arts specifically, “it is feared that traditional lay or “folk” dance, drama, and music practices will not survive the sweeping reforms and prohibitions of Chinese “liberation” policies in Tibet, and further, that if they do survive, the indigenous performance genres will be influenced beyond recognition by the now-hegemonic classical and popular Chinese aesthetic styles (as is indeed happening)” (Diehl 2002: 65). Jamyang Norbu, former director of TIPA, and author of several acclaimed books on Tibetan performing arts, describes in detail the types of changes occurring within the genre of performing arts in Tibet under Chinese occupation:

[Since the occupation], there has been a systematic and wholesale perversion of Tibetan folk songs, dances, and operas to serve as vehicles for Communist propaganda and a buttress for racist and pseudo-historical claims...Painstaking efforts have been taken by the Chinese to remove, as far as possible, any vestige of Tibetan character in the performing arts. Even the very way that Tibetans sing has now changed. In the past, with the exception of opera singing, Tibetans sang in an easy natural way. Now female voices are invariably rendered in the hideous and shrill falsettos of the Peking opera, while male voices reflect Russian operatic influences (Norbu 1986: 5).

A couple of the artists at TIPA with whom I spoke, attested to the changes occurring in the performing arts in occupied Tibet. When talking about the importance of preserving traditional arts, Samten la, one of the opera instructors, mentioned that “the Chinese are making a lot of mixtures – kitchari¹²! (laughs). In Tibet now, the apron is very thin, they wear heels. The movements are lot like ballet, which is not suitable for Tibetan performing arts. They might be adding these changes just to make it more attractive for youngsters. From this point of view, we have to judge what is authentic and what is not.” This perspective implies that it is TIPA’s role not only to preserve the performing arts for future generations, but to authenticate what constitutes as “Tibetan,” and what does not. Dawa la, a student at TIPA since 2004, echoed similar sentiments to those of her instructor, saying:

¹² Kitcheri literally means “mixture,” and refers to an Indian dish usually made from a mixture of grains.
It’s not only about singing and dancing, you know? It’s about preserving our culture. These days, our rich culture is in danger of extinction because of the occupation. In Tibetan dance, there’s no type of ballet. But in Tibet now, they use their hands like this, all the ballet movements. The costumes are all changed now. So here, we are free, we are independent, you know? India, very nice country, very independent country. So we have the chance to preserve our culture here, we have freedom. So it’s very important to preserve our culture and our tradition, our costumes. As a single person, I have a big responsibility to preserve our culture. I know all this only after I joined here.

I understood clearly from my conversation with Dawa la that she, along with the other TIPA members I spoke to, saw their existence at the Institute as strongly intertwined with their duties as artists and as Tibetans in exile. In Dawa la’s eyes, she was lucky enough to have lived outside of occupied Tibet, in a country where it’s possible to follow one’s own culture. This opportunity, however, was balanced with the responsibility of preserving this culture and tradition with the help of an institution like TIPA. In this case, TIPA serves almost as an awakening factor, a call for duty. There’s an awareness that the transformation of Tibetan art forms in occupied Tibet is destroying the very Tibetan-ness of these art forms, and that one thing that can counteract this transformation is the dedication of artists and members of TIPA towards cultural preservation.

TIPA’s preservation endeavors involve efforts to engage with not only the broader genres of art forms, such as lhamo, performed in Lhasa, but also lesser-known folk music and dances from all the regions of Tibet. The members of TIPA aim to facilitate a holistic preservation, discovering these various pieces and putting them in dialogue with one another within the communities-in-exile. Sonam la describes in detail the process through which these regional songs and dances are consolidated: “We go to Tibetan settlements, we got to the elder people, we talk with them about art, music, what they know we write down, record, bring it here, and then we learn from the tapes and then teach to the younger generations. Because it’s very hard to find those elder professionals, most have them have passed away.” Through the tireless work of TIPA opera masters like Norbu Tsering, the Institute’s repertoire now consists of nine operas, hundreds of folk songs and dances, and some traditional and modern historical plays. I think these efforts, which can be thought of as ethnographic processes of preservation, exemplify the concept of preservation-as-construction, since the Tibetan identity is expanded and nationalized through the arts to an extent that would not have been possible or even necessary had Tibet remained free. This idea resonates with what Keila Diehl theorizes in discussing the preservation of the Tibetan identity in general: “Tibetans of all regions and sects have come in contact with one another for the first time and have had to learn about and confront the diversity of what the term “Tibetan” really means” (Diehl 2002: 64). Clearly, the preservation of a Tibetan identity or the Tibetan arts has created a new definition of both of these entities. In Old Tibet, being “Tibetan,” might have meant belonging to a particular community and speaking that region’s dialect, among other things. In exile, however, the Tibetan identity, and consequently, traditional Tibetan performing arts, encompass a far larger number of people, and a greater diversity in all aspects of social and political life.
Stages of Evolution

In my conversations with the artists and administrators at TIPA, I embarked on a quest to discover what, in their opinions, had been preserved over the years, and what had changed. I spoke with the opera instructors, who are no doubt the more senior members at TIPA, about the ways in which ‘artists’ had trained in Old Tibet, and the ways in which students currently train at TIPA. Generally, I found that while training and performance techniques had perhaps changed as the art form became more professionalized and regulated, the core aspects of the performances, such as the values the stories sought to propagate, and the necessity for the audience to understand and imbibe these messages, were maintained with determination. I also understood that preservation is a process that is entirely dependent on the individuals leading this process. Different elements of the arts are important to different people, and what is chosen to get preserved depends on the person, most often the instructor, who does the choosing. In this way, as Keila Diehl says, “While keeping traditional arts alive is crucial, genres are, in practice, typically more blurred than not. They may be best understood as the results of decisions made by historically-situated individuals (both performers and audience members) rather than as canonized forms one can expect to be replicated and kept perfectly distinct” (Diehl 2002: 98).

Training

The artists at TIPA are divided into different categories, namely: staff, senior artists, junior artists, and first and second-year training students. As Joanna Ross writes in Lhamo: Opera from the Roof of the World, “During their two-year training, students must master the dramyen (six-stringed lute), traling (transverse flute), drum, pi-wang (two-stringed fiddle), and yangchen/gyudmang (hammer dulcimer), develop their voices to cope with the demands of lhamo, study choreography and learn songs, dances” (Ross 1995: 7). After their initial training, artists continue their study for at least several more years, specializing in one art or genre.

While speaking with Samten la, I came to understand how musical training was different in Old Tibet compared to the ways in which it takes place now. Firstly, in the age before recording technology and the internet, memorization was the most highly relied-upon method of learning. “In the olden days,” Samten la told me, “the guru does not know how to write. So it’s more like memorization. These days, people don’t have that much time to memorize. So now we put it in computer, make it more clear, so we can pass it on easily. Not so dependent on the older person, once he dies, he takes everything with him. So now these days, we teach mostly through writing, more than orally.” The current age of technology and the World Wide Web have drastically transformed methods of knowledge-transmission all over the world, and Tibetan performing arts are undoubtedly no different. With more permanent storage spaces in computers, lhamo pieces and other songs and dances can be preserved for longer, and shared with a larger number of people.

13 In quotes only because apart from the major opera companies, there were few other professional lhamo performers.
Apart from the way knowledge was transmitted, the advent of technology has also impacted the techniques artists used to physically train as musicians. Before 1959 in Tibet, when there were no microphones, artists were required to develop very loud voices, “like mountains,” as Samten la analogized. To develop such a voice, there were many “ancient techniques,” such as going to the valleys and shouting, trying to make one’s voice reach as far as possible. Students would also try finding a waterfall, and singing as loudly as possible, trying to drown out the sound of rushing water with their own voices. Referring to adages that gurus in Old Tibet would pass onto their students, Samten la said, “They also used to tell us something like, ‘the best medicine for your voice is to train. So...singing itself is a medicine for your voice.’ And voice is something that’s god-gifted. Once you have a very good voice, then you can make any shape. If you don’t have a very good voice, then it’s very difficult.” With technology such as microphones, vocalists nowadays have no need to increase the capacity of their vocal volume. They focus much more on refining the quality of their voices, and their overall singing capabilities. Also, training with the more ancient techniques in less vast spaces, that is, while living in closer quarters with other people, might not be as practical anymore; “you could be disturbing someone. People will come and say “shh!””

Sonam la also spoke of previous teaching methods TIPA used in the years immediately following the Occupation and the founding of the Institute:

Since TIPA was set up, few professional performers have trained. Most of the instructors are from the villages, elder people who know a few songs, they will come here and teach us. So we were not taught technically, professionally teaching methods. Just simple classes here, music class. Once you are here in TIPA for 4, 5, 6 years, then you learn more... It’s like this – I learn something from the elders, I teach you orally, not through writing. It’s orally transmitted to younger generations. No music scales, professional vocal lessons like in the West. Here, everyone has to learn everything. In TIPA, every student knows opera, historical plays, folk dances, religious dances, instruments. So then after a few years, if you want to be a professional in some line, you can choose.

Here, he touches upon the professionalization in teaching and training techniques, a theme that reappears frequently in the other ways in which Tibetan performing arts have evolved at TIPA. From Sonam la’s insight, it is clear that although classes may have become more elaborate and comprehensive in comparison with the initial years at the Institute, there still does not exist the specialization which is found in Western training of the performing arts from the early stages of learning; from the very beginning, Tibetan artists are provided with a basic education in a wide range of art forms, styles, and genres, enabling them to later choose and follow any genre.

Performance

The changes that have been facilitated in performance techniques for lhamo can be summarized with the word ‘professionalization,’ or ‘regulation,’ as Samten la and Sonam la described it. Although the stories that are being performed are being presented in similar
format and structure to earlier performances, the arrangement of actors on stage, and a stronger distinction between the artists and the audience have partly constituted the professionalization of lhamo. As we shall see in my conversations with the TIPA members, this need to and process of regulating the Tibetan performing arts – further controlling the movements and the behavior of the artists on stage, as well as limiting the extent to which they can interact with audience members outside of their dialogues – stems mainly from the Institute’s interactions with modern theatre in America and Europe. As TIPA artists travelled abroad, they observed how theatrical and musical performances were designed specifically for a seated audience that witnessed the show from a distance, with these audience members participating just as spectators. As Samten la mentioned:

In olden time, when we performed Tibetan opera, or circular dance, people had their own freedom. If you want to sing, you can sing, if you don’t want to sing, you don’t. But nowadays, we have to put it in regulation, since people are watching you. You are entertaining these people...so one cannot stare with mouth like this, like that. So in regulating, we’ve taken a lot of techniques. In olden times, in Tibetan opera, if you have a good voice, that’s it. People will begin to like you, you need not have a good face, or good motion things. But now these days, if you take the role of queen, you need to look very beautiful...So all this comes from the regulating of performing arts. And also, in olden time, people used to stand in circle, like a chorus, to help the main actor. They can stand like this, they can talk to the people behind them, interact with the audience. But now you cannot do like that. You are there, you have to stand very still, if you try to move, people will lose their attention. So this all comes from the West, and these are the important things we have added to our art.

Ultimately, these changes have been incorporated into the Tibetan performing arts so that it meets a standard set by ‘the West’ for the global stage. In terms of bringing these techniques back to performances in India, the instructors at TIPA, like Samten la and Sonam la, feel that this sort of ‘professionalization’ holds the audience’s attention for longer, and denotes a certain seriousness in the artists’ efforts as well. In this way, the art form is constructed anew; rather than being performed by the entire community in a less controlled environment, it is performed for the community, by artists trained specifically for that purpose. Therefore, the dynamics of the performances change considerably; while before, lhamo might have served mainly as a form of educational entertainment and community-building, now, as a vehicle for cultural-preservation, it serves importantly as a marker for ‘what-used-to-be.’ In other words, “The songs, dances, and operas are not merely being preserved as entertaining museum pieces of a culture that once was, to be cherished for pure
sentimentality, but rather to provide an accurate insight and picture of how life in Tibet was before it fell under communist domination (Ross 1995: 10). It is because of this new responsibility affixed to the art form, that the artists at TIPA perceive a necessity for professionalization. Their performance styles and presentation techniques have to be suited to the magnanimity of the Tibetan cause. The freedom that performers might have had on stage in Old Tibet is replaced with a new sense of purpose; artists are encouraged to be “more serious” on stage, as Sonam la said. Basically, with heightened responsibilities, ‘traditional’ performances are reconstructed to suit the needs of a technologically evolving stage, and to match the urgency of cultural preservation.

What must stay, and what must change?

The conversations I had with the senior opera instructors and TIPA’s Secretary were especially insightful because they helped me understand how exactly culture evolves through an art form, and particularly, who directs the trajectories along which the art form changes. Different members of TIPA had varying opinions on what adaptation is, and what TIPA’s role is in this process. I was mainly interested in hearing how my informants thought TIPA achieves any sort of balance between preservation and adaptation, and whether they even perceived these two phenomena to be opposing processes.

Samten la, when asked how TIPA preserves tradition while simultaneously adapting to a changing world, responded that the Institute is more concerned now with the act of preservation rather than adding any changes to the art forms. His response implied that for him, preservation and adaptation were not entirely connected, that the latter could be postponed while the former was an immediate priority. Samten la foresaw a future when TIPA could perhaps focus more on adaptation, on “catching America,” saying, “maybe the time will come one day, when the Tibetan issue will be resolved. Then all the Tibetans will gather together, like all the performing art groups, and we’ll discuss what to do.” For Samten la, TIPA should be expending it efforts in acquiring regional songs and dances from elderly Tibetans. This acquisition of knowledge from people who had been born in Old Tibet was how he perceived the process of preservation to work. Adaptation, in terms of changing the stories being performed, or the costumes in which people perform, should not occur too quickly so as to not “upset the elder people, since it is because of them that we are able to preserve.” Another concern Samten la expressed was the idea that “if we jump very far, and then try to come back to the good aspects of old Tibet, it’ll be very difficult.” This was an acknowledgement that the pace of modernization, once underway, is exceedingly hard to control; many times, people might lose control over what gets retained and what becomes changed. Ultimately, preservation in this case was linked with the older generation of Tibetans and Old Tibet, while adaptation was instantly associated with younger generations of Tibetans and America.

Lhaksam la conveyed slightly different sentiments on preservation during my conversation with him. As a member of the administration, his perspective aligned more with TIPA’s survival as an institution, and in relation, the survival of Tibetan performing arts. The extent to which the arts were flourishing, in Lhaksam la’s point of view, could be partially
measured by the number of people who attended these performances. Therefore, the art form accommodated changes to keep its audience engaged, entertained, and educated. Many times, adaptation is triggered by a decrease of interest in the audience. In Lhaksam la’s words:

If you look at the folk music, the folk tradition, just like any other country, we are also facing that lack of people coming to take part in that event. If you look at the programs that we have, especially the Tibetan opera the first day, there would be thousands of people coming. That’s because His Holiness would also be coming to bless the event. But after that, people would begin to shy away. Usually, we have problems trying to pull the audience towards the folk traditions. So on one hand we need an audience. So if we do something new, people tend to come. So we have to do that balancing act...we need an audience to come watch us, but we also need to exhibit traditional arts.

Keeping Samten la’s response in mind, I asked Lhaksam la how important or essential it was to keep the older generations of Tibetans happy with the ‘traditional-ness’ of the performances. His response told me that keeping elderly Tibetans happy was not necessarily an obstacle to the development of the art form. “That wouldn’t matter much,” he said, “because culture has to evolve in the end. Even the present opera format has evolved from something, it’s not static. So there’s no need for the elder people to feel bad. For art to adapt and art to survive, it is very important to evolve. We can’t really live in that time-frozen moment, it has to evolve.” This implied an understanding of culture as continuously evolving. Preservation and adaptation, rather than being opposing processes, were two sides of the same coin; together, they constituted the process of cultural construction. Lhaksam la also brought up the interesting point that even opera presented in its current form, as a traditional art form, is a construction from the past, a product of evolution and change. If change is natural to culture, then why would older generations of Tibetans be upset?

Sonam la, as one of the senior opera instructors, is a driving force for both preservation and change at TIPA. I spoke with him considerably about what he believes requires change, and what he thinks is valuable to keep the same in the field of Tibetan performing arts. Like we discussed earlier, technological advancements are changing the genre of the performing arts all around the world; these changes of course, are also taking place at TIPA, but Sonam la acknowledged that it is perhaps harder for TIPA to constantly keep updating its stage equipment due to financial constraints. As TIPA artists travel abroad, they become aware of the types of technologies that are developing performing arts elsewhere: “I learn things about the Western stage. And I share this knowledge with them – “this is how they do it in the west.” Otherwise look at our auditorium, we don’t have enough light, proper sound, the stage is not the right size, too small, but we manage. But we know what kind of stage we need, though we can’t afford it.” Sonam la echoed both Samten la and Lhaksam la’s thoughts in a different way, believing that technological change is inevitable, so it is important to focus on preserving the traditional aspects of the art forms: “These things [technological development] are all based on money. The best thing what you have is your art, keep it strong, whatever you do traditionally,
authentic. These other things automatically come – time changes, auditorium will get better, more professional.”

In such a complicated process of evolution, so to speak, it might seem difficult to control what traditional aspects are maintained in a performance, and what aspects are purposefully changed. As Sonam la arranges productions and coaches his students on their performances, he’s very particular about what elements of the traditional performing arts he retains. His decisions, far from being haphazard, are based on much thought and many years of experience: “I’ve studied Tibetan art for 38 years, I’ve grown up with these things, so I know that there are things which we need to change. And there are some things which I don’t want to change.” Among the things that Sonam la does not want to change, moral value (stemming from religious foundations), simplicity, and the educational value of the performing arts are the most important. In Sonam la’s words, “in the opera, our ancestors, whoever made these stories, they were very religious, and they put in traditions that were very much Tibetan, like non-violence, and compassion, you know? You will never see a Tibetan opera with war, fighting, killing, revenge, no! They always teach good things.” It is interesting how values such as compassion and non-violence are so intrinsic to Buddhist-influenced Tibetan culture that they are spoken of as “Tibetan values.” The stories told by lhamo pieces propagate such values, within a particularly Tibetan context, to a lay audience that might not receive such an education elsewhere.

Another aspect that Sonam la is careful to retain in all of his performances is the simplicity found in Tibetan performing arts, especially lhamo, where “scenery, sound effects, and props are virtually nonexistent” (Ross 1995: 35). Additional elements, he felt, had the potential to distract from the story and the performance, as well as detract from the underlying messages the story is trying to convey. Here, Sonam la provided a fitting example:

Ok, simple as a boat. People laugh when we perform here, watching this, because our boat is very colorful, there’s water drawn, snakes, fish, and some goddesses of the water. It’s so simple that even a small child can watch and understand, “oh!” You know that now we can make a real boat, but what we use looks so simple, so pure. So these things, we don’t want to change it, I want to keep it very simple. I’ve watched performances of many world artists. For me, all those performances are about flying, you know? Jumping, lots of movements… But I feel I want to be very close to the earth.

Again, retaining the simplicity of earlier performances is a showcase in itself of what earlier performances were like. The simplicity concept is interesting, because while some aspects of the performing arts are retained for the sake of simplicity, others are slowly being changed in some performances, for the same reason. As we shall see in the Milarepa production composed by the Karmapa, dialogues are delivered in colloquial Tibetan instead of classical Tibetan, all so that more members of the audience would be able to follow along. In this example, I was fascinated how preservation and change occur simultaneously for the purpose of maintaining simplicity, yet to facilitate both a remembering of home but also a better understanding of the performance.
In terms of remembering home, Sonam la described how firstly, the Tibetan performing arts contain certain elements that are unique to any other art form, making it specifically “Tibetan.” The singing style, for example, is something Sonam la would never change, as it’s “very unique to other cultures and other forms of opera.” As Joanna Ross explains further, “Singing is distinguished by the breath moving through the throat rather than the more nasal Chinese sound, or the classical Indian style where the breath is shaped by activity in the mouth” (Ross 1995: 47). Other aspects of lhamo that are unique to Tibetan culture include the use of specifically colored masks and costumes to distinguish between different types of characters; “even if you don’t know the story, by watching the characters, and understanding the significance of their masks, you can understand 50% of the story,” Sonam la ascertained.

Secondly, the nature of the stories themselves assures a holistic portrayal of Tibetan society before the Occupation. The characters represent various sections of society, with corresponding costumes, dialogues, and behaviors. In one opera, as Sonam la explained, the audience will see the whole spectrum of Tibetan society, from the aristocrats to people who work in the fields. Preservation in this sense functions in a framework dependent on frozen-time. An image of ‘traditional’ Tibetan society is constructed based on the representations of society found in these age-old Tibetan stories. While artists like Sonam la insist that these stories be kept the same, they are enthusiastic about adding other lhamo pieces to their repertoire; “We can make new stories, like Milarepa...In Tibet, before 1959, it was never performed. The story is there, right? But nobody performed Milarepa as an opera. Also, the story of Thang-tong Gyalpo, the founder of Tibetan opera – every performer knows this story, but nobody performed. We performed that story here. So we try to change, we try to make things.” From this, I realized that the construction of tradition, or preservation and adaptation, works in layers; while preservation operates in one layer of the art form, another layer is simultaneously being adapted to suit different needs.

WESTERN INFLUENCES

Aside from technological influences, North America and Europe are also affecting the musical palette available to younger generations of Tibetans. Youth at TIPA, alongside training in Tibetan performing arts, also keep updated on the pop music culture of the West. When I asked Sonam la about this, he interjected emphatically,

“Of course they are! They’re listening to all the different types, from the blues to reggae and Bob Marley. But we cannot stop these things. Time changes, people change. This is their right. I’ll never ask them to stop listening to these things; I will encourage them, in fact. You have to listen to other important musicians. These are like the wind, you cannot stop this. But I will tell them one thing – your real duty is to preserve tradition. On top of that, listen to other things as much as you can.”

Again, change is presented as inevitable and necessary, as are the influences from other cultures and art forms. What is important however is to prioritize certain things, such as the preservation of Tibetan performing arts, over this change. Change may be unstoppable like the wind, as Sonam la
described, but it is necessary to steer oneself accordingly to it, and control the extent to which it sweeps one along.

Challenges TIPA Faces

One can imagine that an institution like TIPA, assigned with the important role of preserving Tibetan culture and the arts, faces countless challenges, within its grounds as well as in the eyes of the Tibetan community at large. Foremost among its challenges is the incessant lack of resources that restrict the facilities that are available to the artists, as well as the number of performances that the Institute can arrange and present each year. Another challenge that TIPA faces is fascinating in light of its involvement with the art forms of yore; deeply rooted in Old Tibetan culture is a “centuries-old tendency to regard musicians and actors as disreputable, and the dismissal of the arts as a waste of time and resources” (Diehl 2002: 72). These connotations attached to the arts have been carried over into refugee communities, and sometimes heightened further, as these communities are struggling financially to establish a footing in their host societies. As Diehl describes in detail:

The primary social issues that present challenges to Tibetan musicians are rooted in commonly shared notions of status (with its attendant focus on financial earnings) and modesty, concerns that largely determine the degree to which any Tibetan can devote him or herself to making music of any kind. Regarding the issue of status, the perception of music-making and any form of entertainment work as an inferior position of service has deep historical roots and affects traditional musicians training at TIPA.

This social stigmatization consequently facilitates a very mixed message. On one hand, children learning Tibetan music and dance in their schools, as well as artists training at TIPA, are taught that the entire responsibility of cultural preservation rests with them. On the other hand, when entering the field of performing arts, these young artists are plagued with concerns of financial stability and worthiness to their community. Interestingly, this issue of stigmatized arts did not directly appear in my conversations with my informants at TIPA; in fact, they fully appreciated their roles as musicians and actors, seeing their purpose at TIPA as very fulfilling and important for their communities. However, the financial concerns Tibetans face as artists did present itself in my interviews in the form of another challenge TIPA faces generally as an institution.

While the ‘West’ is serving as a model for many of the technological developments that are taking place in the field of performing arts, it has also become a magnet for many of TIPA’s artists. This became evident to me first in my conversation with Samten la. While describing the different levels of training offered at TIPA (as junior and senior artists), he said, “After becoming a senior artist, you can reach even professional status by writing books about your

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14 America has definitely become a desirable destination in the past two decades, ever since the “1990 approval of a special act by the U.S Congress that allowed one thousand Tibetan heads of household and their families to resettle in the United States as immigrants with green cards rather than refugees.” The thousands heads-of-families were selected by lottery, leading to about 8000 Tibetans currently settled in the U.S. (Diehl 2002: 156).
experiences, but no one has done that yet. They all go abroad to make more money. Even I worked in New York for six months, as a waiter at Papa John’s.”

Sonam la has had similar experiences of travelling abroad for tours and for temporary job opportunities. To an extent, he’s rooted to the West even more than my other informants, because his wife and children are settled in Canada. Though acknowledged by many as one of the best Tibetan opera singers in exile, Sonam la has not followed many of his colleagues permanently abroad, and has chosen to stay on at TIPA, teaching and performing. His reasons for doing so are no doubt stirring, and have presented him as an inspiration and role model for the younger artists at TIPA. Sonam la started his interview telling me about the story behind his enrollment at TIPA. “I was born in a mixed-race family – my father is Indian, my mother was Tibetan. When I was six, my father left, I have not seen him since. When I was 10, the Tibetan representative for the Dalai Lama’s office, wanted to help those young Tibetans whose families didn’t have a father or mother – one-sided families. So I don’t know, maybe it was my karma, so they selected me.” Sonam la’s mother was insistent that he receive a proper education with a formal institution. Along with 13 other children from ‘one-sided families,’ Sonam la arrived at TIPA for auditions, whereupon he and two other children were adopted by the Institution. He considers himself, therefore, to be the eldest son of TIPA, and sees his role of teaching and training as giving back to the school which gave him everything when he had nothing else. For Sonam la, serving TIPA is far more valuable than seeking a more lucrative career or position in North America.

Additionally, Sonam la’s decision to stay at TIPA has also been heavily influenced by his interactions with His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself. Years ago, when Sonam la received a Fulbright scholarship to study in the U.S, he visited the Dalai Lama before his departure, as was customary for all Tibetans in India who had received the scholarship. In his talk with them, the Dalai Lama told the students, “It’s very good that you’re getting these opportunities to study abroad. Please go study. But you have to come back. I’ve seen many Tibetans who disappear once they leave.” Upon seeing Sonam la among the crowd of students, His Holiness requested him instead to stay in Dharamsala – “You don’t go. Why do you want to go to America? It’s better if you stay here. You can teach Tibetan opera.” Sonam la described how he was at a loss for a few moments, “First, I couldn’t say. I’m not a person who opens my mouth like this. I don’t speak much, honestly. So I stood aside and thought. I said, I’ll just go for one year and then I’ll come back. So he blessed me, and gave me kataks and all.” After spending exactly a year studying at Middlebury College, Sonam la returned to Dharamsala, and had the opportunity immediately following his return, to perform in front of His Holiness. At the end of the performance, the Dalai Lama publicly thanked Sonam la for returning, “This guy here, Sonam – I met him before he went to study in America, and I told him not to go. He told me he was coming back. And he came back, and today he performed, and I enjoyed. So I would like to say thank you for coming back.” After this incident, Sonam la said he acknowledged this immense blessing he has, the opportunity to be an artist and play such an important role in the Tibetan exile community. In his words, “I feel that I’m so lucky, I shouldn’t leave. Of course, if you go to the West, maybe you earn more money. But here, my heart is richer than those people who are living there.” The language of duty, fate, responsibility, and blessedness that is evident in Sonam la’s story is very much present as well, in the artists’ experiences working with His Holiness the current Karmapa, as we shall see now.
The Milarepa Production – An Opportunity of a Lifetime

On February 14, 2010, in the wintery air of Bodhgaya, an audience of twenty thousand watched with bated breath as the life of Milarepa was presented to them, as a play, by artists from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts. The production lasted for around four hours, with six acts performed by a total of 54 actors and musicians. According to TIPA, the Kagyu Monlam News reported that the event was the largest theatrical event in Tibetan history. This production, however, was very unique in the field of Tibetan performing arts for other reasons as well. Firstly, the script was composed, and the actors were directed by His Holiness Gyalwang Karmapa, the current head of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Secondly, Milarepa’s life story was presented in the format of a play, rather than a lhamo piece. Because of these two very unique and important elements, the Karmapa’s production, I discovered, was a consolidation of many of the issues discussed above, such as preservation, evolution, duty, fate, responsibility, and the Tibetan identity. My conversations with several members of TIPA brought to light, mainly, the incredible sense of duty they felt in being artists at such a renowned institution. The fact that they had had the opportunity to work with an important spiritual leader like His Holiness the Karmapa revealed that they not only thought of themselves as endowed with an immense responsibility, but also that they were indeed blessed, that good deeds performed in previous lifetimes had enabled them to work in the Milarepa production. Through the lens of this play, my informants made sense of their identities as Tibetan artists in exile, and they also situated themselves spiritually, along the cosmic lines of karma. As Diehl says:

While in the Tibetan case religiocultural resources such as the belief in karma, reincarnation, and spiritual refuge may have mitigated the day-to-day difficulties of exile for Tibetan refugees to varying degrees, they have without a doubt provided them with an interpretive model, pattern, and language for attempting to make sense of their displacement in a way that is, in moments of reflection, meaningful and reassuring to their community (Diehl 2002: 113).

Of course, each participant had a varying view on the production, and each of these varying views contributed new ideas to my understanding of the production. By providing an overview of the relationship between His Holiness’s monastery and TIPA, the preparation for the play, as well as my informants’ individual experiences participating in this production, I hope it becomes clear how the ideas discussed in the rest of this paper were in dialogue with one another in the ‘Life of Milarepa’.

Collaboration with TIPA

The fact that His Holiness Karmapa chose to have the artists from TIPA perform the piece he had composed has a specific history behind it. The collaboration was carefully and purposefully intended, supported by several reasons. As Sonam la enlightened me, the current Karmapa was introduced to the Tibetan community in Dharamsala by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the grounds of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts. That day, artists at TIPA were presenting a lhamo on the life of Milarepa; they had been planning this production for almost a year, not knowing that the
final performance would be attended by the young Karmapa. His presence, made known to the audience and the artists at the end of the performance, came as a very pleasant surprise, and even as what Tibetans call “ma thik pe tem thel,” or an “auspicious coincidence.” Sonam la told me that:

We had no idea, we had already planned that this year we were going to perform Milarepa opera. So that day, I felt very special that His Holiness came here. He was a young little boy, it was the first time I saw him in live, of course I’ve seen him in pictures. So Milarepa’s story is very much related to the Karmapa’s lineage. So right after the performance, His Holiness spoke to the public. The opera finished, there were thousands of people seated around him. So His Holiness said, “today, we performed the story of the legend master yogi Milarepa, so I’m very proud to introduce today the little boy here, who is the real lineage of Milarepa. So that was very touching for us, because we didn’t plan it. It happened.

Keeping this incident in mind, the Karmapa had requested the artists at TIPA to perform his play on Milarepa’s life, as recognition of the coincidences that had initially brought him to TIPA. Actually, this play was presented as a conclusion to a three-year “empowerment” on Milarepa’s life that the Karmapa had been teaching his students. Milarepa is one of the root spiritual masters of the Kagyu lineage, and his life story could serve as an example for all Tibetan Buddhists, or people familiar with Tibetan Buddhism. As Lhaksam la explained, “If you look at his story, at the beginning of his life, he faced many problems and he did so many evil things in the mid part of his life, and at the end of his life, he regretted what he did and started practicing. So he became enlightened during one lifetime.” Knowing that such a story, of self-realization being attained in one lifetime, and that too by someone who had committed atrocious sins in that same life, would inspire and move any audience that came to watch, the Karmapa desired to present this story in Bodhgaya on Losar, the Tibetan New Year. In the DVD of the production, a very inspiring message spoken by His Holiness appears right before the play begins:

As Mila aspired, so too I pray that each moment of his inspiring life story becomes a source of confidence and sustaining strength for each of us and that this performance ensures that Milarepa’s flawless character and perfect qualities are not forgotten. Although many have already read Milarepa’s biography, I pray that the live enactment of this history today plants seeds of liberation within the minds of everyone who sees it. The main point of this performance of Milarepa’s life story is gratitude. Just as we ought to be aware of the source of our water with every mouthful we drink, so clearly we ought to reflect on the kindness of the great masters of the past who are the source of the pure dharma.

In encouraging his disciples and the audience to reflect on the yogis who have lit the path for so many millions of other Buddhists, His Holiness the Karmapa is also emphasizing the importance of roots, both of religion and of communities. It is fitting therefore, that this production was presented by an institution that strives continuously to find the various roots of Tibetan performing arts and maintain them in their performances.
The Milarepa production acted also as representation of the Tibetan identity. Originally, Sonam la told me, a Taiwanese theatre company requested that they be given the opportunity to perform this play when they found out the Karmapa was composing it. His Holiness, however, had refused the Taiwanese actors, intending, “I want this play to be done by Tibetan artists.” When the performance was completed successfully in Bodhgaya, His Holiness conveyed to the participants how happy and proud he was of them, that Tibetan artists had presented the story of a Tibetan yogi to so many thousands of people. In this way, the production was an act of laying claim to a certain history while in exile; it made me think that in the world of performing arts, if one presents it, one owns it.

Preparations

Rehearsals for the production took place over a period of approximately two months. Most of them were conducted down in Sidhpur, where His Holiness’s Monastery is located. As Lhaksam la described it, it was more difficult for the Karmapa to travel up to Mcleod Ganj, where TIPA is located, partly because of his VIP status so he said, “it’s better you come down. If I come up, you have to arrange a lot, it’ll be more work for you.” Sonam la was involved in preparing for the production from the very initial stages, collaborating with His Holiness to train the artists for each scene. The script had first been given to the artistic director of TIPA for overview, but when preparations were delayed, the project was turned over to Sonam la. For the arrangements for the primary rehearsals, Sonam la said, “I took the script and started to make things around, whatever was written, I tried to bring it on the stage, the acting, the positions for the actors.” Ten days later, a preliminary version of the play was presented to His Holiness, who was very happy with the results. And then full-fledged rehearsals for the actual performance ensued.

Lhaksam la, as the Secretary of TIPA, was partially responsible for the sound and lighting for the play. TIPA initially had prepared its own members to supervise the logistics for the production, but, when the main show happened at Bodhgaya, “the Rinpoche made sure all the sound and lighting people were from Calcutta. So we had professional cameramen, professional sound technicians, and for light...So our technicians did not have much of a job.” This aspect prompted a slight challenge, according to Sonam la, who said, “The only problem we had was with sound and lighting. They were from Calcutta, the lighting, and another group from Taiwan. We didn’t have much time to rehearse with them, because the day we wanted to rehearse sound and light, there were heavy rains in Bodhgaya. But the Rinpoche was confident. He told us, “it’ll be ok.” And accordingly, the production was a roaring success. As the Kagyu Monlam News reported online,

High-end theatre technology was imported for the event and put to great effect. Even before the performance began, the audience burst into rounds of applause as the stage lighting subtly shifted shades while the audience slowly filtered into the arena. Multiple cameras captured the event for projection on massive screens that flanked the arena, greatly enhancing visibility for the massive crowd.
Evidently, the technological support for the production added a new taste to performing arts for the audience. They were still there to watch an ancient story being performed in a performance style that carried many traditional aspects, but the digitalized adaptations greatly increased the extent to which the audience understood, appreciated, and enjoyed the production.

Operas and Plays: What’s the Difference?

Having heard that His Holiness the Karmapa was introduced to the Tibetan public after a lhamo on Milarepa’s life had been performed, I was curious to find out how the Milarepa play differed from the lhamo, and from other performances my informants had been in previously. Firstly, it was fascinating to find out that the genre of a ‘play’ was new to Tibetan culture. I had begun my research, watching the DVD of the production and reading Milarepa’s biography, expecting His Holiness’s production to be in the format of a lhamo. I was informed soon into my conversations with Samten la and Sonam la, however, that “this was more of a play, not an opera.” There are certain notable differences between the two, the first of which is that in lhamo, dialogues are delivered in the form of song, whereas in a play, they are delivered as speech. In Sonam la’s words, “lhamo has its own style. We have the singing, especially in the dialogues. We don’t speak the way we speak, dialogues are more like narration. Every dialogue between two people is spoken in tune, in a song. And movements have to be performed, we move as an ensemble.” For the purpose of this play, His Holiness the Karmapa chose for the story’s dialogues to be presented in narration format to enable the audience to better understand the story. If presented in opera style, “people would not understand. If you don’t know the song properly, you would just hear the melody, and you wouldn’t understand the words” (Samten Dhondup, 4/16/13). Sonam la echoed these exact sentiments, saying “I think plays are better for the public to understand. When we perform Tibetan opera, I would say many young people have trouble understanding. Even if they know the story, singing/speaking-wise it’s different. In the play, it’s just like us, sitting here, talking very clearly, not many movements like dancing.” While the instructors spoke with the audience’s perspective in mind, Dawa la concurred with the Karmapa’s decision to maintain the dialogues as normal speech from the perspective of a performer on stage. She mentioned that lhamos were also wonderful to participate in, but “in drama [plays], it’s more active, since it’s like a conversation. In opera, we have to keep waiting to see what the other actors are singing. The interactions between the actors are slower.”

Another important difference between this play and other performances presented by TIPA in the past, is that dialogues were written and performed in colloquial Tibetan rather than classical, or literary Tibetan. Sonam la mentioned how this script was one of the best scripts he had ever worked with, because it was so simple and easy to understand. In the play, the actors delivered their dialogues just like “like normal students speaking in a classroom. Even a 4 or 5 year old child can understand what the actors are saying. So it’s more attractive for the audience to watch all day.” In previous lhamo performances, Sonam la had observed that when people did not understand the dialogues, they would be talking amongst one another, eating, “doing their own thing.” But in this production, despite the winter chill, “even the high lamas,
wearing their heavy layers, watched without moving.” Another difference between this production and lhamo was the absence of the traditional characters, like the ngonpas, gyallu, and the ache lhamo, that appear customarily in every performance (though there was a narrator who still provided summaries of each act). Since the production was a play based solely on Milarepa’s life, these extra characters were not added. Evidently, though traditional costumes were retained, and the story was presented exactly as it appears in Tsangnyon Heruka’s biography of Milarepa, many changes were also incorporated into the play, mainly for the sake of the audience, so that the performance would be more accessible and relatable for them. As the Kagyu Monlam News eloquently explained, “even for audience members who are highly conversant with literary Tibetan, the shift to a colloquial register of speech allows for a more intimate and immediate encounter with Milarepa as a human being.” This engagement of the audience with the story and the performers, helped that night in constructing a new genre of Tibetan performing arts, adorned with traditional elements – the play.

**Directed by a Rinpoche**

My final quest in my research was to discover how each of my informants’ experiences were being directed by the current Karmapa. It is no doubt an experience they would probably receive only once in a lifetime. How did the fact that they were being directed by such an important spiritual leader impact their roles as artists? The play took on a very different significance for each of the participants I interviewed, but what several of them had in common was immense gratitude for having had the opportunity to perform. Their gratefulness for being involved in His Holiness’s production reflected the blessedness they felt in being artists at TIPA generally. In my conversations with them about the Milarepa production, and working with the Karmapa, their responses were cloaked in a language of karma, or fate. Additionally, the blessedness the participants felt in working with His Holiness was situated in an overarching sense of gratitude and responsibility for being artists at TIPA to begin with. My informants’ roles at the Institute had enabled them to perform in this particular production, and it embodied the essential tasks of preservation, education, entertainment, and cultural construction that accompanied the privilege they enjoyed by accessing the resources and knowledge at TIPA.

For Samten la, this opportunity served as a spiritually educational experience, what he called an “initiation.” It was special enough that an inspiring story like that of Milarepa’s life was being performed. But the fact that Gyalwang Karmapa had written and composed this play, as well as directed the artists, changed the dynamics of the artists completely. Samten la said, “It’s like you get an initiation of Milarepa’s namthar – namthar means life story. Actually, if you tell me that story, maybe...well, you’re not from that lineage. But when one comes from that lineage and passes to another, which means that the person who is listening is directly initiated.” Being presented the story of Milarepa by a spiritual leader directly belonging to the lineage of Milarepa, made receiving that direction all the more meaningful. Samten la added how it matters completely on how an individual takes the experience personally; it is up to the artists to think of the Karmapa’s direction either as simply any other performance, or as a spiritual initiation. Additionally, having the Karmapa’s involvement in the play enabled a greater access to resources that might not have had otherwise, like the “big stage,” which would have cost a lot of money had TIPA arranged for it themselves. Samten la ended his response with “I feel
very blessed,” because such a performance would have been very difficult to achieve with any other individual directing it.

Lhaksam la, as the Secretary of TIPA and having been in charge of sound and lighting initially, provided the administrative and back-stage perspective of working with His Holiness. He was not directly under the Karmapa’s guidance, so he connected the significance of the Institute working with His Holiness in a historical perspective. In Old Tibet, he told me, many opera performers and troupes were “looked after,” or sponsored by the surrounding monasteries. Monks would sometimes participate in the performances, and during the Shoton festival, monasteries would sometimes even hire costumes for the troupes they had a better relationship with. According to Lhaksam l, when high lamas conducted some kind of initiation, or spiritual discourse, they would invite these opera performers to perform in the monastic court yards (Ten Lhaksam, 4/17/13). This relationship between the performing arts and monastic institutions was broken when the Chinese occupied Tibet and systematically destroyed many of these monasteries. In exile as well, these relationships have “died down.” For Lhaksam la, therefore, TIPA’s collaboration with His Holiness and the Kagyu Monlam symbolized a sort of revival: “The Rinpoche, and most spiritual masters, they’re well-versed in poetry. So I thought this could symbolize a future between our artists and those spiritual masters.” I was fascinated how Lhaksam la’s perspective harkens back to circumstances in Old Tibet while simultaneously projecting a possibility for these relationships to continue in the future.

Dawa la described her experience completely within the framework of karma, seeing the opportunity to be directed by His Holiness as a reward for good deeds performed in a previous life. She described it as:

Firstly, I was in awe, speechless in the beginning. In our previous life, I think we TIPA members, even me as an individual, must have done some good things, to be included in this acting. I must have done some good deeds in my past life. There are lots of Tibetans who can act better than us, but I’m just a normal Tibetan girl, and I got this opportunity. It’s all because of previous life good deeds.

Dawa la laughingly remembered how intimidated many of the actors had been in the beginning of their rehearsals: “He was so serious, we were afraid to make mistakes. But if we did make any mistakes, he would stop us – ‘no!’ and come and show us himself how to act. It was a really nice period.” In this way, Dawa la explained how a different side of His Holiness’s persona was revealed to all those who performed in the production. Just as Milarepa was made more relatable and human through the use of a colloquial register of speech, so too, was His Holiness through these personal interactions the artists had with him.

Having worked with the Karmapa since the very initial stages of production, Sonam la’s experience was fully transformed by his close communication with His Holiness. Like Dawa la, Sonam la’s first impressions of the Karmapa changed drastically over the course of the rehearsals and preparation: “Honestly speaking to you, when I saw the Karmapa for the first time, he was very serious – he never laughs. So it felt very strange – “why is he so serious? How am I going to work with him?” But then once you are close to him, you understand what kind of person he is. So open! I swear to God.” Sonam la was similarly exposed to a different side of His
Holiness during practices, when the Karmapa would get up to demonstrate some of the scenes himself. At these moments, Sonam la realized what an incredible artist the Karmapa was himself, and the relationship between them evolved into one between two artists and enthusiasts of the performing arts:

If he wasn’t a Rinpoche, he could be a very professional artist. He knows so many things, he loves music! He can learn music very fast. There’s a special scene where Marpa drinks. I get drunk and I go to Milarepa and pretend like I’m drunk, tell him to finish this, break that. And His Holiness, he wanted to do this scene every time! Every time that scene comes, he would ask me, “can I do this?” and he would do it so beautifully. The way people speak when they’re drunk, you know? My artists were shocked watching him! So he’s very special, gifted.

Sonam la has continued working with His Holiness on several other productions following the Milarepa play. This has only strengthened his relationship with the Karmapa, and evidently, this relationship continually serves as a rejuvenating and motivating factor in Sonam la’s career. He described how during the past four years, ever since he began collaborating with His Holiness, he has been vested with a new energy and enthusiasm for his role as a Tibetan artist: “So I’ve been working with the Karmapa for almost four years straight. I’m very much blessed. I feel much better, maybe it’s my mind. I have never felt sick, I don’t know. There are some energies that have come to me – I want to do this, I want to do that.” Sonam la’s collaboration with His Holiness for the past four years continues to motivate him for future projects, reminding him repeatedly of the important role he plays as an artist, of the responsibility he holds towards his community members. With so much enthusiasm, Sonam la shared that “As a Tibetan artist, I feel very much blessed, and I want to work more and more. I want to share my knowledge of Tibetan arts with everyone. In my whole career, I will never get a high person like him to write scripts for me. No way! So I’m very blessed, very happy.” The Milarepa production was apparently the best production Sonam la had worked on in his entire career of 38 years, mainly because of the opportunity he had to become so close with His Holiness. The fact that a spiritual leader like Gyalwang Karmapa appreciated Sonam la’s talents as an artist and welcomed these talents in collaboration with his own artistic abilities, seemed to confirm Sonam la’s efforts teaching at TIPA and performing all over the world; it was tangible evidence to him that whatever he was doing in service for Tibetans and the Tibetan cause was valued and necessary. Ultimately, Sonam la’s role as an artist, embodied in his participation in His Holiness’s production, is validated as a form of service. As Sonam la ended his interview, “I feel in my heart that I’m doing something for this school, and for the cause of Tibet. Some people are burning themselves, others are going on hunger strikes for months. I cannot do all that, but I have my own way of serving my country.”
Conclusion

My three weeks of research in Dharamsala, consisting of interviewing members of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, reading academic materials on the Tibetan performing arts, and watching the DVD of the Milarepa production as well as reading Milarepa’s biography, resulted, ultimately, in a complete paradigm shift. Though I focused specifically on one genre of Tibetan art, and that too, through the lens of one production, I obtained a completely different perspective on the process of ‘preservation,’ and how this process ultimately facilitates a construction of culture and tradition. Societies all over the world are engaged in processes of preservation, determined to retain aspects of their cultures and art forms, protected from the influences of time, for the consumption of future generations. What I finally understood through my research, however, is that culture is a complete social construct. We create in the present whatever we wish to identify with and can relate to, and we project these visions onto our past and future. By conversing with artists at TIPA, I was given the opportunity to get an in-depth perspective at the process of cultural construction – I saw that it is a phenomenon very clearly headed by a handful of individuals, and these peoples’ perceptions of what is important to preserve determine how entire populations conceive of their cultures. Basically, conscious decisions facilitate the construction of culture, and these decisions have widely-felt implications.

As a student of Carnatic, or South Indian classical music, who grew up in a diasporic community in the U.S, I can attest to the extent to which learning and practicing an art form is important to keeping that art form alive. While Carnatic music is continuously evolving, especially in India, it has taken on a different form in Indian-American communities, simply because it is presented in the context of ‘preservation’. Similarly, while lhamo has been influenced by Chinese institutions like the Peking opera in occupied Tibet, it has been adapted and presented in a unique way in Tibetan communities-in-exile, again, because of the framework it is presented in. The difference is that in the Tibetan context, preservation takes on an urgency at a completely different level, because the process is facilitated outside the boundaries of a homeland that is occupied. Ultimately, therefore, the products of preservation that are created at TIPA and elsewhere, like the Milarepa production, are each embodiments and representations of a Tibetan identity-in-the-making. They carry messages to the audience as well as the artists themselves, of what lies at the core of their identities, while the struggle for Tibet’s independence continues.
Samten Dhondup – 10:30 – 11:00 am.
Interview conducted in lounge of TIPA’S main office.
Role at TIPA: Opera Instructor
Role in Mila production: Milarepa’s father

What role did you play in the production?
I am the father of Milarepa. His name is Mila Sherub Gyatsen.

How many months did the practice go on for?
It was almost like... one and half month. We had to go down to Sidbury, in front of His Holiness Karmapa because Karmapa could not come up because we had to arrange a lot. So he told, “it’s better you come down. If I come up, you have to arrange a lot, it’ll be more work for you.

Samten la, what are the productions that you’ve acted in before?
Related to His Holiness the Karmapa? No, not necessarily. My work over here is as an opera instructor. I used to perform in major operas of Tibetan performing arts. And then I used to travel all over the world. And now I’m the instructor. In my young time, as an artist, I used to perform.

What were your experiences like acting in some of those previous productions?
Those were some of the very traditional, the ancient performances. The ones that people used to pass from one to another orally. You have to learn all the melodies, the conversations, the [synchronizations/improvisations]. So all these things you have to learn, at age 16 I started to learn from one of the very famous actors from Tibet. He died recently, just one month ago. He was my guru, I learned from him. But now it’s my turn to take the seat, to teach others.

What is your guru’s name, Samten la?
Norbu Tsering.

How do you train for traditional lhamo?
In olden times, in my time, the guru does not know how to write. So it’s more like memorization. These days, people don’t have that much time to memorize. So now we put it in computer, make it more clear, so we can pass it on easily. Not so dependent on the older person, once he dies, he takes everything with him. So now these days, we teach mostly through writing, more than orally.

So before 1959, when we didn’t have this microphone, and all these things, people had to have very loud voices, like mountains, we used to say. So people had to train a lot, by the vocal. There are a lot of ancient techniques, like you have to go to the very empty valleys, and you have to shout, and make your voice reach as far as possible. You try to
sing like that, this is also one technique. You also go to a waterfall nearby your town, and you go there, and you try to fight your voice with the waterfall’s voice. You try to sing louder. They also used to tell us something like, “the best medicine for your voice is to train. So...singing itself is a medicine for your voice.” And voice is something that’s god-gifted. Once you have a very good voice, then you can make any shape. If you don’t have a very good voice, then it’s very difficult. And now these days, we don’t use this kind of technique, since you could be disturbing someone. People will come and say “shh!” These days, you try to go to auditorium and sing, and we have all these microphones and facilities, so anyone can be a very loud singer. So the only focus is on how better you can sing.

**How was, in your opinion, His Holiness’s opera different from the operas you’ve been in before?**

Actually, the Karmapa’s production is not opera, it’s more like a play.

**What’s the difference between opera and a play?**

Well, in opera, there’s a lot of singing and narration. It has its own style of singing and narrating, lot of improvisation which is not related to the story. It’ll be related to this period. You’re telling a story of 20th century, and in the improvisation you’ll find these days what’s happening – sometimes they’ll talk about politicians, sometimes they’ll talk about health issues, sometimes about human rights. It might not be related with the story. Like this, a lot of things are involved in Tibetan opera. But the Karmapa’s production was more like a serious play; he did not want to perform it through opera style, because people would not understand. In the old version, many people do not understand opera properly. Once you don’t know the song properly, you just hear the melody, and you don’t understand the words – what they’re speaking, I mean. So that’s why His Holiness mentioned that it’s better to do it as a play, so the people can understand better.

I read in one article that His Holiness incorporated monks, chanting in the production, and usually, in other forms of performing arts...do monks participate?

When we talk about the play itself, down there, in 2009...there are monks chanting, which is related to Milarepa’s story. So His Holiness combined this aspect of monks chanting in between scenes from the play. It was like, what call, modern theatre. I don’t know what the chanting means – you’ll have to ask His Holiness. So this play was written and directed by the Karmapa. And the Karmapa is from Milarepa’s lineage. He has also this karmic link. He also wanted to perform this Milarepa because he is at that time, he was giving the initiation of Milarepa’s story, and it finished. And then as an auspicious end, he wanted to perform this. That is the story behind the production.

**How did it feel, personally, to be directed by such a high lama?**
It’s something like you get an initiation of Milarepa’s namthar – namthar means life story. Actually, if you tell me that story, maybe…you’re not from that lineage. But when one comes from that lineage and passes from one to another, that means that the person who is listening is directly initiated. If you think in a [pride] way? If you don’t think in that way, then you’ll feel that the Karmapa is just telling a story. It depends on how each individual thinks. If you want to attend the initiation of Milarepa given by his Holiness the Karmapa, then at that time you’ll understand why Milarepa did that, so you can learn a lot. So my job is more like acting. So for me, I feel very blessed to get this opportunity. He created this big stage for an institution like this, so it’s a great chance. If we were to create something like this on our won, it would cost a lot of money.

You said you travelled a lot, so does TIPA adapt techniques from other art forms around the world?

It’s something like…when we talk about modern Tibetan theatre, so we say yes. When we talk about traditional folk dance, very authentic, we don’t share western technique. Something like the exercises, like breathing – these things are very important, we can learn from the west a lot. Like, how to breathe during singing…In the olden days, we didn’t have such techniques; if you have a good voice, your teacher will give you more roles. There was no school [infrastructure]. You should know this now. In Old Tibet, the performing arts…the Tibetan opera itself was like a theatre group. Theatre was like daily life. Like, if you gathered in my house, all the people would gather, they would all know the songs. We dance together, it’s not like entertainment where people just watch. Kids, when growing up and watching their parents dance, now when they’re older, they know the steps. So now in exile, we are trying to preserve these things. We go to the elders, “do you know any songs from your young time?” They’ll recall something, we write the script down, and we teach it to our students. So then, there was no school like that, so there was no need for western technique to be there. In olden time, when we performed Tibetan opera, or circular dance, people had their own freedom. If you want to sing, you can sing, if you don’t want to sing, you don’t. But nowadays, we have to put it in regulation, since people are watching you. You are entertaining these people…so one cannot stare with mouth like this, like that. So in regulating, we’ve taken a lot of techniques. In olden times, in Tibetan opera, if you have a good voice, that’s it. People will begin to like you, you need not have a good face, or good motion things. But now these days, if you take the role of queen, you need to look very beautiful. If you look ugly, people will say “what is this?” So all this comes from the regulating of performing arts. And also, in olden time, people used to stand in circle, like a chorus, to help the main actor. They can stand like this, they can talk to the people behind them, interact with the audience. But now you cannot do like that. You are there, you have to stand very still, if you try to move, people will lose their attention. So this all comes from the
West, and these are the important things we have added to our art. And also with the clothing – in Old Tibet, costumes were made from wool. But now in India, it’s mostly cotton, because it’s so hot. The fabric changed, but the design stays the same.

So as small, small things like this change, how do you preserve your art form while you adapt? TIPA is preserving culture and tradition for the past 50 years, but at the same time, it has to adapt to a changing world, right? How do you maintain that balance?

Right now, TIPA is focused more on acquiring things rather than jumping so fast. We are more concerned with traditional opera and folk dances at this time. So maybe the time will come one day, when the Tibetan issue will be resolved. Then all the Tibetans will gather together, like all the performing art groups, and we’ll discuss what to do. One thing right now, is that we cannot upset the elder people. Because of these people, we are able to preserve. So whatever you have in your head. So now suddenly if you try to jump on modernization too fast, the elder people will feel, “what is this?” and they will feel bad. So I feel that it’s not the right time to completely focus on the younger generation. In the west, they jump a lot, and then they try to come back – it’s very difficult. Tibet right now, is very fortunate in some sense. In the 21st century, it’s very fresh, to become a modernized country. It was very isolated before, people had a lot of blind faith. If we jump very far, and then try to come back to the good aspects of old Tibet, it’ll be very difficult. So now we have two hearts – one is to preserve the ancient, and the other is that we want to catch America, which is very fast. So as an elder member of this institution, I can say that this is not the time. A time will come, and at the time, we can adapt how much ever is suitable. Like, from one side, there is political problems, on the other side, there are preservation issues, and above that, the Chinese are making a lot of mixtures – kitcheri haha. In Tibet now, the apron is very thin, they wear heels. The movements are lot like ballet, which is not suitable for Tibetan performing arts. They might be adding these changes just to make it more attractive for youngsters. So from this point of view, we have to judge what is authentic and what is not. When we talk about the tastes of people, then it’s very different. We can spend millions of dollars to make a stage, digitize everything to attract people. But when we perform here, we don’t have anything. We have one painted mountain, looks very ugly, but at the same time, when we talk about emotions, we are trying to preserve that.

Can you tell me about yourself? Where were you born?

I was born in Mustang, not really Mustang. My father used to call it Hakhsang Bukh, very near to the Nepal-Tibet border. At the age of 6, I was sent to school in Manali. Then I did my class 10, and then I joined TIPA. Since then I’ve been here. I have 7 brothers and sisters, my parents are still alive. They live in Dehradun, I told them to come to India. Why stay in Nepal? There’s so much government corruption, the Maoists, lots of problems. All my brothers and their children are living in India.
Appendix B

Ten Lhaksam – 11:30 – 12:00 pm.
Interview conducted outside TIPA main gate, near tea stall/cafeteria place.
Role at TIPA: Secretary
Role in Mila production: partly responsible for lighting and sound.

Can you tell me what your role was in this production?
Actually, I work in the office, so I’m not directly related to performance and stage work. As a member of TIPA...for me, we had the early contact with the Karmapa, and during the main performance, my job was more related to logistics, getting the facilities ready for the artists. I’ll tell you a brief idea about why the Rinpoche wanted us to stage the Milarepa play. His eminence Karmapa, he had given empowerment on Milarepa, for three consecutive years, in a series. And it was the third year, and it was the concluding part of that initiation, that empowerment of Milarepa’s teachings, that he wanted TIPA artists to stage that play. And what we performed was the whole life of Milarepa, from his birth to death. Milarepa is one of the root spiritual masters of the Kagyu lineage. But his stories have been serving as an example for all Tibetan Buddhists, or people familiar with Tibetan Buddhism. If you look at his story, at the beginning of his life, he faced many problems and he did so many evil things in the mid part of his life, and at the end of his life, he regretted what he did and started practicing. So he became enlightened during one lifetime. So that was a big inspiration for all Buddhist followers who understand this story. And for us...when the Karmapa first came to India from exile, we staged one performance, and when the Rinpoche watched from the pavilion, I heard that he wrote one poetry. And one of our artists made that into a song later. So the Rinpoche has some special concern for the artists at TIPA. And that’s why he took us into his production, and how we got this chance. I think it was 2010...so the script, direction was taken care of by the Rinpoche. How long did rehearsals take place for? Rehearsals...I think including writing the script, the whole thing took one year. But in between, they rechecked the script, some of the dialogues were changed. But I think for rehearsals, it took some two months. All the artists most times had to go down to the monastery in Sidbury for rehearsals. It was quite challenging. Sometimes the Rinpoche would come up here, but his movement is very limited because of his VIP status. So yeah, it was quite a challenge.

How many people were involved in the acting, and the music?
I think for actors, including the extras, there were maybe 40 actors.
And in logistics, how many of you were taking care of sound and lighting?
Sound and lighting, well...initially we had our own men for that. But then we found out that they didn’t have much of a role. The main show happened at Bodhgaya, and the Rinpoche made sure all the sound and lighting people were from Calcutta. So we had professional cameramen, professional sound technicians, and for light...So our technicians did not have much of a job.

So from the perspective of backstage, how was it for you, Lhaksam la, watching such a high lama direct such an important life story?
I was born in India. So for us, it was the first time...I had heard that before Chinese occupations, we had pockets, or groups of performers, and many of these performers had been looked after by monasteries. Many of these opera performers and their troupes were looked after by monasteries. But after coming into exile, that trend has died down. The patronage being provided by monasteries kind of died down. So what I saw was a revival of that relationship between the monastery and the performers. The Rinpoche, and most spiritual masters, they’re well-versed in poetry. So I thought this could symbolize a future between our artists and those spiritual masters.

In Old Tibet, when monasteries, had connections with these troupes, what kind of relationship was this? Did monks participate in the performances?
Yes, in some monasteries, yes. Monks would have their own performances, ritual dances. During the Shoton opera festival, some of these opera troupes were taken care of by monasteries. Even during the actual performances in Lhasa, some of the monasteries would hire better costumes for particular groups. So there was some kind of relationship. Even high lamas – when they had some kind of initiation, or spiritual discourses, they would invite these opera performers to perform in the monastic court yards. So this is a relationship that has been broken since the Chinese invasion. Now, it’s being revived.

Have you been part of the logistics for other productions?
We used to organize this opera festival, and that was the main task that we had. For the festival, there would be nine, including us, opera companies from India and Nepal that would come here. So we have to get ready with everything. That was the main experience I have.

How were those experiences different from this one?
This one...the Shoton opera festival is our main festival. But this performance in Bodhgaya was just a part of the initiation program. Just one event from that whole program where the Rinpoche was giving the initiation. He has many followers, from Japan, Taiwan, Tibet, China, mainland, India, Thailand...

Samten la was telling me that this production was more of a play, not an opera, right? The way I see it, TIPA is doing a balancing act; on one hand, it’s preserving all these
cultures and traditions from Old Tibet, but it also has to adapt with changing times and new generations. How did you see that play out in this production?

Traditionally, there’s no ‘play’ as such in Tibetan community. What we have is the opera, which we call lhamo. For us, this play is a new thing. From 1980’s, we’ve been trying to evolve, and act along with other countries are doing. Earlier, our senior members have performed some patriotic dramas, so I think that was the first time we had such an experience. The Karmapa invested a lot of money, into the stage and everything. So we saw the professionalism in him. Each and every detail, he spent around 2-3 lakhs on that stage. For us, it was a massive investment for that small play. He made sure everything was there. The play is a new thing for us (we did it in 1980’s, trying to spark patriotism by staging all those patriotic dramas), but the Karmapa took us to another level of professionalism.

You’re such an important member of the administration, Lhaksam la. So for TIPA, how does preservation and adapting happen at the same time?

For us, there’s no choice. If you look at the folk music, the folk tradition, just like any other country, we are also facing that lack of people coming to take part in that event. If you look at the programs that we have, especially the Tibetan opera the first day, there would be thousands of people coming. That’s because His Holiness would also be coming to bless the event. But after that, people would begin to shy away. Usually, we have problems trying to pull the audience towards the folk traditions. So on one hand we need an audience. So if we do something new, people tend to come. So we have to do that balancing act...we need an audience to come watch us, but we also need to exhibit traditional arts. Even the westerners would come here out of curiosity.

While you’re adapting, how do you keep older Tibetan generations happy?

That wouldn’t matter much, because culture has to evolve in the end. [Give me a minute, I have to smoke]. Even the present opera format has evolved from something, it’s not static. So there’s no need for the elder people to feel bad, or get so fussy about the things that they see. We have to do that fine balancing act – trying to preserve is one thing, trying to evolve is another. For art to adapt and art to survive, it is very important to evolve. We can’t really live in that time-frozen moment, it has to evolve.

For Tibetan art forms, they face a unique situation because this community is in exile, right? How does that impact TIPA’s role?

Yes, yes, yes. If we were a free nation, we would be more focused on entertaining the public. With the changes that have taken place in Tibet, under Chinese occupation, we have to preserve what’s ours. So there’s a dual responsibility preserving ancient Tibetan folk music as well as catering to the challenges that have been given by the 21st century. For us here, in Dharamsala also, if you look at the youngsters, most of them tend to watch MTV, music channels, they would love singing Hindi songs...so for us it’s a huge
challenge to pull that segment of the audience to our side. And with satellite television, it’s even more tough for us. But there are some organizations, like [Spikniky?] and ICCR (Indian Culture…) with whom we have worked that provide us with help.

**Where were you born? How did you get involved in TIPA?**

I was born here, in Dharamsala. My father, he earlier worked as a cook…like, when he came from Tibet, he was 12/13, and he studied cookery, he worked for a couple of restaurants in Kalimpong. And later, when TIPA was performed, they had this initial culture tour, around India. They were looking for a cook who could provide the daily meals for the artists, and he volunteered, he got involved in that tour. Then he stayed back and worked as a cook. And later, for some opera presentations, he would play the humor parts, like, he was a comedian. And now, retired. So I had a childhood wish to work here.

**Did you choose to be part of administration rather than some other department?**

There was a time when I wanted to be an artist, but I don’t know…I passed my school, TCV, then went to college, and came back here, and applied for this work. That was like uh…deviation.

[Many of the main actors who were a part of this production are now abroad].

**Have you ever toured abroad with the actors?**

No, not abroad. I’ve been within India – South India, Delhi, Chandigarh, Sikkim.

...There are troupes that used to perform 3 specific stories – [Pema Yoeba, Suki Nyima, Drupa Sangma]. This opera master, Norbu Tsering, he was the one who taught us. What we follow is his lineage of acting. He’s from the [Kormulingpa] troupe in Old Tibet. He recently passed away, at the end of February. I didn’t know lhamo was passed down through specific lineages? No, not really through lineages. It all happened because of the Chinese occupation in Tibet. Most of the performers are like a group of families. Suppose there’s a mall village, and they have a couple of very good singers. So they used to perform for the whole village, because sometimes when you perform, you’re exempted from taxes. You have this perk from the government. These troupes were built on that foundation, they would be like a family venture. Lhamo, I think is more at a village level. Villages would have their own troupes, who would go around and perform at opera festivals. Traditionally, during the Shoton opera festival, that happens in Lhasa, there are around 4 major opera troupes, and 12 minor opera troupes. For a whole month, they would travel around performing, like a summer picnic.

**Has the structure of the Shoton opera festival remained the same, from when it was held in Tibet?**

In Tibet, it happens at the end of summer because, most of the monasteries have this schedule, where the monks would finish a month-long retreat called yerne (summer retreat session). So they have a lot vows during that time, and at the end of that retreat,
every monastery would hold some festivities for the successful completion of the retreat. At that time, this [Drupu] monastery, they used to invite opera troupes to the monastery, to perform for the general public. Every year, it grew in numbers – the number of opera performers coming to take part in this festival. And later, the venue was shifted to Norbulingka, the summer palace. So the festival grew from that one monastery. And then later, it became sort of an official calendar, where government officials, His Holiness, would gather and watch.

**How many hours did the Milarepa production last?**

The actual play was one hour. But in between, the Rinpoche added a lot of chanting by the monks and nuns. So it took us about 3 or 4 hours to finish. Traditionally, lhamo is a one-day event. But I’ve heard from elders that there have been lhamos that lasted one whole week. It depends on the researcher who writes the script. If you look at the sotires, most of them are from the Buddhist canon. So whoever is more eloquent, or has done more research, he can make the performance longer. But traditionally, lhamo is a one-day event. There’s the story of Prince Norsang, I’ve heard an unabridged version can take a whole week to perform.

**Do you know how the Karmapa chose to teach Milarepa’s biography to all those students?**

Milarepa is one of the most famous saints of the Kagyu lineage. There are four schools in Tibetan Buddhism – Nyingma (oldest school), Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk (the monks who wear the yellow hat). Milarepa, although he’s considered one of the most famous yogis in our history, his disciples started this Kagyu sect of Buddhism. For the Kagyupas, Milarepa is considered the root guru. So from that point of view, His Holiness the Karmapa must have thought about giving this teaching, or empowerment from Milarepa’s life.
Appendix C

Dawa Bhuti – 12:30 – 1:00 pm
Interview conducted on stairs outside classroom, near basketball court.
Role at TIPA: Student (junior artist)
Role in Milarepa production: one of the back-biting ladies

When did you join TIPA?
In 2004.

How does the recruitment process work for TIPA?
I was born in Karnataka, I was in school, 10th class, and I got notice that TIPA was going to select some students, and we have to give examination. First test, we did in Bangalore. And then, after the exam, we got notice that I had been selected in the first test. Actually, first, they selected from some pictures – we sent some pictures, passport-size, then we gave test in Bangalore. Like singing, dancing, playing musical instruments. I love singing and dancing, I’m in the dancing team at school. I got notice that I had been selected, so we had to come here to give the next exam. Among 300 students, 22 were selected. Level boys and level girls. It’s my fate, you know? That brought me all the way from South to here. And in school, I knew singing and dancing. But we didn’t know the real meaning, we just sang and danced like this, but after joining here, I understood how important our culture is, our tradition is. It’s not only about singing and dancing, you know? It’s about preserving our culture. These days, our rich culture is in danger of extinction because of the occupation. In Tibetan dance, there’s no type of ballet. But in Tibet now, they use their hands like this, all the ballet movements. The costumes are all changed now. So here, we are free, we are independent, you know? India, very nice country, very independent country. So we have the chance to preserve our culture here, we have freedom. So it’s very important to preserve our culture and our tradition, our costumes. As a single person, I have a big responsibility to preserve our culture. I know all this only after I joined here. One of my luckiest things is that I got to play even a small role in the Milarepa play, composed by the Karmapa. So I’m very fortunate to participate in this play. We just had a small role, but we did our best, I enjoyed, you know?

How did you participate in the rehearsals? How did you practice?
We have Milarepa opera, but we have turned it into a drama. So the stories and everything was composed by his holiness. So we went down to his monastery, in Sidhpur, every afternoon to practice. And during practice, if we made mistakes, his Holiness would say “no!” and he would himself perform to show us. It was so nice. We
are very afraid because he was so serious, so if we didn’t act properly, he would show us himself. It was a really nice period.

**How was that experience, being directed by such a high lama, different from the other productions you have been in before?**

Firstly, I was in awe, speechless in the beginning. And then, in our previous life, I think we TIPA members, even me as an individual, I think I’ve done some good things, to be included in this acting. Secondly, I think I’m very lucky, I must have done some good deeds in my past life. There are lots of Tibetans who can act better than us, but I’m just a normal Tibetan girl, and I got this opportunity. It’s all because of previous life good deeds.

**You mentioned that there’s a Milarepa lhamo, right? How is the Karmapa’s play different from the lhamo?**

I have acted in small, small roles in other lhamos, since I’m a junior artist hahaha! So right now, we’re both talking. In drama, our conversation is like talking. In opera, our conversation would be like singing. The words are put into singing. **Which is more enjoyable for you?** Both are interesting, but in drama, it’s more active, since it’s like a conversation. In opera, we have to keep waiting to see what the other actors are singing. That’s old traditional, so it’s slower.

**In what other ways was the play different from lhamo?**

The make-up was different. In opera, we do make-up by ourselves. In that drama, His Holiness invited beauticians from Taiwan. They made us look completely different – when I looked in the mirror, I was like, “Is that me??” They put a lot of different stuff on us hahaha!
Appendix D

Sonam Phuntsok – 10:50 – 12:00 pm
Interview conducted in main office lounge of TIPA
Role at TIPA: Senior Opera Instructor
Role in Milarepa production: Marpa

Where were you born, Sonam la?
I was born in India, in Sikkim.

How did you first join TIPA?
When my family escaped from Tibet in 1959, they stayed very close to the border, in northern part of Sikkim. It’s very close to Tibet. Right now, the place where my family lives, if I drive 24 km, I’m in Tibet. So very close to Tibet. I was born in a mixed-race family – my father is Indian, my mother was Tibetan. At age 6, I think, my father left, and since then, I have never seen him. I have younger brothers and sisters, we lived in a very remote area for a long time. When I was 10, the Tibetan representative for the Dalai Lama’s office, in [Gyansok], the capital city, wanted to help those young Tibetans whose families didn’t have a father or mother – one-sided families. They wanted to help, so they came looking for little poor Tibetan families. So I don’t know, maybe it was my karma, so they selected me. I don’t speak very good Tibetan, because I was born in a remote area...I can speak Sikkimese dialects. In the atmosphere around, most of the people speak Nepali and Sikkimese. So then I was brought to Dharamsala, I remember it was ’76 or ’77. How old were you then? Ten! My mom wanted me to go to the Tibetan schools here. In the 70’s, the exile government was very poor, and we didn’t have many schools here. So we were looking for schools, some institutions. Then, I was brought to TIPA. There were fourteen of us, not orphans really, people with one-sided families. TIPA wanted to adopt, I would say adopt – I love that word, because I don’t have any skills to become an artist or singer. We were very poor, I think, so TIPA adopted three kids out of fourteen. So I was one of them. Since then, I have lived here, studied here, grown up in this school, I finished my MA Master of Arts here, I became an instructor in this school, I married, had kids. So I’m the eldest son of TIPA. I don’t have much experience, I’ve grown up in this small area, maybe gone to tour in the West. The opportunities I gotten through TIPA – I’ve toured almost every part of the world. Few of the communist countries, I have not been to, but rest of the world, I have been touring since 77’, 78’, 79’. I became an instructor, folk dance instructor for some time. Then since my opera master retired, I became the opera master – currently I’m the senior opera master for this school. That’s why I get the opportunity to get involved in the Holiness the Karmapa’s production. Actually he had given the script to the artistic director at TIPA, then I don’t know what happened, but he didn’t start the preparation. Then one day, the Rinpoche was leaving for Bodhgaya, and ten days before leaving, he wanted to sit and watch the play. The artistic director had forgotten to make it, so we had a small meeting, and the TIPA director called me and said, “Sonam, can you help me?” So I took the script and started to make things around, whatever was written, I tried to bring it on the stage, the acting, the positions for the
actors. So in ten days, I had done the full thing, not professionally, because it’s just ten days and I didn’t know the scripts very well. So I did what I could and performed it for the Rinpoche – the whole thing, but not very professionally. Because some of them couldn’t memorize the dialogues, since ten days is too short, right? I performed, and Rinpoche was very happy. He gave me some notes, some changes in the dialogues. I started going to his palace everyday for a few hours, I write down…I rehearse with the actors here, I make changes. I go again, he makes changes. Like this, I worked with him for one month. Sometimes, I take the actors, I prepare a 15-minute scene, take them to His Holiness, we perform, he watches, writes down the mistakes, so like that, I start working with the Karmapa. And…it went ok. I was fortunate, everything went ok, and His Holiness especially liked the way I worked. I wanted to make it the best that I could. So I worked for almost two months, went to Bodhgaya to perform. It went ok, I wouldn’t say very big or professional, but by His grace, since we were blessed by him, the show went perfectly. We didn’t make mistakes. The only problem we had was with sound and lighting. They were from Calcutta, the lighting, and another group from Taiwan. We didn’t much time to rehearse with them, because the day we wanted to rehearse sound and light, there were heavy rains in Bodhgaya. But anyway, the Rinpoche was confident – he told us, “it’ll be ok” since he’s watched it a few times. But lighting was a problem. But the stage and everything, made by those Taiwanese people, was ok.

The one thing that I like about this Milarepa is that…actually, before the monlam, I mean the teaching, started, they had a meeting with the Kagyu sponsors who are supporting the Karmapa. They had a meeting about the plays, the year before we performed, since Rinpoche was writing the Milarepa play. And one of the professional artist groups from Taiwan wanted to do this play by themselves. Rinpoche told me this – he suddenly started saying no to the group, “I want this play to be done by Tibetan artists.” His Holiness told me that he has a special relationship with TIPA. Why? Because when he first came to India, this is the ground that His Holiness (the Dalai Lama) first introduced the Karmapa. We didn’t know Karmapa is coming, we didn’t know he was coming with His Holiness to watch Tibetan opera, we didn’t know about these things, but we were performing Milarepa. In Tibetan we call this “unexpected”...if we had known he was coming, and we performed Milarepa, that means we prepared something before. But we had no idea, we had already planned that this year we were going to perform Milarepa opera. So that day, I felt very special that His Holiness came here. He was a young little boy, it was the first time I saw him in live, of course I’ve seen him in pictures. So Milarepa’s story is very much related to the Karmapa’s lineage. So right after the performance, His Holiness spoke to the public. The opera finished, there were thousands of people seated around him. So His Holiness said, “today, we performed the story of the legend master yogi Milarepa, so I’m very proud to introduce today the little boy here, who is the real lineage of Milarepa. So that was very touching for us, because we didn’t plan it. It happened. What’s the Tibetan word for that? We say...[ma thik pe tem the] [Lhaksam la: In Tibetan we have this expression, ma thik pe tem the, which means “auspicious coincidence”]. It was the first time ever that TIPA was performing that story in exile. So that’s why, he told me, the Rinpoche wanted us to perform this story, “I know that you can do it.” He wanted us to do it, and we did it, and after the performance, His Holiness told us – he was very happy, proud. “The Taiwanese actors really wanted to do this, and I
refused them, and I’m very proud that you guys did it today, and I’m very proud now in front of those Taiwanese actors. So since then, His Holiness has become very close with this school. He always says he has special feelings for schools, because he himself is a writer – he writes poetry, he writes lots of songs.

I have spent 38 years in this school, and this was my best, one of my biggest works. I’ve done small plays, many plays before, I’ve done some movies as well, but I think overall, this was my biggest stage show that I’ve ever had in my life. I played Marpa’s character. Helping them to make the story, and also being part of the directors, helping to set up the stage...But I’m still not satisfied. Why, Sonam la? I can make it better, because of the time. How much time did you have totally? Not even two months, and we had some problems, some changes, students had to go out to perform folk dances, there wasn’t really good time. If I had three whole months just for Milarepa, then I can make it really professional. Again, as I told you, we didn’t get time to rehearse with sound, light, musicians – so these things...otherwise, it went ok hahaha.

How was this play different from the Milarepa lhamo that you originally performed?
I think it was very different, because lhamo has its own style. We have the singing, especially in the dialogues. We don’t speak the way we speak, dialogues are more like narration. Every dialogue between two people is spoken in tune, in a song. And movements have to be performed, move as an ensemble. I like to do more of the play, I think it’s better for the public to understand. When we perform Tibetan opera, I would say many young people have trouble understanding. Even if they know the story, singing/speaking-wise it’s different. In the play, it’s just like us, sitting here, talking very clearly, not many movements like dancing. I loved performing Milarepa through play. I think it was better. But same script, I made it short, because before, we had the script of the Tibetan opera, which was written by the artistic director here. But the Karmapa changed the script, produced it in his own way of writing. So I took that script and I made a short opera, two hours. We performed it in Washington D.C, during the Kalachakra festival. Many of my friends said, “Sonam, if you do opera this way, it’ll be much better.” Because I mixed up play and opera. Same play, shortened up, the dialogues were like in the Karmapa’s play – very clear speaking, and between that, I sing one or two opera styles. Many of m young friends liked this different play. There was opera that the elders can listen to, traditional, but then there is play where the actors can act. And then I used some drums and cymbals that we use in opera, and there are pieces of opera movements. Especially at a point when Marpa gets upset, I used opera singing, because it can be very loud. And once when he’s teaching nicely, I used dialogues, for the more religious things, it sounds peaceful. One of the Rinpoches, [the Karmapa himself was in D.C at this point, he couldn’t come, but I invited him, because I’m very close with him. Because of the security problem in America, he couldn’t come, but he sent some of his assistants/[disciples] to watch, and they think “if we mix up opera and play, it’s better.” Many elder Tibetans wanted to hear traditional singing there. But people who don’t understand the dialogues in opera can understand this, because I’m speaking in normal language. I put some soundtracks in the back, this is modern way, you know? If I’m performing traditional Tibetan opera style, I cannot use these soundtracks; I don’t want to use it – even if I had the materials, I don’t want to use them, mix it up. I just want to keep it traditional. But this
was a new kind of opera, mixed with play. I thought, “This is new,” so I wanted to use some soundtracks. It helps the public understand better. In scenes where Milarepa is doing black magic, I need thunder, winds, so I used all these things. It helps the actors and the public. It improves a lot, you know? His Holiness’s script is one of the best scripts I’ve worked with, so simple and easy to understand. Many scripts we have taken out of Tibetan religious scriptures, and sometimes it’s difficult to understand. In His Holiness’s script, he put in normal dialogue, like the one we use. **Oh, so it wasn’t in classical Tibetan?** No, very simple! Everyone can understand easily. So that was my experience, and I think it was the best experience I’ve ever had in my career as an artist. I think 20 to 30 thousand people watching at the same time. I remember that evening was very cold, and even those high lamas were wearing a lot of [layers] and watching without moving.

**So Sonam la, TIPA has such an important role; it has to preserve all these art forms, but like you were saying, it has to adapt new techniques and styles. How do you attain that balance?**

I’ve studied Tibetan art for 38 years, I’ve grown up with these things, so I know that are things which we need to change. And there are some things which I don’t want to change. In Tibetan opera, there are some things which are very much uh...we can of course, if you have money nowadays, you can do so many things with lighting and sound. But in the opera, our ancestors, whoever made these stories, they were very religious, and they put in traditions that were very much Tibetan, like non-violence, and compassion, you know? Teaching all these good things. You will never see a Tibetan opera with war, fighting, killing, revenge, no! They always teach good things. So because Tibetan religion is powerful, there are things that are very traditionally used. Ok, simple as a boat. People laugh when we perform here, watching this, because our boat is very colorful, there’s water drawn, snakes, fish, and some goddesses of the water. It’s so simple that even a small child can watch and understand, “oh!” You know that now we can make a real boat, but we use looks so simple, so pure. So these things, we don’t want to change it, I want to keep it very simple. I’ve watched performances of many world artists. For me, all the performances are about flying, you know? Jumping, lots of movements...I feel I want to be very close to the earth. This is important to my body. Even if I wanted you to sit, this is very uh...comfortable, luxurious. If you really want to sit, maybe in a tent, with wooden cups, a hard seat not a soft one, with some black tea, just sit down together and feel how important these things are, because they’re the first ever things we used. My art has many small things which are very traditional, and simple for the people to watch. People sometimes ask me to change it, and I say no, because these things are very precious to me, like how they started. Stage set-ups, movements of characters and actors, these things we can change maybe. In Tibet, we were not taught acting. A queen had to be nice and gentle, a king very religious, so some general background ideas. But the actor comes on stage, he sings his lines, doesn’t think much about his expressions. Nowadays, these things I try to change. I want actors to be more serious on stage. In Tibet, very strange, artists have a lot of freedom. I’ve seen these things – if I’m standing on stage, and some of my friends are coming to watch, I would just say “hi!” They had this kind of freedom in Tibet; they would shake people’s hands from stage. But now we don’t do this, we’ve become more professional. If I use a cup, I want to use a traditional Tibetan wooden cup, not those beautiful, colorful, glass things. We are trying to keep some things as authentically Tibetan.
as we can, but there are other things that I know we have to change. For singing, I don’t want to change – it’s very different, very unique to other cultures, other operas. Because by watching our opera, even if you don’t know the story, by watching the characters, you’ll understand 50% of the story. You’ll understand by the masks the characters are wearing. One nice thing is that in one opera, you’ll see people from the aristocracy to the people who work in the fields. Different dialogues, dress-ups. Aristocrats have their own way of speaking, same for servants. Everybody has a different character, a different dialogue, way of speaking – all these things you’ll see in one Tibetan opera. That’s why we don’t want to change opera much. We can make new stories, like Milarepa...In Tibet, before 1959, it was never performed. The story is there, right? But nobody performed Milarepa as an opera. Also, the story of Thang-tong Gyalpo, the founder of Tibetan opera – every performer knows this story, but nobody performed. We performed that story here. So we try to change, we try to make things.

**In Old Tibet, there was lhamo, but there was no such thing as a play? Is a play kind of a modern creation?**

No. In Tibet, people love music and songs. But opera is the only kind of show that everyone is waiting for. It is the biggest entertainment. Of course, there are people singing folk songs in the street, but opera is performed in festivals only several times a year. So it’s the only entertainment you have in a year. We didn’t have performances like this, only festivals. Villages would have festivals, people would sit around, watch, and in the evening there would be bonfires, and people would drink. There’s no entertainment like “oh, there’s a play going on, there’s a folk dance going on.” No stages in whole Tibet. Norbulingka, the summer palace, was the only stage where you performed Tibetan opera. But of course, people performed in village festivals. Not professional artists, the village people themselves would perform. So we didn’t have any organized kind of performances. That’s why, now in exile, we’re trying to research all of this. We go to Tibetan settlements, we got to the elder people, we talk with them about art, music, what they know we write down, record, bring it here, and then we learn from the tapes and then teach to the younger generations. Because it’s very hard to find those elder professionals, most have them have passed away. Only a few escaped to India, most who came to India were monks.

**So in order for people to better understand, the art form has become a play format?**

I would say that by using traditional dialogues, people don’t always understand. If we do a play, we speak dialogues like normal students speaking in a classroom. So even a 4 or 5 year old child can understand what the actors are saying. So it’s more attractive for the audience to watch all day. I remember times when I’ve performed lhamo, and people would be eating, talking, their own thing, because they don’t understand, maybe they feel bored. Only the elder people can understand very clearly what the actors are saying. [Demonstration]. We’ve also tried to make some small comics for the kids, as a way of preserving these stories. Every year, we send students from here to teach the kids at TCV, some basic things about Tibetan opera, so they can learn and when they grow up, can understand when we perform. His Holiness always says that Tibetan opera is the tree of Tibetan culture, because it’s very much related to religion and teaching good things. So His Holiness always says, “please spread this to the Tibetan
...So now in exile, we have 10 different companies. So Tibetan opera is not dying, it’s very much alive.

**As generations grow up, many of them might be listening to Western music...**

Of course they are! If you go up to their rooms, they’re listening to all the different types, from the blues to reggae and Bob Marley. But we cannot stop these things. Time changes, people change. This is their right. I’ll never ask them to stop listening to these things; I will encourage them, in fact. You have to listen to other important musicians. I myself am like that – I used to play guitar, I love to sing modern songs, new Tibetan songs. These are like the wind, you cannot stop this. But I will tell them one thing – your real duty is to preserve tradition. On top of that, listen to other things as much as you can. Learn any instruments, watch different plays, movies, all movies, not just Hollywood or Bollywood. Whatever I learn, I teach my students. I have no experience teaching, I’m not an Oxford professor! But whenever I travel abroad, I learn things about the Western stage. And I share this knowledge with them – “this is how they do it in the west.” Otherwise look at our auditorium, we don’t have enough light, proper sound, the stage is not the right size, too small, but we manage. But we know what kind of stage we need, though we can’t afford it. I’ve seen those stages in the West. Still, it doesn’t matter. These things are all based on money. The best thing what you have is your art, keep it strong, whatever you do traditionally, authentic. These other things automatically come – time changes, auditorium will get better, more professional.

**Personally for you, how did it feel to be directed by such a high lama?**

Very blessed. Honestly speaking to you, when I saw the Karmapa for the first time, he was very serious – he never laughs. So it felt very strange – “why is he so serious? How am I going to work with him?” But then once you are close to him, you understand what kind of person he is. So open! Only his face looks serious. I swear to God. …I felt this way; if he wasn’t a Rinpoche, he could be a very professional artist. He knows so many things, he loves music! He can learn music very fast. There’s a special scene where Marpa drinks. I get drunk and I go to Milarepa and pretend like I’m drunk, tell him to finish this, break that. And His Holiness, he wanted to do this scene every time! Every time that scene comes, he would ask me, “can I do this?” and he would do it so beautifully. The way people speak when they’re drunk, you know? My artists were shocked watching him! So he’s very special, gifted. When I’m sitting next to him, something is coming out, I feel very open to him, I share with him. So he became very close to me. So the Milarepa production was my first project with the Karmapa. And then when they celebrated 900 years of Karmapa, again, the Rinpoche invited me, “Sonam, I want to do some classical dances for this program.” There are court dances performed only for high lamas. So I arranged everything, with 20 artists from TIPA. I taught the students, rehearsed here, and then performed there. After the 900 celebration, he wrote me a script for the second Karmapa, Karmapa Pakshi. Now I’ve become very close to him, so every time he does something, he calls me and tells me to make it. So I’ve been working with the Karmapa for almost four years straight. I’m very much blessed. I feel much better, maybe it’s my mind. I have never felt sick, I don’t know. There are some energies that have come to me – I want to do this, I want to do that. I volunteer around when they are teaching, I do security works. Not only being an actor, but very close feelings with the Karmapa and his monastery. This
time I went to Sikkim, not even a month back, with a group. When we went there, they treated us so well because we were from TIPA, with tea, everything. There is something between TIPA and the Karmapa’s monastery. As a Tibetan artist, I feel very much blessed, and I want to work more and more. I want to share my knowledge of Tibetan arts with everyone. In my whole career, I will never get a high person like him to write scripts for me. No way! So I’m very blessed, very happy. I want to work under him more, with his blessings. It really helps, you know? When I come home in the evening, I think about what I’ve done, and what more I can do, make bigger productions, maybe some movies. I’m close with the Rinpoche now, so sometimes I even get his calls on my cell phone, we have discussions. He likes whenever I go to see him, if there’s a talk, or if I go to his monastery. He’ll say “don’t go yet, stay for a while, let’s talk.” So he’ll ask me about TIPA, he’s very much concerned about TIPA, and our artists. “What’s happening now? Any problems? Water?” All these things he asks, about our facilities, whether its clean. Because he’s environmentally very conscious. That’s why when we do some performance together, I feel confident that it will be good. He’ll pray, do something, for it to go well.

**Sonam la, how did you train as a musician and actor?**

Training in TIPA is very strange. Since TIPA was set up, few professional performers have trained. Most of the instructors are from the villages, elder people who know a few songs, they will come here and teach us. So we were not taught technically, professionally teaching methods. Just simple classes here, music class. Once you are here in TIPA for 4, 5, 6 years, then you learn more. I realized from the Western methods, how you learn things, what are the important things to learn. We were not really professionally taught. It’s like this – I learn something from the elders, I teach you orally, not through writing. It’s orally transmitted to younger generations. No music scales, professional vocal lessons like in the West. Here, everyone has to learn everything. In TIPA, every student knows opera, historical plays, folk dances, religious dances, instruments. So then after a few year, if you want to be a professional in some line, you can choose. You have the basic...you know lots of things about the Tibetan art, traditional music, dance, folk songs. Especially folk songs are from different regions of Tibet, and you learn from all of them. Even the different dress in each region, this way in the West, that way in the East – you learn all of this. It’s hard, but once you learn, you know so many things. That’s why every Tibetan school in exile has a music and dance in exile. Kids from 5 to 6, in the schools, will know traditional folk songs. This is where we send our artists, to the Tibetan schools. Some professionals, we keep them here. Even from a young age, they learn everything. So when they grow up, if they want to become professional musicians, they can come to TIPA. So this is a very useful system, because from childhood, you know your national anthem, festival songs, folk dances from different regions of Tibet. This is one thing His Holiness did very well. Wherever you see Tibetans gathering, there is music. Everyone can sing, everyone can dance. In America, Europe, Canada, there are Tibetan refugee communities. My wife and kids are also in Canada. But I loved living in Dharamsala, teaching. It satisfies me. Because when I was nothing, this school adopted me. When I learn something, I think of giving back something. I told my wife, “You can live there with my kids. I want to serve.” I want to pay back my school, and that’s why I’ve stayed back for 38 years. Whatever I learn, I want to share my experiences with my fellow
artists. We say instructors, teachers, but I never felt like I was an instructor or a teacher. I always think of myself as the eldest son of the school. The artists here are my younger siblings. I don’t have any connections with my Indian side. I don’t know my father; my mother says he’s from Dehradun, but I’ve never seen him, I don’t know any of the relatives on my father’s side. Now of course, I have some Tibetan relatives from my mother’s side, but apart from that, there’s no one else. Without this school, I’m lost. I’m very fortunate. My mother was very kind – she had a very hard time after escaping Tibet, but still she cared about my education, and she made sure I got one. So Sonam is now 48, grown up in Tibetan society and now very much Tibetan. Of course I love India; it’s been so kind to the Tibetans, especially those who have been here for almost 50 years. But I have no kind of connection to Indian society, because I just grew up in this school. I don’t know much about my father’s side of the family. This is one sad part of my life. Because everyone wants to know something. I wanted to know what he looks like, if I have any brothers or sisters. No, only my Tibetan mother’s side. But it’s ok, not bad.

**Yeah, I was going to ask you – so many of your colleagues have gone abroad. What motivated you to stay here?**

So many of my friends have gone abroad. Many of them, when I tour abroad, say “Sonam, stay here.” But very strange feeling, I don’t know why. Sometimes I’ve decided to stay, but I’m not happy. I feel uncomfortable, and I say, “Ok, I’ll go back.” This has happened many times. I’ve lived in America for many years; I was at Middlebury College for a year as an exchange student. I’m one of the first Tibetans who got a Fulbright scholarship to return. Before I went – maybe this was luck for me – every student who got a Fulbright has to go see His Holiness before they leave India. Very strange, right? I was one of the 19 students who got the scholarship and was going to America. When we went to seek His Holiness’s blessings, he said, “It’s very good that you’re getting these opportunities to study abroad. Please go study. But you have to come back. I’ve seen many Tibetans who disappear once they leave. It’s not good for the next students who come – they might not give scholarships if people are illegally staying in the U.S. So he spoke nicely to everyone. And he knows I’m one of the artists at TIPA, and that I’m one of the best opera singers in exile. He stopped me and said, “You don’t go. Why do you want to go to America? It’s better if you stay here. You can teach Tibetan opera.” First, I couldn’t say. I’m not a person who opens my mouth like this. I don’t speak much, honestly. So I stood aside and thought. I said, I’ll just go for one year and then I’ll come back. So he blessed me, and gave me katas and all. So I left here on September 3rd 1993. I finished my school on September 3rd, 1993. Same day, I flew back to India. I remembered that I promised him, so I didn’t want to stay even one day. So if I’m abroad – I’ve lived in America, New York, for a long time, after six months, I come back. I don’t feel good. My mind always says “go back.” I was lucky; I finished college and came back, and the day I returned here, TIPA artists were practicing Tibetan opera. My late master said, “Oh good! Sonam, you’re back! We have to perform this opera, His Holiness is coming in a few days.” I was lucky, right? My master knew that I was one of his best artists, so I performed after a few days. At the end, His Holiness spoke in public about the characters, and the singing. I played the character of the father of the hero. And he said, “Today, I was very happy to hear the father character’s song. I found it very interesting; whoever made it, made it so beautifully. And this actor sang very beautifully. This guy here, Sonam – I met him before he
went to study in America, and I told him not to go. He told me he was coming back. And he came back, and today he performed, and I enjoyed. So I would like to say thank you for coming back. So since then, people say, “Oh Sonam, you’re so blessed.” People say that it’s important for me to stay here and teach opera. So my mind changes that way. This is something with my karma, my past lives. Whenever His Holiness is walking around, he’ll hold me and say “Keep doing what you are doing. Good job!” And TIPA knows that His Holiness knows me. Since then, I’ve been working here for many years. And recently, I’ve become close with the Karmapa and have gotten chances to work with him. So I feel that I’m so lucky, I shouldn’t leave. Of course, if you go to the West, maybe you earn more money. But here, my heart is richer than those people who are living there. I feel in my heart that I’m doing something for this school, and for the cause of Tibet. Some people are burning themselves, others are going on hunger strikes for months. I cannot do all that, but I have my own way of serving my country. So I thought, this is the easier way – teaching kids, sharing the arts.
Appendix E – Methodology

I conducted my research in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India. Since I was focusing specifically on the Milarepa production composed by His Holiness the current Karmapa, I began my research by reading the biography of Milarepa, written by Tsangnyon Heruka, as this was the version that His Holiness used as a basis for the play. Alongside reading the biography, I watched the DVD of the production, making observations on the elements of the performance, such as costumes, dialogue delivery, and stage arrangements. I continued my research by reading academic publications on lhamo, traditional Tibetan performing arts in general, music in Tibetan exile communities, and other anthropologists’ fieldwork conducted at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts. I obtained the majority of my information, however, by interviewing two senior opera instructors, one student, and one administrator at TIPA. Many of the performers who had participated in the Milarepa production were touring abroad or in other regions of India during the time of my research, but my conversations with Samten la, Sonam la, Dawa la, and Lhaksam la greatly contributed to my understanding of Tibetan performing arts, the Milarepa production, and TIPA’s role in reserving Tibetan culture. At the beginning of my research, I also spoke with Tenzin la, our SIT coordinator in Dharamsala, who helped me establish contacts at TIPA, and offered herself as a sounding board for my ideas.
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Suggestions for Future Research

I realized during my research that the Tibetan performing arts constitute a very vast genre of Tibetan art forms. In my conversations with my informants, there were often points where I wished I had more time to explore different trajectories of research than the ones I was focusing on then. I would definitely liked to have looked at the role gender plays in performing arts, and maybe the connection between gender and the process of preservation. Traditionally, women did not perform in lhamos, because this was supposedly inappropriate conduct. But what are the complexities behind this, I wonder. If women participated in folk performances, then what was different about lhamo that they were not allowed to join their male counterparts? And now that women do perform in productions at TIPA, how did this transformation take place? Did the urgencies of preservation in a foreign land allow for the incorporation of more Tibetans into this process? If women did not perform earlier, yet now they do, how does this evolution impact perceptions of preserving tradition? I would definitely recommend that future students explore the intricacies evident within the gender dynamics of Tibetan performing arts.

Figure 3: Divya writing her ISP!