

2. Reincarnation: Rebirth and Recollection in Tibetan Religion

It is perhaps the most well-known belief in Tibetan Buddhism that the life of a lama never ends but continues in perpetual cycling through reincarnation. This idea of rebirth through another secular body is found in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Particularly, lamas in Tibetan Buddhism gain the ability to reincarnate through a programme of strict training called the “Six Practices of Naropa” (Samuel 2012). Through this practice, a lama are able to control their life and death, as well as rebirth, in a way that he (normally “he”) can predict the time and place of his rebirth, along with the identity of the child as whom he will be reincarnated. Through reincarnation, a lama’s life continues in a cycle without genuine death, and a lama’s authority is inherited by himself. Therefore, the pure lineage of a lama’s life is stressed by many different Tibetan Buddhist schools.

Gupta (2002) concludes Stevenson’s famous studies on reincarnation cases all over the world during mid-twentieth century as having three features: first, the prediction of rebirth, which means that the dying person can be aware of his or her coming rebirth and its specific location and time; second, the physiological characteristics of the reincarnation naturally resemble those of the previous incarnation. Once the infant can speak, he or she is usually able to recoun this or her previous life, along with memories of specific locations associated with the previous family and names of relatives in the previous life. Third, “the child displays behaviours and attitudes that may be unusual in his or her family, but correspond quite closely to what is known or subsequently learnt about the previous incarnation” (p. 38). In other words, for reincarnated people, previous deaths are not the end of life, but another beginning, and the fundamental aspect of this process is the recollection of memories about the previous life. The idea of rebirth is to some extent a claim to remembering the past. However, Gupta sees reincarnation as accompanied by fears of the objects or people that caused the incarnation’s previous death. What’s more, he also mentions that it is normally sudden, violent and painful deaths that lead to reincarnation. In this sense, reincarnation is caused somewhat arbitrarily and, according to Gupta, children who possess the memory of a previous life normally lose such memories as they grow up. This implies that reincarnation is unstable and arbitrary, since these preservation of these memories in the next life is not within the deceased person’s control.

If one brings such conclusions to bear on Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation, one might be surprised by the absence of arbitrariness in this religious process. First of all, the memory of lama’s incarnations, who are normally 2 or 3 years old when they are found, will be kept as a life-long memory. The lineal authority of lamas lies in this stable and constant inheritance of memories. In the case described by Gupta (2002) of the process of searching for the next incarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama, one of the most important procedures was to test whether or not the child who was reported to be Dalai Lama’s incarnation, according to the deceased Lama’s will and prophetic predictions, possessed inaccurate memory of his previous life. The tests included asking the child to distinguish between strangers whom the previous Dalai Lama had hardly known and his real disciples, and letting him choose from a pile of objects those which belonged to the previous Dalai Lama. However, the cardinal part of this procedure consists of putting the child in front of a shrine and asking him to recite some important parts of Buddhist canons. The natural, inborn gift of remembering holy texts is regarded as the most extraordinary power of an authentic incarnation, and is treated as a symbol of the inheritance of Buddhist authority.

The belief in such reincarnation, as pointed out by Zivkovic (2010), is a “biographical process, the lama continues beyond death in new materializations” (p. 185). However, beyond that, the life of lamas is not simply confined to one single form of reincarnation as a human being, but can be present in multiple forms simultaneously (Zivkovic 2010). The relics of his dead body, the texts recording his previous life, the stories spread orally in local communities, and the next incarnation himself, all possess his sacred and magical presence. The ‘presence’ of lamas, as argued in Zivkovic’s ethnography, stems from a deep belief in the magical power and superiority of a lama’s body. As high-status lamas are seen as “living Buddhas” (*tulku* ལྷནས་པ་), they all “possess the three *kaya* or ‘bodies’ of the Buddha” (Zivkovic, 2010; pg. 120): the *dharmakaya* body which is all-pervasive, timeless, and spaceless, existing beyond any specific embodiment; the *sambhogakaya* body that is equivalent to the bodies of celestial Buddhas or celestial beings; the *nirmanakaya* bodies which constitute “vehicles into which spiritual exemplars consciously incarnate and reveal themselves to ordinary human beings” (p. 120). Therefore, a lama’s life is not limited to a specific life-span but pervades the spatiotemporal universe. Reincarnation is a way for a lama to manifest his true life from the realm of Buddha to the secular world, with his life reincarnated in this world but at the same time connected with the realm of Buddha. The cycling life forms in this world of lamas are just extensions emanating from the lama’s transcendental body. In this way, memory is also a transcendental vehicle which delivers wisdom from one space to another.

This process of the embodiment of a lama's life, known as *trikaya*, creates a life course that is on the one hand cyclical in that it repeats the same pattern, the same person and the same life, and on the other hand linear in that the pure linear inheritance of memory is strongly emphasised.

3. Time and History: the Reincarnated Path

The story of lamas' reincarnation clearly involves a cosmology of time that contrasts with a Western common-sense notion linear, progressive, and mortal time (Gupta 1992). The modern Western conception of time stresses a clear beginning of time, present both in scientific theories of the origin of the universe and the Christian myth of Genesis. In such conceptions, time has an end too, because just like individual human being, it dies. The universe dies, or the world will end with final judgement. Gupta argues that this Western idea of time indicates a strong emphasis on progress in society in that macro-scale time is related to the life-course of human beings, from childhood to maturity, from uncivilized to civilized and from primitive to developed. History in this way proves to be linear and progressive, and the Western world stands at the forefront of such progress. Thus, when one thinks about, say, childhood in this temporal perspective, it is with a nostalgia for an irreversible past. The theme of departures from the past are highlighted in a Euro-Christian culture as a sign of being mature a means to farewell to a person's and a country's childhood. There is a clear cut between past, present and future with a clear beginning and a clear end.

In Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, however, childhood is never in a linear position from which every life starts, especially for lamas. Reincarnation creates a figuration of time in which childhood is the beginning of the last life. Death is hence not the end of a lama's lifetime but a temporary absence. The idea of an immature and primitive childhood is subverted in that as childhood is the extension of the previous life, nascent incarnations of lamas possess inborn wisdom and maturity along with their sacred memories that surpass those of common adults. Therefore, time in Tibetan Buddhism does not move in a linear and progressive course but a cyclic repetition pattern. This is not to say that no linear features can be found in this kind of time perception, as reincarnation lineage per se is linear, but within this linear feature, time frequently goes back to its previous status and repeats itself, and a linear and progressive history is only an illusion, a manifestation of the same pattern of time. The past can be the present, the present is the foreseeable future, and future is the past that can be restored. This, in Žižek's analysis of the three bodies of Buddha, is formulated as the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space. Death, or ending, as a temporal process, is described in terms of the true subject leaving the secular world and moving to the transcendental one; birth or beginning is regarded as the recurrence of the subject from another space to the present. In contrast, the location or space in which the embodiment of a lama's true life lies is just an extraction from the enduring temporal stream of the history of the lama's third body. Time in the secular world is in this way spatialized, and can move back and forth.

Influenced by such a perception of time, history and historical memory in Tibet inherited the properties of reincarnation as well. The recent revival of a Buddhist tradition of treasure excavation, namely the *ter* Movement, shows just how history and rituals containing historical memory resemble the reincarnation system. In the Tibetan context, treasures have a very specific reference: the treasures that were buried in the times of the ancient dynasties, and which have subsequently been rediscovered and excavated according to high-status lama's enlightenment. "There is in fact an ancient Tibetan precedent for burying religious artifacts in the earth in the face of persecution and later re-excavating these concealed items amid a landscape of ruined temples and resurgent hope" (Germano 1998, p. 54). These treasures, especially religious texts, were said to have been buried by Padmasambhava བསྐྱེད་ལྷན་པོ།, the Indian Buddhist master of the eighth century who brought tantric Buddhism to Tibet, and to whose name many excavated scriptures were ascribed in order to gain historical legitimacy (Gyatso 1993). Both Germano and Gyatso point out that often the lamas who receive visionary enlightenment of the landscape of the location of such holy treasures announce the origin of these treasures to be in the past imperial dynasties. In the Nyingma tradition, which particularly stresses the importance of the *ter* cult, the significance of concealing treasures by Padmasambhava is that treasures were concealed for the future darkness where Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture would suffer from destruction and for restoration of Tibet, in which his own incarnations and incarnations of his disciples could rediscover treasures and bring hope (Germano 1998).

This idea of decay and restoration of Buddhism and the project of the future in the contemporary *ter* movement is highly lama-oriented; in Germano's ethnography of a high-ranking lama in Golok Serta called Khenpo Jikphun, who was believed to be a miraculous treasure discoverer (*ter-ton* འཇེ་རྩོན་པོ།), he notes the intimate relationship

between treasure discovery and lamas' reincarnation. When visualizing the holy landscape in which the treasures lie, meditative power and the purity of soul are vital for the realization of such knowledge. In other words, the pure lineal inheritance of the memories of previous lives is extremely important for the ability of *tertons*. In fact, Khenpo Jikphun himself was claimed to be the incarnation of an ancient heroic Buddhist king who had lineal connections with Padmasambhava himself. Khenpo Jikphun's ability as a *terton* was also connected, as he himself claimed, with the purity of his soul and his righteous behaviour based on Buddha's teaching (Germano 1998). One of the objectives of Khenpo Jikphun was to preserve the purity of Tibetan Buddhism. To keep the purity, the preservation of Tibetan identity and Tibetan Buddhist rituals was considered as most important in confronting the situation after the Cultural Revolution and the dominance of the Han Chinese government. Instead of violent demonstrations and resistance, to him, peaceful restorations of history and culture were a more feasible solution. The recall of the collective memories of the past glorious empire, and the dark times in which Buddhism was devastated, was realized through the discovery of treasures. On the one hand, the modern destruction and political upheaval could be explained and even projected through the miracles of treasure excavations, and on the other hand, lamas' authority could be reinforced in this religious as well as political ritual. The entanglement of current situation and the memory of the imperial past are formed by the perception of time as lineal on the surface, cyclic in essence. The *ter* movement extends the roots of the present not only in the contemporary geographic landscape but also in the landscape of Tibet's remembered past (Germano 1999, p. 91). In this way, it is of unique value in imbuing the present with the greater value of resonance for a very unsettled generation of Tibetans; the retrospective reality stemmed from the past dynastic period of this movement is *de facto* an extension of the time configuration of reincarnations.

Besides, the mythical and esoteric patterns of the transmissions of *ter*, are represented in canonical texts, and follow three stages. These patterns resemble the three bodies of Buddha as well. According to Gyatso (1993), the transmission of treasure follows three stages from the realm of *Akanistha* འཁའ་མིན་མེད་, to the realm of symbols, then to the realm of people's ears. That is to say, treasures, namely, holy artifacts, were first transmitted in Buddha's world in which time and space are absent, and the teachings are "wordless and signless". History in that world becomes impossible. They are then transported to the intermediate phase where symbols emerge as the vehicles of teachings, and finally teachings are verbalized in the secular world to the ears of the people. It is in this stage where Buddha's teachings are recorded in real texts. This coincides with the three bodies of the lama and to some extent personifies treasures as the reincarnations of Buddha's teaching. The buried is found, exemplifying the rebirth of a lama, and the found will be buried in the future darkness of the destruction of Buddhism and wait to be found, exemplifying the death and rebirth of the lama in the future. In this way, the historicity of treasure lies in its reincarnate properties. History in this way is projected through the paradigm of reincarnation. This autobiographical interpretation of history, in which the history of Tibet is compared to the life story and reincarnation of the Buddhist masters, again explains current problems and furthermore reinforces or even restores the authority of Buddhism in Tibet. Facing the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the assimilatory policies of the Chinese government, Tibetan identity finds a solution to the conflicts.

This is why McGranahan's (2005) idea of 'arrested history' in communities of Tibetan exiles is partly a universalist claim that neglects the larger cosmological pattern of history and historiography in Tibet. The silence and selective retelling of history among these exiled Tibetan communities are not merely due to the fear of history and the fear for the future, but owe more to responding to the cyclical movement of history and time. To be silent, to be selectively oblivious, is not only out of the desire to fix troubles to fit in the current situation. History will fix itself without any active human efforts. Thus to these refugees and political dissents, silence itself is an action.

4. Conclusion

The conceptualization of time is never a unified phenomenon in human cultures; time is always perceived in different ways and in this way history and the historicity of human life are understood diversely. However, sometimes it may be our only choice in terms of cultural translation. In the Tibetan case, the movement of time is symbolized by the life course of lamas in the cycle of reincarnations. Thus time moves in a cyclical way and possesses some autobiographic properties of lamas' reincarnation. The understanding of history hence follows this type of cosmology, and the fluid of history is represented in this course, especially by the treasure discoveries: the *ter* movement.

The reincarnate history is a strategy adopted by some high-status lamas to reinforce Tibetan identity and the authority of Buddhism after the destruction of traditional Tibetan society during the Cultural Revolution and other historical phases. History is understood as a repetitive movement and such a historicity is embedded in the hidden treasures from the glorious imperial past. Therefore, no matter how different a particular time or era looks like from the past, the innate pattern of its movement is always the same, and without any explicit effort, history will always go back to its original track.

References

- Hirsch, Eric & Stewart, Charles. 2005. "Introduction: ethnographies of historicity." *History and Anthropology* 16, 261-274.
- Germano, David. 1998. "Remembering the dismembered body of Tibet: contemporary Tibetan visionary movements." *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*. California: The Regents of the University of California.
- Gupta, Akhil. 2002. "Reliving childhood? The temporality of childhood and narratives of reincarnation." *Ethnos* 67(1), 33-56.
- Gupta, Akhil. 1992. "The reincarnation of souls and the rebirth of commodities: representations of time in 'East' and 'West'." *Cultural Critique* 22, 187-211.
- Gyatso, Janet. 1993. "The logic of legitimation in the Tibetan treasure tradition." *History of Religions* 33, 97-134.
- Lambek, Micheal. 1998. "The Sakalava poiesis of history: realizing the past through spirit possession in Madagascar." *American Ethnologist* 25, 106-127.
- McGranahan, Carole. 2005. "Truth, fear, and lies: exile politics and arrested histories of the Tibetan resistance." *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (4), 570-600.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. 2012. "Reincarnate lamas." *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Zivkovic, Tanya. 2013. "Returning from the dead: contested continuities in Tibetan Buddhism." *Morality*, 18(1), 17-29.
- Zivkovic, Tanya. 2010. "The biographical process of Tibetan lama." *Ethnos* 75(2), 171-189.
- . 2010. "Tibetan Buddhist embodiment: the religious bodies of a deceased lama." *Body & Society*, 16 (2), 119-142.