

Embodying Lama's Vision: A New Reincarnation Lineage in the Tibetan Exile Community

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Phrases such as “lama factory” (*bla ma factory*)¹ and “lama’s time” (*bla ma’i dus tshod*)² are quite common among Tibetans living in exile in India these days. These expressions signal, among other things, an increase in the number of reincarnations in the exile communities. The growth in the number of incarnate beings has much to do with interest in Tibetan Buddhism among Western and East Asian supporters³ and with Tibetan religious elites’ enthusiasm for the preservation of their religion in exile and in the Buddhist Himalayan regions.⁴ One such new reincarnation lineage is that of Losang Gyatso (*blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1928-1997),⁵ the former

¹ It refers to a contemporary family in exile that has recognized a number of its own family members as incarnate beings over the past few decades. Tibetans in exile use the phrase sarcastically to talk about the representation of the reincarnation phenomena in exile. This is not to say that they do not believe in the reincarnation system.

² This term is a satirical take on the growing number of incarnate lamas in exile and also on the wealth and popularity they receive in the global world. Even in a small Tibetan settlement in northern India, there are three young incarnate lamas compared to thirty years ago when there was none. Two are historical, and one is a newly established incarnate lineage. One spends the majority of his time abroad and occasionally visits his monasteries back in Tibet and India, and the other two are receiving monastic education in India. The term “historical” is used here to refer to those incarnate lamas whose predecessors came from a lineage that had already been established in Tibet prior to the 1959 exile.

³ See Lopez 1999 and Moran 2004.

⁴ For an excellent piece of writing on what it means to preserve Tibetan culture in general and Tibetan music in particular, see Diehl, 2002, especially Chapter 2.

⁵ I will refer to him as Genlak, a respectful term meaning “teacher,” in this article. In many ways this paper is personal, as I studied under Genlak for a decade, and the topic of reincarnation has always piqued my interest on many levels. It is, as Kirin Narayan (1989, 9) says best, not an article about “the exotic,” rather it is “in many ways a deepening of the familiar.” “Familiarity” or Clifford Geertz’s “deep hanging-out” can also lead to layers of complexities. As Narayan (1989, 10)

director and teacher of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD).⁶ What follows are a brief life-story of Genlak (*rgan lags*),⁷ the narratives surrounding the recognition of the new incarnation, and a contextualization of the stories within the exile community.

Genlak was born in Kongjorawa (*kong jo ra ba/ kong rtsed ra ba*) in Kham (Yunan Province) in 1928 and became a monk at his local monastery at the age of five. After spending twelve years at the local monastery, he finally made a long trip to Drepung Losaling (*'bras spungs blo gsal gling*) monastery in Lhasa to undertake the Geluk (*dge lugs*) scholastic education. At Losaling Monastery, he studied the usual Tibetan Buddhist scholastic topics, such as perfection of wisdom (*phar phyin*), epistemology (*tshad ma*), middle way (*dbu ma*), and monastic discipline (*'dul ba*) for over a dozen years.⁸ In 1959, following the escape of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama⁹ after the Chinese takeover of Tibet, Genlak also fled into India.

In India, Genlak first lived with fellow monks in Dalhousie in the state of Himachal Pradesh and later went unwillingly to Dharamsala to receive a teacher training course in the Tibetan language. As he reminisces in his memoir, "I did not want to become a school teacher, such activity was tied up in my mind with non-monk activity...."¹⁰ He further recalls, "In a [non-monastic] school I was going to have to teach writing, grammar, and poetry, and never mind teaching others, I was no good at those subjects myself. 'I will never be a successful school teacher,' I thought."¹¹ While he was initially reluctant to undertake the training and was ambivalent about its efficacy, one piece of advice given by His Holiness, according to Genlak, stuck in his mind and continued to inspire him for the rest of his life. As he recollects:

That talk [on the importance of the education of the Tibetan youth] by His Holiness filled me with inspiration and

observes, "Familiarity with the situation has also made me aware of complexities that I cannot glibly simplify."

⁶ For detailed official accounts of the institute, see Gyatso 2003, 3-114.

⁷ For detailed biographical information on the life of Genlak, see Sparham 1998.

⁸ See Dreyfus 2003, Chapter 6 on Tibetan monastic curriculum.

⁹ Henceforth, His Holiness, unless otherwise specified.

¹⁰ Sparham 2008, 302.

¹¹ Sparham 2008, 304. Georges Dreyfus (2003, 132) states, "Ge-luk students tend to focus exclusively on the inner science and logic, the first two of the standard five major branches." So, while Genlak learned Buddhism and Buddhist epistemology, which are included in the first two of the five major sciences, he never learned grammar, poetry, etc. that are considered as "external and secondary," to use Dreyfus' words. For a short discussion of the five major and minor sciences, see Dreyfus 2003, 101-106.

removed all my doubts. I felt at ease and dedicated myself to this new vision of life that His Holiness had set before us. Whatever I might say, think, or do would be in line with his vision. I would put all my effort into learning how to be a school teacher and into teaching the children of Tibet.¹²

Upon successfully completing the teacher training course in 1963, Genlak was sent to Mussoorie, another small town in northern India, to teach Tibetan language at a Tibetan elementary school. He assumed other duties over the next many years of his stay in Mussoorie. So, the majority of his early life in India was spent within a non-monastic setting, which ultimately seems to have shaped his perception of the role of education for the Tibetan youth within the Tibetan exile community.

In 1973, Genlak was called upon by His Holiness to serve as the director of his newly-founded IBD in Dharamsala. This was a major turning point. Genlak assumed the position and served as director of IBD for the rest of his life. IBD was originally established for Tibetan students with a modern secular education who wanted to study Buddhism in a “non-traditional”¹³ environment, which also entails maintaining a non-sectarian approach to other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. As Genlak says in his *History of the Dialectic School*, “Although the characteristic [of the institute] is Mahāyāna, it retains a non-sectarian or common approach to the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.”¹⁴

¹² Sparham 2008, 306.

¹³ I am employing the phrase “non-traditional” based on this passage wherein Genlak uses the Tibetan word “*sngar srol*” (old custom or tradition) in contrast to “*deng dus*” (modern). He says, “One reason is that although there are many monasteries that have been built in many areas in India, the administrators of these monasteries are overly attached to their habituated old tradition. Because of that, the Tibetan youth who attended modern schools are not fond of this.” “*rgyu mtshan ni rgya gar sa khul du bod kyi dgon sde mang po gsar 'dzugs thub yod kyang/ de tsho'i 'gan 'dzin rnam pa ngan lang shor ba'i sngar srol la gces 'dzin che drags pas/ deng dus slob grwar 'grims pa'i gzhon nu tsho de la dga' mos mi byed pa red/*” Gyatso, 2003, 16. For His Holiness' remarks about the objectives for the establishment of Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, see Sparham, 310. For Dreyfus' personal account of the early period of IBD, see Dreyfus, 2003, 72-74.

¹⁴ *rnam pa ni theg pa chen po'i chos lugs yin yang/ bod du dar ba'i chos lugs bzhi thun mong ba'am ris med du gnas/* See Gyatso 2003, 30. However, Genlak points out that there is a debate over the non-sectarian nature of IBD since it offers courses using commentaries authored by Geluk authors such as Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357-1419), Gyaltsap Darma Rinchen (*rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen*, 1364-1432), and Panchen Sonam Drakpa (*pan chen bsod nams grags pa*, 1478-1554), whose texts are studied at Losaling Monastery, where both His Holiness and Genlak received their monastic education (Gyatso 2003, 30). He acknowledges that the institute needs to make improvements on the non-

While the course curriculum has changed over the history of IBD, currently, a decade long program of study based mainly on Geluk commentaries on the perfection of wisdom, epistemology, and middle way culminates in a degree equivalent to an M.A. Upon completion of these courses, students can take courses for four more years on higher knowledge (*mngon pa mdzod*), monastic discipline, and the doctrinal views (*lta grub*) of Nyingma (*rnying ma*), Kagyü (*bka' brgyud*), and Sakya (*sa skya*) schools of Tibetan Buddhism. After that, one can study Tantra for two more years, completing a program of study called the Rimé Geshé (*ris med dge bshes*) degree,¹⁵ which as Chung Tsering (*chung tshe ring*) notes, "is a term designated to those Geshés who have completed the study of all four schools—Nyingma, Kagyü, Sakya, and Geluk—of Tibetan Buddhism."¹⁶ In concurrence with these Buddhist scholastic courses, students also take classes in classical Tibetan grammar, poetry, and English.¹⁷

Graduates of IBD are expected to pursue either the path of contemplation by devoting their lives to meditation or undertake civic professions within Tibetan society, such as teachers, translators, and Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) officials.¹⁸ IBD, therefore,

sectarian nature of the school. See Gyatso 2003, 41. At monthly meetings I observed at IBD in the early 1990s, some student-monks argued that if the institute could not ritually observe the death anniversaries of the founding fathers of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, they should not have to ritually observe the death anniversary of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk School of Tibetan Buddhism. The concerns raised at these meetings, according to some students, demonstrate that the institute is not only Geluk-leaning in terms of commentarial studies, but also, the bias in favor of Geluk was evident in the religious ceremonies that were observed. The historical significance of attaching the label of "non-sectarian" to the identity of IBD should be understood within the context of the Shukden controversy in exile. As Dreyfus (1998, 255) states, "The situation began to deteriorate in 1975, a year which can be described as the Ge-luk *annus terribilis*. In this year, a book written in Tibetan about Shuk-den by Dze-may Rin-bo-che (*dze smad rin po che*, 1927-1996) was published. Retrospectively, we can say that the whole affair started from this book and the Dalai Lama's reaction to it."

¹⁵ See Dreyfus, 2003, 254-260, on different types of traditional Geshé titles. Notice that Rimé Geshé is not found there.

¹⁶ For the original Tibetan passage, see Chung Tsering 2013, 224. Chung Tsering further goes on to say that, "It is not only new in exile, it is perhaps the first one in the history of Tibetan [Buddhism]. There have been ten Rimé Geshés so far, and among them one was a woman."

¹⁷ See *Information Brochure*, 13-14. Notice that Hindi is not taught at IBD despite the fact that it is the language that is spoken to interact with local Indians. Also, see n11.

¹⁸ As Chung Tsering (2013, 224) emphasizes, "One of the regular remarks that the late Genlak made was 'I do not need any scholars who are difficult to support.' What he meant was that he would not support those lazy scholars with only scholarly persona. If the society were to support such scholars, they would just

emphasizes the importance of “productivity,”¹⁹ to use Peter Moran’s term, within a monastic culture. It could be argued that IBD, given the exile context, purports to produce “ideal modern Tibetan monastics” (*deng dus kyi grwa pa tshad ldan*)²⁰ in both the religious sphere through their non-sectarian approach, and in a non-monastic context through their social engagement.²¹

Genlak’s influence on traditional Tibetan education in Dharamsala extended beyond IBD. In 1992, after almost two decades as IBD director, he began expanding IBD’s educational mission by creating the new institute, referred to as the College for Higher Tibetan Studies (CHTS), in a place called Sarah, a 30-minute taxi-ride from IBD. A naughty, tipsy child²² from a small town in Kham had

show their scholarly persona without doing any work. What Genlak really needed was [graduates] who could get involved in the society and do some hands-on work. This is what Genlak said repeatedly.” For a brief list of graduates serving in different capacities, see Chung Tsering 2013, 224-227.

¹⁹ Moran (2004, 105) argues, “Both the Chinese government and Tibetan exiles have taken up modern discourses of productivity, in which merely being a resident of a monastery, wearing robes and trying to observe the discipline is not enough. Instead, what is required is that one be a particular kind of ‘student,’ and eventually, hopefully, a scholar or meditator who upholds tradition.” Pamela Logan speaks of a similar sentiment that she heard from many Tibetans about incarnate lamas in Tibet, “as scholar Palden Nyima writes in an unpublished article: “These [Living] Buddhas often are of no help to the people, have little understanding of Buddhism, and simply live a good life at the expense of the common people.” This opinion is shared by many educated Tibetans.” See Logan, 23.

²⁰ McMahan (2008, 28) provides a useful description of several ways to be a Buddhist in the contemporary world. He groups them into “a Western Buddhist sympathizer,” “Thai lay woman,” “American Dharma teacher,” “traditional monk,” and “Asian modernizer,” and he argues, “I want them, first, to show the profound differences between the extremes of traditional and modernist forms of Buddhism; second, to illustrate some of the ways tradition and modernism are sometimes intertwined; and third, to deal with themes that are prominent today but can be traced back to the formative period of Buddhist modernism.” “Ideal modern Tibetan monastics” falls somewhere in between “traditional monk” and “Asian modernizer.”

²¹ I am not suggesting that “non-sectarianism” or “social services in a non-monastic setting” were not present in traditional Tibet or in Tibetan Buddhism before 1959, but rather the context in which these occur cannot be oversimplified. For instance, McMahan (2008, 250) argues, “Certainly Buddhism throughout its history has carried forth various programs of both introspective contemplation and sociopolitical engagement—forest monks and ascetics in mountain caves as well as Dalai Lamas as political leaders and monks as advisors to kings. But the conditions that have produced the contemporary spectrum of personal spirituality and socially engaged Buddhism are uniquely formed by crossfertilizations between Buddhism and the discourses of modernity, along with their late modern articulations.”

²² The words “naughty” and “tipsy” come from Genlak’s memoir where he talks about how people would refer to him as “naughty” and how much he enjoyed

now become an institution builder on the other side of the Himalaya. Although CHTS was not ceremonially inaugurated by His Holiness until 1998, almost a year after the unnatural death of Genlak, courses had already begun to be offered there prior to his demise. CHTS primarily offers classes on Tibetan language, history, poetry, and Buddhism. Their course curriculum in brief is as follows:²³ one-year further study course in Tibetan language for high school graduates or students with an equivalent degree; three-year advanced Tibetan literature course; two-year teacher training course for primary school teachers; and one and a half year graduate teacher training course.²⁴ Compared to IBD (which has 'Buddhist' in the name), the sister school purports to put "a greater emphasis to (sic) secular subjects."²⁵ Furthermore, CHTS places greater emphasis on the civic service or social work component at its core, as their brochure describes.²⁶ Chung Tsering observes that CHTS has greatly benefitted the Tibetan exile community by producing graduates who work in varying capacities.²⁷ So, while IBD boasts of creating ideal monastics, CHTS fosters ideal Tibetan citizens (*bod pa tshad ldan*) in education and service within the exile community. As many of Genlak's inner circle claim, CHTS was considered to be the fulfillment of Genlak's vision or dream.

Not only was Genlak an administrator, he was also an educator of Buddhist doctrine and Tibetan literature at IBD. Moreover, unlike many other traditional Geluk scholars,²⁸ Genlak was a prolific writer,²⁹ who wrote on topics ranging from advice to his fellow Tibetans on the problems of alcoholism (*chang rag gi nyes dmigs*) to commonly appearing subjects (*chos can mthun snang ba*) of the Madhyamaka School to the criticism of the controversial Shukden

drinking alcoholic beverage as a child before becoming a monk. See Sparham 1998, 28.

²³ Sparham 1998, 23-25.

²⁴ According to *Information Brochure*, the Department of Education of the Central Tibetan Administration formally recognized CHTS in 2001, and the Public Service Commission of the CTA "began to accept CHTS degrees and diplomas as valid for government recruitment and on a par with those granted by Indian universities" in 2006. See *Information Brochure*, 21.

²⁵ *Information Brochure*, 23.

²⁶ *Information Brochure*, 23 and compare it with that of IBD's "Aims and Objectives" on 11.

²⁷ For a list of graduates in different programs from CHTS since its inception, see Chung Tsering 2013, 230-231.

²⁸ See Dreyfus 2003, 120-123, where he discusses the "discouragement of writing" at Drepung, Sera, and Ganden monasteries.

²⁹ His writings have been compiled into a nine-volume collected works published by Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, Dharamsala.

(*shugs ldan*) deity worship.³⁰ Like many other contemporary Tibetan religious figures of his stature, he traveled widely to different parts of the world for various purposes, such as representing the CTA or His Holiness, and raising funds for IBD and the establishment of CHTS.

While the public Genlak is known for his service as an administrator, teacher, writer, and loyal disciple of His Holiness, the individual, human Genlak could be described as a study in contrasts: he was humble, yet arrogant in many ways; he was flexible and progressive, yet stubborn and conservative; he was as much a believer in Dharmakīrtian logic as he was a believer in the efficacy of ritual propitiation; he was gentle as well as harsh (and sometimes violent) to his students; and he was compassionate, yet short-tempered. Finally, at the age of sixty-nine in 1997, because of his stand against the worship of the Shukden deity,³¹ he was stabbed to death in his tiny room in Dharamsala,³² the very place where he saw a glimpse of hope for the future of Tibet in Tibetan youth.

Because of his long and admirable service at IBD, ordinary Tibetans who knew him respectfully referred to him as "*mtshan nyid rgan*" meaning "IBD teacher," with no other prestigious religious titles such as "*rin po che*" (precious one), "*mkhan po*" (abbot), or "*sprul sku*" (incarnate being).³³ The monk, who lived quite simply for his entire life, is now given a ritually sanctified new body, officially known as Tsennyi Khentul Tenzin Tseten Rinpoché (*mtshan nyid mkhan sprul bstan 'dzin tshé brtan rin po che*), but commonly referred to as Tsennyi Rinpoché (*mtshan nyig rin po che*). He was born on the fourteenth of May, 2001 in Ladakh to Sharma Sahib, a Garsha (*gar sha*) father of Indian citizenship³⁴ and Lhazöm (*lha 'dzoms*), a Tibetan

³⁰ For a detailed study of the history of the controversy, see Dreyfus 1998.

³¹ Genlak's miscellaneous writings on the issues surrounding the worship of Shukden are found in a volume compiled by his students. For the volume, see Gyatso 1997.

³² Dreyfus (2003, 303) writes, "In 1996, the Dalai Lama issued a stronger statement against Shuk-den, and a year later Gen Lob-zang Gya-tso and two of his students were brutally murdered in Dharamsala. Nobody has been apprehended but the Indian police have issued indictments against some known followers of Shukden, who escaped into Tibet."

³³ Samdhong Rinpoche (*zam gdong rin po che*), however, says that he had heard that Genlak might have been an incarnation of a famous Geshé nicknamed Nakpoba (*nag po ba*, the dark-skinned one). According to Samdhong Rinpoche, Genlak was referred to as "the dark-skinned one" because of his complexion and perhaps because of his predecessor. See Samdhong Rinpoche, 12-13. Gareth Sparham, the author of Genlak's memoirs, tells me that he never heard from Genlak that he was referred to as "the dark-skinned one" because of Geshé Nakpoba.

³⁴ Many news reports on the enthronement ceremony of the new reincarnation mistakenly (either intentionally or unintentionally) identify his father as a Tibetan. None of my informants said that the father was a Tibetan, but rather

refugee mother. He was confirmed as the reincarnation of Genlak at the age of five in 2006 by His Holiness, based on his divination (*mo*) result and the recommendation of the IBD representatives who oversaw the search process. He was officially enthroned in 2009 on a day determined through an astrological reading at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala. The ceremony was attended by highly ranked Tibetan dignitaries from the CTA. He is currently receiving his Geluk monastic education at Losaling monastery in south India.³⁵ In addition to his monastic training, he is also learning English and Chinese. He is fluent in Ladakhi, Tibetan, and Hindi.

Since the new body is an extension of his predecessor in the Tibetan Buddhist world, I will examine the narratives that construct the connection between the two bodies or lives.³⁶ Since the narratives are not available in writing, my account depends on informants' verbal accounts; it is these reports that served as the basis of His Holiness' final decree approving of the identification. I interviewed a dozen people for their insights into this matter in 2012-2013, but the following will focus mainly on information gathered from the following four major informants:³⁷ Norbu (*nor bu*) was Genlak's grandnephew, and is now a teacher and attendant of the young Rinpoché; Samten (*bsam gtan*) and Tharchin (*mthar phyin*), who trace

they emphasized that he was from Garsha (*gar sha*), located in the district of Lahaul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

³⁵ Norbu has this to say about the young Rinpoché's interest in study: "Right now perhaps because of his age he does not really have any interest in studying; he just wants to play. I have to literally stand beside him day in and day out so that he can focus on education. He is a very well-behaved child, though."

³⁶ As Ian Stevenson (2000, 98) observed among his subjects for his work on rebirth stories in many parts of the world, there are five major features that are seen in a fully developed rebirth case. They are: 1) an elderly person predicts that the dead person will be reborn; 2) someone has a dream about the rebirth of the dead person in a particular family; 3) birthmarks are noted when the baby is born; 4) the child makes statements about the previous incarnation's life; and 5) the child displays unusual behaviors. So, broadly speaking, Tsennyi Rinpoché's case is perhaps nothing unique, but rather operates within a broader practice of framing reincarnation tales. However, what might make the Tsennyi Rinpoché's rebirth distinctive is the Tibetan diasporic context in which it occurred.

³⁷ I conducted the interviews in Tibetan some of which I have translated in English here. All the names of my informants are pseudonyms. Even in quotes, I have replaced the names of the informants with the pseudonyms. I did not interview Rinpoché's father because of his lack of participation in the identification of Tsennyi Rinpoché. As Samten, one of the informants spoke of the father: "He said he does not care whether he [his son] is a reincarnation [the father used the word "avatār" in Hindi], but he wants his son to grow as a good person." Samten adds that the father is Buddhist. Furthermore, despite several attempts to contact the mother of the young Rinpoché, I was not able to interview her.

their regional background to Central Tibet, work in the administration at IBD; and Drölma (*sgrol ma*) is a sister of Tharchin.³⁸

Several years before Tsennyi Rinpoché was born, Genlak, a public figure, left behind powerful material or conceptual markers in a community where they can be easily used as signs for a future reincarnation. The markers include the infrastructures for the two institutes, many IBD graduates who studied under him and who hold prominent public positions in the exile community, Genlak's loyalty and devotion to His Holiness, the physical marks left on Genlak's dead body, and a visible threat posed to non-sectarianism as construed by the folks on His Holiness' side. So, it should not be surprising that discussions and narratives about his first reincarnation ensued after his tragic death.

Soon after the untimely demise of Genlak in 1997, several monastics representing IBD and Phukhang Khangtsen (*phu khang khang tshan*), the monastic hostel to which Genlak belonged when he was at Losaling, had an audience with His Holiness for his guidance and advice on dealing with the loss of Genlak. Norbu was in the audience and summarizes the meeting with His Holiness as follows:

There were four main things that we presented to His Holiness: 1) any lead on Lüdrup's (*klu sgrub*) incarnation,³⁹ which Genlak had requested but had stalled; 2) His Holiness' advice for Losang Ngawang's (*blo bzang ngag dbang*) family on how to cope with his death;⁴⁰ 3) His Holiness' advice on what Genlak's relatives could do in honor of Genlak; 4) any remedy to ward off general problems such as suicide, unnatural death, and other problems that had recently plagued Kongjorawa.

At the meeting, His Holiness addressed these concerns, but he did not mention anything about the possibility of Genlak's reincarnation. Samten also states, "The IBD administration initially did not express any interest (*do snang*) or persistence (*shugs*) on whether Genlak's reincarnation would be found or not." However, in 2001, four years after the initial audience, His Holiness decreed in writing that there would be a reincarnation (*yang srid*) of Genlak and that he would be

³⁸ They, thus, form a close-knit group of informants who are related to each other either by blood, regional background, or close friendship in the Tibetan social world.

³⁹ He is a prominent Rinpoché from Genlak's native hometown.

⁴⁰ He was one of the two students who were murdered on the same night. According to Norbu, his father is a respected religious virtuoso in his hometown, so his untimely death was obviously difficult to bear for his family and the local community members.

found in Nepal born to a devout (*chos pa*) Buddhist couple of Nepali citizenship (*bal po'i mi khungs*). A search was immediately carried out, and according to Norbu, "A former student of Genlak basically told IBD that he would collect names from different children in Nepal. He gathered around 500 names from different schools [in Nepal] and gave them to IBD. The institute presented the names to the Private Office of His Holiness (*sku sger yig tshang*),⁴¹ and His Holiness asked IBD to check on one particular child."⁴² As the story goes, a search party consisting of Samten and Gendun (*dge 'dun*)⁴³ went to Nepal to examine the child, but it turned out that the child was born two years before the death of Genlak.⁴⁴

As the search party was beginning to lose their hope in finding the right candidate in Nepal,⁴⁵ Tharchin started hearing a story from his sister, Drölma, about an "unusual child" (*spu gu mi dra ba/spu gu ya mstan*), who exhibited "signs and marks that resembled that of Genlak" (*rgan gyi rtags dang mtshan ma yod mkhan*). Contrary to what His Holiness had clearly specified, the child was born in Ladakh to a couple that were neither Nepali citizens nor devout Buddhists.⁴⁶ As Samten recalls, "In December, in the winter of 2004, we received a call from [Tharchin's] sister... She said that she knew a couple, Lhazöm and her husband, Sharma Sahib. Their son started talking about a monastery in Dharamsala, and he was quite unusual. We should come up and examine the child." As I asked for more

⁴¹ It is now known as Ganden Phodrang (*dga' ldan pho brang*) in Tibetan and the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in English.

⁴² Norbu adds, "To be honest, I was not there [in Dharamsala]. I did not see any letter from the Private Office of His Holiness asking IBD to examine this particular child."

⁴³ Gendun is a pseudonym for another person who works in the office of IBD.

⁴⁴ Norbu speculates that they went there mainly for another purpose. Since they happened to be in Nepal they dropped by to see the child. It is interesting that the person who collected the names of the potential candidates did not gather their ages.

⁴⁵ Norbu has this to say about the rationale behind the remarks that His Holiness made about the Nepal connection: "In retrospect, as I think about why His Holiness said that the reincarnation would be found in Nepal, I later found out that the parents were on a pilgrimage in Nepal in 2001. So, one could not say that what His Holiness said was without base (*ma red zer yag mi 'dug*). At least, that is how I made the connection in my mind (*nga'i sems nang la bang sgrig stang*)." I am reminded of Robert Orsi's (2005, 2) work where he describes religion "as a network of relationships between heaven and earth.... These relationships have all the complexities—all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on—of relationships between humans."

⁴⁶ They are Buddhist, but when asked about their religious orientation, Samten says that the mother went to Tibetan Children's Village school in Ladakh implying that she is not particularly devout. The father does not have much faith in the institution of "avatār" (reincarnation).

information about the narrative that Samten and Tharchin had heard from Drölma, both of them insisted that I speak with her directly.

I took their advice and conducted two interviews with her. I asked her to give her account of the child. She said:

I don't remember that much now, but I will tell you what I remember. Sharma and Lhazöm [the parents of the child] were going to get married in a few days. Lhazöm asked me whether there would be success in their marriage and asked me to do a dream analysis.⁴⁷ So, that night I did some dream analysis. In my dream, I saw Sharma and Lhazöm going down to Sarah from an area near Geshélak's (*dge bshes lags*) [i.e., Genlak] room (*bzhugs sa*) in a white Gypsy car. This was before they got married. They arrived at Sarah. There was a black stone surrounded by many snakes. They probably symbolize gems and Nāgārjuna [respectively]. The next day, Lhazöm asked me whether I had a dream. Our shops are next to each other. So, I told her that Geshélak was a great person and perhaps she was going to have his reincarnation (*yang srid*). I did not know that IBD was looking for Geshélak's reincarnation. I assumed (*nga rang rang gi bsam tshul*) that there would be one. Lhazöm told me that she was going to have a baby (*spu gu*) more precious (*rtsa che ba*) than Geshélak. And, I asked her why she would need someone more precious than him. There could not be any one more precious than Geshélak. He was Tenzin Gyatso's (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*) [i.e. His Holiness'] right-hand man (*dpung pa gyas pa*).⁴⁸

As a skilled narrator, Drölma places herself at the center of the story and then weaves together a meaningful narrative thread that connects and complicates the relationship between Genlak, his institutions, monastic scholasticism, and the parents. While she continued to speak for a long time with details "full of boundless possibilities,"⁴⁹ I interrupted her at some point and asked her what and when she reported about the child to IBD. She then said:

⁴⁷ I asked Tharchin and Norbu whether Drölma practiced any dream analysis. The response that I received from them was a rhetorical question "Did she say that?"

⁴⁸ According to Tharchin and Samten, she never mentioned this particular dream to them.

⁴⁹ Narayan (1989, 243) argues, "A story's lifelikeness also allows events to become believable within it, even if they should never occur in everyday life. For though the world created by a story is often similar to lived cultural reality, it is also full of boundless possibilities. Within a story, received categories can be combined into fantastic new shapes, and time can jump backward, sideways, or far ahead. Men can be born to virgins, gods can fly through the heavens, objects can change

One day before I told IBD, I brought the child (*spu gu*) to my room and gave chocolate and sweets to him. It was just two of us. I asked him, 'Please tell me what you were in your previous life and I will tell Tenzin Gyatso [His Holiness].' So, he told me that he would tell me everything. He said that he had two students. They fought a lot. [She is referring to the night when Genlak along with his two students were murdered.] He told me the names [of the two student-monks], but I don't remember. The child was probably around three years old then. I felt convinced, and I called Tharchin and told him that the child might be the reincarnation of Geshélak [Genlak]. Please tell this to His Holiness, oracles, and Samten. Tharchin told Samten, but IBD did not really do that much for a while. I called him [Tharchin] again and asked him to tell Tenzin Gyatso. I said I don't have any clairvoyance (*mgnon shes*) or realization (*rtogs pa*). They finally reported everything that I mentioned to His Holiness. They presented a five-page report to His Holiness detailing her descriptions. Within a month or so, they [Samten and Tharchin] said that they would come to Ladakh. Samten told me that if the child was Geshélak's reincarnation that would be great, but if he is not, then what? I got a bit upset and angry and told him that it would be up to His Holiness and the pair of the Red and Black protector deities (*srung ma dmar nag gnyis*).

Having heard stories such as this,⁵⁰ so the narrative goes, the search committee informed the Private Office of His Holiness of their report from Nepal and the latest update on the quest. The search for a child born to a devout Buddhist couple of Nepali citizenship thus ended. His Holiness' response arrived quickly, asking IBD representatives to go to Ladakh immediately to examine the child. Samten asked Norbu to accompany him. They flew to Ladakh shortly thereafter. Samten describes his memory of his initial encounter with the child as follows:

shape, and animals can speak. By stretching conceptions of the possible, narrative transcends the here and now."

⁵⁰ It is important for us to keep in mind that stories are told differently to different people even by the same narrator depending on the context. As Narayan (1989, 26) states, "A folktale like 'That's Good, Very Good' can be retold in many ways, both by the same teller and by tellers separated in time and space. The version Swamiji told the couple was by no means an authoritative text. Rather, it was just one among many retellings, using a hodge-podge language and narrative details shaped in performance to a particular set of circumstances."

We told Gen Pemalak (*rgan pad ma lags*) [the caretaker of the residence of His Holiness in Leh, Ladakh, where the informants stayed] about the child. We said that it [the whole search process] was still quite secret (*gsang ba*). Gen Pemalak knew of the child and concurred that he was special. Gen Pemalak took them to the parents' two-storied house. There were some trees in the courtyard. The child did not know that we were coming, but he was standing there as if he was waiting for our arrival. He expressed some familiarity with us.

In the words of Kirin Narayan, stories such as this seem to "dramatize" the abstract Buddhist tenets such as karma, rebirth, *samsāra*, and *nirvāna* "through character and plot."⁵¹ So his initial impression of the child, as the narrative suggests, was that of the child's possible longing for his permanent home based in Dharamsala, far away from his temporary two-storied house. Since the two search members spent some time at the house, I asked Samten whether he observed any other special characteristics about the child. His account continues:

The child said that he had been killed with a knife. We asked him where. He immediately took off all layers of clothes and showed his bare stomach indicating where he was stabbed. This was the most extraordinary (*ya mtshan shos*) instance [that we observed at the parents' house that day]. He was only around five or six years old then. Then, we had the late Genlak's (*rgan dam pa*) chess set with us. Remember Genlak was very fond of chess! Norbu showed the chess set to the child; he really liked it. His mother told him that it was not his, but he kept saying that it was his. They left the chess set with him that night. But one thing that I want to say is that the incarnate does not like meat at all. He does not even eat meat! But the late Genlak loved meat! Other than that, he is very much like the late Genlak.⁵²

⁵¹ Narayan 1989, 244.

⁵² Drölma adds this to the story: "When they came to the parents' house, Samtenlak had brought a lot of fruit, biscuits, and others. Samtenlak started asking questions to the child, such as, "Who am I?" [to which the child said] "You are my student." And, "Who is this [pointing to Tharchin]?" "This is my relative (*spun mched*)," says the Rinpoché. Samtenlak then says, "You must have beaten him a lot, probably" "No," answers the child. Tharchin started crying, and then he said that Genlak never beat him. They all teared up now." I am reminded again of what Narayan (1989, 91) has to say about narration. She argues that folk

As an administrator, Samten's narrative is less personal, and focuses more on the connection between the child and the institutes. On the other hand, Norbu's story is more personal, making a conscious attempt to create a personal connection between himself and the child since Norbu was Genlak's nephew, student, and attendant, and they were from the same monastery in Kongjorawa. Here is how Norbu recalls his initial encounter:

I think we arrived there in the morning around nine o'clock. Gen Samtenlak recounted the purpose of our visit to Gen Pernalak, who responded by saying, "If that is the child, he must have gone to school by now. You should take a rest and visit the family in the afternoon." I was a bit tired and laid down on the bed in our room. Gen Samtenlak was on his bed on the other side of the room. I had a dream then. I never told this dream to anyone other than Gen Samtenlak, but I think it is okay if I share it with you now. I don't know whether it was a good omen or a bad omen (*rtags yag ga yin sdug ga yin mi shes*). In my dream, I was sitting by a lake and two gold fish started to come close to me.⁵³ I extended my open palms out in the water and they came straight into my palms. I woke up immediately and shared the dream with Gen Samtenlak, who didn't say much about it. Around four in the afternoon, we went up to the child's place. As we approached the house, I took a glance at the house and saw the kid looking down at us. This is just my personal experience (*nga rang gi tshor sang*). As I saw him for the first time, I had a vivid image of Genlak's face (*rgan lags kyi rnam pa dang gdong pa phra lam mer mjal khan bzo 'dra byung*). As we walked into their house, he really seemed to like me a lot. Perhaps because we brought a lot of toys, such as trucks and airplanes, and some candies. The kid and I started playing with the toys, while Gen Samtenlak and the parents were talking. We bonded very well (*cham po zhe po cig chags song*) within a few minutes and felt very comfortable with him (*bde po zhe po cig chags song*). Every now and then I would tease (*skyag skyag byas*) him by asking, 'Do you know Norbu [referring to himself]?' He would just give me a blank look without saying anything in response.

stories "are not just told; they are *performed* to audiences, and so they act as a form of theater."

⁵³ Two golden fish is one of the eight auspicious symbols in Tibetan tradition.

Both Norbu and Samten said that they were impressed by the child's demeanor at their initial meeting with him. Their enchantment with the child would continue over the next few days, as Norbu's story shows: "The following day, we rented a car and went on a pilgrimage to several sacred places in Ladakh. I was very impressed by the kid and how he behaved himself at the sacred sites. I felt that he was very unusual, but I did not know whether he was Genlak." And the day after, as Norbu recalls:

The next day, Drölma invited us to dinner. At some point the child got up and started ripping off a tissue paper on his own and started making something. His grandpa asked him to stop, but he did not. He made something with a head and wings. Gen Samtenlak asked him, "What is it?" He said, "Dha." "What?" asked Gen Samtenlak again. "Dha" the child repeated. Gen Samtenlak looked surprised and immediately said, "Oh, he is trying to say 'Dharamsala'" and asked another question, "Are you coming?" He said, "Yes!" Gen Samtenlak said, "Where are you going to sit?" He pointed at the head of the paper airplane. Gen Samtenlak asked, "Should we come with you?" He nodded in response. Gen Samtenlak asked, "Where should we sit?" He pointed at the tail-end of the paper-airplane.

Upon their examination of the child over this three-day period, as the narrative goes, the administrator and the nephew-disciple confirmed that he was "unusual" or "extraordinary" (*mi 'dra ba/khad mtshar po*). However, both of them stated that they could neither confirm nor deny whether he was the reincarnation of Genlak. Nonetheless, they returned to Dharamsala thinking that they had found a child with some extraordinary signs. Now they would have to report it to His Holiness, as Drölma had recommended in her request to Tharchin and Samten at the beginning of the little-known quest. As per their accounts, they presented a written document to the Private Office of His Holiness soon after their return to Dharamsala from Ladakh. Not long after that, they, along with other IBD representatives, were summoned for a meeting with His Holiness in 2006. At the meeting, nine years after Genlak's death, His Holiness officially confirmed the young child in Ladakh as Genlak's legitimate reincarnation.

Conclusion

Genlak's life is marked by two major challenges faced by the exile community: (1) the preservation of Tibetan literary culture and religion; and (2) sectarianism. Genlak, as a loyal disciple of His Holiness, devoted his life to addressing both in his writings and through the development of IBD and CHTS. While these contributions may forever influence the younger generation of Tibetans in exile, they could not create the socio-religious connections that a new reincarnate body can.⁵⁴ The new body could and does interact with his predecessor's students, receive teachings from His Holiness, and create religious connections with his teachers at Losaling. Genlak's new hybrid body with his language skills (something that Genlak never acquired) could help His Holiness with his broader vision of fostering a non-sectarian attitude among Geluk monastics, educating the younger generation with Tibetan literary tradition, and disseminating Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayan regions beyond the Tibetan exile community. Using John Strong's idea about the Buddha's relics being an extension of the Buddha's biography,⁵⁵ we could contend that Genlak's reincarnation is not only an expression and extension of the predecessor's biography, but also of the predecessor's guru.⁵⁶ As His Holiness is in his early eighty, only time will tell us whether the young Tsennyi Rinpoché can fulfill the vision (*dgongs pa sgrub*) of his predecessor's root lama.

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⁵⁴ For an excellent study on how an incarnate body can establish such relationship, see Anya Bernstein's article in this special issue (2017) as well as her recent book (Bernstein 2013).

⁵⁵ See Strong 2004.

⁵⁶ Ordaining monastics, recognizing incarnate beings, giving teachings, traveling throughout the world, writing books, and engaging in politics can all be seen as a part of the activity of the lama (*bla ma'i mdzad pa*).

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