

EXAMINING ‘VERNACULAR’ SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLIC POWER IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

This article* examines the significance and impact of vernacular symbols with national and ritualistic importance, focusing on their roles in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as the Tibetan crisis. The study asserts that the effectiveness of these symbols in mobilising public sentiment depends on their ability to elicit a diverse range of emotions. It analyses symbols that have garnered global attention, particularly following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and China’s occupation of Tibet in 1959.

The methodology combines fieldwork and interviews with Tibetan communities in Kalimpong near Darjeeling (West Bengal), Belakhuppi (South India), and Sikkim, along with Ukrainians residing in Estonia. By utilising both traditional ethnographic approaches and netnography (Kozinets 2015), the study investigates trends and emotional impacts through social media, incorporating digital tools for interviews.

The research explores the transformation of religious and cultural symbols into instruments for constructing national identity amid geopolitical conflicts. It examines how these symbols validate personal and collective identities during national

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crises, offering insights into their role in affirming one's identity as it relates to a lost or threatened nation.

KEYWORDS: symbols • comparative studies • politics of identity • crisis • net-nography • vernacular

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PAPER

The geopolitical response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February on 24 February 2022¹ highlighted a complex web of interests, alliances and strategies among various countries. A wide range of reactions were expressed, from outright condemnation and punitive measures against Russia to cautious neutrality and abstention from direct involvement. Each country's stance was influenced by its strategic interests, historical relationships, and domestic political factors. Various Western countries have condemned Russia and supported Ukraine, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and many others. They expressed their strong diplomatic disapproval of Russia and implemented a series of harsh economic sanctions. To isolate Moscow economically and pressure it to withdraw from Ukraine, these sanctions targeted key sectors, such as finance, energy, and defence. Simultaneously, these countries ramped up military and humanitarian support for Ukraine, including substantial financial assistance, military equipment, intelligence sharing, and training for Ukrainian forces. This was meant to bolster Ukraine's resistance and convey a message of collective defence based on international principles, particularly sovereignty and territorial integrity. In contrast, countries like India and China, both rising Asian powers, adopted a neutral position, which was criticised, especially by the West. The Indian government has chosen a path of strategic autonomy, refraining from openly condemning Russia and engaging in significant trade relations, especially in the energy sector. The decision was driven by India's longstanding military and energy ties with Russia, as well as its concerns over Chinese aggression along their shared border. Conversely, China sought to position itself as a neutral party advocating peace talks and dialogue, as well as criticising the expansion of NATO. According to reports, China and Russia have a 'no-limits' partnership, suggesting a deep strategic alignment, but not an outright military alliance (Spechler and Spechler 2022). China has, however, been careful not to overtly support Russia's military actions in order to maintain its international reputation. By refusing to join the sanctions or condemn the invasion outright, India and China's neutrality has been criticised by Western nations and commentators as indirectly supporting Russia (Nadkarni et al. 2024). This criticism stems from a belief in collective international responsibility to uphold international law and deter aggression. However, from the perspectives of India and China, their approaches are shaped by national interests, the complexities of their regional security, environments, and their long-standing relationship with Russia. They must manage relations with both Western powers and Russia, making a tightrope walk between opposing global pressures inevitable. Other countries have varied in their responses based on their regional security concerns, economic dependencies, and historical ties with Russia or Ukraine. For instance, countries in Eastern Europe have generally shown strong support for Ukraine,

driven by their own historical experiences with Russian influence and the threat perceived by Russian expansionism.

Apart from the geopolitical response, the use of social media platforms contributed significantly to the global response to the invasion of Ukraine, particularly by disseminating symbols and generating awareness. With social media and the internet, activists were able to keep the conflict in the public eye and mobilise support throughout the world. A prominent symbol of support was the sharing of the Ukrainian flag on social media platforms. The simple act of including the Ukrainian flag's colours in social media posts, profile pictures and cover photos served as a digital badge of solidarity, showing support for Ukraine's sovereignty and resistance to Russian aggression. During my interview with a Tibetan living in the Czech Republic, whose Facebook and WhatsApp icons showed the Ukrainian flag and whose apartment balcony displayed the Ukrainian flag with the Tibetan flag, I asked him about his views on the conflict. Jigmi explained that, "we Tibetans have always been supported by our Ukrainian friends. And now it's our turn". (FM: M, 42) In such cases, changing the profile picture of your social media accounts is also equivalent to saying, 'I support you!' Similarly, in November 2021, I visited Belakuppe, in Karnataka, South India, popularly known as the Tibetan refugee campsite, and conducted interviews with a couple of Tibetan youths about their support for the Ukrainian cause. I found rather fewer effects and fewer sentiments about the crisis, yet they still changed their profile pictures in social media (Facebook and WhatsApp) to include the Ukrainian flag as part of following the trend.

I focused on the Tibetan community as I found parallels and commonalities between the ongoing Ukrainian crisis and the Tibetan struggle for freedom. Both Ukraine and Tibet have experienced external aggression that threatens their sovereignty and cultural identity. Ukraine's crisis involves a direct military invasion by Russia (I consider this important to how it created international attention), while Tibet has dealt with the consequences of Chinese occupation since the 1950s, including the suppression of its culture and political freedom. Though differing in scale and context, both situations involve a powerful neighbour imposing its will on a smaller entity. However, it was the use of symbols that attracted my attention most. In both contexts, symbols serve as powerful tools for sustaining identity and rallying support. Both domestically and globally, Ukraine has emphasised its national flag, language, and historical narratives of independence and resilience. Tibet upholds symbols such as the Tibetan flag and images of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which are both prohibited in China, and distinct cultural practices (such as the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism) to preserve its identity and appeal for international support. Since the aggression, Ukrainian diaspora communities have been active in using cultural symbols to garner global support against Russian aggression. Similarly, the Tibetan diaspora uses symbols to keep the issue of Tibet's struggle for autonomy in the international consciousness. One of the current examples is Tibetan activist Chemi Lhamo (Photo 1), who publicises the Tibetan Flag during all her international peace talk and travels. Born in India, the now Canada-based youth activist shared with me how she uses the Tibetan flag to enlighten international communities about Tibet:

I was invited to speak at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy on 16th May 2024 where I noticed that the political discussion on Tibet even in the

human rights space has been reduced to minorities affected by or in China. That didn't sit right with me, so although it wasn't part of my speech to rally the crowd of leaders and international organisations, I did and got them all to join me in saying the words 'Free Tibet'. (FM: F, 28)



Photo 1. Chemi Lhamo on stage at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy proudly showcasing her Tibetan flag during her speech. Photo from Chemi Lhamo's personal archive.

By paralleling the experiences of Ukraine and Tibet, the article presents an exploration of symbols and provides insights into how oppressed or invaded communities use cultural expression to assert their identity, resist erasure, and engage the international community.

This comparative approach aims not only to broaden our understanding of each situation but also to highlight the universal power of symbols in global political struggles and crises. This article is devoted to the values and symbolic meanings derived from various vernacular practices and uses that can influence future practices constructively.

To accomplish this, the article presents netnographic accounts and introduces the notion of vernacular symbols, i.e. widely adopted symbols that represent heritage and values. It could be political, cultural, economic or national symbols that can become part of vernacular narrative discourse, making them popular among various groups and individuals. When integrated into daily discourse, these symbols transcend their original meaning, becoming representations of broader ideas. A compilation of examples is based on literature reviews, documentation, and personal experience. Additionally, the methodology of this paper integrates traditional fieldwork with digital ethnog-

raphy to investigate Tibetan communities in Kalimpong, and Darjeeling (West Bengal), Belakuppi (South India), Sikkim, and Ukrainians residing in Estonia. These locations were selected for their cultural and socio-political significance, as well as my personal proximity to these communities. As a native of Sikkim, I possess unique insider access to the Tibetan diaspora, with one of the major Tibetan refugee settlements being in India. My fieldwork in Belakuppi in 2022 further enhanced my understanding of Tibetan refugee networks in South India. Additionally, since 2016, I have resided in Estonia, where I regularly engage with the Ukrainian diaspora, particularly in the context of the 2022 invasion. This engagement renders Estonia a critical site for examining how diasporic communities navigate conflict and displacement. The methodology employs netnography (Kozinets 2015) in conjunction with traditional ethnographic techniques, utilising digital platforms to track trends, emotional responses, and the digital activism of these communities. This hybrid approach facilitates real-time interactions through digital tools, thereby enhancing interview opportunities and providing insights into the lived experiences of displaced and conflict-affected communities. By analysing both the physical and virtual spaces occupied by these communities, the study captures the dynamics of how diasporic identities are constructed, negotiated, and sustained in an increasingly fluid global landscape. The paper concludes by exploring the folkloristic perspective on symbols as a means of understanding how communities in crisis rely on a variety of symbols to construct an ideology of the nation-state and a collective identity when they are under siege or no longer exist, contributing to the discourse about war and conflict.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE USE OF SYMBOLS IN THE CURRENT SCENARIO

Folklorists have become increasingly interested in the relationship between folklore and the internet, contributing to digital folklore as a new field of study and the development of a new method called netnography (Kozinets 2015). Kozinets's netnography is a research method designed to study online communities and cultures. It adapts traditional ethnographic methods to the digital environment, focusing on how people interact, form communities, and express themselves on the internet. Netnography involves observing online behaviour, analysing discussions, and interpreting digital content to gain insights into social dynamics and consumer behaviour. In the early 1990s, scholars began to recognise technologically mediated folklore as online traditional discourse, according to Robert Glenn Howard (2008: 193): "as diverse jokes, contemporary legends, local rumors, folk beliefs, music, and storytelling, this 'e-lore' is well documented and easily assimilated into already established genres".

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine continuing, the world continues to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people by displaying various symbols on the internet. The sunflower, a symbol of peace and resilience in Ukraine, gained new meaning during the 2022 Russian invasion, particularly as a symbol of solidarity on the internet. This adaptation of traditional symbols in online spaces exemplifies netnography as the study of online communities and cultures. Historically introduced to Ukraine by Spaniards in the 17th century, sunflowers became part of everyday life, with Ukrainians using their

seeds and oil. Their cultural significance deepened over time, symbolising peace, especially when US, Russian, and Ukrainian officials planted sunflowers in 1996 to commemorate Ukraine's nuclear disarmament. After the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the 2011 Fukushima disaster, sunflowers were also planted to remove radioactive toxins from the soil, further associating the flower with resilience and recovery (Mufarech 2022). Following the 2022 invasion, the sunflower spread across digital platforms as a symbol of peace, hope, and Ukrainian identity, illustrating how traditional symbols are recontextualised in online activism. This netnographic transformation shows how the sunflower evolved from a national emblem to a global icon, rallying support for Ukraine worldwide.

Globally, awareness of the association between sunflowers and Ukraine has grown since Feb 24, the first day of the invasion, when the news outlet Ukraine World shared a video on Twitter showing a Ukrainian woman in Henychesk giving sunflower seeds to Russian soldiers, with the striking instructions to the put the seeds in their pockets so the flowers will grow where they die. The video has racked up 8.6 million views on Twitter since it was uploaded on Feb 24, and comedian John Oliver featured it on Last Week Tonight. (Waxman 2022)



Photo 2. A protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine at Tallinn Freedom Square, Estonia on February 26, 2022. Photo by Silver Tambur (Estonian World).

According to Trevor J. Blank (2009), the folk universe of cyberspace is not located in a specific socioeconomic sector or nationality but rather represents a participatory process, referred to by some as the open web or democratic web. Howard's discussion on the vernacular web delves into how everyday people use the internet to express and perpetuate their cultural and social norms, a concept deeply connected with digital expressions of identity and community. The vernacular web refers to in a way how ordinary internet users create, share, and communicate content that is rooted in their specific cultural backgrounds, experiences, and expectations. (Owens 2013) Bronner (2012) asserts that folklore shapes how people interact with cyberspace and mediate it. The absence of the internet resulted in significantly lower popularity of protests and resistance movements during the Tibetan occupation, although it has recently seen a surge in social media visibility. To express solidarity, the people of those times resorted to more dangerous and harmful actions. With the growing availability of information on computers just one click away, the spread of 'online nationalism' has caused a swift transition from traditional forms of protest to online protest. In the current situation, the thousands of Tibetan refugees scattered around the world can be brought together to form an imagined community united and protesting in favour of the Free Tibet Movement in the technology sphere, thus helping them mitigate their identity, maintain group identity, shape beliefs, gather support, and affect change.

This is similar to the troubles in Ukraine where a post-Soviet nation, the communities of which are widely perceived as multiple and largely imagined (Anderson 1991), endeavours to gather vernacular symbols that evoke collective resentment for the past Soviet world, seeking to overcome it (Dragic 2023). In this situation, national symbols are widely recognised as potent sources of political power and influence, capable of rallying support for state interests by evoking emotional expressions of national identity, loyalty, and sacrifice. Sociologists (Mills 1961 [1959]), anthropologists (Firth 1989), political scientists (Lasswell 1935), historians (Curti 1946), and psychologists (Kelman 1969) have explored the popularity of symbols and how they can evoke emotions and behaviours and help to understand a nation's fear and future actions. There are also many contemporary scholars whose work explores how symbols affect cultural identities, behaviours, and emotions by intertwining folklore, symbolism, identity, and cultural practices (Bronner 2012; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Glassie 1999; Jackson 2005; Noyes 2016). These scholars contribute to the understanding of how symbols play a vital role in preserving cultural identity and social order.

As markers of psychological and social processes, symbols relate to concepts and emotions that differ from those of one's national symbols. To begin with, I noticed a surge of Ukrainian flags hoisted over government buildings, schools, and universities across Europe to show support in social media. This eventually escalated to nail polish, car accessories, beer, chocolates, bags, notebooks, mugs, cakes, etc. A Ukrainian acquaintance I met in an Estonian language class and became friends with said, "I am not bothered by people hoisting the Ukrainian flag. Watching what is happening is soothing and comforting." (FM: F, 34) In contrast, another Ukrainian said,

I am fine with the display of Ukrainian flags on houses and buildings. However, when they are displayed on nails, cars, and other merchandise, they seem to disrespect the national flag. They seem to think that they own it or at least they benefit from someone else's suffering. I find it wrong and dislike it. (FM: M, 41)

Symbols become powerful because they evoke sentiments – positive or negative – in a variety of contexts, including daily life. A symbol can become effective through rational or irrational means, through folk tales or academic theories, or in cyberspace if the connection between symbol and effect is credible.

WHAT IS A VERNACULAR SYMBOL?

Society often uses signs and symbols to represent various aspects of its culture and beliefs. These symbols play a significant role in shaping individual and communal identities, guiding behaviours, and facilitating communication. This paper aims to explore how national symbols evoke meaning and significance within these broader categories. By focusing on how these symbols are constructed, transformed, and engaged with, the paper aims to understand their impact on both individuals and communities. There is a strong theorising potential associated with symbolism on the function of national symbols as both a representation of national pride and association, as well as a representation of knowledge, values, memories, and narratives associated with their display, transforming them into the phenomenon of ‘vernacular symbol(ism)’. Folklorist Leonard Primiano (1995: 44) popularised the term ‘vernacular’ in folklore study, defining it in religious research as “the study of religion as it is lived, as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it. As religion inherently involves interpretation, it is impossible for an individual’s religion not to be vernacular.” This perspective allowed scholars of folklore to look at the individual aspect of people’s religious lives and to study the symbols used and their meanings, which is beneficial to the communities involved. Vernacular practices function around time and context as illustrated by religion, tradition, society, and culture. I use ‘vernacular symbols’ as they pertain to the use, practice, living, and interpreting of symbols by people during times of crisis. One such example, as mentioned in the introductory section, is how the Ukrainian flag, as a symbol of the Ukrainian nation, became equally a symbol of solidarity and, in some ways, a symbol of nostalgia and fear.

I understood from the conversation I had with an Estonian fellow (45, M) during one of the dinners, that Estonian support for Ukrainians goes beyond being concerned with the severity of the aggression and empathy for the loss of one’s sovereign nation. It also evokes fears that Estonia could become the next victim. Reminiscence is another reason such that memories of the Soviet period still lurk fresh in the minds of the post-Soviet countries. As part of that same conversation, an Estonian fellow added that Poland’s support for Ukraine and sense of solidarity with Ukraine are rooted in their sense of alienation. Thus, one can conclude that the Baltic countries’ support is a result of fear and memories of the Soviet era. Therefore, the assertion is that national symbols serve multiple functions within a society. On one hand, they act as potent symbols of national identity, representing the collective heritage, values, and aspirations of a nation (Anderson 1991), serving to unite citizens and foster a sense of belonging and pride in one’s country (Billig 1995). On the other hand, national symbols can also be wielded as tools of political expression, used to demonstrate support for a particular cause, leader, or ideology (Smith 1991). In times of conflict or crisis, they can be invoked to rally public sentiment, instil courage, engender reminiscences, and bolster morale. Additionally,

gion, were beginning to show a more nuanced understanding of and respect for Tibetan culture and religious practices. Nevertheless, with its exotic fascination for European audiences, Tibetan Buddhism continued to be a primary focus and thus continued to paint a culturally homogenous picture of the Tibetan Plateau.

In the pre-modern period, religion is likely to have featured prominently in Tibetan's self-identity through people's close association with local monasteries, deities, sacred landscapes, and rituals. However, modernists and/or constructivists would argue that religious identity in the pre-modern period was localised and vertical, i.e., limited to a relationship with local practices and religious leaders, and did not lead to identification with a broader population. Although religion is today a unifying feature of a pan-ethnic identity, some constructivists would argue that such horizontal identification with a broader community only becomes possible with modern communication technologies (Anderson 1991: 113). The view of Tibetans as being culturally homogenous was perpetuated by the influential writings of a few British officials who lived and worked in central Tibet early in the 20th century. Some of these officials had close relationships with the Tibetan elites, and their writings thus reflected Lhasa-centric views³ about the reach of the Tibetan government's religion, if not the political influence. The *People of Tibet* (1928), written by British diplomat and Political officer Sir Charles Bell, referred to the various peoples of the plateau as Tibetan "tribes". Bell (ibid.: 143) described eastern Tibet's culturally and linguistically diverse regions, for example, as "a large province containing eighteen Tibetan tribes on the Sino-Tibetan border". Contemporary scholars are keener on examining the diverse cultural identities of the people of the eastern plateau, with some arguing that such groups have only recently been 'Tibetanised' by scholarly and political discourse (Jinba 2013; Roche 2016).

The first mass migration of Tibetans into India, which started the Tibetan diaspora, took place in March 1959, after the failed Tibetan popular uprising against the Chinese state. Thousands of Tibetans followed His Highness the 14th Dalai Lama's flight into India, compelled by the violent and forceful response of the Chinese government. In response to the significant influx of refugees, the Government of India first set up transit camps to provide essential assistance to incoming refugees in 1959. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA; now known as the Tibetan Government in Exile)⁴ soon worked to relocate refugees to agricultural settlements and other lands set aside for them by the Indian Government. Today, there are numerous small Tibetan communities as well as 54 formal settlements (agricultural, agro-industrial, and handicraft-based) scattered around India (including northeastern states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim), all with health centres and Tibetan schools, with the most significant and most prominent settlements in areas such as Karnataka State (South India), greater Dehradun and Himachal Pradesh (North India).⁵ To manage Tibetan settlements and schools in India, the government of India has granted autonomy to the government in exile. As a result of generous support and assistance from India and international aid agencies, Tibetan refugees in India have succeeded in re-establishing social, political, religious, and humanitarian institutions run entirely by Tibetans.

The Tibetan settlements and communities in India span three generations, each with its unique connection to Tibetan heritage and identity. The first generation, who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, fled Tibet due to political turmoil. The second generation, aged between 20 and 50, was born and educated in India, growing up immersed in both

Tibetan and Indian cultures. Meanwhile, the third generation consists of school-aged children who are the inheritors of their ancestors' cultural legacy. In India, unlike many other countries hosting refugees, the Tibetan community has been supported in preserving and promoting its distinct culture, traditions, and identities within various settlements across the country. This support has facilitated the use of national symbols and signs, which have gained increased significance in exile. Over time, the meaning and interpretation of these symbols have evolved, reflecting the changing dynamics of the Tibetan diaspora. Within the different generations, the role and representation of the symbols have changed and shifted. Whether implicitly, through the display of flags, or explicitly, through the construction of memorials, national symbols serve to crystallise the group's past into a historical entity. These symbols can be glorified, romanticised, and mythologised, shaping the collective memory and identity of the Tibetan people (Kammen 1991: 65).

TIBET'S NATIONAL FLAG

The earliest work focusing on Tibet's religion and religious practices and the downfall of the Tibetan Kingdom leading to mass migration plays a vital role in understanding the role and transformation of the use of the Tibetan flag. According to the Central Tibetan Administration website, Tibet's national flag, also known as the snow lion flag, is the flag of Tibet's military, introduced by the 13th Dalai lama in 1912 and used in the same capacity until 1959. For Tibet as a sovereign nation, the flag symbolises the pride and honour of the country. Infused with Buddhist values and beliefs, it features religious motifs and symbolism.

The symbols encrypted in the Tibetan national Flag include (see Symbolism of the Tibetan Flag):

- The snowy mountain, the sun with its rays shining brilliantly in all directions, represents the equal enjoyment of freedom, spiritual and material happiness, and prosperity for all beings in the land of Tibet.
- The six red bands spread across the dark blue sky represent the Tibetan people's original ancestors. The combination of six red bars for the tribes and six dark blue bands for the sky means the unceasing enactment of virtuous deeds of protection of the spiritual teachings and secular life by the black and red guardian protector deities with which Tibet has been connected since time immemorial.
- The centre has a magnificent snow-clad mountain, representing Tibet, a land surrounded by snowy mountains.
- On the mountain slopes, a pair of snow lions stand proudly, blazing with manes of fearlessness, representing the country's victorious accomplishment of a unified spiritual and secular life.
- The beautiful and radiant three-coloured jewel held aloft represents the ever-present reverence respectfully held by the Tibetan people for the three supreme gems, the object of refuge: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.
- The two-coloured swirling jewel held between the two lions represents the people guarding and cherishing the self-discipline of correct ethical behaviour, principally

represented by the practices of the ten exalted virtues and 16 human modes of conduct.

- The yellow border symbolises the fact that the teachings of the Buddha, which are like pure refined gold and unbounded in space and time, flourish and spread.

Since the 1960s Tibet's flag has become a symbol of Tibet's independence movement, the Free Tibet Movement, and of resistance against oppressive forces. Therefore, using the flag became a more general sign of the fight against oppression. Any display of the flag in conditions of oppression gained much value and importance. In his work titled *Early Awareness of Tibet's National Flag*, Jamyang Norbu (2015) says:

Some may feel it is a waste of time studying such trivial aspects of Western juvenile culture – even if it relates to Tibet. However, these objects reveal that in the first half of the 20th century, there was a general (if cursory) awareness in much of the world of Tibet as an independent, albeit mysterious, nation, with its unique national flag. It is reassuring to know that all you need are a few cigarettes and bubble-gum cards to demolish the assertion of hostile academics that Tibetan exiles fabricated the trappings of their 'bogus' national identity after 1959.

The institutional as well as symbolic practices of HH Dalai Lama led the Dharamshala establishment to encourage people to act socially and cohesively as Tibetans in an 'alien' environment. This emphasis on constructing unity does not mean eliminating differences within the community. As in any other vibrant society, one can find differences based on generation, socialisation, gender, religiosity, region, sects, period of departure from Tibet, class, and political opinion (see Ardley 2002; Diehl 2002). The prevalent tendency within the media, Tibet support groups, and many Tibetans themselves is to represent the Tibetan diaspora as united under the leadership of HH Dalai Lama. In this instance, the HH Dalai Lama acts as a vernacular symbol or icon creating unity and solidifying the community. However, significant differences can be seen in the diaspora between the Tibetans from the U-Tsang region (the central province of traditional Tibet, home to Lhasa and key to Tibetan governance), the Khampas (the ethnic group from the Kham region known for their nomadic lifestyles), and the Amdowas (the ethnic group from the Amdo region known as agriculturalist). The difference is witnessed in religious matters such as the Shugden affair,⁶ the Rumtek Monastery controversy,⁷ and the less-publicised differences in the South Asian monasteries between the old arrivals and the newcomers (Ström 1997: 39–42). Although unity in the Tibetan case is sometimes constructed through the similarity one finds in ethnic identity across regional differences, vernacular symbols play a vital role in the life of the individual, giving people a sense of collective belonging and bringing them together in fighting for one cause – freedom. Thus, a unified Tibetan exile identity espoused on behalf of the Tibetan diaspora is a rhetorical device and an imaginary construct. At the same time it would be naive to dismiss considerations of the identity question on these grounds only, as all identities are in the final analysis, a product of the imagination. Though Tibetans imagined and contested the construct (Anand 2007: 105), in the process of writing this paper I discovered that the Tibetan identity, although fragile, is yet made strong by national sentiments expressed as vernacular symbols, for example, flags, HH Dalai Lama, etc.

Among the Tibetan diaspora community, the unifying agents are the same. Since exile, and during the occupation, every expression of a distinct culture is a political act in itself. Tibetans have built an exile community around the world, emerging and gaining significant visibility for the Tibet independence and human rights movements, especially symbolised by the 14th Dalai Lama in the 1980s and 1990s. The institution of the Dalai Lama acts as a unifying symbol for matters of religion and politics. The community sees him as a symbol of resilience for his people; he is the principal reason why Tibetan culture survives after over six decades of exile (Purnell 2021). A Tibetan entrepreneur from South India told me:

All the Tibetan community in the diaspora is blessed by HH Dalai Lama. As you see around the world, Tibetans thrive in whatever they do, whether it is business education or cultural activity. This unity is retained through the strong faith that people in our community have in HH Dalai lama as the provider for the Tibetan population. (FM: M, 56)

The Dalai Lama is the king and the god, the active agent between this world and the next. He presents contradictory images: a simple Buddhist monk, and the supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism; a human god; he is both world-renouncing and world-encompassing. Personal loyalty to HH Dalai Lama plays a key role in the government in exile's effort to strengthen the sense of a united Tibetan identity: collective faith in Buddhism and the office of Dalai Lama has provided the cohesion necessary to maintain a form of 'proto-nationalism' within a widely dispersed diaspora. HH Dalai Lama has in this case transitioned from the "spiritual leader of all Tibetans to one of the most important parts of their culture to maintain their ethnic-national identity" (Choedon 2022: 29) as an effective symbol of unification. Today, the Dalai Lama is not just a person of spiritual authority and the retired political leader of all Tibetans, but his name also carries deep symbolic power among Tibetans (*ibid.*). Thus, the Dalai Lama's shift from a social role to a symbolic cultural image, therefore, makes his role a vernacular one. Because symbols are used to unify, disagreement with or abandonment of such symbols could be detrimental to the position of any individual within the community. Pema Choedon (2022) has pointed to multiple aspects of unquestioning loyalty and to the negative consequences that Tibetans within the community face when unity is questioned or threatened. If one takes a rationalistic approach to understanding symbolic manipulation, one can hardly appreciate the zest with which symbols are presented, and one can easily overlook the contributions made to symbolic life by those who receive, internalise, and change them as they are applied. According to Mary Douglas' (1973) approach, symbols can be emotionally manipulated for political purposes, with results that affect our everyday lives. This also holds for 'natural symbols' such as race, blood, and kinship. Following on from religious belief as a 'natural symbol' the figure of HH Dalai Lama has been a nexus to emotionally connect with and maintain the unity of the community as a group. Many other vernacular symbols ranging from books, poetry, songs, and traditional food such as Tsampa,⁸ Buddhist monasteries, people wearing traditional costumes, religious altars, prayer flags, and Buddhist deities, symbolise the lost country, the identity of the exile community and resistance, and act as unifying agents. These symbols are cultural agents that show a sense

of loyalty towards an imagined collective identity, which Anderson (1991: 112) describes as expanding everyday relationships in a process in which people move from a social to a cultural understanding of loyalty. For many Tibetan youngsters, the Tibetan flag is a medium that shows loyalty, a powerful emotive instrument of mass persuasion. When Loten Namling, a folk musician, born and raised in India but now living in Switzerland,⁹ skied from Bern to Lausanne, where the Olympic organising community is based, he explained: “To raise awareness, I walked along the road with the Tibetan flag in condemnation of the Chinese Olympic organising committee.” When I asked him about the use of the Tibetan flag during his protest and performances, he added, “the Tibetan flag is me, and I am the Tibetan flag” (FM: M, 60).

In addition to providing a means to conceptualise disappointment and humiliation, these symbols also allow the Tibetan population to express other feelings (Herzfield 1992: 13). In doing so, people are less able to perceive issues that are not conducive to categorisation in terms of accepted models of inclusion and exclusion, but rather in terms of a collective identity. Among Tibetans, these symbols collectively have different meanings and values, and invoke different emotions, although HH Dalai Lama remains central.



Photo 3. Loten Namling at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Photo from Namling's personal collection.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper underscores the pivotal role of symbols in political crises, particularly examining how the symbolism or materiality of objects can transform when infused with interpretations linked to national sentiment or political agendas. Beyond their religious or national significance, vernacular symbols – those widely adopted and integrated into everyday life – become essential totems of identity, resistance, and community solidarity. These symbols not only reflect the historical narratives of the communities they represent but also play a critical role in shaping collective identities, especially during periods of political tension and conflict.

By exploring the evolution of symbols in both the Ukrainian and Tibetan contexts, this paper highlights how these cultural and political symbols transition into elements of resistance and rebellion. In Ukraine, the national flag has emerged as a powerful symbol of resilience and hope amid adversity, particularly in response to the Russian invasion that commenced on 24 February 2022. The Ukrainian flag has transformed into a digital badge of solidarity on social media, serving as a visual representation of

support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Conversely, for Tibetans, the Tibetan flag, which initially represented religious honour and national pride, has evolved into a potent emblem of opposition to Chinese oppression in exile. Symbols such as the Tibetan flag and images of His Holiness the Dalai Lama are crucial in preserving cultural identity and rallying international support for the Tibetan cause. Despite the similarities in their struggles, the international response to these two crises reveals significant disparities. The West has strongly condemned Russia's actions, imposing a series of harsh economic sanctions aimed at isolating Moscow and pressuring it to withdraw from Ukraine. Western countries, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, have provided substantial military and humanitarian support to bolster Ukraine's defences. This support includes financial assistance, military equipment, intelligence sharing, and training for Ukrainian forces, driven by a commitment to uphold international principles of sovereignty and self-determination.

In contrast, Tibet's long-standing struggle for autonomy and human rights has received far less overt support from Western nations. Although some governments and human rights organisations have raised concerns regarding China's human rights violations in Tibet, the overall response has been muted. This discrepancy can be attributed to the geopolitical dynamics surrounding China, where economic and strategic interests often take precedence over human rights concerns. Consequently, Western countries have generally maintained diplomatic relations with China, leading to questions about the hypocrisy of their political alignment and moral discourse. This paper critiques this uneven global attention, highlighting the need for a consistent application of principles concerning sovereignty and territorial integrity across all nations. While the West champions Ukraine's struggle against Russian aggression, Tibet's plight has been overshadowed by broader economic and strategic interests. The disparity in support reflects the complexities of global politics, wherein the perceived threats posed by Russia to European security contrast sharply with the more nuanced and less immediate concerns surrounding China's policies in Tibet. By paralleling the experiences of Ukraine and Tibet, the analysis reveals how oppressed communities leverage cultural symbols to assert their identity, resist erasure, and engage the international community. For instance, the Ukrainian diaspora has actively employed cultural symbols to garner global support against Russian aggression, while the Tibetan diaspora utilises symbols such as the Tibetan flag and the figure of the Dalai Lama to keep the issue of Tibet's struggle for autonomy in the international consciousness. Ultimately, this comparative approach broadens our understanding of power of symbols in global political struggles, revealing how they can influence international discourse and mobilise collective action. It also exposes the selective nature of international support for communities facing aggression, challenging us to reconsider how principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and human rights are applied in different contexts. By focusing on the cultural expressions and symbolic meanings derived from the struggles of both Ukraine and Tibet, the paper emphasises the universal power of symbols in navigating political crises and fostering resilience among marginalised communities.

NOTES

1 It does not consider the events of 2014 in Crimea or the war in the Donbas region, but rather their aftermath and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine starting on February 24, 2022. For further information on the former, see Coker 2023.

2 May 9 is a controversial day in Estonia (for further details, see Wright et al. 2024).

3 “Lhasa-centric views” refers to perspectives or interpretations that prioritise or focus primarily on Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, often at the expense of other regions or viewpoints within Tibetan culture or society. For example, scholars have criticised certain historical accounts for adopting Lhasa-centric views, which overlook the diverse cultural practices and experiences of Tibet’s rural and nomadic populations (see Barnett 2006).

4 The name Central Tibetan Administration was adopted in tandem with the Dalai Lama’s devolution of political power to an elected Tibetan leadership in May 2011.

5 Today, 54 years after the uprising, the number of ethnic Tibetans in India is currently about 94,000, with approximately 130,000 in the diaspora worldwide.

6 The Shugden affair revolves around the worship of Dorje Shugden, a deity in Tibetan Buddhism traced back to the 17th century Tibetan Lama Tulku Dragpa Gyaltsen. Initially revered as a protective deity, tensions arose in the 20th century when the 5th Dalai Lama issued edicts against Shugden worship, citing concerns about sectarianism. Subsequent Dalai Lamas, including the current 14th Dalai Lama, continued to discourage the practice due to fears of division within Tibetan society. (See Lopez 1998; Anand 2008.)

7 The Rumtek monastery controversy: The Kagyupa sect has its headquarters in exile at Sik-kim’s Rumtek Dharma Chakra Centre. The Rumtek monastery has been wracked by the controversy over who is the real incarnation of its founder, the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, who died in 1991. (Kotwal 2013)

8 Tsampa, a roasted flour made either of wheat, rice or barley, is a staple food of Tibetan and Himalayan communities. It is usually mixed with salted butter tea and consumed at breakfast. (Neilson 2019)

9 More about Loten Namling and his work as part of Tibet 2024 and in the film *Tibetan Warriors* by Eda Elif Tibet (2020).

SOURCES

FM = Author’s fieldwork materials. Most informants have chosen to remain anonymous, and their wishes have been respected. For those who are named, explicit permission has been granted to disclose their identities.

FM: F, 28 = Chemi Lhamo, 28 years old; interview through online medium May 20, 2024

FM: F, 34 = XX, female, 34 years old; August 20, 2022

FM: M, 41 = XX, male, 41 years old; October 12, 2022

FM: M, 42 = Jigmi, male, 42 years old; July 2, 2022

FM: M, 45 = Estonian colleague, male, 45 years old; December 28, 2022

FM: M, 56 = XX, male, 56 years old; December 2, 2022

FM: M, 60 = Loten Namling, male, 60 years old; October 8, 2022

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