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a James Kenyon (Liverpool Hope University)
b Joel Rookwood (Liverpool Hope University)

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Sporting education – a Global Hope? Examining a sport development educational initiative at a Tibetan SOS Children’s Village in northern India

James Kenyon and Joel Rookwood
(Faculty of Sciences and Social Sciences, Liverpool Hope University)

Abstract

Tibet used to be an independent region of Southwest China whose people have been subjected to mass torture and imprisonment for more than half a century. This persecution has caused many to seek refuge in other countries, notably India. Exiled Tibetans have attempted to protect their culture and identity and ensure the survival of Tibetan Buddhism by educating the children in their own schools using the Tibetan curriculum. Tibetan Homes Foundation was established as a member of SOS Children’s Villages, providing schooling and accommodation to support the cultural and educational protection and development of Tibetan settlers. As part of an evolving culture of engagement in social development, some UK academic institutions have assumed a facilitative role in this respect. Staff and students have implemented initiatives focusing on health, education and sport. This paper examines the perspectives and experiences of staff, students and participants during a short-term sport-based educational development programme run by Liverpool Hope University in a Tibetan Homes Foundation village in Mussoorie in northern India. The project aimed to enable staff to engage in an in-depth application of workshops focusing on sport development and coaching, sport psychology and sport physiology. This research analyses the perceived meaning, application, significance and limitations of sport and physical activity in this respect. Through an examination of focus group, interview and observational data this article explores the contributions offered and meanings gauged from the workshops, as well as the perceived role and significance of sport and physical education. The paper closes with a critical comment upon how well the initiative may have related to Tibetan culture and the actual needs of the SOS children’s village at that time.

Introduction – India and the Tibetan Diaspora

If it were not for our community in exile, so generously sheltered and supported by the government and people of India and helped by organizations and individuals from many parts of the world, our nation would today be little more than a shattered remnant of a people. As it is we have built schools and monasteries in exile and
have created democratic institutions to preserve the seeds of our civilization (The Dalai Lama, 1989 Nobel Peace Prize lecture – Piburn, 1990).

Tibet is a semi-autonomous region of Southwest China, with a landmass of approximately 2.5 million square kilometres. This once independent state has been striving for political sovereignty since the Chinese army invaded and claimed ownership of the tri-province nation in 1949. The collective reluctance of the Tibetans (a Buddhist people who usually adhere to principles of non-violence) to recognise this higher authority has resulted in their mass torture and imprisonment. It is claimed that over 1.2 million Tibetans have died as a direct result of the invasion (Harrer, 2005), with some commentators referring to Tibetans as the ‘Jews of Asia’ as a consequence (Ramola, 2009: 19). The mass influx of Chinese into Tibet constitutes a critical threat to Tibetan national identity. Thousands of Chinese are moving into Tibet, made possible by the development of transportation networks linking the high altitude region to cities such as Beijing. Indigenous Tibetans face the threat of assimilation and annihilation as a separate people and a distinct cultural and religious group (Ingram, 1990). This cultural genocide can be referred to as “ethnocide”. This persecution has caused many to seek refuge in other countries, both neighbouring and remote, particularly those whose governments are sympathetic and responsive to the growing humanitarian need this situation has produced (Swenson, 2005). During the late 1950s, the head of state and spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama, fled Tibet and sought asylum in Mussoorie, a small town in the Himalayan foothills of Northern India. Thousands of Tibetans have since followed, trekking for weeks through treacherous mountain passes, taking refuge in the bordering countries of Nepal and Bhutan, and in India. Many asylum seekers have died en route, with survivors of the journey suffering significant health problems upon their arrival at their new location (Norbu, 1987; Swenson, 2005). The Dalai Lama has stressed the importance of meeting the needs of surviving Tibetan settlers, particularly young people, a multifaceted focus which also involved the requirement to,

Protect Tibetan culture and ensure the survival of Tibetan Buddhism by educating the children in their own schools using the Tibetan curriculum... the future of Tibetan culture in India was through education and not by using violence to reclaim their country (Clarkson, 2008: 114).

As a manifestation of a collaborative effort with sympathetic international agencies, the Tibetan Homes Foundation (THF) was established in 1962 as a member of SOS Kinderdorf International (SOS Children’s Villages) to cater for the needs and education of thousands of young exiled Tibetans.
The aim of SOS is to “build families for children in need… help them shape their own futures… [and] share in the development of their communities” (SOS Kinderdorf International, 2008). Currently active in 132 countries and territories, they are an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) who have actively promoted and addressed children’s rights and needs since 1949. THF/SOS have built partially self-sustaining communities with homes and schools for thousands of young people. The context for this paper is located within one of those villages. The Tibetan home in question on the outskirts of Mussoorie educates and houses more than 1600 pupils and employs in excess of 250 members of staff. Growing numbers of children are continuing to risk their lives to flee the Chinese regime in search of a more stable and protected environment. The THF/SOS accepted 600 new arrivals between 2007 and 2009. The plight of Tibetans has permeated international consciousness at various stages in the last half century, punctuated by media coverage of a variety of events. In 2008 the upsurge of national uprisings in all three provinces of Tibet, together with the related protests prior to and during the Beijing Olympic Games (against the Chinese occupation of Tibet) provide notable examples (Ramola, 2009). Such exposure of the mistreatment of Tibetans and the continued need to support the various communities of Tibetan refugees has inspired a number of organisations with political, developmental, charitable, educational and sporting agendas, to engage in collaborative work with THF/SOS, in order to make a sustained contribution to the development of young exiled Tibetans.

The role of UK universities in social development

In Britain, a small number of academic institutions have illustrated an international commitment to support young people living in developing, fractious and disadvantaged communities. Whilst such efforts may be motivated in part by a desire to further the reputations of these universities, the small number of ventures they have committed to reflect a genuine desire to make a meaningful contribution to the communities in question. There is also the useful personal development spin off for the UK-based students and staff who volunteer on the programmes. Volunteering; offering one’s services but not for monetary gain, is becoming increasingly popular amongst British students (Sugden, 2007a). As Taylor’s (2005: 117) recent claims illustrate, “almost half of the population engaged in some form of formal (organization based) voluntary work in the previous 12 months and almost a third volunteered regularly every month”. The University of Brighton is a key example in this respect, as they are responsible for Football for Peace (F4P), formerly known as WSPP – World Sports Peace Project. This British Universities project has been staged annually in Israel since 2001. The F4P model employs a value-based football coaching programme to facilitate peaceful integration in Jewish and Arab societies (Nujidat, 2007). According to the founder F4P is a “secular
organisation that is underpinned by a principle of neutrality and is not affiliated with any religious or political groups” (Whitfield, 2006: ix). Each year fifty undergraduate students from the University of Brighton engage in a comprehensive training programme before travelling to Northern Israel to lead the project (Liebmann and Rookwood, 2007; Rookwood, 2009b). The coaches are supported by respected local figures who provide practical and linguistic support. The students follow guidelines provided in a specifically produced manual, which emphasises value-based instruction through football coaching. The underlying principles were implemented through “teachable moments” (Lambert, 2007: 20). These values are considered to promote co-operation and mutual understanding and aid conflict prevention and co-existence, including trust, respect, neutrality, responsibility and inclusion (Rookwood, 2008). Analytical research has been conducted on the F4P initiative, which is published for “those wanting to run such a project in other political climes” (Whitfield, 2006: 174), providing a “valuable resource for those concerned with similar projects and initiatives taking place in different parts of the world” (Sugden, 2007b: 181).

More recently the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) established a collaborative project in Southern Africa. Undergraduate sport students who enrolled on the Sport and International Aid module attended a semester of related lectures and seminars before volunteering on a Right to Play (RtP) football development project in Zambia. RtP is an athlete-driven international humanitarian organisation that uses sport and play as mechanisms for youth development in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the world. Their programmes aim to improve the lives of children affected by poverty, war and disease (Flynn, 2008). The projects are designed to teach key skills including teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, communication, self-esteem, commitment, respect and fair-play. This collaborative academic programme commenced in 2008 and as it is still in its infancy, its value and impact are yet to be evaluated. However, it represents a key objective of the organisers at UCLAN in providing students with the opportunity to engage in a life-changing cultural experience whilst delivering humanitarian aid that will help children to play and have fun. Liverpool Hope University (LHU) are another institution that has demonstrated a commitment to serve the educational needs of developing countries and communities. The initial development stages of Liverpool Hope charity Hope One World (HOW) commenced in 1982, under the original name, Third World Development Group. Bamber (2008: xiii) states that, “HOW believes in the power of education to achieve positive and lasting change. Three values are central to the way we work, social justice, partnership and learning”. In 2008 Global Hope (GH) was established as the charitable arm of Liverpool Hope, an
organisation which aims to engage in a widening range of educational disciplines, including sport.

**Sport and educational development**

The significance and applicability of sport as an educational tool has been noted across a number of contexts, eras, and localities. The international development of sports such as football partly reflected its perceived capacity for nurturing social order (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994). The game was expanded in Africa through colonisation (Armstrong, 2004), with a key purpose being “civilise the savage” (Giulianotti, 1999: 91). Whilst many such prejudices have been eroded, sport’s propensity for nurturing social order continues to be discussed. In nineteenth century Britain the notion of Muscular Christianity was introduced, a philosophy which involves promoting a person’s “moral and spiritual health at the same time as their physical health” (Lupson, 2006: xvi). Sports were employed in institutions such as public schools, where the qualities of fair play, courage, self-control and unselfishness served as key elements of the various games played (Mechikoff and Estes, 1993). Sorak (2002) argues that a legacy of this approach can be to establish moral boundaries, whilst Donnelly (1993) claims that sport can have a transformational function in relation to social development. Sport has also been used to promote peace in numerous politically and socially tense environments (Riak, 2000), and programmes of this nature are increasingly being employed to build bridges between communities, to foster peace and to promote social and educational development (Rookwood and Palmer, 2008; Rookwood, 2009a).

This paper examines the applicability of a Sport Development project run in June 2009 in the SOS Tibetan Children’s Village (TGV) in Mussoorie, by three sport lecturers and four students (including the authors on this paper) from Liverpool Hope University, representing GH. This programme aimed to build on a history of collaborative work between the two organisations (see also Stevenson and Grantham, 2008), although this was the first initiative involving sport. The aims of this project were to make grass-roots interventions into the sporting culture of Mussoorie, particularly amongst the staff and children of the SOS Children’s Village. The project aimed to provide staff with the platform to engage in an in-depth application of workshops focusing on sport development and coaching, sport psychology and sport physiology. The programme was structured around carefully designed educational clinics and coaching programmes, underpinned by appropriate value-based philosophies, and structured around “teachable moments” and involved working with staff and children of the village. Ten workshops were facilitated by staff (assisted by students) focusing on how sport can be used, played and coached, and how the body operates physiologically. Also addressed was how to develop
psychological processes to enhance participation and psychological wellbeing. Additional coaching and coach education sessions focused on value-based sport skills via involvement in competitive and non-competitive sport and physical activity. In this respect the programme aimed to educate individuals, focusing on the whole person in mind, body and spirit. This initiative was designed to be sensitive to the ethno-religious and cultural beliefs and practices of exiled Tibetans, relative to our understanding, whilst remaining responsive to the needs, education, training and professional development of the local staff.

The workshops involved structured group discussions of key themes, which were introduced and explained by the facilitator. The leader of each session was supported by the remaining six GH project staff, each of whom was assigned a group to work with. The various discussions centred on the meaning, application, significance, and limitations of sport and physical activity (relative to the disciplines highlighted above). Many of the individual opinions were collated and recorded by the respective GH staff member. These recordings of attitudes provided a rich source of material, with the twenty-eight Tibetan participants each contributing to a total of twenty-hours of directed discussion (subject to attendance). These interactions served as informal focus groups, within the framework of Miller and Brewer’s (2003: 120) definition of this method, “A focus group is a research approach whereby a group of individuals are selected to discuss together, in a focussed and moderated manner, the topic under research”. This flexible qualitative method does not constrain respondents by asking questions according to a rigid criterion, such as a rating scale (Markham, 1997). Instead, it was selected here because it facilitates direct interaction with participants, enabling the researcher to request clarification, explanation or expansion of an expressed opinion, whilst allowing respondents to react to the arguments of fellow contributors (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

In order to examine particular issues in greater depth, interviews were also conducted with four key personnel, namely the THF Children’s Village Secretary General, the Education Officer and the two staff responsible for the provision of physical education at the school. Four pupils at the school were also interviewed; timetabling constraints prevented further direct engagement with students. Ethnographic observation formed the final method of data collection to examine elements of the school culture that were not verbally discussed but were acted out in daily routines. The remainder of this paper examines observational, focus group and interview data and explores the contributions offered during workshops. The data is expressed with an indication of the type of method employed to collect it (IV, interview, FG, focus group, PO, participant observation), followed by an indication of the role of the respondent (TS, Tibetan staff, TP, Tibetan pupil, WP, workshop
participant, GL, Global Hope lecturer, GS, Global Hope student) and a number to distinguish between individuals and data of the same category (e.g. “IVTS3”).

**Value education and the sport development workshops**

We only preserve what we love.
We only love what we understand.
We only understand what we study
(Tibetan saying).

Education is a significant element of Tibetan culture. The experience of working at THF Mussoorie confirmed this perspective, which was also endorsed by the pupils and teachers of the village. Clarkson (2008: 113) notes that,

From its beginning 45 years ago, when Tibetans escaped over the Himalayas and were given refuge in India, the Tibetan Children’s Village has become a thriving, integrated educational community for destitute children in exile.

Each member of the GH project team received a DVD produced by THF which outlined the work they are involved in. One of the chapters was entitled “Keeping alive a nation through education”. The anonymous narrator of the DVD stated that at THF, “Every effort is made to impart and inculcate the rich traditions, moral values and cultural heritage of Tibet. This is particularly important given that all these children are growing up in exile”. Literature produced by THF staff reflects similar sentiments, with the following line printed in the school’s annual magazine serving as a key example, “We Tibetans must not lose our hearts but we must affirm our duties in the respective fields. Students must study, teachers teach, parents support and so on” (Editorial Board, 2008: v). Also, a pupil interviewed for this research claimed, “We are the future of Tibet, so we study hard” (IVTP3). The language used in these examples is significant, particularly regarding the use of personal pronouns. These statements imply that the staff and pupils sense a collective responsibility and engagement in the THF educational process. Goffman (1974: 21) highlights the requirement to examine how people express their experiences through particular activities, citing letters written to be published in newspapers as an example. He suggests that such discursive “frames” are developed to enable people to discuss and define their experiences, philosophies and identities, turning, “what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful”. It is clear that the staff and pupils of THF have developed a well reasoned approach to their way of educating their young people and have utilised various mediums including DVDs, magazines and online materials to express this philosophy.

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Many school staff and pupils were also keen to engage with us in formal conversations (taped interviews), workshop-based focus groups and shorter informal exchanges (expressed as observational data). During an interview with the General Secretary of THF Mussoorie, he stated, “We provide food, education, health, welfare. We are a foundation, we raise our own funds through all channels... we have no government aids, no government grants, no government subsidy of whatever form. We are funded from individuals and organisations, both international and local” (IVTS1). In addition, he also noted that when pupils arrive from Tibet they are placed into “special classes”, where they receive “intensive coaching in English, Tibetan and Mathematics” (IVTS1). Significantly, he also referred to these as “serious matters”. However the school’s full educational programme is one that the staff consider, “a modern-education for our children where at the same time we are also imparting them the rich tradition, moral value and rich heritage of Tibet” (POTS6). Some students made reference to the source of inspiration for this educational approach, with one pupil stating, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama advised us to work hard in learning the Tibetan language, culture and traditions” (IVTP4). The staff made similar comments, such as, “We teach our pupils the Tibetan way. Our culture is very important to us and we show that in classes” (POTS11). However, the educational secretary argues that the learning objectives of THF can also be placed in a more recognisable (i.e. Western) frame, “our aim is to prepare students academically and for the responsibilities of citizenship and their future career” (Norbu, 2008: 1). Another teacher stated, “Tibetan Homes Foundation looks after its pupils. Many have gone to university. I even have a Masters degree. They pay for this. They want you to learn and do well but they expect you to come back to teach, to give back to Tibetan culture” (IVWP4). More specifically, another respondent argued,

Our children when they go out of the school, they have very good future prospects. We give them scholarships... Currently we have nearly 250 children in higher studies, funded by us. So if they do well they get a three year degree course or two year professional course, if they continue to do well, you get funded for a Masters degree and we encourage you to go for specialisation. We are obliged to their awards throughout their life. Many come back to work here. We have 250 staff members, about 100 are ex-students (IVTS1).

Also at the school’s vocational training centre, those students who do not wish to or are unable to go on to further or higher education are provided with technical training in different Tibetan arts and crafts. The three different vocational opportunities are tailoring, Thangka painting and modern oil-painting, and the goods pupils produce are often sold outside of the school to help fund THF.
It was important to first consider participant perspectives of Tibetan education in order to better appreciate what one GH staff member referred to as “the political and social baggage that the participants brought to the sessions” (POGS8). Subsequently the following examination of the receptiveness and effectiveness of the workshops adopts increasing significance. The workshops were (officially) attended by twenty-eight THF participants, each of whom received a certificate as recognition of attendance. The sessions were sandwiched by formal opening and closing ceremonies, which were infused by Tibetan Buddhist tradition, involving a number of institutional dignitaries. These filmed procedures provided an indication of the expectations and impact of the workshops. In his opening speech, the General Secretary referred to the previous experiences of THF Mussoorie in stating, “We know our past workshops have been on serious matters and difficult things like mathematics and science and things like that. But today we are doing a very different, an entirely different theme – on sports” (POTS2). In a debriefing following the first workshop, one of the GH staff commented that, “The project didn’t exactly get a full endorsement from the Gen Sec. It might only have been a throw away comment but I can’t believe he said that really, as if sport was a joke” (POGL7).

The UK personnel experienced a number of “challenges” during the project, which “made the job harder than we expected. The workshops were real challenges” (POGS12). The numbers of participants attending dwindled after the first workshop and gradually declined to fifteen in the final session. However, with only two staff in the entire school responsible for physical education and sports coaching (from a total of more than 250 staff in a school of 1600 pupils), it is perhaps unsurprising that there were issues with “engagement”, “The staff weren’t that enthusiastic as a group really. Some engaged but not all of them. I’m not sure if they were forced to go or if they went for their own development. Hardly any seemed to even like sport” (POGL13). The GH students who were facilitating group discussions experienced difficulties in convincing the workshop participants, “that we knew what we were talking about. A few times advice we gave in group activities was completely ignored” (POGS8). Another GH staff member commented that, “There seemed to be a general reluctance from the workshop participants to ask questions, or answer any that were openly addressed to the group” (POGS12). However, reflecting on the work of Bourke and Bennett (2008: 77), it is evident that some of the difficulties experienced were not specific to this sport development project, “It is not unusual for people attending such workshops to demonstrate signs of shame and embarrassment. Thus consideration of cultural attitudes, values and beliefs must be built into any workshop programme if complex educational messages… are to be understood and acted upon”.

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In preparation for working in an ‘alien’ environment, in an area of India that none of the GH team has previously visited, and in a socio-political context that was expected to present some challenges, the first two introductory workshops primarily related to value education. During these sessions, the participants examined perspectives of sport, play and values, primarily through the lens of social development and then sport psychology. This provided the participants with an insight into Western culture and sporting tradition, but also enabled the UK personnel to gain a better understanding of Tibetan culture and values. This knowledge was applied in subsequent workshops, “We learned from the initial sessions. We had to adopt a developmental approach. The early workshops showed us what formats and subjects worked and what didn’t. It wasn’t perfect after but it got better” (POGL4). This learning process proved an important element of the project and aided the delivery and facilitation of the remaining sessions. Other workshops related to personal and social development through sport, exploring issues pertaining to the suitability of values in relation to constructs such as realism, practicality and flexibility. Additional elements were examined such as the capacity of coaches to deliver such programmes, the commitment of leaders, the receptiveness of participants and the degree to which players absorb values as a guide for their future action. During the closing ceremony for our visit, one of the workshop participants offered the following reflective comment,

The ten-day workshop was very informative… I can see that life is beautiful and life will be more beautiful if we are more informed. And wisdom will come from us and peace and compassion, and peace is the solution to each and every conflict in the world, which you have taught us through the football, and that is amazing (POWP19).

Another respondent argued that the health and nutrition sessions proved particularly useful, as “these are things that affect us all, whereas other things, politics and psychology, we are different in Tibet. But we all have to eat and look after ourselves” (POWP16). The majority of participants were more receptive to the nutrition workshops. These were better received than the sports coach education sessions, which the staff, “seemed to enjoy but I’m not sure what impact they had. We taught them new games involving sports they don’t play like rugby. But their attitude to PE is totally different from ours” (POGS6). In addition,

We mostly coached the pupils who really liked the sessions, but the staff just watched really. But we did some geography lessons as well which were for the kids and not so much the teachers. So I guess the coaching was not really a workshop in the end but more about us having experience coaching kids, and them learning new skills (POGS11).
The senior members of THF staff were quick to emphasise the value of the workshops and coaching clinics to the staff as well as the pupils however, as the following statement illustrates, “To the participants, I sincerely hope this will enrich our own educational skills and our own educational input as teachers... The aim of the workshops is ultimately promoting an investment in developing and educating our children” (POTS13). The “ultimate” goal however was clearly orientated towards pupil rather than staff development, and the Tibetan teachers were keen for their students to have personal experience of an “English physical sports class lesson from experts from our friends from the UK” (FGWP4). Newman (2005: 19) argues that, “young people often have extremely limited social networks exclusive of anyone beyond immediate family members”. This is particularly the case in THF where the “make-shift family unit” (POGL2) as one staff member described it, represents a relatively closed environment. There was even some evidence pointing to isolationism in the village which could be viewed of almost as a ‘village state’, a Tibetan ghetto virtually isolated from the surrounding communities. The school notice board was positioned on one of the main corridors, which was split into two sections, one on “notices”, of which there were several, and the other on “world news”, which remained blank for the duration of the project. There was a reading of some “international news” during a full school assembly, yet this was the only portion of the ceremony read in English, and it appeared that it was solely for the benefit of the GH representatives, who were among the only persons present able to understand the reading. Importantly, in relation to sport and physical activity, the GH staff considered it important to engage with the THF pupils in a way that they had previously been denied. This was considered to have both educational and recreational consequences, as one GH staff member argued,

PE here is basically drills. It’s more like yoga or some military exercise than what we have in England. So the kids don’t have many ways to play. And you can learn through play, especially when you’re young. There’s a few climbing frames and they shoot hoops on the basketball court, but that’s about it. Then it’s Tibetan dance, which the lads seem to dread. And on the SOS celebration day they had some weird games. For one the kids who can’t have been more than eight stripped down to their underwear and had a race to put their clothes back on, in front of the entire school! It must be a cultural thing, but surely football and rugby are better options. Hopefully by giving them this equipment and coaching them we’ll give them a few games to play and have a bit more fun (IVGS2).

**Tibetan identity and the value of sport**

Religious conviction and spirituality are deeply entwined within Tibetan cultural heritage. McKay (2001: 89) argues that Tibet was once seen as, “the home of monks, mystics and magicians… gilded aristocrats, free-spirited nomads and simple and honest peasants”. However, the recent influx of Chinese people encroaching and...
settling in “Tibetan territory” constitutes a critical threat to this picture of mystic Tibetanness. Since the completion of the high-speed Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006, connecting the Tibetan capital, Lhasa with mainland China, the numbers of “migrating” Chinese has swollen rapidly, with many indigenous residents fleeing into neighbouring countries. The remaining Tibetans, therefore, face their identity as a separate people with a distinct cultural and religious ethos being wiped out (Ingram, 1990). For Tibetans-in-exile, these recent developments in their homeland have reinforced a desire for the determined preservation of their national identity. Moraes (1960: 144) argues that, “Over the centuries the chief concern of the Tibetans has been two-fold - to preserve their religion and to maintain their independence.” Despite being a dated opinion, this position has not changed in the last half century, emphasising the longevity of the Tibetan plight. During an interview with the THF General Secretary, I enquired whether “the dream would be a collective return to Tibet in the future”. He replied, “Yes. The recent statements of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, our government policy is that we are willing to live with China but only with the guarantee of the protection of our cultural heritage” (IVTS1). In addition he argued, “The chance of freedom is rested upon the Tibetan spirit... History teaches us that in the long run, the spirit of people cannot be vanquished. In due course things change” (IVTS). This process of change and the nature of the Tibetan spirit are intertwined with the construction, maintenance and meaning of civil, religious and national identities.

Identity is a complex construct, emanating from the expectations attached to roles that social actors occupy and which are then internalised. It is unclear whether this is a sociologically fixed or “pure” entity, and whether there is an authentic self or identity behind the various masks we present to others (Goffman, 1959). This could be because individuals as rational beings inhabit multiple identities, which may not be discrete, but might often interact producing a hybrid of cultural identities that serve as the product of mixing, fusion and creolization (Marshall, 1998). The ‘self’ allows an individual to reflect on his or her nature and the social world through communication and language, facilitating a process of identification (i.e. placing ourselves in socially constructed categories). Various vehicles and modes of communication have been developed in regional, national and continental contexts, in order to express a construct that is socially bestowed, sustained and transformed (Berger, 1966). This is particularly the case for Tibetans. The maintenance of ethno-religious and socio-political identity and the desire to prepare for life in a “free Tibet” are infused within the mindset of exiled Tibetans, and by extension, the educational goals of THF. The school’s Principal argues that, “the main aim is to develop children’s cultural values and therefore help them to maintain their national identity” (Norbu, 2008: 5). The religious focus of the THF was always evident in the
school environment and contributed to a strong sense of identity. For example, chanting was an integral part of school assemblies, often led by the Buddhist monks in residence in the THF village. These chants were inherently religious in nature, and yet could also be considered an expression of Tibetan national identity. In addition, symbolic images of the Dalai Lama were one of the most consistent visual features evident throughout the THF school and village. Some rooms even had life-size cardboard cut-outs of the Dalai Lama sat cross-legged on a raised base adorned with candles and Buddhist paraphernalia. Tibetans referred to him as, “His Holiness, the Dalai Lama”. The following interviewee provides a key example, and in doing so also uncovers some of the challenges of living in exile, “I am so grateful for his Holiness Dala Lama kindness and I am so happy because I’m serving the Dalai Lama... but I so miss my Mum and Dad. I can’t remember the last time I see them” (IVTP1).

However, some of the GH staff and students expressed a sense of confusion regarding the forms of religious behaviour that they were exposed to in THF, claiming it was, “different to other forms of Buddhism I’ve seen. And the Dalai Lama who they worship is Tibetan. So it seems it’s all about Tibet. It’s like being from Tibet is their religion” (POGS). One could frame a reflection of this statement with reference to the concept of civil religion. Bellah (1992) examines civil religion in America (USA) and argues that in this context the phenomenon can be viewed as an institutionalised collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation. He points to the singing of the national anthem, the Pledge of Allegiance and the symbolism of the national flag as examples of behaviour which challenge national self-worship and call for the subordination of Americans to certain ethical principles. Bellah (1992) identifies the American Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement as decisive historical events that have informed the content and imagery of American civil religion. Similarly, for Tibetans in exile, a comparable connection can be made between the significance of the state and the collective belief system, “I don’t see Buddhism, I see Tibetanism. That’s not to say that Buddhism isn’t there, but that the indoctrination and belief in all things Tibet seems to be in every aspect of their life in the village, whereas Buddhist beliefs seem... a bit more compartmentalised” (POGS21).

There was some evidence of nationally-focused religious instruction (which some could view as indoctrination) in the THF school buildings. For example, there were a number of signs posted around the school, such as, “Tibet will not die because there is no death for the human spirit. Communism will not succeed because man will not be slave forever. Tyrannies have come and gone and so have Caesars and Csars (sic) and Dictators. But the spirit of man goes on forever (Jayaprakash
Narayan). Also a number of THF teachers (and some older pupils) wore t-shirts with strong political messages, such as, “justice has been raped in Tibet”, “Tibet will never be a part of China”, “Stop killing in Tibet – where are you Red Cross?” and “Free Tibet now, stop the genocide, a new generation awakes”. Although the fortnight of observational opportunities afforded to the researchers facilitated considerable access to the THF community and the perspectives of its members, it was not feasible in the limited time available to ascertain a detailed sense of the extent to which this religiosity permeated the beliefs of the pupils. We were able to more reliably reflect on the attitudes of staff, via the various methods employed in this work. However, our understanding of the pupils’ attitudes is less comprehensive, and largely reliant on a limited number of interviews and some assumptions. As an example of the latter, when conducting literature-based research on Tibetan culture in the modestly-appointed SOS/THF library, the issue slip in many of the books on Tibetan culture and religion indicated they had not been borrowed by students for more than a decade (most other books on subjects such as popular culture where loaned far more regularly and recently). Given the large numbers of pupils who could access these books, this may suggest that the extent of engagement in Tibetan forms of Buddhism is limited. In addition, “a lot of the kids looked bored by the rituals in the assemblies. You wonder how much they buy into it” (POGS16).

However, when exploring Tibetan identity and religion it is important to be mindful of the excess of events that Tibetan people have been subjected to. Western public opinion of Tibetan issues and culture has partly been informed by the Tri-Star production *Seven Years in Tibet*. The 1997 film is based on the book of the same name, which is an account of Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer’s experiences in Tibet between 1944 and 1951, and his relationship with the Dalai Lama. Harrer (2005: 292-293) provides this account of the atrocities that the people of Tibet were subjected to,

> After almost forty years, the destruction of Tibet still continues… Decades of destruction, oppression, sterilization, genocide and political indoctrination - none of this has been able to conquer the Tibetan’s desire for freedom. Their faith and their respect for the Dalai Lama are undiminished.

It may seem naïve now to consider that our programme of Sports Development could have an impact upon these young people given this backdrop of events in their homeland and their current displacement from it.

McKay (2001: 92) argues that historically, in pre-occupied Tibet, “Tibetan sporting contests usually took place during festival and feasting days as part of the general
entertainment”. However McKay (2001) also argues that for Tibetans modern sport is viewed as, “popular culture and secular culture and is consequently ignored”. Consequently, this may be evidence to suggest that this latter position largely reflects the attitude of the THS towards sport. There are a limited number of infrequently staged sporting events at the school, yet these represent, “the only organised sport we play throughout the year” (FGWP7). The most popular sport amongst the staff was clearly basketball, and as a group they considered their senior physical education teacher to be “the best basketball coach in Tibetan society. No-one comes near him” (FGWP15). The GH staff ran coaching sessions in rugby, partly due to the perceived novelty of the sport. However the coaches were surprised that, “None of the students and even the majority of the staff have ever seen a rugby ball. When the workshop group was asked what they thought it was, most thought it was an American Football” (POGL9). Football was undoubtedly the most popular sport amongst the pupils, although some of the staff seemed completely disinterested in football. At break times and after school, the students were not allowed to play with regulation sized footballs in the playground, “as they could break windows and cause other damage. It is not safe” (POTS16). There was no prevention of the use of full-sized basketballs however. Harrer (2005) states that the popularity of Tibetan football suffered when a particularly bad hailstorm occurred during a league match. The storm was interpreted as an omen from a higher power, and the game was consequently banned, yet the basis of this sporting prohibition was thought to be “monastic opposition to the game” (McKay, 2001:99). Again, this implies that the dislike of sports such as football was religiously motivated.

Although organised sporting interactions were not “taken seriously in Tibetan curriculum” (FGWP21), every student participated in two forms of compulsory daily exercise. Firstly, “we jog for about five kilometres before the start of school around the hills” (IVTP2). The second is a form of yoga known as Surya Namaskar, which translates from Sanskrit as Salutation to the Sun. As a practice Surya Namaskar is made up of twelve yogic positions or asanas which according to Ramdev (2004: i), can bring about “mental and physical cleansing and soul enlightenment” in the participant. Based on this description of Surya Namaskar, there are similarities here to McKay’s (2001) historical commentary of the activities undertaken by nineteenth century Tibetan Monks, in that this type of physical activity might also be considered to be a “psychic sport” (Loseries-Leick, 1995: 12). The function of such engagement may be exercise aimed at spiritual enlightenment, rather than sporting interaction. Participation in such activities was considered “sufficient for Tibetan school children” (FGWP20). The GH staff did not encounter a single student who was notably overweight, which may appear to substantiate this argument both from a religious perspective and from a health perspective, which
respectively proved the collective primary concern and interest of Tibetan staff in the workshops. However, as one of the GH staff argued, “this may have been affected by dietary factors. It’s unlikely that their diet is particularly unhealthy or that the kids have money to spend on junk food” (POGL19). Another respondent suggested that, “the problem is partly the equipment. I know we’ve given them loads of sports stuff but before we came they didn’t have much. Plus they don’t have many places to play sport” (POGS3). Adjacent to the THF school there is a large civil servants sports complex with full sized tennis, volleyball and basketball courts, football pitches, a fully-equipped indoor gymnasium, a fitness area and an indoor multi-use hall. In contrast the THS sports facilities consisted of one full-sized and correctly marked basketball court (which doubled as the school’s playground) and one football pitch, which was merely an unmarked, disproportionate dirt field with makeshift goals. A number of respondents made reference to the issue of facilities. For example, “We do not use the pitches [at the adjacent campus]. I have only ever been on one once and I teach PE!” (IVTS4). Also, “They don’t seem to really believe in sport. It’s got to be partly the fact they don’t have much space, but it seems it’s more than that. They just don’t really believe in it. There’s just no suggestion they want to invest much time or money into sport” (POGS1). This was making the Western facilitators from Hope University doubt that what they had come prepared to offer was not really what the Tibetan people wanted or needed.

**Conclusion**

In his speech given for the Nobel Peace prize, the Dalai Lama presented a five-point proposal, approving the concept of Tibet as a demilitarized zone of peace, neutral, unaligned and unoccupied. He also stated that, “we are dependent on each other in so many ways that we can no longer live in isolated communities and ignore what is happening outside those communities” (Piburn, 1990: 12). For people living in exiled ghettos however, the threat of isolation is a very real one. As a consequence of the persecutory ethnocide of indigenous Tibetans as a distinct cultural and religious group, the Tibetans living in India have been afforded considerable privileges as refugees. The Indian government for example have for fifty years risked the political and even military wrath of the Chinese by supporting Tibetan communities and allowing them to take up so called “temporary” Indian residency. Education serves as one of the key vehicles to maintain and express Tibetan culture for those living in exile and as Piburn (1990: 91) argues,

> With this experience we intend to implement full democracy in a future free Tibet. Reason, courage, determination, and the inextinguishable desire for freedom can ultimately win… this realization fills us Tibetans with hope that some day we too will once again be free.
Religious belief, political sovereignty and socio-cultural identity may serve as primary informers of Tibetan educational philosophies and policies for those living in exiled communities; however it could be argued that the refusal to engage in and take advantage of other opportunities might prove a limiting factor.

Competitive sporting engagement for example, in which grassroots participation can foster and inspire, is a context that could facilitate the mitigation of political dilemmas. For example, in commenting on the problems of Middle Eastern politics and the “clarity” of football in this regard, Freeman (2005: 16) quotes the former Iraqi national team manager Bernd Stange as saying, “I only wish that politics had rules as clear as those of football. It’s not a coincidence that FIFA [world football’s governing body] has more members than the United Nations”. A number of “nations elect” have utilised engagement with sports competitions and governing bodies for political expediency. At the end of the Cold War the communist system in Europe was significantly weakened and in the multiethnic Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFYR) the communist party began to lose its ideological potency. SFYR had been a conglomeration of six regional republics and two autonomous provinces but in the late 1980s national and separatist ideologies provided direct threat to centralised Yugoslav control. In 1992 one of the regional republics Bosnia and Herzegovina passed its own referendum for independence and successfully gained FIFA membership, which it used as an indicator of viability to obtain United Nations recognition (Sack and Suster, 2000). As one of the SFYR autonomous provinces, Kosovo came under Serbian rule following the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s, but declared independence from Serbia in 2008. The territory of Kosovo which remains unrecognised in the context of political sovereignty is also gaining increasing political support through involvement in “international” sporting competition. The connection to sporting federations as a prequel to mobilise political representation can prove problematic. For example, the decision made by FIFA in 1998 to readmit Palestine as a member state has not yet led to the territory being recognised as a nation-state and the current scenario has caused problems for some talented Israeli-Arab Palestinians who have to decide which football “nation” they owe allegiance to (Sugden, 2006). However, an inference can be made that for some countries sport may have been a means of overcoming such political barriers and that this might similarly be the case for Tibetans, if they chose to engage in sporting interactions on the international stage.

The correlation between grassroots participation and elite performance may be significant in this regard. Although this often translates as a point of friction in sports policy and funding contexts, most analysts and practitioners would agree that the investment of economic, physical and human resources in order to encourage
youth involvement in sport is a vital prerequisite in order to foster performance at the elite level. This connection was also made by one of the Tibetan physical education teachers, “To have a good team to play other countries in the world Cup would be my dream. Not the non-FIFA one. But for this we need to get our young people playing” (POWP18). Tibet currently participates in this “non-FIFA” competition, known as the VIVA Cup. This biannual international football tournament was founded in 2006 and is organised by the New Federation Board. The competition is reserved for nations unaffiliated with FIFA, who are keen to promote the legitimacy of their own nationality and wish to foster relations with other nations. Competing teams include Zanzibar, Greenland, Sami, North Cyprus, Monaco and Padania. The decision of the Tibetan National Football Association to compete in such organised international sport is significant, but it is doubtful whether this level of engagement in a competition that lacks the media exposure and political weight of its FIFA-run counterpart, will have the desired effect to elevate Tibet to independent recognition as a nation.

On the wall of the small THS sports storage facility a newspaper article was pinned to a notice board, entitled, “Playing ball gives Tibetans a sense of nationhood” (Saxena, 2009: 45). The story depicted a “friendly” football game played by a representative Tibetan team in a contest described as “The Tibetan people’s unique unifying event”. However, for Tibetans in exile, the educational approach, both curricular and extracurricular, simply does not endorse the place or role of sport. The experience of coaching Tibetan school pupils and facilitating workshops with their teachers was particularly enriching and informative for the personal development of the UK personnel. Unfortunately however, the same might not be said for the Tibetan school community. Ultimately, it proved difficult to escape from the initial impression which was collectively perceived and established following comments made by the THF General Secretary. The Sports Development initiative had provided some interesting recreation opportunities for some of their pupils but appeared to register Maths and Science more highly on the academic timetable. The remainder of what proved a very enjoyable and enlightening experience for the GH staff was frustrating in a sporting context, largely due to the incomparable philosophies on sport. For the visiting staff and students sport and physical activity were viewed as vehicles which can promote a healthy and active lifestyle and improve the character of the individual and the conduct of the collective, with sporting competitions holding considerable significance for social, cultural and political interactions and identities. For the host institution however, sport was simply not viewed as a remotely serious matter.
The failure of the project to alter this mindset necessitates immersion in detailed analytical reflection, which cannot be realised here. However, a fundamental assessment would be that the Tibetan staff were not receptive to the value-based coaching sessions, the examination of projects in other political climes, or various other psychological and physiological sporting explorations. This is partly due to the failure of the GH organisers to apply the advice of Bourke and Bennett (2008). Due to the inexperience of the staff, the project did not involve building an informed understanding of Tibetan cultural attitudes, values and beliefs into the workshops. In addition however, unlike the F4P initiative in Israel, which involves more than sixty UK-based personnel each summer, the GH programme did not employ large numbers of lecturers and students or make a commitment to continue their work and revisit the school on a regular basis in the coming years. This limitation was compounded by the refusal of THF to meaningfully engage in sport at an institutional level. A school with 1600 pupils and 250 members of staff that only employs two people to teach sport and physical activity sends a clear message about the value of sport in this establishment. Our experience reflects the view of McKay (2001: 92) who argues that for Tibetans, sport is viewed as, “popular culture and secular culture and is consequently ignored”.

References


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2. Author profile: James is 27 years old and recently graduated with a first-class degree in Sports Studies / Sports Development. He is currently engaged on an MSc in Research Methods with a view to enrolling on a Sport Sociology PhD in the future.

3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on, James Kenyon, kenyonj@hope.ac.uk and Joel Rookwood, rookwoj@hope.ac.uk.