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SHOUTING, CLAPPING, AND LAUGHING WITH THE MONKS

Toward a boisterous, cosmopolitan argumentation pedagogy

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Contrary to expectations based on stereotypes, Tibetan monasteries are actually full of playful, boisterous, highly physical argumentation (see Drepung, 2009). Tibetan monks could be described as "first and foremost *homo disputans*" (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 204), having adopted and adapted Indian philosophical debate in their seventh century turn to Buddhism (Perdue, 2008). Unfamiliar observers often describe the format as mesmerizing to watch; one Westerner even thought he was watching some type of new, emerging genre like "Tibetan Socrates meets Jerry Springer" ("Tibetan Monks," 2007, para. 2).

I stumbled upon this remarkable practice during a fellowship exploring Himalayan art and culture. The shouting, clapping, and laughing in the format drew my interest, as did possible implications for the study and teaching of argumentation. In a globalizing planet where the possibilities for incommensurability loom large, Liu (1999) has urged scholars to examine novel, productive intercultural debate practices like "cross-arguing," where "two contending sides . . . each try to justify [their] position in the other party's terms" (p. 309). Combs (2004) has further described many differences between holistic, polysemous traditions of Daoist debate and Greek traditions; such contrasts in argumentative style and assumption are well worth parsing out.

Intracultural traditions can provide new deliberative forms that can be adapted for intercultural engagement. Hicks (2002) called for such "interactive" and "emergent" models of public argument (p. 256), while Bohman (2000) argued that:

> for all their talk about deliberation, few theorists or philosophers describe it at all, and few of those who describe it do so in sufficient detail to make clear why it is democratic, [and] what putting it into practice would mean.
>
> (p. 17)

Habermas and others have also continued to explore religious models that could point the way toward useful deliberative norms (see Goodnight, 2007, p. 103).

For these reasons, this study examines the practices of Tibetan debate to construct new perspectives for argumentation. I inputted the search term "Tibetan Debate" on *YouTube* and then conducted a close reading of the 583 video search results (excluding redundant or non-related materials), while working through links and other sources provided. These videos and other sources provided a range of perspectives on Tibetan debate – from first-person footage to engaging lectures around the world on the topic. Given obvious difficulties in language translation and context, I also searched for and threaded together extant literatures on Tibetan debate.

In the following section, my goal is less to cover all the intricacies of this debate form than to construct and distill several themes from these data with implications for the theory, practice, and especially the teaching of argumentation. Based upon this analysis, this essay concludes with a classroom exercise that may be implemented in argumentation or deliberation courses.

Combining Status and *Stasis*

The unequal postures between arguers constitute one of the most striking features of Tibetan debates. In its most basic form, one person *stands* and walks around as a questioner, while the other *sits* on the ground ready to defend a position (Perdue, 1992, p. 28). The overarching spirit of these debates is highly egalitarian ("Great Debates," 2011), but also is aimed at sharpening the mental capacities of both debaters by assigning height, movement, and "presence" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) to the questioner, while the questioned assumes a more meditative, still position. Typically, novices are assigned to the sitting position while more experienced teachers or students stand.

Tibetan debate defines *stasis* as independent from equal status. As much as figures like Habermas (1985) emphasized that *ideal speech situations* should maintain equality between participants, for pedagogical purposes this does not always need to be the case. Both participants exhibit respect toward one another – indeed, differences in beliefs and attitudes are revered in this tradition ("Great Debates," 2011) – but for the sake of learning, debaters play higher and lower statuses to increase the intensity of questioning, answer giving, and audience involvement.

Those standing pose a question on a particular topic and the person sitting responds with a thesis; finding some initial agreement has historically been a way to provide some equal grounding for monks meeting from different sectarian traditions (Dreyfus, 2001a, para. 3). Debate then proceeds, with those standing using boisterous movements to enliven their arguments. Those sitting start at a physical disadvantage, which calls for heightened, intense concentration toward the incoming questions.

A major goal of this format is as much to become more aware of the limitations of one's own understanding (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 269) as to discover or generate knowledge. Participants are asked to become as comfortable raising their status as lowering it – cultivating the ability to play both for a short-term win in the debate competition while accounting for long-term needs for the relational and individual growth provided by the exercise.

Shifting, Improvisational Coalitions

Compared with Oxford and other debate styles where arguers focus on a resolution and audiences may vote at the end ("Great Debates," 2011), in Tibetan debate audiences are far more involved and even enter the forum themselves as argumentation proceeds. Any topic can be

debated ("Tibetan Debate," 2006), with debates becoming increasingly collective ("Great Debates," 2011). The videos and talks evidence background observers suddenly joining in so that, for instance, two defendants of a thesis become seated while one questioner stands. At other times two questioners argue with one person sitting. Combinations of any number of debaters are possible to the point where entire cohorts can be seated or standing against other players. A group versus group format can also develop.

These practices demonstrate a procedure where audience members are allowed to change their minds over the course of a debate and need not decide a position and stick with it ("Highlights," 2011). In general, the goal is to start with rules and procedures but move to a point where participants can go beyond "set formulas" ("Highlights," 2011, 5:25). It is not uncommon for the initial debaters to eventually switch roles in the course of a session given the debates tend to continue for hours at a time (Dreyfus, 2001b). These practices teach that debaters and audiences should not necessarily remain polarized or come into the debate with inviolable *a priori* commitments; instead, Tibetan debate focuses students on open-ended investigation.

Tibetan debates highlight pluralism and human processes involving multiple interpretations on matters of wisdom or truth. Monks recognize that "the hold of tradition cannot be too tight; otherwise tradition would be unable to cope with ever changing circumstances" (Dreyfus, 2008, p. 44). Underscoring the expansive goals of the form, Geshé Rabten argued that "after developing his [*sic*] intelligence and discriminatory powers in this way, a monk is able to apply as many as twenty or thirty logical approaches to each major point of teaching" (as cited in Cabezón, 2008, p. 3).

Games of Consequence

Tibetan debates are quite similar to Socratic methods of argument but also surpass such methods in several respects. Some of the format's features could be characterized as games of consequence. Questions and answers generally follow an enthymematic line of reasoning, collapsing syllogistic logic into single thesis sentences like "the subject Socrates is mortal because of being a man" ("Great Debates," 2011, 7:30), which quickly allow the debates to take off in numerous directions.

From the thesis statements, Tibetan debates follow an argument-from-consequences structure. Other debating forms tend to adhere to probative structures, which aim "to establish a true thesis to an audience that does not yet know it to be true," while consequences models aim "not to establish a point but merely to draw the consequences of previous statements and bring out the contradictions or absurdities entailed by these statements" (Dreyfus, 2008, p. 47). Respondents are expected to provide fast answers to questions, following one of three/four general responses: I agree, I disagree, this is a fallacy, or by trying to turn the question back on the questioner ("Buddhist Monks," 2011). In general, respondents' main method is to draw distinctions about their topics to prevent contradictions (Dreyfus, 2001a).

An informal spirit guides these formal procedures. Tibetan debate should be seen as a game like chess, where each move has numerous implications ("Great Debates," 2011, 38:35). The rules are not completely strict and many rhetorical elements such as humor can contribute to making the debates more lively and involving (Dreyfus, 2008). In the same way that Palczewski (2002) described argumentation built upon metaphors of play as offering more expansive, productive possibilities for debate, fun is meant to be a part of the exercise. Debate in Tibet is, as one observer described, "a mental sport [that] has the advantage of being most useful and delightful" (Sierksma, 1964, p. 140).

Animated Sounds and Physicality

The aural and kinetic dimensions of these debates challenge simple, "talking heads" conceptions of argumentation. Indian culture, from which Tibetan debate developed, placed more emphasis upon oral communication than just about any other ancient culture (Kennedy, 1998, p. 172). Outside observers sometimes wrongly assume that there is a great deal of anger present among debaters (see Sierksma, 1964, p. 140); yet, far from some scholastic exercise (see Stein, 1972), these debates evidence useful intellectual *and* emotional activity (Dreyfus, 2008).

Several physical characteristics stand out. Debaters usually start in low vocal tones, which rise progressively to animate arguments. The questioner's clapping invokes a specific Buddhist ritual, with the right and left arms representing a joining of "method" and "wisdom" ("Great Debates," 2011, 5:05). Gestures like stomping also have Buddhist overtones, indicating the avoidance of rebirth in a lower dimension, with the hope that rigorous debate will lead to emancipation (Cabezón, 2008, p. 4). Another practice involves the questioner wrapping a robe around his or her waist to signal "understanding and control" with "forceful sweeping gestures" ("Tibetan Monks Debate," n.d., para. 4). Gestures not only help stage the debates, but bring a focus on clear expression that mobilizes both debaters and audiences (Dreyfus, 2008, p. 50).

These practices direct our attention to how argumentation can incorporate more sound and movement than has been the case in many Western traditions. Such an approach comports with tested educational programs integrating "multiple intelligences" in curricula (Gardner, 2006). Moreover, deliberation scholarship has perhaps overstated needs for civil language and behaviors; as Ivie (2002) suggested, more rowdy conceptions of deliberation could be warranted in public argument. Respectful communication remains an ideal, but Tibetan debate invites us to consider how civil rhetoric can perhaps be more emotional and embodied than has been thought possible.

Outdoor Argumentative Spaces

Different than many educational institutions, monasteries do not have any classrooms. Instead, the academic space is an outdoor courtyard, which is primarily designed for debate. The courtyard space is important for argument in a few respects. As demonstrated in the videos, this context permits debaters to argue in a louder and more energetic style than an indoor setting allows. Additionally, given the external interferences of nature and, often, fellow monks debating all over the courtyard, questioners and defenders are challenged to bring force to their arguments.

These spaces also are designed as distinct zones for failure. The courtyard is considered by monks "a separate arena where embarrassments and even humiliations are seen as part of the learning process. Hence, no stigma is attached to one's mistakes" (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 197). There are plenty of times and places in everyday life when people are subject to structures of hierarchy and perfection (see Burke, 1966). But in Tibetan debate, the courtyard is a place to free individuals from social demands and expectations that might normally hinder generative argumentation.

Conclusion and Exercise

Tibetan debate can advance the study and practice of argumentation. The form is currently practiced in some Indian middle schools (Learning, 2009), but as Perdue suggested, "there is

this potential for adaptation" in the format (as cited in "Great Debates," 2011, 47:00). Others have proposed that it could be used in undergraduate education ("Great Debates," 2011, 48:00), but specific instructions are needed. Toward this end, I built from the previous analysis to construct the following exercise.

First, instructors should draw students' attention to the topic of intercultural argumentation. At a point in the semester when students have covered more Western understandings of debate, perhaps through the practice of policy or parliamentary debate, instructors can segue to how comparative cultural forms support or challenge extant understandings of argumentation. I would advise showing a six-minute "Highlights" (2011) video, which provides both a context for Tibetan debate and demonstrates how it is typically conducted. Other short videos (e.g., Drepung, 2009) can provide more direct examples of actual Buddhist monks debating. These segments should lead to discussion – given where classes are at this point in the semester, what do students make of the monks' styles, etc.?

Second, after discussing the videos, teachers should cover the five aforementioned approaches in Tibetan debate: the combining of status and *stasis* in debaters' verbal and nonverbal orientations, the shifting improvisational coalitions that can be built over the debate's progression, the games of consequence format that focuses logical procedures, the animated sounds and physicality that are available as rhetorical resources, and the ways in which having an outdoor space can contribute to the argumentative encounter.

Last, instructors should explain that course members will engage in a few, adapted rounds of Tibetan debate in an outdoor space on campus. The exercise can start with two individual volunteers, one the standing questioner and one the sitting defender. Debaters should start with a handshake to signal respect toward each other. Although just about any topic is fair game for the format, I recommend starting with a philosophical or religious topic, like most Tibetan debates. Topics should be somewhat accessible, such as: Does truth exist? Is religion good for society? Are the lives of animals equal to or less than human lives? The respondent should provide a thesis statement answering the question so the debate can proceed.

Instructors should remind students of several expectations. The questioner should generally only ask questions, trying to draw out the consequences of the respondent's statements to point out potential contradictions. Respondents, in turn, should respond to answers as quickly as possible. The questioner should start to use energetic movements and heightened vocal gestures (as respectfully as possible) to make her or his points. After the first few minutes, audience members should begin to join one of the sides, putting their hands up if they think they have additional points to help either the defender or questioner. The first time the debate takes place, the instructor should let the students know she or he will be facilitating at various points to help the process run more smoothly. For teaching purposes, I recommend that the instructor calls time and uses the number of students who have shifted to each side to determine which side won. At other times, an ending will emerge more organically, such as when a questioner is no longer able to prod forward with a line of questioning.

Once this example debate has occurred, a variety of formats can be used, such as pairing every student with debate topics chosen by the instructor. Alternatively, a two-on-two or five-on-one debate can be formed. Providing these variations should allow for repetitions of the exercise to keep students interested. Once the exercise is completed, instructors should debrief with the class: Did they find their debating skills sharpened? What areas for improvement did it help them identify in their argumentation? What did they learn about themselves in this process? To finish on an encouraging, positive note, the instructor should identify best practices and anything noteworthy observed during the debates. Overall, there is much to be gained from such argument traditions. Following the Tibetan monks, this training can

sharpen students' skills, enlarge their outlooks, and, hopefully, inspire them toward a reasoned and reasonable way of life.

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