

# Exploration into an asylum seeker's narrative retelling.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research topic

According to the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugee, signatory countries have the responsibility of protecting individuals that present a well-founded fear of persecution (Convention relating to the Status of Refugee, 1951). The text provides a definition of who is to be regarded as a refugee; what types of threats of persecution can be considered. This raises fundamental questions with regards to the process of asylum seeking: by whom and how is the quality of refugeehood assessed? Is it the state that determines who the refugee is, or the asylum seeker that defines his need for protection? This question cannot be answered categorically, but stems rather from the perspective taken. In the context of the administrative procedure the aim is to determine whether the individual can be recognized as an asylum seeker in legal terms. To understand how this process of recognition unfolds the administrative and legal frame as well as the asylum seeker's narrative construction of their story need to be analyzed. Asylum seekers most often rely solely on their story in order to demonstrate their fear of persecution (Millbank, 2009). How this story is assessed becomes a central issue as it will determine the future of the asylum seeker. However, narration also plays a central role for asylum seekers in order to make sense out of radical change. Indeed, the displacement they undergo engenders discontinuities within their everyday lives thereby requiring new interpretations of their experiences in order to "make sense of the disruptive change" (Eastmond, 2007, p. 251). The present study will thus focus on the processes of narration in which asylum seekers engage.

### 1.2 Research questions

This research is part of my master theses which will aim at understanding how the story of the asylum seeker is constructed for the audition, notably with the help of legal experts (but also without), and what the criteria of assessment are. The objective is to unearth and understand possible tensions between the administrative frame for the story and the personal narrative of the asylum seekers. The following study however, is part of a series of exercises that were executed in the context of a course in qualitative research and focuses only on the interview of one asylum seeker, hence the objective is narrower. The primary goal is to carry out a first exploration of how this specific asylum seeker tells his story. The research question may hence be stated as such: How does the asylum seeker narrate his story until his asylum application. Of course, the context of the asylum audition and the context of the interview I held are radically different. However, the focus is not on how the story was told during the audition, but rather

on the structure, themes and self-presentation in the story as it is told in the specific interview I conducted with him.

Asylum narratives are stories that are produced in a specific context. They respond to the administrative requirement of providing proof of one's refugeehood. These narratives are hence recounted in accordance to the asylum seekers understanding of how the flow of events and actions led to their present situation and how they relate to their claim. Central in the way they reconstruct their story is their conception of what a refugee is and what events or circumstances in their life constitute them as such. Usually, the knowledge asylum seekers hold of the procedure in the country of application as well as the specific legal definition of refugee (included for example in the 1951 convention) is very imprecise even when the procedure is underway (Zimmermann, 2009). Moreover, the self-established justifications for going to Europe may have been very different at the moment of departure than once their asylum application has been set off. However, the aim of the following research is not yet to understand the link between the asylum seeker's representation of the procedure and how they construct the story for that purpose. Rather, the focus here will be mainly on the story as it is told during the research interview.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This study focuses on the processes of (re)telling stories in which asylum seekers are engaged. The concept of narrative thus presented itself as a useful entrance point to elaborate the theoretical lens and choose an appropriate methodology. The renewal of interest in this concept across a whole array of disciplines began in the 1980s and is sometimes referred to as the "narrative turn" (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2005). Its definition is hence open to debate as each discipline brings its own range of meanings (Hazel, 2007). Of particular interest to us in the context of this research is its use in sociology and notably the link that has been made with identity. The following chapter will thus begin with a first section outlining the concept of narrative identity. The second section will highlight the several aspects pertaining specifically to the context of the audition in which asylum seekers are requested to narrate their story. Although present study will not focus specifically on this context, it is discussed in order to understand the general aim of the master thesis in which this study is inserted.

### 2.1 Narrative and identity

The concept of *narrative* identity enables to overcome the threat of essentialism of the concept of identity alone. The concept of identity has been rightly identified as problematic by Brubaker and Cooper (2000). Amongst the various criticism, they particularly highlight the risks of reification when the practical usages of the term are conflated with its analytical purposes. The practical employment on the one hand refers to

the ways in which individuals apply the term in everyday life or for political purposes. The analytical use on the other hand serves specifically to understand individuals and their actions. The danger of reification refers to the risk of apprehending identity or certain forms of identity (ex: race and gender) as something fixed, ahistorical and universal. Indeed when the language of politics is uncritically adopted for analytical purposes, the categories involved are taken for granted rendering them fixed and unquestionable. The diverse and particularistic world becomes simplified and general. Brubaker and Cooper thus suggest rather conceiving of identity as a process which may become crystallized at certain moments in time but always remain variable. Somers (1994) presents a similar criticism of the concept of identity. Her critique focuses mainly on the way recent politics of identity have created new forms of “totalizing fictions”. She highlights that these have been adopted and reified by identity-theory (p. 610). This is a clear example of the conflation of practical and analytical employments of the term. The problem remains the same: essential, pre-political categories are taken as the basis for analysis thereby ignoring the historicity and variable character of these very categories. The solution she suggests is the one chosen in this research, which is to incorporate the “destabilizing dimensions of time, space and relationality” central in the concept of narrative (606).

The basic premise of the narrative perspective of identity is that personal self-conception emerges in the narrative. Simply understood, a narrative is a discursive construction that creates a coherence and unity out of disparate events. The various experiences in one’s life thereby acquire meaning in the context of the story as a whole (Elliott, 2005). In this conception the story plays an important role as a mode of meaning making. The narrative can be conceived as a form of explanation which tells us why an event occurred as well the intentions and goals of the actors (Ritivoi, 2009). The narrative is thereby the “form in which self-conscious agents make themselves intelligible to themselves as agents persisting through time” (Rudd, 2007, p. 63). Hence the story does not only serve to make events meaningful but equally to make oneself intelligible within the context of the narrative. The temporal element referred to in the above quote highlights the role of the narrative as a form of “self-constituted continuity” (Atkins, 2004). By creating meaning and coherence, the story enables the individual to recognize herself over time. The approach taken here however, is not to understand the individual’s psychology, how they constitute a sense of self. Rather, the narrative provides a means by which we, as researchers, may have access to how social agents justify their actions through stories (Ritivoi, 2009, p. 32).

Apprehending people through their narratives also enables to capture the mutual constitution of agency and social positioning. The narrative perspective of identity thereby strikes a balance between humanist and structuralist approaches. On the one hand, the individual is reattributed a certain level of agency as she has the power to create her own story. On the other hand, socio-historical elements are also

crucial to take into account as the individual is socially positioned. Cultural conventions, institutional framings, and the multitude of other narratives in which she is embedded are all factors that influence the way the person constructs her story. However these influences do not shape the individual uniformly. Rather, she reappropriates them in her story (Somers, 1994). These two aspects of agency and social positioning will be further elaborated upon.

The narrative of the individual is first a form of representation. Eastmond (2007) illustrates this well by making the distinction between ‘life as lived’, the simple flow of events that occur, ‘life as experienced’, the perception and meaning people ascribe to these events according to their past experiences and cultural repertoire, and ‘life as told’, which refers to the way people finally articulate their experience in a specific context (p. 249). This distinction clearly demonstrates that the story never reveals occurrences fully and directly. Rather, it is produced and edited throughout the multiple retellings. Individuals attempt to control how their experiences are represented and their capacity to do so point to their creative facet and agency (Ritivoi, 2009). The first step in recounting the experience is the selection of events which are considered essential for the narrative (Hazel, 2007). This aptitude for selection reveals the self-reflexive character of people. It is the individual’s capacity for evaluation which enables to distinguish and choose amongst the infinite numbers of events, experiences, people that constitute everyday life (Somers, 1994). This evaluation of the narrative provides access to the actors’ interpretation of events (Elliott, 2005).

When apprehending a story, it is essential to take into account the context in which it was uttered. The narrative is always told in the presence of another implying a process of negotiation between the various actors involved. However, there is more than simply the specific, interpersonal exchange. Individuals are inscribed within a multitude of individual, public, institutional relations as well as cultural, historical and ontological narratives that change in space and time. For example, our stories are constituted by the various rules that determine what a coherent stories is. These rules may change from place to place and at different moments in time. Narrative identities can thus only be understood within the context of these cultural and relations matrices. However, as has already been highlighted, these relations don’t shape the story directly. Individuals evaluate the multitude of relations within their stories (Somers, 1994). Nonetheless, certain institutional setting, such as an asylum hearing, may be relatively constraining. In this particular situation, asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable to the way in which the listener will interpret her story as this will have direct consequences on her future. The next section will thus elaborate on the specific case of asylum seekers’ narratives.

## 2.2 Asylum hearings and refugee stories

Asylum seekers' narratives are confronted with the legal criteria for acquiring the status of refugee as well as the public narratives concerning them. When formulating their narrative in the context of a hearing, their story is assessed by an official who will make a decision according to the legal criteria but also according to the credibility of the story. The latter evaluation is largely informed by what Somers (1994) has termed 'public narratives' that is "narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual" (p. 619). The following section will firstly elaborate briefly on some of the legal criteria involved in an asylum hearing. Secondly, the consequences public narratives may have for asylum seekers will be further highlighted.

The basic legal criterion is the legal definition of a refugee. In Switzerland, this definition is based on the Geneva Convention of 1951 relating to the status of refugee. According to this definition the asylum seeker has to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution, a future risk of persecution, that this fear is political rather than personal, that it is directed to the individual herself. In her study on credibility assessment in refugee determination, Millbank (2009) highlights three further factors that are used to assess the credibility of asylum seekers' story: demeanor, consistency and plausibility. She demonstrates how each of these criteria is based on culturally informed preconceptions and previous experiences and lead to various issues in the assessment of the stories. Indeed, the pre-formed assumptions often lead to a neglect of important considerations concerning the divergences between the decision-maker's and asylum seeker's knowledge base and cultural frame. A vivid example is the difference between what is considered as relevant information by the decision-makers and by the asylum seekers. Shuman and Bohmer (2004) show in their study for example, that general political details are of no interest for the application, unless they highlight the individual claim. Moreover, only specific types of injustices are deemed relevant in the legal process in order to demonstrate the well-founded fear of persecution. This example demonstrates that the asylum seeker's "experience must conform not only to the categories of refugee law but also to the 'metanarratives of truth and credibility' of the judicial system (Eastmond, 2007, p. 260).

Public narratives also impact the way that asylum seekers narratives are apprehended. These include the narratives concerning refugees, and what a refugee experience is. For instance, several studies have highlighted that the refugee experience is typically associated with trauma (Marlowe, 2010; Salis Gross, 2004). According to Marlowe the tendency to represent the refugee experience as traumatic leads to a thin description of the individual. The person is understood within a framework of pre-conceptions concerning the responses to trauma. The individual's personal response is not taken into account. In such a context refugees' "primary social currency in the 'terrain of truth' rests more with physical and

psychological injuries associated with trauma than people's testimonies and narratives" (Marlowe, 2010, p. 190). In her article on the dominant public narratives of the refugee experience in Switzerland, Salis Gross (2004) demonstrates how this experience is construed within a discourse on trauma. The consequence is the medicalization of the asylum seeking process. This discourse represents refugees as passive victims and undermines them as agents capable of taking conscious decisions and of responding to trauma. Moreover asylum seekers must identify with this discourse on trauma in order to be perceived as proper refugees.

Both of the above examples demonstrate that legal criteria and public narratives both constrain the space and freedom that asylum seekers are granted to recount their stories as they wish. Before apprehending these constraints, which can be qualified as initially external to the story, it is important to first understand how the story is constructed in the more open context of the research interview. The present study thus aims at examining power and constraints to action that are internal to the story.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Interview strategy**

As the focus of this study is the process of storytelling in which asylum seekers engage, it seemed natural to choose a narrative form for the interview. Hence the interview began with an open question inviting the asylum seeker to freely recount his story as he wished. In this first part I only intervened in order to clarify certain terms. The second part of the interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions either clarifying aspects of the story or focusing on the asylum seeker's experience of the procedure.

To gain access to an asylum seeker to be interviewed, a gatekeeper was necessary. The gatekeeper in this case was a Swiss woman who organizes activities in which asylum seekers are notably involved. These activities are entirely unconnected to the procedure and open to all (the high presence of asylum seekers being a consequence of free German classes!). I was invited to one of the activities and met my respondent personally. I explained what kind of research I was doing and he immediately offered to be interviewed. The ease with which the contact was made was probably due to the context in which I met my respondent, which was relaxed, open, and familiar to him. This contributed greatly in establishing the necessary trust for the interview.

#### **3.2 Method of analysis**

The first and second parts of the interview are very clearly distinguishable. The first part consists of the story till Switzerland. The second part consists of shorter answers concerning the asylum procedure. In the



analysis, I treated the first part of the interview as ‘Norbu’s story’, although many of the responses in the second part also took a narrative form. In the following of the analysis, the term ‘story’ thus refers to the first part of the interview. This choice was possible because he presented his story with such a clear plot with an opening and closing. It enabled to analyse how the different sections of the story were assembled into a coherent whole. The second part of the interview was used where it could help to better understand certain themes evoked in the story.

Finding an adequate path for analysis was done intuitively by combining different methods. The principle method for inspiration was Rosenthal’s (2004) narrative analysis. However, certain elements proposed by Flick’s (2006) thematic analysis were also retained. Indeed, certain aspects of Rosenthal’s method remaining vague, Flick’s suggestion to analyse the sequential construction of emerging themes appeared to be particularly relevant for this case. Saldana’s (2009) chapter on coding also proved to be a useful guide to coding, a method that was applied during the thematic analysis. The following section describes in detail the steps that were employed for analysing the data. For the sake of anonymity, all the names of people were changed to pseudonyms and the specific name of places were left out or initialised (when included in a quotation).

The data was first broached through a global analysis (Flick, 2006); all the material was read through. This initial step enabled to make a first identification of certain recurring or important themes as well as make some notes concerning the structure of the story. Moreover, at this stage of the analysis I decided to focus solely on Norbu’s interview for this research. More material was collected, such as an observation and another interview with an asylum seeker. These also present useful information, however they also present particular difficulties which require them to be analyzed differently than Norbu’s interview. They will thus be apprehended for the master research, but left aside for this specific exercise.

Following Rosenthal (2004), the second step was an analysis of the biographical data. All the data devoid of any subjective interpretation of the interviewee was listed. A first set of hypotheses was generated from this data. This step also necessitated the collection of additional information concerning the political situation in Tibet under Chinese occupation. It enabled to begin establishing points of connections between the various data points.

In the third step the story as told was apprehended. It was first sectioned into small units according to thematic shifts and changes of textual sorts (following Rosenthal, 2004). The textual sorts include descriptive, narrative, expository (geared at explanation) and argumentative (geared at evaluation and subjective judgment) sorts. Nearly 200 sections emerged from this process. To keep an overview of the text, the sections were grouped and named with titles and subtitles. This was a crucial step in order to

understand the structure of the life story. Following this step a first list of topics and possible thematic groups was established, and memos written for each.

The fourth step was an in depth analysis of the story as told. Each section was coded chronologically according to the themes that emerged. This process was thus a continual alternation between coding and establishing of themes. In coding each topic, the location of the themes within the narrative and the textual sort were analysed. This served to understand why a particular topic emerged in a specific point of the story. Here the questions proposed by Rosenthal (2004) were very helpful (p.58): Why is she or he presenting this sequence in such a way? Why at this place – and in this sequential order? Why in this text sort? Why in this length? Why this topic or content? What does the biographer not present? Which biographical data is left out or not elaborated? What is the thematic field? Which themes do not fit in the data?

## **4. Analysis – Norbu’s story**

### **4.1 Biographical data**

Norbu was born in a small rural village in Tibet near to the Nepali border. He comes from an agricultural family which mainly lives off growing crops and herding animals. Until 6<sup>th</sup> grade he attended a Tibetan school run by Chinese administration, and also prepares for a monastic education. When he finishes school his father enrolls him in a monastery where he becomes a monk. During the unrest in 2008, a group of Chinese and Tibetan men come to the monastery to give patriotic education. These patriotic education teams were part of a regular campaign initiated by the Chinese authorities. These focused particularly on monasteries as religious professionals were often targeted as political suspects (Barnett, 2009). During a monastery meeting several monks voice their dissent leading an escalation of tension with the Chinese officials and the confiscation of mobile phones. In the evening between twelve and fifteen monks are arrested including Norbu. They are kept at the police station for two to three days. Four of the monks suspected to have initiated the protest are transferred to another prison (although their location remains unknown to Norbu.) The other monks including Norbu are released but are banned for life from attending any monastery in Tibet. Norbu returns to his home. He is then employed in another monastery as a cleaner, caterer and tourist guide at the monastery’s hotel and restaurant. The monastery being close to Mount Everest, many foreign tourists pass by. He meets an American couple who give him a picture of the Dalai Lama, an item which is prohibited by Chinese law. During a prayer session in his home community, Norbu voices his opinion concerning the political situation in Tibet and calls for support of the Dalai Lama, laying his picture on the shrine. The incident is reported to his father, who decides during

the night to send him away from Tibet. Norbu leaves the next day and travels to Kathmandu illegally where he is hosted by a family friend. He then reaches Switzerland with the help of this friend. At the moment of the interview, Norbu has been in Switzerland for a bit more than a year, has had one interview and is waiting for a second (but has not received an invitation yet).

## 4.2 Life story

Norbu's story as he recounts it is structured around two events. The first one is the incident at the first monastery which leads to the ban from becoming a monk. The second is the main turning point in the story and concerns his voicing of opinions at the community prayer which leads to his departure from Tibet. The rest of the story sets the scene by providing contextual information particularly concerning the general situation under Chinese occupation, and by narrating other events that pave the way for the turning point. The story is mainly composed of narrative textual sorts interlaced with expository sorts geared at explaining why the actions unfold in a certain way. Norbu's story as he tells it in the first part of the interview contains very little argumentative sorts. Although he does evaluate different moments of his story he does not employ argumentative language but rather describes his emotional responses. It is up to the listener to interpret these.

The strength of Norbu's story resides in the clear structure of his story and particularly in the way that the various sections link to one another. He recounts the events in chronological order which permitted to easily converge the biographical data with the life story in order to map of the narrative.. The following analysis highlights three sections of the story: setting the scene, recounting the action, and being in exile. Each section analyses the main themes of the section notably by depicting how they are apprehended in the story, what role they play in the narrative construction, and interpreting why Norbu presents them in such a way. The analysis thus presents a combination of sequential and thematic elements.

## 4.3 Setting the scene

Norbu begins his story by setting the scene for the actions. This first part comprises of two sections. He first introduces "who he is" by depicting his origins and his education. This first section is geared at explaining how he became a monk. In doing so he exposes two reasons, on the one hand the Tibetan tradition, on the other his father's wish. However, the latter is predominant in the story. The figure of the father is the first theme that will be elaborated in more depth, as he is a strong and recurrent initiator for action throughout the story. In the second section, Norbu goes on by providing contextual information about the situation in Tibet under Chinese occupation. In contextualising he introduces a number of

interconnected themes that become leitmotifs throughout the narration and serve to construct the Chinese occupation as an important constraint to action.

### 4.3.1 The father figure

Norbu begins by explaining: “Tibetan tradition you know like in a family, like one man should go to a monastic education.” As his older brother is destined to take care of the house, the monastic duty falls on him. However, he goes on to explain that it is his father who decides that he will follow a monastic education. Although at this point of the story it is not yet clearly apparent, the decisional role of the father plays a predominant role in guiding action on several occasions. In this section, Norbu highlight this role of the father by distinguishing it from his own wish.

“So after I’m done my school then ya, my father he wrote me to a monastery which is called like S. monastery. So actually it is not my wish it’s my parent’s wish to send me to the monastery education. So I was there, then, ya I was ordained in the monastery education. Now I’m a monk.”

Here, Norbu does not voice what his ‘own wish’ may have been, but by distinguishing it from his parent’s wish he stresses the importance of the latter over the former. The father’s decisional role becomes more apparent later in the narrative, particularly after the incident at the community prayer where Norbu voices his opinion concerning the Chinese propaganda on the Dalai Lama. Indeed it is again his father who takes the decision, without him, that he is to leave Tibet.

“Like my father, then my cousin and my father and my brother they just discuss what to do you know. And they said like, they made- I was not there – and they made kind of a discuss about it and they said no, I should go you know, I should leave the house.”

Here, although the brother and the cousin are also involved, it is still the father who remains the main authoritative figure. The brother and the cousin are never depicted as having a direct decisional power over Norbu, but have a certain authority due to their involvement in family matters (the elder brother being the one who takes care of the house). The fact that his father remains the central figure becomes clearer later on in the text when Norbu refers to the decision above as: “my father and my family’s.” This quote further highlight Norbu’s depiction of the father as the main figure of authority in the family. Indeed, on several occasions he conflates his father’s decision with his parent’s or his family’s decision. It thus appears that the father’s authority also stems from his role as representative of the family.

The father’s authority is one that Norbu accepts. Indeed, he abides to the decisions that are taken concerning him such as becoming a monk or leaving Tibet. However, this authoritative role of the father does not only have concrete effects on Norbu by guiding his actions, but is also reflected in Norbu’s emotional response. The disappointment of (or fear of disappointing) his father seems to be a particular

effect of Norbu's failure to adhere to his father's wishes. When he is banned from becoming a monk Norbu assesses the situation in relation to his father: "so it's like I broke the promise of my father, what he wants for me in a life to be a monk". Moreover, when he goes back home after the incident at the community prayer session, his father scolds him. The following quote illustrates well the feeling of helplessness linked to the anger of his father.

"He was very angry and he said just "get out from the house", you know, something like that, because he as a little bit angry and he don't know what to do. And I just went to my cousin's place, like next to the house and staying there. I don't know what to do. I was a little bit sad."

#### **4. 3.2 Contextualising: the Chinese occupation**

Throughout the whole narrative, Norbu repeatedly exposes the situation under Chinese occupation. Already when introducing the story, he depicts in length various aspects of the occupation. The main purpose is to provide a context for the following episodes by suggesting a preliminary explanation for acts that are taken and their consequences. The first time that Norbu contextualises the narrative, the two ways in which he broaches the topic are apparent. On the one hand he talks about the situation in very general terms. On the other he specifies by providing examples. In the latter case, the Dalai Lama represents an important figure. Each of these elements will be further explored.

Norbu begins: "In Tibet, so basically what you need to know is what's the problem in Tibet". This quote already announces the informative character of the passage, which he deems essential to understand the events that constitute his own life. He departs from the assumption that I may not know much about the situation and that it is thus important to clarify the context. The 'problem' he depicts is China's invasion in Tibet. "So we don't have like human rights, in Tibet, we don't have like political rights. So at the ... since then we have, there's some kind of like, political problem against Chinese authority you know." This quote highlights well the general language that Norbu uses throughout the story to depict the problem.

Norbu specifies the general situation by giving examples, the main one he employs being the law forbidding images of the Dalai Lama.

"The Chinese they made kind of very frequent kind of rule, laws, you know. So since then we are not allowed to like to give the photo of his holiness the Dalai Lama and if you keep that you are illegal. You have to be like in the prison you know, they will caught you, put you in prison for how many years I don't know, maybe for 8 years maybe for longer than that, maybe for a lifetime."

It is only here that the lack of human rights and political rights becomes apparent as it highlights the Chinese censorship and repression. Although in this passage it mainly serves to illustrate the oppression, this example later becomes crucial, as it is particularly this law that frames Norbu's consequent actions.

#### 4.4 Recounting the action

All of the actions that Norbu depicts relate to the general political situation. There is thus a constant to and fro between narrative and expository text. This reflects on the one hand the need to provide information to the listener and on the other serves as a kind of justification for his actions. In the first incident at the monastery, Norbu does not refer to the action in personal terms but rather appeals to the general response. The following quote pertains to the general reaction of the monks when one of them stands up to voice dissent against the patriotic education team's propaganda concerning the Dalai Lama.

“Slowly with this topic then lots of us, even we did that thing you know, we support him. We said we do not agree with what you said and what you are going to do with us you know”.

In this quote, Norbu refers to the action as ‘we’ rather than ‘I’, placing himself in the general flow of action. It thereby clearly indicates that he does not initiate the action, but rather follows the overall reaction. It is only later that he takes on responsibility for this event when he asserts that he broke the promise made to his father to be a monk.

Between the two main events (at the monastery and at the community prayer) he explains his lack of ability to act in relation to the fear of being reported by spies to the Chinese. At his new employment in a monastery's hotel and restaurant he is regularly in contact with foreign tourists who want to know about the Tibetan situation.

“When I was there it was really complicated. Maybe it was mainly foreign tourist they want to know about Tibet you know, and also they know it's very difficult. But then also for me it's difficult to tell them what is going on in Tibet, you know. What the Chinese are doing for us. And if I tell them you know it's a big problem for me. I already have a problem with Chinese and they kind of do looking on me you know”

“So lots of tourists are interested by what is going on in Tibet and somehow asking me but I was not able to- I really want to tell them sometimes I don't get the courage to tell them because I'm afraid. Of course of my life. Apart of my life of those of my family will suffer also you know, about this situation you know.”

In these quotes he justifies his constraint to act by different means. He highlights the general situation of ‘what Chinese are doing for [them]’ but also his specific position, having already been arrested and probably being spied on. Both these aspects engender an emotion of fear that annihilates the courage necessary to talk about the situation. Furthermore, he emphasises that the situation is ‘really complicated’ and ‘very difficult’. This highlights his inner conflict between wanting to talk and being afraid of the

consequences. Hence the constraint is not only the actual (or perceived) threat but also his emotion. Indeed, in the next episode, when he voices his opinion at the prayer session, it is his emotion of fear that he overcomes and enables him to act despite the persistence of the actual threat.

The second episode stands out in the whole story, as Norbu focuses on his own power to initiate action. This is triggered by a shift of emotion as his courage takes over his fear. “So then like I just, I don’t know how I got courage to speak like that, then I just got like- then I just stand up and said [...]”. Although in this specific quote he asserts that he does not know *how* he got the courage, it becomes clear in relation to the previous event. Indeed, he recounts that he already got courage when he met the American couple, to tell them his story and keep the forbidden picture of the Dalai Lama. This episode is revelatory of his strong identification with what he later terms ‘the Tibetan cause’. Indeed, it is the knowledge of the couple concerning the Tibetan as well as their support that triggers Norbu’s courage. Moreover, Norbu highlights the strong emotional content of the exchange, thereby emphasising the women’s empathy and the ‘sadness’ of the Tibetan’s situation.

“She gave it to me [the picture of the Dalai Lama], and I’m emotional kind of because she’s also kind of crying while talking because she knows the situation in Tibet, what is going on in Tibet and she knows about Tibet very well.”

#### 4.5 Being in Exile

The last part of Norbu’s narrative depicts his departure and exposes his perception of ‘being in exile’. The term ‘exile’ which he uses in his story, contrasts with the terms, ‘asylum seeking’ and ‘refugee status’ which only appear in the second part of the interview when talking about the asylum process in Switzerland. Exile is the same word that he uses to refer to the situation of the Dalai Lama in the beginning of the story. The term is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as “the forced removal from a homeland” or “a person forced to emigrate for political reasons”. The term focuses on the link with what is left behind, and lost. This is clearly highlighted in Norbu’s narrative, not in relation to the ‘homeland’ however, but rather to his family. In contrast, the terms ‘asylum’ and ‘refuge’ focus on the specific administrative process of acquiring a legal status.

“So then, ya after, after all this then I was in, in Kathmandu. Ya. Then in Kathmandu I don’t know what will happen you know. What I, what I should do. I never thought like I will go in my life to exile in my life you know, leaving my family behind, I never thought you know really.”

This quote also highlights the uncertainty linked to being in exile. Norbu’s daily life is abruptly modified and he losing points of reference such as his family. This uncertainty is already expressed the moment he leaves his home and begins a journey into the ‘unknown’. This uncertainty is apprehended by Norbu as a

constraint to action, indeed he does not know ‘what to do’. In the following quote, his close relationship with his family is highlighted by his worry that he will never see them again.

“And so I don’t have a good chance to say goodbye something like that you know. And even I don’t know when I will come back. And the thing is you know like what will happen next you know. Maybe I’m in danger or my family in danger. What will happen next, really, that kind of thing then I worry, sad, and I’m not sure that I will come back to the family or not you know. Ya...”

Another element that emerges from these quotes is the involuntary aspect of Norbu’s departure. Indeed, he asserts that he never thought he would go into exile in his life. This highlights that circumstances beyond his control forced him to depart and that he had planned. The last sentences of his story illustrate this point very well.

“So here I never thought why, why I come here to Switzerland, I don’t know really. I left my family far behind. I don’t know I will see them in my life. So that’s the story till Swiss.”

Another interesting point to highlight is Norbu’s justification for departure. After having provided the narrative of departure which seems to justify adequately the ‘political nature’ of this emigration, he still feels the need to distinguish himself from economic migrants.

“So this is kind of- unfortunately I have to go to exile because I have a problem with the Chinese authority you know. Not with my family, I didn’t come here because we don’t have food to eat, we are economical poor, because we are happy. We are a family, we have- even though we are not that rich like here in Swiss, we don’t have cars something like that, but we are happy. We are happy with what we have.

The reasons behind this specification are not clear. However it could be read in the light of current discourses, particularly in Europe, that highlight the abuse of the asylum system by economic migrants (Zimmermann, 2009). Confronted to such discourses, Norbu probably feels the need to distinguish himself from economic migrants, and emphasise the involuntary character of his departure.

## 5. Discussion

Starting at the elaboration of the topic until the writing up of the analysis, a number of practical and theoretical issues emerged which I jostled down throughout the whole process. In the following section, I will first present issues relating to the analysis, particularly with regards to the impact of the researchers’ already established knowledge and presuppositions on the interpretation of the data. I will then outline some issues and choices made with regards to the research focus. Finally, I will also raise some ethical considerations.



Analyzing the data was a difficult and time consuming process, particularly because I was attempting to apply a method for the first time. It was like creating and solving a puzzle at the same time. A particularly delicate point was to shift from a mere descriptive level to a level of analysis of the data. Writing memos appeared to be particularly helpful, as it obliged me to constantly question the data. However what remained difficult was not to impose my personal knowledge and presupposition upon the data. For example, the ‘forced’ vs. voluntary character of the migration of refugees is a distinction commonly made, but which has been highlighted by several researches to be erroneous (Thielemann, 2012; Zimmermann, 2009). During the analysis of Norbu’s interview I initially rejected that interpretation. However, it became apparent that the ‘involuntary’ character of his departure is a point that Norbu particularly emphasizes. One way of providing a nuance, is to highlight how this ‘forced’ aspect is constructed in the story, and what other elements come into play, such as the decisional role of the father in this particular case.

Another difficulty was to keep the connection with the main research question. Indeed, the data can produce an infinite number of interpretations and it is up to the researcher to select what is relevant. It is only during the process of analysis that I chose to focus on Norbu’s positioning in the story, particularly with regards to the way he renders the power or limitations to initiate action. This enabled to provide a coherent line of interpretation. However this specification the research question for the analysis also represents an important reduction of the initial research focus. Moreover, during the analysis I also chose to concentrate mainly on the story as it was told in the first part of the interview. This choice stemmed from the fact that the second part consisted in a depiction and evaluation of the asylum process. Although this data will probably be useful for consequent steps of the research, the focus here was specifically to understand how the asylum seeker constructs his story. The relevance of these two choices that were made during the analysis will depend on the evolution of the general research, and on the future interviews that will be conducted.

Asylum seekers are in a vulnerable position because their future depends on the decision by the immigration office. Their main and often only proof in order to acquire the status of refugee is their story. This renders their story a sensitive topic. This sensitivity may result in the asylum seekers reluctance to open up, particularly if they are afraid that the information they provide might leak to the migration office. This did not seem to be the case during Norbu’s interview, probably thanks to gatekeeper. However, one must keep in mind that certain information may have been left out of the story by fear of protection. This leads to another important point that is the information provided by the asylum seekers must be provided with great care as not to harm the respondent. In this case, all the names and places (besides countries)

were changed or initialized. I provided a lot of biographical information, however I consider that it is vague enough not to recognize the person.

## 6. Conclusion

This study had enabled to make a first analysis of the narrative construction of an asylum seeker. Several points have been highlighted pertaining particularly to the way he positions himself in the story with regards to other characters and situations. Norbu's father as well as the Chinese occupation are two elements which he presents as framing action. Moreover both elements contribute to producing a sentiment of fear which he identifies as the main constraint on his agency. It is by overcoming this fear that he gets enough courage to act. However, the consequences of his actions are severe as he finds himself forced into exile, a situation that initiates a time of uncertainty in his life.

The interview can however be analysed in more depth for the purpose of the master research. For example the elements highlighted above can be related to Norbu's points of identification such as the 'Tibetan cause'. The next steps of this master research will delve into the way asylum seekers' stories' are elicited and assessed during the audition, and how they are prepared with the help of legal advisors. The main aim is to understand how asylum seekers construct their stories *in response* to the context of the asylum procedure and the way they understand it. My intuition is that there the administrative frame for the story, particularly the criteria of the audition and interpretation, may conflict with the asylum seekers' personal process of identification in the narrative.

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