

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #17U – Sonam Dolma
April 3, 2017

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #17U
2. Interviewee: Sonam Dolma
3. Age: 77
4. Date of Birth: 1940
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Tsang
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 3, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Tibetan Women's Centre, Rajpur, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 53 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Sonam Dolma was born in 1940 in Tsang, Utsang Province, whose residents paid taxes to the District of Zongkar. Her family was *samadok* 'farmers and herders,' who divided their work between growing barley, wheat and peas and raising several types of domestic animals. They led a self-sufficient life because they got everything they needed from the fields and animals. Sonam Dolma's family moved up into the mountains with the animals during summertime when the crops were growing in the fields.

The animals raised by Sonam Dolma's family were sheared during springtime and they spun the wool by hand. She explains the process of weaving the wool to make tents from yak hair. In her region the woven tent was used only as a roof placed over a stone structure that was left standing when they moved. Goat hair was used to make bags for transporting soil and barley on the yaks. Clothing was also made from the wool and dyed.

Sonam Dolma explains how disputes were settled by the district administrator, who gave lashings to both the parties under the assumption that only the guilty one would cry out in pain. She also talks about how they atoned for the negative action of slaughtering sheep for consumption by lighting butter lamps.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, farm life, nomadic life, customs/traditions.

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Interview #17U

Interviewee: Sonam Dolma

Age: 77, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 3, 2017

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:10

Interviewee #17U: Sonam.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#17U: Yes.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

#17U: Okay.

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know.

#17U: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#17U: [Nods]

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#17U: [I] have no problems.

Q: We're honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in this project.

#17U: [Nods]

Q: *Ama-la* 'respectful term for mother,' tell me how old you are?

00:02:15

#17U: 77

Q: Where were you born?

#17U: It was Tsang in Tibet.

Q: Which province in Tibet?

#17U: We had to pay taxes at Zongkar, at Zongkar District, and the grass tax to the district.

Q: Is it Utsang?

#17U: Yes, Utsang.

Q: And for a livelihood, what did your family do?

#17U: For our livelihood we worked in the fields and grew barley and wheat—wheat to make flour—and peas. We worked in the fields, removed weeds and plowed using yaks and *dzo* ‘animal bred between a yak and cow’ and then sowed barley and lived that way.

Q: Did you do that all the time or did you also have any animals?

00:04:00

#17U: There were animals. During summer [we] worked in the fields and in winter and autumn the animals were taken up the mountains.

Q: How many animals did your family have?

#17U: There were many; around 7-8 *dri* ‘female yaks,’ 8-9 yaks and *dzo*.

Q: How many *dzo*?

#17U: Around two *dzo* and three *dzomo* ‘female *dzo*’ and two cows.

Q: Were there any sheep in your...?

#17U: There was a large number of sheep and goats, around a hundred. There was a total of a hundred sheep and goats.

Q: Did you gather the wool from the sheep and the goats?

#17U: From the goats, one sheared hair that is used to make tents called *ba*.

Q: *Ba*?

#17U: Yes, and then also bags to transport soil, rocks and barley on yaks. We did the spinning to weave the bags.

Q: Salt and barley?

#17U: Soil and barley. The wool of the sheep is loosened with the hands, combed, spun and woven into woolen cloth.

Q: For the goats, did you shave them of their fur once a year or how often?

00:06:42

#17U: Once, it was sheared once. It was not sheared all the time, but once. That was used to make bags for soil and barley. You did the spinning and weaving.

Q: What was it about the goat's hair that was so useful for bags, for salt or for *ba*? What was the quality of the hair?

[Interpreter interprets as: The hair of sheep was used to make *ba*...]

#17U: Sheep's wool was not used to make *ba*. Sheep's wool was used to make *chupa* 'traditional dresses' that we wear [made with] woolen cloth. It was woven into woolen cloth to make *chupa*.

[Interpreter to interviewee]: Sorry *ama-la*, I meant goat.

#17U: The goat...

Q: You mentioned that the hair of goat was used to make *ba* and bags. What was the quality of the goat hair that made it so useful?

#17U: Some goats have ample hair that is long while others have less hair. We mixed these and did the spinning. The long and short are mixed, spun and made into balls. Then it was woven.

Q: About how long was the hair of the goats? Can you show me how long?

00:08:38

#17U: The longer hairs were this much [gestures off camera] and the shorter ones only so much [gestures off camera].

Q: Okay, and how did you...you said that you would spin the goats' hair and then it was woven into the...like how long...A *ba* is very big. It's a big tent home for nomads. So how long did it take to make one *ba*?

#17U: To make a *ba*, the yak hair...

Q: Isn't it the goat hair?

#17U: No, it was the hair of yaks. The hair of yaks and *dri* are long and that was the one used.

Q: Oh, okay. We'll talk about that next. I made a mistake. I see. So the goat hair was mostly for bags. I thought you said the *ba* but no?

#17U: Yes, [ba] was made from the hair of yaks.

Q: And the bags were made from the hair of goats?

#17U: Yes, goats.

Q: Can you tell us how long will the hair be on the yaks before it could be spun and woven?

00:10:26

#17U: Yak's hair is long, about this much [gestures off camera]. Some have like this and some have very long. There are various kinds.

Q: Would you mix them altogether and then weave them?

#17U: Yes, the shorter hair was used as *khopun* 'thread running through the *gyu*' and the longer ones were used as *gyu* 'thread stretched lengthwise and crosswise on a loom to make cloth.' One needs *gyu* when weaving. You spun and made the *gyu* and the short ones were used as *khopun*.

Q: Was there any story in Tibetan history about who figured it out how to use the yak hair and make tents?

#17U: That was so when I was little. [I] think the parents did the same long ago.

Q: For many generations back?

#17U: Yes, since many generations.

Q: *Ama-la*, what made the yak hair very good for a *ba*?

00:12:31

#17U: Yak hair is strong and good. It is strong. It is long like our hair. That was used to make [the *ba*]. When it rained or snowed, water did not seep inside. Yak hair is very good.

Q: If you shaved or cut off the hair of the yak, would you do that in the summertime?

#17U: It was done in the springtime. [The hair] grows in summer and is cut off in springtime. It is not cut in autumn because [the yak] will feel cold during winter because the country of Tibet is cold. The hair was cut in springtime. It was cut in springtime and grows long during summer. It was the same with wool and all others.

Q: How many...like how much yak hair would you need to make a *ba* for a family of your size? I think you're five people in the family, six people?

00:14:42

#17U: [The hair of] 8-9 yaks are required to make a big one. There should be enough for the *gyu* and the *khopun*. By the standard of weight around 10 kilograms are needed or a little more than 10.

Q: So how many yaks was that? You need 8-9, 8-9 yaks. In one cutting, like in one springtime, could you have that many yaks have their haircut and could you weave and make a *ba* before wintertime?

#17U: One cannot because spinning has to be done first. It takes a long time, as the thread has to be readied. You do it yourself and [the job] was not given to others. If there was a man at home, he does the cutting and then there was the spinning and weaving. It takes 2-3 months. It takes a long time. If there was a lot of old stock [of thread], it was used to make [the *ba*]. There were people that stocked balls of thread.

Q: Would you build the *ba* in pieces or how did you put it together? How did you make it?

00:17:03

#17U: The *gyu* is about this long [gestures off camera], about the size of this carpet. It is long and two pieces are joined and stitched in the middle. It is not in the form of one piece.

Q: Show me the size. How big?

#17U: Width?

Q: Not the actual *ba* but the pieces that are joined. How big are the pieces?

#17U: It depends on the size of the home. If it is a big one, [the pieces] have to be long, long. They cannot be short and have to be long ones and then they are joined.

Q: How long were they, *ama-la*?

00:18:05

#17U: About 10-15 such pieces are required.

Q: About 10-15 long pieces are required?

#17U: We measured by this standard [indicates elbow to fingertips], measured by this standard in Tibet.

Q: About 10-15 of such lengths?

#17U: Yes. Its length is 10-15 times this [indicates elbow to fingertips]. Such used to be made.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: 10-15 for one strip.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...one strip of *ba* material and then pieces were stitched together.

Q: So a *ba* would be...so from the ground to maybe the ceiling this high, 10 foot. You would need 10-15 of those pieces?

#17U: Yes, but it was different in different parts of Tibet. In our region, there were walls made of stones like this [raises both hands] when a *ba* has to be pitched. [The walls] were not *ba* [material] but stones. Then it was covered with the woven *ba* material like this [crosses fingers]. [The pieces] were stitched, flattened and draped over the walls.

Q: Oh really? A rock foundation...like a stone or rock?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: A stone foundation and then the *ba* material covered the stone foundation from the top.

Q: And was the stone foundation something you just used as a measurement or carry it with you?

00:20:47

#17U: There were only stones. In our region it was just stones.

Q: The entire walls were made of stones and the *ba* covered only the top portion?

#17U: Yes. The walls were made of stones; the walls like these [points around room] were made using stones and plastered with clay inside. Then the *ba* covered the top.

Q: That makes sense.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: And plastered with clay inside.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Only the roof...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, only the roof.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: That's what she said—stones for the sides...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not the foundation but the walls.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: The *ba* covered the walls or the ceiling?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The *ba* covered the ceiling, the roof.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And then the walls were stones.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: And plastered with clay inside.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And plastered with clay.

Q: Is that the kind of house you lived in growing up?

00:22:00

#17U: The *ba* is pitched only in the summertime when the yaks and *dzo* were herded on the mountains. [The animals] were not kept at the village because there were the fields and the goats, sheep and yaks could eat the crops. So [the animals] were driven far away to the mountains. That is when the *ba* is pitched.

Q: So it was just summertime and you would put the roof on and live in that kind of a structure. And then when you left did you take the roof off and use it another time?

#17U: Yes. Only the roof part of the *ba* is removed, packed and transported. The walls were left standing. [The animals] came down in wintertime. Then in summer [the *ba* material] was draped over [the walls]. [The herders] lived on the mountains when the sheep, goats and yaks were driven there in summer. That was the place where they stayed.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: It was a very portable roof.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Now what kind of a house did your family live in the wintertime?

00:24:01

#17U: The yaks and its kind were not kept inside the house in the wintertime. There was a yard in front of your house and the yaks and *dri* were put together. The *dzo* were taken inside the house. In our region the *dzo*, cows and oxen felt the cold easily. The yaks did not feel cold and were kept outside. We would cut grass with our hands in the summertime, which was fed. Then when the snow melted, [the animals] were driven to the mountains. It was a lot of work. [Laughs]

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So the ox, *dri* and what else, goats?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Goats, sheep and the yaks stayed in the yard.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay, goats, sheep and yaks.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The *dzo*, and the cows and the oxen because they felt cold they were taken inside the house.

Q: What about in the winter months, how did you... You said that you brought the animals in, but what kind of a house was it? What was your house made of?

#17U: The houses were built like this [looks around interview room]. [The houses] were built entirely of stones. There was nothing but stones. The earth was dug deep and then stones stacked. [The walls] were made of stones. The roof was laid with wooden planks.

Q: When it became very cold in the winter, how did you keep your house warm, *ama-la*?

00:26:45

#17U: It was like this for us: There was a stove in the center and wood was used to make fire. Wood and the droppings of sheep were used as fuel. When the cows and other animals felt cold, sheep droppings were used to make a fire outside and it generated much heat.

Q: Outside?

#17U: A fire was made outside.

Q: What about the fire in the center of the house?

#17U: Inside the house where we stayed wood was used as fuel for cooking. Wood, but mostly it was dung, cow dung. Cow dung was very useful. Cow dung was gathered, dried and stocked in the house to be used as fuel for the winter. It was also used for cooking. Since the house was made of clay and stones, it was not cold inside. It was warm inside the house. If it became extremely cold, we had sheepskin [laughs] and *tsukduk* ‘winter blankets with long hairs’ to wear.

Q: On those long winter days if you cannot farm, do you still take the sheep out to graze?

00:28:45

#17U: When it snowed...it snowed heavily, snowed up to here [gestures off camera]; it rose above the feet. The snow came up to here [interpreter interprets as ‘up to the knees’]. At such times [the animals] were kept near the house. During autumn we cut and stocked a large quantity of grass in 2-3 rooms; grass that grew in the summer was cut and stocked at home, and this was fed in small quantities. If the sun shone they stayed out in the pastures nearby and came home in the evening.

Q: What did the family do in the house? There were long cold days or dark nights. How did you keep busy? What kind of tasks did you do?

#17U: There was not much work inside the house. The boys spun thread for the *ba* while the girls did wool work. You did the wool work and also got the food supplies ready. The fields produced barley that was roasted and then taken to the watermill for grinding into *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ Most of the time we ate *tsampa* in our region.

Q: The boys were weaving the yak hair, right? Did they have a special weaving machine to do that?

00:31:33

#17U: There was piece of long wood called *yokshing* ‘spindle’ of this length [indicates tip of forefinger to the wrist]. Spinning was done on that. Then for the mixing, the boys used a long thin stick [indicates shoulder to hand]; spread a mat of pelt on the floor and beat [the yak hair] with the sticks like this [uses both hands alternately].

Q: On what?

#17U: With the sticks.

Q: On top of the yak hair?

#17U: Yes, on the yak hair. The long and short [hair] must be mixed together by beating. Then they got mixed together.

Q: It sounds like a lot of work.

00:32:33

#17U: There was a lot of work. There was a lot of work in Tibet. You worked hard and produced your food. There was no trading.

Q: How about the women, the girls? They did the...they spun the wool and then they did weaving. Did they have special tools for that?

#17U: Tools for weaving the woolen cloth...for spinning wool, it was a piece of wood. Wood is very useful. It was a piece of thin wood with a wheel at the bottom, a small wheel. A small wheel is fixed and then spun like this [make spinning motion with thumb and forefinger].

Q: What about...how did they weave the cloth?

#17U: That was woven and this was how you do the weaving. First the thread is looped.

Q: What's the instrument for weaving?

#17U: You had a loom in the front of the house on which [the yarn] is looped. One [end of the loom] is fixed with a stick and the other is tied [indicates waist]. I explained this earlier [during the pre-interview]. It was tied to the waist and then the weaving was done. You stretched the legs out. You made the woolen cloth yourself. It was not done any other way. We did not have any...[not discernible] but made our own woolen cloth.

Q: Did you make all your own clothing?

00:34:52

#17U: Yes, you made it yourself. Clothes for boys were made separately and for the girls it was *chupa*. Woolen cloth for this was made separately and dyed. Boys' [clothes] were not dyed.

Q: Dye?

#17U: Yes, dye.

Q: Where did you get the dye from?

#17U: One got the dye from the place called Rongsam.

Q: Yes? Where?

#17U: Rongsam.

Q: Rongsam?

#17U: One must travel to places like Tsum taking salt from Tibet and on the way back...there are people that sell a certain plant used as a dye. These were brought to our region. You ground the dye into a fine powder and soaked it in water. It must be soaked for a few days until it began to spoil.

Q: For a few days?

00:36:00

#17U: Yes, wrapped in clothes. Then bubbles began to form like *chang* 'home-brewed beer.' This was poured into a huge copper pot and mixed with water and boiled. When it began to boil the woolen cloth was immersed in it and then it is dyed. Then it became colored. It was a lot of work [laughs]. One is so comfortable now.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Was the water...did you say...was the water heated or...?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Heated, the pot was heated and then you soaked the woolen cloth in that pot.

Q: What colors?

#17U: Colors on sale were green, red, black and grey. These were available for purchase.

Q: Were all the clothing that you made for the women and the men, were they all of wool, all wool clothing?

00:38:07

#17U: That is right, wool.

Q: Were there different kinds of qualities of softness or was it all pretty strong wool?

#17U: Some were like this. The wool of little lambs born to the sheep during the year is soft and very good. The wool is short and pretty. This was spun separately. This was spun separately and used to make shirts for the boys. This woolen cloth was different; the woolen cloth was beautiful and soft. The rest were all mixed together.

Q: What about babies? Did they ever get soft cloth for clothing? Babies?

#17U: [Babies] got soft clothing. There was the hide of little lambs that was squashed and cured. If there were many lambs, there was bound to be death. The hide of such was cured. It became supple and soft and [babies] were laid in them. Woolen cloth was softened and made fluffy by combing and used [for babies].

Q: What about the aprons? Were they made of wool, the one you are wearing?

00:40:42

#17U: Yes. The yarn is dyed and then you did the weaving of the apron. You wove the apron and also the one worn at the back [touches back of waist]. These were made using colored yarn.

Q: How many *chupa* did a girl or mother have?

#17U: One cannot say because the rich may have many. Those that were poor like us owned only two *chupa*, one to change into when the other needs washing, around two *chupa*.

Q: When we were talking about meeting with you, you said something about your father had been involved in a dispute about a *chupa*. Can you tell me what happened?

00:42:52

#17U: It was like this. We had fields to cultivate—cultivate barley and rice...No, there was no rice, but barley and peas. The other person and our plots were similar [in size]—similar. However, the other person greedily encroached upon our land. When [he] encroached, my father said, “This is not your land but mine.” When my father said that, he claimed it was his land though it was ours and the issue was taken to the court.

Q: What happened?

#17U: When there was a dispute in Tibet we took it to the leader, the district administrator. The leader gave no other sentence but punished by lashing—lashing. If the other person was right, he was lashed too. Both the men were made to lie down and then lashed and every lash counted. The one who was in the wrong screamed while the one who was right did not feel the need to scream. God helped him because we prayed. The protective deities helped and he did not feel much pain.

Q: So if the person who was guilty felt the pain and the other innocent one felt protected by the deities, what happened when your father was lashed along with the other man?

00:45:52

#17U: My father said that the other person screamed and cried. He said, “I did not scream. Although I was bleeding I did not scream.”

Q: You were not there?

#17U: I was little then, a little child, and did not go where disputes were being settled.

Q: So did your father get the land back that was his?

#17U: [He] got it for it was said, “He is innocent and does not feel pain.” The other person was told, “You have lied and are not honest.” Father was given back his land. Father narrated this story.

Q: So Father got the land back.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Father got the land back.

Q: You know, when you were saying that you had to work at home in the winter, what did you do for light to be able to weave and make your clothing? What kind of lighting was used?

00:47:54

#17U: A lamp was lit. A small lamp was made and that was lit. There was no electricity. Ours was an isolated region and [we] were *samadok* ‘farmers and herders.’ So there was no electricity.

Q: Did you ever use any butter lamps for...you know...oh, I see. Did you ever slaughter any of the animals for oil or not, not really or just food? Were the animals just slaughtered for food?

#17U: Yes. We did not slaughter any during summertime, but a few in the autumn, perhaps a sheep or two for consumption during wintertime. That was it. The person that did the slaughtering was someone else. He did it and not us.

Q: Did you make any offerings in honor of that dead animal?

00:49:58

#17U: Yes, it was done. The fat around the heart of the sheep was cleaned and washed thoroughly and used to light a lamp as offering. Then a hundred butter lamps were offered.

Q: So the fat that grew around the sheep’s heart was melted and used to light butter lamps to pray for the wellbeing of the sheep who was killed?

#17U: Yes, for it [the slaughtered sheep]. Besides that, we lit a hundred butter lamps.

Q: Why did you feel it was necessary to do that?

#17U: We had killed the sheep for our consumption and it was in order to wash away the negative action. [Smiles] It was atonement.

Q: *Ama-la*, that’s a very tender story to care about the wellbeing of the sheep, and I care about your wellbeing and I think we spent a very good amount of time with you, and I want to thank you for this beautiful account of the history, early experiences from your childhood and all that we’ve learned about the nomads and how they built their *ba* and took care of their animals and made their clothing. Thank you for such wonderful information.

00:53:00

#17U: [Nods] I would like to thank you, too.

Q: You're very welcome. I want to do just one more check. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#17U: I have no problems whatsoever.

Q: Thank you for sharing your story with us.

#17U: [Smiles]

END OF INTERVIEW