

Ati's Account of His Life in Tibet
As recorded by
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I was born in 1932 in the Nyarong region of Kham Province. Although we owned lands, you can say that we were nomads. I lived with my mother and my father lived in a separate home. He was the husband of both my mother and her sister. My mother was living separately and my father cared less for our home than his other one. My mother's older brother, who was a monk, took responsibility of our home and I was supposed to take care of mother.

Nomadic Life in Kham Province

Since the time I can recall, I used to herd yaks and sheep. There were not many tasks. We drove the animals to the mountains early in the morning and herded them where there was good grass and water through the day. One must also guard them against predators like wolves and wild dogs. In the evening we drove them back to the tent made from yak hair. In summertime the animals were brought back home around 6 or 7 o'clock, and then the female yaks were milked.

The milk was boiled and then dinner was cooked. In our village cooking was not an elaborate affair. One made tea, ate *tsampa* [flour made from roasted barley] and meat. Then it was bedtime around 10 o'clock. Just before going to sleep, we recited the Dolma prayer [praises to 21 Taras] two or three times. Little children just looked on, as they did not know the prayers. Then when the mother went to bed, they did too.

Animal thieves were a threat during wintertime when the animals were well fed and around the autumn period of the 9th and 10th lunar months. We had to beware of thieves who were poor people and such. Wolves were also a problem. If the wolves appeared during daytime, we would shout and they ran away. They were also killed by firing the guns that we were armed with. In our village every family possessed a gun. The older ones carried guns, but I was small then and did not have one.

Joining a Monastery

When I was around 10 years old, I became a monk and started studying. There were no schools in my village. I went to a lama that lived in retreat at a hermitage and studied with him for around three years. The lama taught me the script and the dharma. Except for reading, there was no writing taught to the young monks of the village. One began to learn to write only when one grew older.

There were two or three other small monks like me who studied under the lama. In the beginning we used to feel sad and cried a little, but after a few months we became accustomed to being separated from our families. We used to play and that was very enjoyable. The lama was loving and there was no lack of food. One could eat meat, butter, *tsampa* or whatever one wished. We started studying each morning when there was enough light to read the characters.

Then I lived as a monk in Gyukhu Gonpa for 2-3 years, which was our main monastery. It was a Nyingma monastery. It was a happy time—a monk's life was a very happy one. There were around four monks there from my family, including maternal and paternal uncles. I lived happily, extremely so, among them.

New monks were admitted into the monastery during a great prayer assembly. One would be given a ceremonial scarf as one entered the temple to signify that one was now a monk. The monastery would provide a good meal and give treats to the new monks, like round-shaped brown sugar cubes from Lithang. The names of the new monks were then entered in the monastery's register.

Attendant to the Village Leader

There were no other sons except me so I did not want to remain a monk. I was the one who had to take care of my mother and the home. In my region, the son took responsibility for the house. I thought that I should have a bride come into my home and that someone should take responsibility. So at the age 15 or 16 I decided to leave the monastery and return home to the nomadic site.

There were four senior leaders in Nyarong and Gyari Nyima was one of them. He was the leader of around 1,700 families. I lived in the same village as him. Wherever a leader went, he took along many people as attendants and assistants, around 10-15 people. Leaders must go to various places to visit their subjects and settle disputes. So I went along as the leader's attendant. Gyari Nyima was a big chieftain and there were dangers from enemies and others. We were similar to bodyguards.

The leader must resolve disputes among the people, look after the welfare of the people, find out their problems, be alert about enemies and various other issues. He must take care of the subjects and look after their welfare. Leaders were greatly revered. They were held in such high esteem as a child would his parents. The reverence was like that.

Gyari Nyima was fair and was not corrupted. Although some people offered bribes to a leader to receive his favor, Gyari Nyima never accepted that. He imposed lashings and penalties but never favored one over the other by taking bribes. He acted honestly and spoke frankly.

It was a very happy period. There was complete freedom to move, to stay, to eat and to drink. One could travel freely anywhere. There was complete freedom as Tibet was sublime. People were incredibly happy. Unlike now, we owned our wealth and there was no one to restrict us. It was a land of freedom and a happy place then. I lived in that way until the age of 24.

Chinese Liberation and Arrests

When the Chinese appeared in Nyarong, they paid Gyari Nyima a government official's salary since he was our leader. In that way he came to understand every plan of the Chinese such as the imposition of liberation, confiscation of wealth, destruction of lamas, monasteries and the people. After he returned from a trip to China in 1955, Gyari Nyima revealed that the Chinese would impose liberation, which was bad.

The "Democratization of Liberation" process began in the first Tibetan lunar month of 1956. The Chinese began the liberation process to annihilate the Tibetans by confiscating their riches and to destroy lamas and monasteries. Gyari Nyima made secret plans with the people of Nyarong. Right from the start he planned to fight and we were undertaking secret activities. While the Chinese held meetings, we started to train for our defense, but could do so for only 17 days.

At that time all the influential men were being captured. There was a fort located at Chandoriwong in which all the leaders of Nyarong had been jailed on the pretext of being given

propaganda lessons. After the Tibetan leaders were jailed, the Chinese could move around freely among the villagers. It was 4 or 5 o'clock in the evening of the 17th day of the 1st Tibetan lunar month of 1956 that the Chinese planned to seize one of our leaders, who was present in a meeting with us. There were around 100 Chinese troops that tried to seize him.

The Tibetan people rose and screamed and the clash began with the firing of guns. And then the fight started in Nyarong against the Chinese army. The people attacked the Chinese and chased them out of the Gyaritsang palace to the fort. Perhaps 1,200-1,300 subjects of Gyari Nyima surrounded the fort. We killed five or six Chinese including two officials. We restrained from killing more because Gyari Nyima was in China at that time. We feared that killing all the Chinese might lead to our leader being killed there by the Chinese.

Battles throughout Kham

We revolted against the Chinese. The main reason we fought them was because of our opposition towards liberation. There were many encounters with the Chinese and a lot of killing took place. There was not anybody to offer us assistance, but when the Chinese caused us suffering we used the weapons we owned and fought. We had handled guns since a young age—playing with them, shooting wild animals and birds. These guns did not belong to the country but were our possessions; we bought them ourselves. The government did not distribute arms, but everybody owned guns.

There was no training of any sort. We had good aim and fought with male energy. The Chinese were causing us suffering and unable to endure it, we fought and killed them. With us too, they killed as many as they could. There was carnage on both sides in great numbers. There was no friction on account of material wealth.

There was no Chushi Gangdrug (Defend Tibet Volunteer Force) in Kham at that time. Nyarong fought until it was wiped out and then Lithang fought until it was wiped out and then Chating fought. Each region waited until the other was demolished. They were not united. Had there been unity, it would not have been easy for the Chinese to overcome the Tibetans.

We fought for six months and then the Nyarong territory was lost. There were around 30 families that did not surrender to the Chinese, including Gyari Nyima's family, and we ran to the mountains. Whether it was winter or summer, we did not have houses or tents. The Chinese were herding animals that had belonged to Tibetans and we attacked such groups and killed these animals as well as wild animals. Except for that, we did not have *tsampa* or anything else to eat. We lived for three years in the mountains surviving solely on meat. At times we could not boil the meat and were forced to eat it raw. We suffered such extreme difficulties.

Pursued by Chinese Troops

We spend the years from 1956 to 1959 fighting the enemy. We continued to live in the forest regions with our wives and children. When the enemy attacked, the husbands fought while wives and other family members fled wherever it was safe from the line of firing. There was no distant place to go to and we moved about within the region. We were being pursued by many tens of thousands of Chinese. Of course, there was fear, both day and night.

We continued to flee through the north, fighting and fleeing along the way. There were no places without Chinese presence since they had free run of Tibet after Lhasa was occupied. When you encountered the enemy, you fired your gun. There was no particular time; you

encountered them in the morning or in the evening or at night. They chased us wherever we went. During the encounter in Golok, their aircraft pursued us and dropped bombs on us. Animal and numerous people were killed. One would not be able to count the number of dead.

The Chinese caught up with us at Tso Kyari Ngori in Amdo Province. They captured or killed all the wives and children in the 6th Tibetan lunar month of 1959. At that time my mother and a sister were lost to the Chinese. Except for 18 men that were able to escape, the rest were lost. Some were killed and some were captured. We were penniless, just the men and our horses.

It was wintertime as we travelled through the Changthang. It was cold. As was the custom in my region, we wore fur coats, but there were no blankets, except for the saddles and seat covers. As for food, there was nothing but meat. There were times when we could not hunt wild animals and for 7-8 days we would be without anything except water. Such were the difficulties we faced. We suffered problems throughout the journey.

The Chinese pursued us until we reached Tsokha in the Mustang region of Nepal. There was no enemy then, as the Chinese could not enter there. A great lama called Nyoshuk Khenpo Jamyang Dorjee was with us then. He offered a prayer of benediction for us and we broke all our guns and threw them in the river. We travelled to Bodh Gaya, India to visit Buddhist pilgrimage sites, to make offerings for the dead, and to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Since we had been fighting since leaving our region and the Chinese had killed all our spouses, the surviving men from Nyarong chose to go back to fight the enemy. I joined the resistance army in Mustang, the organization of the Chushi Gangdrug. Nothing was organized when we arrived there initially. I lived there for around 14 years from 1960 to 1974. And then the Mustang army was closed down by the Nepalese. They destroyed the Mustang army and seized all the weapons. Then we left.