

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #14U – Samten Dolma
April 2, 2017

The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

This translation and transcript is provided for individual research purposes only. For all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: Tibet Oral History Project, P.O. Box 6464, Moraga, CA 94570-6464, United States.

Copyright © 2018 Tibet Oral History Project.



TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #14U
2. Interviewee: Samten Dolma
3. Age: 83
4. Date of Birth: 1934
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Tengyal Gyangkhar
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1957
9. Date of Interview: April 2, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Tibetan Women's Centre, Rajpur, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 51 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Samten Dolma was born in 1934 in Tengyal Gyangkhar, Utsang Province. Her parents had five children and worked as farmers. They had to work before dawn in their own fields and after daybreak they had to perform a labor tax by working at the local leader's farm. Most of the families lived in single-story homes made of stone and mud, while the leader had a three-story house. Samten Dolma recalls a caste system in which the animal slaughterer and blacksmith were considered low caste and were treated differently from the others.

Samten Dolma began transporting goods like fabric, tea, and sugar to earn money. She carried the heavy loads on her back from India to Tibet. After the Chinese invasion, prices for goods dropped significantly and she and her younger sister chose to stay in India to work as coolies. While her sister later returned home to Tibet, Samten Dolma remained in India trying to work off the loan she took out to support her sister's journey.

Samten Dolma met her husband and they continued to work as coolies until he joined the army. In 1962 Samten Dolma joined the Tibetan Women's Centre in Rajpur and worked hard to raise her children and care for her husband.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, farm life, taxes, customs/traditions, life as a refugee in India.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
www.TibetOralHistory.org

Interview #14U

Interviewee: Samten Dolma

Age: 83, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 2, 2017

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:09

Interviewee #14U: Samten Dolma.

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?

#14U: [Nods]

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

#14U: [Joins palms]

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

#14U: [Nods]

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

#14U: Okay.

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

00:02:03

#14U: [Smiles] I do not know what to say about this.

Q: Well, I don't either. Do you think it would be a problem or you don't know, you just don't know?

#14U: [I] do not know, but [you can] do what the others before me have done—do the same as them. I do not know whether there will be problems or not.

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

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

#14U: Okay, okay. [Joins palms]

Q: *Ama-la* 'respectful term for mother,' please tell me where were you born?

#14U: Yes?

Q: Where were you born?

#14U: The birthplace is Tengyal Gyangkhar.

Q: In Utsang?

#14U: Yes, it is part of Utsang.

Q: How old are you now?

#14U: Yes?

Q: How old are you now?

#14U: I am 83.

Q: When you were born, who was in your family? What were the members of your family?

00:04:02

#14U: There were my younger siblings then. I am the eldest child. My younger siblings and both the parents were there.

Q: How many [younger siblings]?

#14U: There were four younger siblings, two brothers and two sisters from the same set of parents. There were five [children] and I am the eldest.

Q: *Ama-la*, what did the family do for a living, for a livelihood?

#14U: The work was tilling your land. It was working in the fields and then we had to serve labor tax for the leader. When serving the tax, [we] had to work in our fields before daybreak and as per the present standard of time, went to serve tax for the leader at 8 o'clock. When serving the tax if one was below the age of 15, working a full day was considered only half a day. Such was the great difficulties in Tibet.

Q: So did everybody in the family who was over 15 have to work full day including the parents on the leader's farm?

00:06:20

#14U: Yes. Mother, me and all the younger siblings worked in the fields while father herded the goats and sheep. The duties are reversed because actually mother should do household chores. Mother worked with the children [in the fields] while Father and my younger brother went to graze goats and sheep. So Father stayed home. The younger siblings, Mother and I went to work in the fields. It was transporting manure in the springtime and harvesting and taking the grains to the house in autumn. We had to work until daybreak.

Q: Did you have to work in the leader's farm every day before dawn or just certain days?

#14U: Yes, one had to go before dawn, go every day.

Q: Wasn't it working in the leader's farm after daylight and your...

#14U: One had to go to the leader's field after daylight at around 8 o'clock while you did yours before dawn. [The leader's field] was at a distance and by the time you reached there it was daylight.

Q: Who was the leader that you worked for?

00:08:24

#14U: Gyangkhar Nangpa. Our leader was called Gyangkhar Nangpa. The name is Gyangkhar Nangpa.

Q: Was he...was it his private land or monastery land? What land was this?

#14U: The land belonged to the region; it came under this leader.

Q: The land that you tilled?

#14U: Yes.

Q: Was your family considered middle income or poor income? What level?

#14U: [Laughs] We had sufficient and did not have to borrow a penny from anybody nor lend to others. We did not have to take loans from anybody and had sufficient [means] ourselves.

Q: Why did you have to work for the leader?

00:10:02

#14U: Serving tax for the leader was a practice that had been going on since long ago. I did not take much interest then and so do not have the full knowledge to talk about it. Is there not any danger for me in asking such questions? I am scared. Should [I] not fear?

Q: I don't think it's dangerous, but I think it's wise to not answer if you don't know something.

#14U: Okay.

Q: Were you the only family working for the leader or many families in the area?

#14U: There were many families. There were many families, a whole village.

Q: The whole village. Where did the leader live? What kind of house?

#14U: When I left for India long ago, [the leader] was living in the village. The Chinese had no come when I left Tibet. At that time [he] was living in Tibet. I came to India at the age of 24 and have no idea where the leader is. My parents were left behind in Tibet.

Q: I see. Do you have any memories? Was the leader good to the people who worked for him or was he unkind?

00:12:30

#14U: [The leader] treated fairly well—fairly well.

Q: I mean like did he live in a big castle or mansion house compared to the other people in the village?

#14U: As for houses most of us...except for two or three families...two or three families had houses with two floors, while the rest of the houses had only one floor. Our leader's house had three stories.

Q: How young were you when you started to have to work in the fields?

#14U: One started to work at the age of 7 or 8. We started working at the age of 7 or 8. In Tibet one could be a servant at the age of 8. Work started at the age of 7 or 8.

Q: Tell us about your own experiences, *ama-la*? Did you work in the fields or work as a servant? What did you do growing up?

00:14:20

#14U: I lived at home as a little one and had not been a servant to others.

Q: I see. What was your house like? Can you tell us a little bit about your home?

#14U: The house was made of stones and plastered with mud. It had only one floor and not two. The village was circular just like here, and all the families of the village lived in that circular area.

Q: What was some of the things in that area, any furniture or carpets or a stove?

#14U: There were no chairs. Wood was scarce in our region and there were no chairs. There were mattresses to sit on. Except for low chairs for the parents there were just the thick mattresses in general.

Q: What did you sleep on at night?

00:16:07

#14U: Everybody in the house slept on the mattresses.

Q: So the whole family slept in the same room?

#14U: Some slept in small rooms outside the house. The parents slept in the house while we the children slept in small rooms outside.

Q: Besides...Was there in your village, was there any kind of a caste system or people were at different levels of society?

#14U: [I] do not know about such things—do not know. Oh, caste system?

Q: Caste system.

#14U: There was a caste system. There was a caste system. There was low caste and high caste. In our village there were around three families of [low] caste. One was the animal slaughterer called *shenpa* 'butcher,' who is low caste. Then there was another family that had moved from another village and it used to be said that they were unclean. Then there was a blacksmith. There were three [families].

Q: What did the blacksmith do?

00:18:11

#14U: The blacksmith made our farm implements to dig the earth like hoes, spades and such using iron.

Q: So when you said there were these three families, the *shenpa*...they slew animals and this middle...the other low class and then the blacksmith. They were all considered low class compared to what? Compared to your family or other families?

#14U: [The three families] were considered low caste. For instance, each carried his cup in the *amba* 'pouch of traditional coat' and never mixed cups with others. In India everybody is considered equal, but in Tibet each one carried his cup in the *amba* and never offered it to just anybody. It was like that.

Q: Is that right? You did not mix cups with people of different levels of caste system or just with anybody?

#14U: Did not mix [cups] with everybody—did not mix.

Q: But it sounds like...was there...were these three types of families, were they treated with lack of respect by the other Tibetans or less respect?

00:20:28

#14U: Yes. When they slaughtered animals...when they made iron tools an appropriate amount must be paid and for slaughtering animals an appropriate amount must be paid. The high caste never mixed cups—never mixed cups with those that were of low caste. Yes.

Q: Got it, but was your family considered high class next to these three groups?

#14U: Yes, we were among the high caste. [Laughs]

Q: Your family even though you worked for the leader, you were considered high class?

#14U: Yes.

Q: Is that right?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Right.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Compared to these three groups. Okay.

Q: Now was there any kind of hard labor...Okay. Did you transport goods for traders or do any transporting of your grains or anything to other cities?

00:22:20

#14U: One must transport things, transport manure that were loaded on donkeys and oxen to the fields. One must lift [the manure] onto the oxen and then spread it in the fields.

Q: Did you ever transport goods to another city or part of Tibet?

#14U: There was not anything of that kind.

Q: Did you ever transport goods for traders from one place to another, even if it's not in your region?

#14U: That was not in our hometown, but in Gangtok [Sikkim].

Q: In Gangtok?

#14U: Yes.

Q: Where to from Gangtok?

#14U: From Dromo to Phari...no...from Kalimpong [India] to Gangtok in Sikkim.

Q: Was that while you still lived in Tibet or after you left Tibet?

00:24:10

#14U: When I left Tibet at the age of 24 Tibet was not yet lost and the Chinese had not yet appeared in our hometown. Before the Chinese came, ours being a remote region, fabric was scarce. Fabric like flannel and material with coin design used for making *chupa* ‘traditional dresses’ these days were available in Gangtok. So I transported goods from Gangtok to Phari, crossing over the Nathula pass through Dromo to Phari. I could take home the wages from transporting goods.

I returned home once—returned home once when Tibet was not occupied. Then I came once again and at this time my younger sister came along. There was a brother younger to me and then a sister next to him. She came along with me. She came along with me and then the prices crashed. The first trip had fetched a good amount, but rates crashed during the latter trip. Then my sister and I did not have money to buy food.

00:25:20

When there was no money, [we] left Gangtok and came to Shingtop on the way to Kalimpong, where one could work as coolies. Sister and I worked as coolies. I worked as a coolie and there were many from the same hometown. The shopkeepers gave wheat flour, rice, margarine, sugar, lentils and everything [on credit]. Women were paid wages amounting to only a *rupee* and quarter. [My] sister and I worked as coolies. The other people, the colleagues, ate hot rice mixed with margarine and salt.

She was younger and had no sense. I was the elder one and had no sense. So how could she who was younger have any sense? We took potatoes...payment was not necessary for it could be paid from the monthly salary. So we took potatoes, lentils, and consumed all the money. After a month the one from our hometown said he was returning to Tibet. When [he] mentioned about returning to Tibet, [my] sister and I had no money for expenses. Although there was no money for expenses, she insisted on going back.

00:26:27

So [we] left from Gangtok and reached Dromo and then from Dromo to Phari. After crossing over the Dhangla pass of Phari our region could be reached in 2-3 days. Two or three days before reaching our hometown there was nothing but Tibetan wild asses, nothing but animals and no accommodation and no food.

Q: What animals were there?

#14U: After Phari one crossed over the Dhangla pass. Between that and our region there were animals called Tibetan wild asses that can be seen on television, and wolves and such.

It was a place where such existed and nothing else. [My] sister insisted on going back. When she insisted on going back...

Q: Where did the wild asses come from?

#14U: Yes?

Q: Where did the wild asses come from?

00:29:14

#14U: The wild asses lived on the mountains of the region.

Q: So you were just about to go home and the region was filled with them. Was there any danger to you or was it just hard to get pass them?

#14U: There was not any danger from the Tibetan wild asses, but she...I told her [younger sister] that there was nothing to eat. In regions where there are Tibetan wild asses one cannot find food. Still she insisted on returning. When she insisted I took credit from a person who was like our leader and sent her back—sent her back. [I] bought *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ Father smoked cigarettes and Mother used snuff. I bought tobacco and sent her back with relatives. I was left behind in India.

I was left in India and worked as a coolie for the person from whom I had borrowed money. [I] spent many months working as a coolie. The lunch I was provided during these many months was boiled potatoes without any wheat flour and such, and on alternate days lunch was roasted corn. [I] lived in such poor condition. Later he returned to Gangtok and never gave me an account of how much of the loan I had cleared and how much was still due. He did not give an account. The father of my children was also working as a coolie. We met each other and by then Tibet lost independence. What to do? I have undergone a lot of suffering.

Q: Just to go back to the first part, if there's a lot of wild asses there'd be nothing to eat, is that because they would eat the vegetation? What was the reason? There would be nothing to eat if they were around?

00:32:28

#14U: What she [younger sister] said was this. She said that [she] would beg along the way. What I replied was that after crossing the Dhangla pass of Phari, there would be no one to beg from it being a wilderness. Where can one beg in a place where Tibetan wild asses exist? So [I] sent her back taking a loan from someone. I could earn only a *rupee* and quarter a day. He [the lender] did not give me an account of how much was repaid and how much was due. The lunch was boiled potatoes and roasted corn on alternate days.

Q: Were they Tibetan people that you took the loan from?

#14U: [He] was a Tibetan. He was a Tibetan who had lived in our hometown long ago. However, I remained in the place called Shingam, while he returned to Sikkim without

telling me how much of the loan was repaid and how much was outstanding. He went back. Then I met the present husband.

Q: Can you tell me when you were carrying goods from Gangtok to Kalimpong; were you carrying them on your back? How were you doing that transport?

00:34:38

#14U: Yes, on the back—carried on the back.

Q: What was it? What kind of goods were they?

#14U: The goods in Tibet...[to interpreter] you must have been born in India and may not know. In Tibet five huge copper water pots called *chuzang* is one *mon*. Then there is a *mon* of sugar and tea like *bagchung* ‘tea leaves compressed into small bricks’ and *charil* ‘tea leaves compressed into cylinders.’ Such were transported. These must be carried from Gangtok to Shasimha, from Shasimha to Dromo and from Dromo to Phari. From Phari perhaps it is sent to Tibet [Lhasa?].

Q: *Ama-la*, what are five copper water pots called? One *mon*?

#14U: Yes, one *mon*. It is one *mon*.

Q: What else? Tea?

#14U: Sugar, one carried a *mon* of sugar. Then also *bagchung*—a *mon* of *bagchung* and a *mon* of *charil*. One carried [goods weighing] one *mon* and in addition your food to last for 5-6 days.

Q: Yeah. So were they very large? Can you show me the size of the goods?

00:36:32

#14U: [The goods] were large. The loads of sugar were the smallest while the utensils were large as also the tea. I have suffered a lot at a young age. Presently due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama I am happy and the children have grown. Otherwise, I have suffered a lot when younger.

Q: I’m glad to hear that [you are happy]. But tell us, do you... You say that when you borrowed money to help your sister go back, you could not repay that money and things became difficult. How did they become difficult?

#14U: I suffered because the person [I borrowed money from] provided only boiled potatoes and roasted corn while [I] worked as a servant. [Younger sister] said she was going to go back begging along the way, but there was not any money to meet the expenses of two people. So I stayed back and worked as a coolie and met the father of [my] children. Then [Tibet] was lost and it was over.

Q: Where did you meet your children’s father?

#14U: Yes?

Q: Where did you meet your children's father?

00:38:30

#14U: [I] met the children's father in Gangtok, in Sikkim.

Q: Just to go back for a minute. The weight of the bundles, how heavy would you say they were?

#14U: It was one *mon*. How many kilograms is one *mon*? According to the Indian standard, how many kilograms is one *mon*? It used to be called *mon* then.

Q: How many kilograms is a *mon* approximately?

#14U: I really do not know how many kilograms. It used to be called *mon* then. A *mon* is perhaps a hundred kilograms. It was very heavy. It was a full load and carried with ropes tied here [indicates chest] and on the head. It was very heavy. Perhaps it is about 50 kilograms.

Q: Did you have a frame, a wooden frame to hold the goods or a band on your head?

00:40:11

#14U: Yes, the bundle of goods was tied with ropes, tied with ropes here and here [indicates left and right side of chest] and over the head.

Q: So you said you met the father of your children. How did your life change when you met him?

#14U: My elder daughter is presently in Nepal. When she was around 5 or 6 years of age, it was said that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was taking children free of cost into a school in Mussoorie [India]. So we did not have to work as coolies as it was heard in Sikkim that even salt was going to be provided free of cost. So in order to admit [our] daughter [we] came to this place.

Q: Your older daughter?

#14U: Yes, the elder one who is now nearing 60. She was born when I was 24...no, born at age 25.

Q: So when you were 25, you met the father of your children and you decided to go to Mussoorie and then?

00:41:59

#14U: Yes, then [we] left Gangtok to send our daughter to school when it was said that children were being admitted to school and that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving

aid and that there was no need for us to work as coolies and that even the littlest item like salt was being given by His Holiness. Such was being reported in Gangtok, due to which [we] came down but then realized that there was no admission to school and nobody was giving any aid. Then [we] worked as coolies and the little money brought from Gangtok ran out. Then the children's father joined the army and I was two or three months in Mussoorie and then joined the Tibetan Women's Centre. I joined the Tibetan Women's Centre at the age of 30. It was 1962 that I came here.

Q: Okay. I'm not sure how...*Ama-la*, I'm not sure how you met your husband and then you had a daughter school age? What happened in that period of time? It's confusing.

#14U: [We] remained many years in Gangtok working as coolies, 5-6 years in Gangtok working as coolies.

Q: Oh, I see. That's when you were raising your daughter.

00:44:21

#14U: Yes, and then it was said that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was admitting children into a school in Mussoorie and giving aid, and that it was not necessary to work as coolies. Then [we] came down here. Once here, there was not any school to admit the children and no one providing aid and the little money [we] brought from Gangtok ran out, and then the husband joined the army.

Q: So you had to start all over again?

#14U: The husband worked as a coolie in Mussoorie while I had little children then, a little one of two or three besides the elder daughter that I took care of and could not go to work as a coolie. Then the money brought from Gangtok ran out and there was nothing to live on. So [my husband] joined the army. When [he] joined the army, I was alone. There was nothing, no gas connection like [we] have now. So I came and joined the Tibetan Women's Centre.

Q: Did he ever join you again?

00:46:04

#14U: [He] used to visit once a month—visit once a month for a day.

Q: When you say you came here, you came to this settlement right here?

#14U: Yes?

Q: Came to this very place?

#14U: I came to this very place in 1962 when I was 31 or 32 years old. Now I am so old. It has been 50-60 years. Still [I] engage in rolling yarn. At a younger age [I] used to weave carpets and presently engage in rolling yarn. Look at these arms [shows both arms]. The

arms look like this. They are crooked due to the amount of labor. The arms are like this, crooked. Look at the arms and the sign of labor. What to do? [Joins palms]

Q: Well, I'm glad you found a good place to spend these days of your life after all your sufferings.

#14U: Yes. [Joins palms] Presently due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama we have just about sufficient means although [we] do not do any business. My daughter's husband is in the army and so [we] have just about enough.

Every day I realize that it is the benevolence of His Holiness and this year in the month of July [I] went to Dharamsala [India]. I saw His Holiness and received blessings [touches head]. [His Holiness] asked the old man [husband], "How old are you?" [He] replied 82, as he was 82 then. "We are the same age—same age," said His Holiness and touched the old man's white eyebrows and blessed him.

00:48:12

I could not get the hand blessing because an old lady pushed in front of me. I did not get the hand blessing, but the old man did. [His Holiness] touched the white eyebrows and advised, "You should stay relaxed—stay relaxed." Since coming to India I wished to go to Dharamsala to see His Holiness and said so many times to the son-in-law. So [we] went there this year in the month of July and now [I] have no regrets if I died. However, I hope the old man goes first; if not he will suffer being bedridden and this is a big worry. [Becomes emotional] Otherwise, it is better to die. What to do? It is so difficult.

00:49:18

It has been 10 years—10 years [since my husband became bedridden].

Q: Well, I understand your worry, but what a wonderful story to hear you met His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

#14U: Yes, it has been good and [I] have no regrets if I died. I must die after the old man for if he lived longer, my old man will suffer being bedridden. We are of the same age, but I have to do everything. [My] daughter has to take care of her children who attend school. [My husband] has no control over his bladder.

Q: Thank you for your story, *ama-la*, and I hope things continue to be good for you and your family.

#14U: Okay. [Joins palms]

END OF INTERVIEW