

Teaching in Tibet

Amanda Hannaford, Peter Tavy Guild and Liskeard Spinners



Yaks being milked
All photos: Dolmakyap

Dolmakyap, a Tibetan (known as DK to his friends) had recently returned from India to live with his family in Tibet. He wanted to set up a textile workshop¹ to give employment to nomads, and in January 2016 was searching the internet for advice on spinning yak down. He found Teresinha Roberts' website and contacted her; she passed his enquiry on to the Online Guild, which is where I heard of it.

I emailed to offer advice, only to be told that what he really wanted was someone willing to go to Tibet and teach. Over the next few months there was a lot of discussion via email and Skype. It was finally decided that I would go for about a month and teach fibre prep, spinning, natural and acid dyeing, and knitting and crochet.

I left on 18 July, flew into Chengdu in China for an overnight stay, then flew on up to Labrang (in Amdo, an area of Tibet just on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau, c. 2900m above sea level). I was picked up by car, taken the scenic route into town, and saw my first herd of yaks about ten minutes from the airport. I watched them being milked, and scrounged a bit of *khullu* (the down undercoat).

My next treat was a wander around the famous Labrang monastery, originally founded in 1709 but largely rebuilt after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. I was invited to lunch by two monks and a nun (DK's aunt and uncles). They were wearing the traditional deep red robes, but I was told it was highly unlikely that they are naturally dyed nowadays. There I had my first experience of Tibetan food, yak butter melted in hot water to dip bread into, and yak milk tea.

Next stop was the workshop, to meet the employees (five married couples), who were either members of DK's family or close friends, and aged between late twenties to late thirties. I had a roomy flat on the fourth floor of an apartment block. The workshop was close by, so it wasn't far to get to work in the mornings.

My first task was to help sort the yak down and experiment with washing it. This was the one area that wasn't successful. The down is collected from the ground after shedding rather than direct from the animal. Consequently, it was really dusty and difficult to get clean without felting the fibres. The traditional method of beating the dust out with two sticks was tried, but it was too labour-intensive and not very efficient.

We switched to mill-processed fibre, and I taught all five women to hand-card rolags. I had taken enough carding cloth out with me for five pairs of carders, which were made up by a local carpenter. As Bliss wheels worked really well for the workshop in Kabul,² I recommended them here too and they had bought three. I demonstrated a woollen longdraw and left three of them practising on the wheels. They were a delight to teach, taking to everything I showed them really easily. Most Tibetan women (of the generation I was teaching) are proficient on the *phang* spindle (pronounced *pong*) but they use it as a suspended spindle, whereas I know it as a supported spindle. Therefore I wasn't so much teaching them to spin as teaching them to use a wheel and a fast drafting technique for easy spinning of very short down fibre.



Amanda demonstrating spinning using a Bliss wheel

As there were five women and only three wheels, we decided to try to get a charkha made locally. I explained how one worked, drew a very rough sketch and then had a fascinating morning touring all the metal workshops in town. A few days later one appeared in the workshop, rather bulky and squeaking like mad, but with some tinkering and fine-tuning they got it working, and at a ratio of around 15:1 it was ideal to learn on. Before I left, DK's eldest sister Sangye Dolma, became very proficient on it and produced cop after cop of lovely fine even thread. He ordered her a box charkha, which didn't arrive until well after I left; but I'm sure she'll master that too!

Next on the agenda was to set up the dye space in a traditional style courtyard house at the opposite end of town. We went shopping for all the dyeing equipment and bought four large, lidded stainless pans. We also got two burners to work off gas bottles, various strainers and buckets, plus a spin-dryer! Most of the dyes and chemicals we needed had been ordered beforehand. For yellow, we planned to use rhubarb root, a traditional local dyestuff which grows easily in the area. In fact in the dye studio courtyard we had our own rhubarb plant growing in a raised bed, which came in useful for experiments with mordanting. Our source of red was brazilwood:³ I also wanted them to try madder, but we had problems translating it into Chinese, even when starting with the botanical latin. We tracked some down eventually, but the initial wishy-washy results suggested it was either poor quality or a different plant to the European madder. For blue we made an indigo stock solution, which we added to the vat with a reducing agent.

At the workshop they already had six looms set up and had had one month's weaving training. They were producing the most beautiful traditional narrow weft-faced woollen fabric known locally as *nhambhu*. It was all undyed, and the idea was that I teach them to dye the wool yarn for weft, along with the khullu fibre in the three natural colours – white, fawn/grey and dark brown.

I drew up a plan for producing 50 different coloured 10g sample skeins. There were usually four of us in the dye workshop, myself with DK to translate for me, Rinchenkyi and her brother-in-law, Dolmakyab. We scoured the samples and mordanted everything with alum. To extract the colour the rhubarb was used both hot and cold, and the brazilwood was boiled. We then over-dyed both hot and cold rhubarb in brazilwood, and a set of all three were also over-dyed in indigo. For each set of five we kept one skein unaltered and modified the other four with acid, alkali, copper or iron. For the final ten skeins we made up an indigo vat, and dipped each skein for an increasing length of time, achieving the darkest shades with multiple dips. DK and myself worked late into the evening once the samples were dry, labelling all the colours and making a reference display for the office wall. I had hoped we would do the same with the acid dyes. We did try them out and produced a few samples, but DK's heart wasn't in it, he didn't want to use acid dyes after seeing the beautiful shades we could achieve with just three natural dyes. Next we dyed the first few full-size skeins, to check that we could scale up the recipes successfully, and there was much excitement in the workshop when Kelsang started the first length of fabric in coloured stripes dyed with rhubarb.



Above: Dye sample skeins

On one shopping trip we found some people hulling walnuts in a greengrocer's shop, and scrounged a carrier bag of husks for dyeing. We dried some of the husks for later and also tried them fresh – we soaked a wool sample cold for 36 hours, this produced a really rich golden brown. DK pronounced it the most beautiful colour yet, so they now have a free source for a fourth dyestuff. While Dolmakyab was sent for training on how to use a sewing machine to make up the fabric, Rinchenkyi continued the dyeing on her own for several weeks after I left, but dyeing ceased during the winter as the space is unheated and it is too cold.

My final task was to teach the women how to knit and crochet; again I wasn't starting completely from scratch as they could all knit to some degree. I soon discovered that Sangye Dolma was a very confident knitter – she could read her stitches, spot and

correct mistakes and pick up dropped stitches with ease. In fact the only thing holding her back was access to information and patterns. We downloaded a simple pattern for a baby jacket from the internet, and with DK translating it for us, I showed her all the steps needed to create a finished garment, right down to needle-weaving a set of Yorkshire buttons for the fastenings.

Lhamokyi and Damdinkyi had also shown an interest in knitting, so using some of the handspun khullu, DK and I explained how to make a tension swatch, and choose the right needles and number of stitches for any size of yarn. They produced a few hats and a short cowl, all knitted in the round; I think they'd only used straight needles before. As time was now short, it was decided that I should concentrate on teaching Sangye Dolma, who could then pass on her skills to the other women, and



*Rinchenkyi with the first batch
of full sized weft skeins*

eventually to other nomads from her village. Next she tackled a pair of gloves on a circular needle, taking the fiddly fingers and the magic loop all in her stride. I'm not sure if she had crocheted before, I don't think so, but by the end of the first afternoon we had a sizeable swatch done in shell stitch. We were waiting for a delivery from the US of double-ended Tunisian crochet hooks; they unfortunately didn't arrive in time, so Rinchenkyi's husband whittled one from a stick, and now she can do double-ended Tunisian too!

It wasn't all work; we had wonderful meals out in restaurants and local cafés, as well as being invited to DK's aunt's house for several meals. We also made a few further visits to his uncle's house in the monastery, where I was fascinated to hear the monks chanting accompanied by drums and horns. I even sat in on a debating session in one of the temples.

If I had to choose just one highlight, then it would have to be the trip out to DK's family's summer camp on shearing day. I had to be ready by 5.30am, and DK's brother took us the two hours by car to the winter village; we then transferred to motorbikes for a further two hours over the grasslands on very rutted tracks. When we arrived the shearing was well underway, and I watched, fascinated. There was no power for electric shears, so it was all clipped by hand. The sheep were grabbed by a back leg, flipped over on their sides and had their feet tied to stop them struggling. The shearers were amazingly fast, and before a sheep realised what was happening it had lost its fleece, had two dollops of red paint daubed on its rump and an injection in its neck.

Dolmakyap then arranged for me to visit the camp next door, as they still had a traditional yak hair tent, which was dark



Sheep shearing day

Notes on Health and Safety

When using any natural material for dyeing, dyers should fully inform themselves as to the possible toxicity of plant material they are choosing to use. They should be aware of local environmental law on the collection of material from the wild – and adhere to it. For information on safe handling of plants, the chemicals used in dyeing and for recipes, dyers should consult the most up-to-date natural dyeing reference books and refer to their health and safety sections. Older information may be inaccurate, or otherwise misleading. **Also note that equipment used for dyestuff preparation and dyeing should NEVER be used for culinary food preparation.**

Tea break on shearing day



brown, rectangular and very smoky inside. The cause of the smoke was a stove in the centre (they use dried yak dung for fuel) with a big pot of mutton boiling on top.

After lunch it was time to start the long trip back, two hours riding pillion and hanging on for grim death – it was great fun! I finally got back to my apartment at 11.30pm, very tired but happy: sheep shearing, yak tents and motorbikes – what more could you want!

Footnotes

- ¹ Chamtsee workshop, Labrang, Tibet: *Chamtsee (compassion in Tibetan) is a very small workshop at present, but we have big dreams for the future and are taking it step by step. We wish to employ Tibetan nomads, to help with the changing nomadic way of life, and to keep our cultural values alive for humanity. We also have an Etsy shop.*
www.facebook.com/ChamtseeWorkshop
www.etsy.com/shop/CHAMTSEE
- ² Hannaford, Amanda (2015) Afghan Adventure: Qaria Cashmere Spinning Training, February/March 2015. *Journal WSD*, 256, pp.22-26.
- ³ Editor's note: *The dye used in this article was obtained from Caesalpinia sappan (also known as sappanwood), which grows in Asia. Brazilwood (Caesalpinia echinata) is now on the CITES list as it is an endangered species (Correspondence. Journal WSD, 259, p.46) and is no longer available in the UK.*

Acknowledgement

Amanda and DK would both like to thank Jenny Dean for her help and encouragement, before, during and after the teaching trip.

About the author: Amanda teaches regularly, either from home or at Guild workshops. She has also taught popular classes at the last few Association Summer Schools, and has now proved herself capable of teaching abroad with the help of a translator. At home she also runs a small Etsy shop with her husband, selling hand-dyed fibre and spinning tools. Amanda has recently added a talk about her time in Tibet to the current Association Speakers' List.

www.mandacrafts.co.uk
amanda@mandacrafts.co.uk
www.etsy.com/uk/shop/MandaCrafts