

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #30N – Ngawang Chodak
April 13, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #30N
2. Interviewee: Ngawang Chodak
3. Age: 79
4. Date of Birth: 1936
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Shungru
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Tashiling Tibetan Refugee Center, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 47 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Ngawang Chodak was born into a nomadic family in Utsang Province. His family reared sheep and yaks for their livelihood. The nomads migrated four times a year in search of pastures and transported all of their belongings on their yaks. The grazing lands were allotted to the families by the leader, who was elected by the public.

Ngawang Chodak provides details about salt gathering, which was done in the spring and summer. The selected men would journey to the salt pans driving yaks. He describes how the salt formed in the lake and how the salt was gathered and dried. They filled saddle bags with the salt and loaded them on the yaks. The salt was taken to farmers and traded for grain.

Ngawang Chodak recalls the horse racing festival which featured a running race and a trotting competition. He vividly describes the riders' clothing and adornments on the horses. The galloping race lasted for over two hours and the riders were normally ages 12-15.

After the Chinese appeared in his region, many people began to flee and Ngawang Chodak's family left suddenly without even bringing any food on the journey. Ngawang Chodak was captured and imprisoned for one month under harsh conditions. He then made a successful escape to Nepal and was able to join his wife and parents there.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, festivals, imprisonment, escape experiences.

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Interview #30N

Interviewee: Ngawang Chodak

Age: 79, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 13, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:11

Interviewee #30N: Ngawang Chodak.

Q: How old are you?

#30N: Seventy-nine.

Q: When did you leave Tibet?

#30N: [I] left Tibet in '59.

Q: How old were you when you left Tibet?

#30N: Perhaps aged 22 or so.

Q: So a young man?

#30N: Yes, young in age.

Q: Did you have a wife and children at this time?

#30N: [I] had a wife but no children. Father and Mother were there.

Q: And you all lived together?

#30N: Yes.

Q: With your parents?

#30N: Yes, in the same home.

Q: And was your wife from your village?

#30N: Yes, from the same village.

Q: Was it a love marriage or was it an arranged marriage?

#30N: Arranged by the parents.

Q: Why did your parents choose this young lady?

#30N: In the past in Tibet an honest, reliable and good person would be chosen.

[Interpreter interprets as: Because in the past in Tibet we looked for honesty and security. So that's why she was selected.]

Q: And when you say security, what were they looking for?

00:02:29

#30N: By security it means an honest person that does not steal, lie or steal and rob. An honest one is called reliable.

Q: Are you still married to this lady?

#30N: Yes.

Q: How long have you been married?

#30N: It has been fifty something years since marriage. I married at the age of 19 and now am 79.

Q: I think you must have been married 60 years.

#30N: Yes, it could be.

Q: Congratulations!

#30N: [Laughs]

Q: I have been married 41 years.

#30N: [Nods]

Q: What is your wife's name?

#30N: Pasang 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, 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 with which we work to use this interview?

00:04:39

#30N: It can be used anywhere.

Q: Thank you. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at anytime, please let us know.

#30N: Okay.

Q: If there are any questions that you don't want to answer or if there is anything you don't want to talk about, let us know.

#30N: Okay.

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

#30N: [I] have no problems at all.

Q: Thank you very much. We're honored to interview. At the end of the interview I'll come back and ask a couple of questions.

#30N: Okay.

Q: So when you're about 19 you got married. What kind of a livelihood did you have? What did you do to live?

#30N: For a livelihood we raised sheep, yaks and such. During summer [we] sheared their wool and did milking, which was made into curd. From curd [we] made butter. Then the butter and wool were...[not discernible].

Q: What was done with the butter and wool?

00:06:25

#30N: The butter and wool were sold and in return [we] received barley and wheat. Then [we] collected salt from the Changthang 'Northern Plateau.' The salt was bartered.

Q: Did your family live in a village or were you nomads moving around?

#30N: As nomads we migrated, migrating once in three months. [We] migrated four times in 12 months.

Q: You took your home with you each time you moved?

#30N: [We] took the whole home. We did not have houses like these. They were tents made from *tsipa*, the hair of yaks that were woven into tents. The belongings were loaded on yaks and moved here and there. [Laughs]

Q: When you moved what were all the belongings that you had to take with you that you put on the yaks?

00:08:54

#30N: Things loaded on the yaks were kitchen items, tents, blankets, mattresses and everything.

Q: What about food?

#30N: The barley was made into *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ The *tsampa* and everything else was loaded on the yaks. It was very simple in Tibet. There was no need to transport chairs and tables like these. [We] were like tourists, like trekkers.

Q: When you moved every three months, did you go back to the same places?

#30N: Yes. These days it is summertime. There is a particular place to stay during summer and then there is an autumn site, a spring site and a winter site, moving every three months. If one did not move the animals must feed on grass and the grass depleted. Then [we] moved to another place where grass grew. Without grass all the animals will die.

Q: Was this land that your family owned or was it just general, you know, public land?

00:11:29

#30N: Generally, there were individual lands. However, we did not say anything if other people’s [animals] grazed there a little bit. Otherwise, there were individual lands.

Q: That sounds remarkable that there was no friction. Why do you think that there was no friction?

#30N: There were no frictions, no frictions over little things. Our region was peaceful. Being a peaceful region [we] did not argue if a little bit [of grass] was eaten. If one needed a larger grazing area, one must seek permission, “Let me come to this place.” and after receiving consent [the animals] can graze there.

Q: Who would they seek permission from?

#30N: If I wanted to graze [my animals] for a long period on your land, I will seek permission from you and you have to give consent. It is like that. If you wanted to graze [your animals] on my land, I have to give consent. The period was fixed whether it was for a month or two.

Q: Who originally assigned the places where you could graze?

00:13:40

#30N: The one that allotted the lands was our group leader, the senior-most. For instance, there are four camps here and we have a senior-most leader called *chitue*. There was one such man that made the decision in regard to all the lands: “This is yours; this is yours; this is yours; this is yours...” and the decision was made.

Q: How did this leader get selected or nominated?

#30N: He was selected by the general public like we elect the members of Parliament. Everybody voted and he was...

Q: Was it actual casting of votes?

#30N: It was not actually casting votes. I do not know very well whether votes were cast then. The man became [the leader].

Q: Do you remember participating in one of these selections?

#30N: My parents participated in the selection of leaders. Father went. I did not because I was young then.

Q: Right because you were only 23-24 when you left the country.

00:15:49

#30N: I was young then and Father went wherever there were any obligations. If the father was not there the son would have to go. Otherwise, [I] was not required to go.

Q: Did your father talk about the conversations when they were selecting a leader? If so, what did he say?

#30N: [He] spoke about it, “There was a division of lands and we have got this plot. That plot was given to them. This was given to them. We must live harmoniously without any arguments amongst us. If there is a little bit of infringement, [we] should not argue.” If [a plot] is required for a longer period like 2-3 months, one must seek consent. The senior leader gave us permission.

Q: So was the same land allotted each time each year?

#30N: The same land was allotted. Rarely...perhaps there would be a change after many years. Otherwise, there was no change. The same was allotted.

Q: What would cause that kind of a change?

00:17:40

#30N: If you did not want to remain on your land, the leader was informed and the plots changed. If you did not send in a petition, there was no need for change. If you really

wished to change, you could do that among us. The leader did not raise any objections as he had already given consent and we were free to do anything.

Q: Can you give an example where your family changed the land with somebody else and what the circumstances were?

#30N: I have no such experience of that occurring during my time.

Q: Do you remember other families changing?

#30N: I do not know about it. Our region was peaceful and [we] lived very harmoniously. Such issues did not take place much.

Q: Was your community...was everyone in the community...have the similar wealth?

00:19:33

#30N: There was difference in wealth. There were the wealthy and the poor. There were different types. Those that were poor grazed the animals of the rich, sort of like servants and received wages.

Q: How would they get paid?

#30N: The wages were full sets of clothes for the winter and summer, the same food [as the employers] and three *di* of grains a month. There is [a measurement] called *di*; three *di* would be equal to six *mana*.

Q: What's *mana*?

#30N: *Mana* is what we...

Q: Kilo?

#30N: In kilogram it would be two kilograms a month. [The employer] gave two kilograms of grains a month.

Q: Besides food?

#30N: Besides food. Besides food and clothes, and at times [the employers] gave big bonuses like animals: goats and sheep.

Q: So was it possible for a poor family to become wealthier?

00:21:46

#30N: If he [poor man] is competent, [he] can become rich. If he does not have the ability...one needs a large number of animals to become rich. If one has a large number of animals, one can become rich, and without a large number of animals, one cannot become rich.

Q: Did you see that happening when you lived in Tibet?

#30N: There were a few instances.

Q: Can you tell us about one of those instances?

#30N: A case of becoming rich from being poor...someone who does not have wealth is poor. For instance, you [interpreter] are wealthy and have a servant. [You] give him bonuses like a cow or sheep. He need not spend on food. [He] collects all of these [animals received as bonuses] and exchanges them for grain and such. He keeps saving the grain for around a year. After a year he buys lambs and kids from others and collects them. By collecting five, 10 or 15 a year, the number grows and later he becomes rich. There are a few such cases.

Q: How many people lived in your community? How many families and how many people?

00:24:32

#30N: People-wise...family-wise, there were over a hundred families.

Q: Around how many people were there in the hundred families?

#30N: Perhaps over 300 people, maybe 400. Each family would have 4-5 members.

Q: How many children did most people in your community have?

#30N: Any number of children was allowed to be born because there was no birth control. Some gave birth to one or two children while others had 10-11 children, a large number of children. If one is rich and has many children, his living standard will become better. If one is poor and has many children, then it will be difficult. There was no birth control in Tibet.

Q: Can you please explain why was it if the wealthy had a lot of children they grew wealthier, but if the poor had a lot of children they grew poorer?

#30N: I do not know why it is so.

Q: Do you think that the families that had just one or two children, do you think that they...how did they ensure that they had only one or two children?

00:26:56

#30N: [I] do not know. One cannot explain that. There was no birth control. So I do not know the reason why. There were also a few that never had any children.

Q: Did the children tend to live past birth?

#30N: Some died. Some died but most survived.

Q: Was that considered somehow shameful or how was it regarded by the community?

#30N: It was not regarded [as shameful]. It was not regarded so. If he did not have children, he could request a relative that had many children to give him a child and it was obliged whether a daughter or son was sought. If a son was sought, a son was given and if a daughter was sought, a daughter was given so that [he/she] could look after his wealth. It was not considered bad.

Q: I'm curious, what did you like most about being a nomad?

00:28:56

#30N: As a nomad living in my hometown [I] liked herding the animals like yaks and sheep. [I] liked that. One must take care of them and let them multiply and then one became rich. If one did not take care of them one became poor and faced problems.

Q: Was this something about herding the animals that you particularly liked, the work that you did?

#30N: I liked taking the animals to where the grass was good. The animals must get grass. One drove [the animals] where the best grass grew and let them graze. In our region there were no thieves and robbers. The *dri* 'female yaks' that had to be milked—those *dri* were taken care of; the sheep had to be taken care of else a bad animal attacked them. Otherwise, all the yaks and horses were driven to the mountains like wild animals.

Q: Yaks?

#30N: Horses and yaks, all these were let loose on the mountains. One went to take a count once in around a week to see if all were there. Otherwise, since the region itself was peaceful...it was very strange.

Q: What kind of bad animals did you have in your region?

00:31:33

#30N: The bad animal was called wolf that ate animals. Here in this country there are leopards and tigers. In our region was one called wolf. It attacked sheep. It cannot attack yaks.

Q: Did you ever have encounters with wolves? If so, could you tell us about it?

#30N: [I] have had many encountered. While we herded the sheep, it looked down from the mountain. Wherever our sheep went, we encountered it nearly every day. When we moved together with the sheep, it did not get a chance to attack easily. It did not get a chance to attack except on rare occasions. Then in Tibet we owned large dogs. The dogs...at night the sheep were kept in the open while the people slept indoors. All the sheep were outside and the dogs; the dogs of Tibet kept watch and stopped the wolves. [The dogs] fought them off. The dogs won and the wolves lost.

Q: Can you tell us about one encounter you remember that was particularly scary when a wolf was attacking your animals?

00:34:17

#30N: At night if the dogs are unaware, it entered among the sheep and attacked. During the day [the wolf] cannot do that much since the men were there. [The wolves] cannot attack.

Q: You mentioned that you would also gather salt and bartering for grain. Could you tell us about that experience of harvesting the salt?

#30N: If this was our region by driving yaks it took around a month for us to go and return from the saltpans of Dabyay Tsakha. Each yak was laden with two big bags. On the way [to the saltpans the bags] were empty except for some *tsampa*. On reaching there the salt was free of cost. The salt was free of cost. Then the salt was collected and packed into the bags. [The bags] were laden on the yaks and [we] returned. On reaching here it was bartered for grains, for barley and wheat. Long ago when we were living in Tibet, not just the Nepalese, even the Indians consumed Tibetan salt. These days we are consuming Chinese salt. Tibetan salt was consumed in the past.

Q: So can you describe a day when you were gathering salt? What was it like?

00:37:29

#30N: Salt is formed on plain ground. Salt is formed on plain ground. There is a huge lake beside which salt is formed. The salt is gathered like dust in a circular metal. It is collected and then packed.

Q: What type of a circular metal?

#30N: A circular metal...compared to today it was something like this [gestures off camera] that is carried in the hand. Metal was rare. That has to be carried and [the salt] collected in it.

Q: So the salt was a powder on the banks of the lake, is that it?

#30N: Yes. Over there is a lake. If one went to the lake, on the banks of the lake was an open ground on which the salt is formed. It is formed like curd. At this time of the year the salt is dry. One must beat it. During summertime the salt was in the form of powder. During this time one must beat the salt.

Q: During winter the salt is dry and must be beaten.

#30N: The salt is dry and must be beaten. It is formed like ice. One must beat it and then collect it.

Q: During summer...

00:39:06

#30N: In summer [the salt] must be taken out of the water and it was a difficult task. It was incredibly difficult. The salt was of good quality and must be removed [from the water]. The effort was incredible.

Q: During summer?

#30N: Yes, during summer.

Q: Did you go both summer and winter to collect salt?

#30N: Yes?

Q: Did you go both summer and winter to collect salt?

#30N: One did not go during winter. It was during summer and this time of the year. One must say spring. It is springtime now.

Q: Autumn?

#30N: Autumn. One did not go during wintertime.

Q: You said it was hard work collecting from the lake when you have to go in. In what way was it hard? What did you have to do?

#30N: The salt was in the water. The salt was in the water. The salt is removed from the water and taken to dry land. One continued to do the same until there forms a large collection of salt on dry land. Then it is loaded on the yaks.

Q: Was it a powder or was it more like a stone in the water?

00:41:49

#30N: It was in the form of crystals like the Nepalese salt. Once removed from the water it looked like lime.

Q: Like what? Glass?

#30N: It was like lime. It must be removed and once on dry land it cannot melt. It remained as it was.

Q: So when you took them out of water, were the bags on the yaks and you would fill the bags that are on the yaks or did you fill the bags on the ground and then put them on the yaks?

#30N: [The bags] were not filled on the yaks but on the ground. The salt was already heaped on dry land. Then the bags were taken off the yaks and filled on the ground. The mouths were closed. There was a lot of work to do. Then [the bags were] loaded on the yaks.

Q: Was it sewn?

#30N: The mouth must be sewn. If not [the salt] would spill on the yak, spill on the ground. [Laughs]

Q: How long would it take you to fill one bag with salt?

00:44:06

#30N: It would not take long, maybe 10 minutes.

Q: To fill one bag?

#30N: To fill one bag.

Q: To go into the water, out, put it in the...

#30N: No, one would take [many] trips lasting 10 minutes or 20 minutes to remove the salt from water. It was left to dry on land, on the open ground. It took around 10 minutes to fill a gye 'bag.'

Q: So how long would it take to collect the salt, dry it...from the point of collecting it to the point of completely filling the bag and sewing it up?

#30N: It would take around a day.

Q: A day to fill one bag?

#30N: It is not to fill one bag. One person can drive 25 yaks. Twenty-five yaks will have 50 bags. It takes one day to fill 50 bags, one day.

Q: What about collecting the salt?

#30N: Collecting the salt to sewing the mouth.

Q: One day.

#30N: Then the yaks must be loaded. It would not take more than a day. The men were very strong. [A person] does 10 times the work done here. What would take 10 minutes here will be completed in a minute there. The men were extremely strong.

Q: How much did each bag weigh?

00:46:56

#30N: [They] were heavy. At a guess each bag weighed around 25 kilograms. So each yak carried 50 kilograms.

Q: Did any of the yaks carry more than 50 kilos?

#30N: No, they were not loaded so. One must love the yaks like one's children. If loaded [more], it would carry but it will face difficulties.

Q: Did the yaks ever complain about the loads that they were carrying?

#30N: They did not.

Q: They never sat down and said, "No more!"?

#30N: Never, [the yaks] did not do that. [They] never did anything like that.

Q: Did the whole family go to collect salt or just certain people in the community?

#30N: The family did not go, just a person from each family, altogether around six people.

Q: One person from each family?

00:49:04

#30N: One person from each family, around six people. The maximum number would be eight, but normally not more than six because a large number of yaks must be driven.

Q: Were they all men or did women ever go?

#30N: Only the boys. Girls did not go.

Q: Olden men, younger men...?

#30N: Those that went were aged between 20 and 50.

Q: Did you enjoy doing this work?

#30N: I enjoyed doing the work of collecting salt.

Q: What was it about that you enjoyed doing?

#30N: Everyone remarked that going to gather salt was good. The salt was free of cost and after gathering it was bartered for grains. So it was like the grain was acquired free of cost, as they were transported on the yaks. Unlike these days there was no transportation charge for yaks. Everything was free of cost.

Q: The yaks belonged to you?

#30N: The yaks were yours. If you did not own any yaks, you could borrow from relatives to go to collect salt and did not have to pay anything for the yaks.

Q: After you collected the salt, did you then take it back to your community or did you immediately take it to barter for grain?

00:51:40

#30N: Initially, [the salt] was taken to our village. After returning to our village, the yaks were left to rest for around a month or two. [The yaks] were taken to good grasslands and fattened up. At times [we] took [the salt] to where the grain was and at times the grain was brought to us. Sometimes the salt was taken there. That depended upon how contacts were made.

Q: What decided who went or came to get the salt?

#30N: Between the farmers and us traders, they needed salt and we needed grain. If they faced scarcity of salt, they came to get the salt and if we faced scarcity of grain we went to get it from them. It was like that.

Q: In your experience, did your family have the greatest need or did the farmers?

#30N: Farmers facing scarcity of grain...salt...

Q: Did you face greater need of grain?

00:53:50

#30N: There was a bit of difficulty with scarcity of salt. We gathered salt from a great distance. There was a bit of difficulty.

Q: Did you face problems with scarcity of grain?

#30N: Scarcity of grain happened sometimes. In order to avoid this problem grain was stocked. Grain was stocked from summer.

Q: When you exchange your salt for the grain, how much grain would you get for one bag of salt?

#30N: We got three bags of grain for two bags of salt.

Q: Salt was more expensive?

#30N: Salt was more expensive.

Q: Did that ever change from year to year?

#30N: [I] do not know what is happening now. There cannot be salt available now.

Q: Not now, but when you were living there.

#30N: During my time there was not any such problem.

Q: Did it remain the same?

#30N: It remained the same. And then bad times dawned.

Q: What changed?

00:55:57

#30N: Then we could not remain in the hometown for the Chinese had appeared. The Chinese arrived and we were unable to stay back. All of us nomads left to go abroad.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: ...that is why these questions are being asked.

#30N: Okay, I consider your questions as being helpful for Tibet and the Tibetans.

Q: Thank you.

So you were living in a fairly remote area I'm assuming and the Chinese appeared and you weren't allowed to stay in this remote area, is that right?

#30N: Yes?

Q: The Chinese didn't allow you to live there?

00:57:06

#30N: Yes, the Chinese came and were killing people, confiscating wealth, and doing various acts. Fearing that all of us fled.

Q: How did you know that the...When did you first see the Chinese?

#30N: Before the Chinese appeared in our hometown, they came as visitors to our hometown two or three times to deceive us. At that time they were good. They treated us well. They said, "Let's eat together and smoke together." They pretended to be very helpful and later they destroyed us.

Q: The first Chinese that you met, were they soldiers or were they civilians?

#30N: I do not know if they were soldiers or civilians. Whoever [they] were, came riding black horses.

Q: How were they dressed?

00:59:11

#30N: They were dressed in blue—greenish, green. [They] were dressed in such.

Q: Green?

#30N: Yes, greenish.

Q: Like a uniform?

#30N: Seemed like uniform.

Q: How many of them came?

#30N: There were eight, nine or 10 people.

Q: When they talked to you how did they explain? What did they say about why they were there? Did they say they were like tourists or what?

#30N: [The Chinese] did not say anything to me. However, my father used to go sometimes and [I] was told that they said, "We will do you good, will lend you great help later..." but they did not explain much.

Q: Did they say what kind of help they would give?

#30N: It was not explained what kind of help but that great help would be given later. Such things were said.

Q: Why do you think the Chinese came into Tibet?

01:01:13

#30N: I do not understand that...do not understand.

Q: Now do you have any thoughts as to why they might have come in?

#30N: These days I think they came in order to destroy our dharma and to destroy the Tibetan people. I realize that now but did not know in the past.

Q: Why do you think they would want to do that?

#30N: It must have been to bring everything under their power. I do not understand that. It must have been the intention to overpower. Presently I think that must have been the intention. I did not know that in the past. Now [I] realize that is it.

Q: In many countries like my country, I'm from England and I live in the United States, both countries they have gone into other countries to like India to take their natural resources. Do you think there are reasons like that that might have influenced the Chinese?

01:03:09

#30N: It might have been like that. They, the Chinese, are mining many of the mineral resources even now.

Q: Are they doing that in the regions where you lived?

#30N: [I] have not heard of such being mined in our region.

Q: What are they mining for?

#30N: There are different kinds of mineral resources in Tibet. There are gold, iron, silver and different kinds of minerals and coal. I have heard people talking but have not seen such. [I] heard that all these were mined and the forests cut. In the forest were precious trees like sandalwood and many such kinds. They have destroyed all of these.

Q: How do you feel about the Chinese mining the land, you know, the land?

#30N: There is no feeling about this. One feels sad but cannot put up any challenge. [I] feel very sad. [I] think [the Chinese] just want to destroy the Tibetans. If [the Chinese] can make it impossible for the Tibetans to survive, the Tibetans are finished.

Q: In your religious faith, is it allowed to mine, to dig up the land?

01:05:47

#30N: It is not allowed. Mining of minerals is not allowed.

Q: Why is that?

#30N: If the region is devoid of the minerals, the people's fortune and merit diminishes. There will be chaos among the people with fights and bad thoughts. Once the people's fortune and merit weaken, the land's [quality] deteriorates and the region comes to naught. It is like burning wood. If wood is burnt there is only ashes left. That is the reason I feel.

Q: In what way does mining affect people's mind?

#30N: If a region's mineral resources are mined, people's brains weaken. I think the brains weaken. Once the brain weakens, the man is damaged. Then he cannot think much.

Q: In what way? How does it change?

01:08:24

#30N: If a person's brain is damaged, he is like insane, a person that cannot think, and people do not trust each other. I think such changes come about. That is my opinion.

Q: So could you please tell us about your escape? You said that you...I think your community fled. Where did they go and how was that?

#30N: I cannot talk about that.

Q: You escaped from Tibet...

#30N: Oh, the escape?

Q: Yes.

#30N: Okay, okay.

Q: You and your community escaped. Where did you flee?

#30N: We fled to the place called Dolpa Tarab, which is close to Mustang [Nepal].

Q: Close to Mustang?

#30N: Close to Mustang.

Q: How close to where you lived is Dolpa Tarab?

#30N: It is close.

Q: How close?

#30N: It is at a distance of 10-15 days.

Q: From Shungru to Dolpa Tarab?

#30N: Yes.

Q: Was it an easy journey or did you encounter difficulties?

01:10:39

#30N: [We] faced great difficulties on the journey. Initially, we were driving the animals. We were sitting at home after having milked the *dri* and put the milk on the stove to boil. [We] had prepared tea and were drinking it. Then [we] saw many people driving animals loaded with stuff. We asked, "What happened?" "The Chinese have come. The Chinese have come." [We] left that very moment with nothing.

Q: Leaving the animals?

#30N: Leaving the animals. [We] were without food for seven days until Dolpa, without food for five, six or seven days.

Q: So what did you do?

#30N: There was nothing to do. We reached a place called Dolpa Tarab, no; it was Moepa. After reaching Moepa we knew some people who gave us food. [We] ate the food and managed to proceed. Otherwise, there was no food for six or seven days, just drinking water and walking.

Q: Did you have children with you? How many of you were in the group and did you have children?

01:12:51

#30N: There were my father and mother but no children. There were my wife and my sibling. We were five people.

Q: Why did you not have food for seven days?

#30N: The Chinese appeared all of a sudden. So we left all our belonging there except the clothes on the body and fled. This happened not just to us but to many people, including the neighbors and close people.

Q: Was there any food of any description on your journey that you could pick up on the way?

#30N: There were not. There were not.

Q: Where were you aiming for when you left, when you fled?

#30N: The closest place was Moe. That is close by.

Q: What's the name of the place?

#30N: Moe. Moe.

Q: Moe?

#30N: Yes, that is where I reached first. That is the closest and [we] reached there. [We] fled to the nearest place.

Q: The closest place that was outside Tibet or...?

01:15:12

#30N: It is in Nepali territory, on the border.

Q: On this journey, the 10-15 day journey, were you...did the Chinese overtake you or did anybody stop you?

#30N: [We] had reached the border. Once [we were] in Nepali Territory the Chinese cannot come. Then we...

Q: ...escaped.

#30N: ...escaped.

Q: Before that when you were fleeing from your country, did the Chinese pursue or stop [you] at anytime?

#30N: [We] did not encounter, did not encounter. We were scared as it was said that the Chinese were in the mountains. We fled in the night and did not encounter the Chinese. Had [we] encountered the Chinese, we would all be caught.

Q: In the pre-interview you had with Tenzin Yangchen, you mentioned escaping people of Kham and your escape and return and capture and the successful escape. What was that?

01:17:18

#30N: Initially, the Chinese arrived in Kham. The Chinese came through Kham, which is why the Kham people fled into our region. [They] fled because of that. After the Kham people came, the Chinese appeared and we fled to Dolpa. On reaching Dolpa we did not have anything to eat and in desperation returned to Tibet hoping to get some animals and then were captured by the Chinese.

Q: And then?

#30N: The Chinese captured [me] and I was in prison for a month and then [I] returned. I fled alone.

Q: From the prison?

#30N: Yes. Not from the prison. [I] was released from prison saying, “You have not committed any crime.” Had I committed murder, theft or robbery, [I] would not have been released. During investigation it was remarked, “You have not done anything wrong.” and was released. Then I returned.

Q: So you were in prison for one month?

01:19:08

#30N: Yes, a month in prison.

Q: Could you describe for us life in prison?

#30N: It was incredibly hard in prison, incredibly hard in prison. One was made to drink water, boiled water. Every day, grain...what to say?

Q: Spoonful?

#30N: It was around 3-4 spoonfuls a day.

Q: What was it? Grain?

#30N: Grain.

Q: *Tsampa*?

#30N: Grain. It was grain. Within the prison was a grinder that we normally have in Tibet. There was plenty of wood. [The prisoners] made fire, roasted the grain in a container and ground it in the stone grinder. There was 2-3 spoonful of *tsampa* a day. And then [we] were forced to work; one could not sit idle during the day. [The prisoners] were forced to make bricks and construct houses. It was hard. They [Chinese guards] stood with guns.

Q: Bricks?

#30N: Bricks like blocks. Earth was dug. A square shaped wooden frame was created in which mud was poured. The next day when the wooden frame was removed, blocks like we have here were formed that was used to build their houses. They moved behind us with guns. If we met a known person, [we] were not allowed to talk. In case there was a conversation, one was beaten.

Q: Did this happen to you?

01:22:22

#30N: What?

Q: This experience in prison?

#30N: Yes, it happened to me. I was a month in jail. While sleeping at night there was no blanket. You slept in whatever you were wearing. Then we have the belt. In Tibet there were long ones. At night these had to be left outside. They [the Chinese] took away any kind of metal and knives and they guarded the door armed with guns. [I] do not know whether [the Chinese] thought we would run away or something. In the evening when we reached back all the prisoners were counted. They counted the prisoners and took all the belongings of the prisoners outside.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: So when they released you, what did you do?

#30N: After the Chinese released [me], I returned to Dolpa. My family was in Dolpa Tarab. So I returned there. [Laughs]

Q: How did you know they were there? Was that where they stopped?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, and then he went back desperate for food. Yes, to get some animals.

Q: Right. So your family waited for you?

01:24:41

#30N: The family had arrived in Dolpa since long and was waiting. I went alone [back to Tibet] and then returned.

Q: Got it. Thank you. So your family was now in Nepal, in Mustang?

#30N: Yes.

Q: And all your family members survived?

#30N: My father and mother are no more.

Q: But [they] were not hurt during the escape?

#30N: Nothing happened during the escape, but Father and Mother passed away after arriving here. Now we are just me, the wife and a brother. That is it.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your life in Tibet?

#30N: I think there is nothing left. Since I was young then [I] do not have much to talk about.

Q: There is one thing on this sheet I'm interested in and you sounded interested in and that's the horse racing festival. Can you tell us about that? I'd love to hear it.

#30N: Which one?

Q: The horse racing.

#30N: Horse racing?

Q: Yes.

#30N: Oh!

Q: Yes. Can you talk about it?

01:26:48

#30N: The horse racing took place when we had festivals like making incense offerings or offerings to divine spirits. On such days people from various places brought many horses and raced.

Q: From different places?

#30N: It was not from different places but the horses were from our region. Those families that owned horses brought them. Those that do not cannot do so. Those that owned horses brought them and there was a competition. It was to see who came first.

Q: Were these, the people who came for the festival, did they come from neighboring communities or just from your community?

#30N: [The people] were from our community because none could come from a distance. It was a great distance, around a day or two's journey. [They] could not come.

Q: Did people 2-3 days away ever come together for celebrations?

01:28:45

#30N: If they were your relatives or close friends—nowadays one can call over the telephone—in those days one had to go to give the message. If such a message reached [the relatives and close friends, they] came. Otherwise, nobody came because [they] would not know.

Q: So it would take 4-6 days for that messenger to go and return?

#30N: Yes.

Q: So during this prayer festival, what was the festival? Did it have a name?

#30N: We call the name of the festival as *dheptsang*, *dheptsang*.

Q: *Dheptsang*?

#30N: Yes, the *dheptsang* of Shungru. It took place during winter. It took place before the end of a year.

Q: Winter?

#30N: Happened in winter. During wintertime all the families came together while in summer everyone scattered around. During winter when all the families got together or *dheptsang*, there was incense offering and horse racing.

Q: *Dheptsang* means to get together?

#30N: Yes, to get together like a meeting. The people made invocation and offerings to local gods, all the people. There were incense offerings, flying prayer flags and racing horses. [Laughs] It was fun and enjoyment.

Q: Could you please tell us, please about the horse races? Who was in them? How many races? What did you do?

01:31:36

#30N: Those families that owned horses, male horses raced. Those that stood first and second received *khata* 'ceremonial scarf' and *ja bagchung* 'small brick-shaped, compressed tea leaves' available in Tibet as prize. Such was done. It was like that.

Q: The tea brick being...?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Tea bricks, tea in the form of bricks.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And who would get these tea bricks?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: First and second prizes.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So the first and second prizes were given...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...ceremonial scarves and brick tea.

Q: Did you ever win a ceremonial scarf and brick tea?

#30N: I have not participated in such horse races. Being a small child [I] feared riding horses.

Q: Who rode the horses?

01:33:07

#30N: If a wealthy person had a child, his child rode. The child must have the ability to ride well. Else, an accomplished rider from a poor family could ride the horse.

Q: Ride a wealthy man's horse?

#30N: Ride a wealthy man's horse.

Q: How old were Tibetan children when they learnt to ride horses?

#30N: [The children] were 15 or 12-15 when [they] rode horses.

Q: Twelve to 15?

#30N: [The children] between 12 and 15 loved riding. Like riding motorcycles here, there it was riding horses. [Children] loved riding horses. Some like me were scared. Falling from a horse hurt. [Laughs]

Q: So did you ever ride a horse?

#30N: [I] have ridden. Riding alone, you could ride freely. The horse trotted slowly. If it began to go fast, you can control the speed. However, while racing they must compete to see who came first. Then it is difficult. There was danger, danger.

Q: What were some of the dangers associated with this?

01:35:28

#30N: The danger while riding was that if one fell from a horse, he broke a leg or an arm. Then it was difficult to get treatment. There was no medical treatment in our region like it is available here.

Q: Sometimes in my country horse riders fall from their horses maybe when they're jumping and they get brain damage; they get paralyzed and sometimes they die. Did that ever happen in your community?

#30N: I have not seen that happening to anyone.

Q: That's good. What was it you liked about horseracing?

#30N: The horserace took place at a plain ground like an airport that stretched from here to Yangsa, around 2-3 hours away. [The participants] went to such a place to race. The horserace began from there and when [the horses] reached here [finish line], some of the horses were exhausted, some left behind and some could hardly walk. The good horses came galloping ahead. The competition was like that.

Q: [The horses] raced for 2-3 hours?

#30N: [The horses] galloped from a distance of more than two hours.

Q: Galloping?

#30N: Yes, [the horses] galloped a long distance.

Q: Was it one single race or were there different races, you know, for different age groups or size of horse?

01:38:26

#30N: There was not.

Q: Was it just one horserace?

#30N: It was just one horserace. There was just one racing competition and another called *do*. During *do* the horses were saddled and adorned with bridles and bells. Then [the horses] walked in a circle that took around an hour. It was a competition to see who came first. There was only one race, which started from a great distance. On the way there [to the starting line] some horses were like crazy and could hardly be controlled.

Ahead of them two men went to the starting line and drew a mark on the ground. The horses stood at the line drawn on the ground. Some of the horses jumped and leaped around. When the two men called out, "*shu-chik, shu-nyi, shu-su*" 'power-one, power-two, power-three' then all [the horses] dashed. [Laughs] There was the danger of being killed, danger of being trampled to death under the horses!

Q: How could you get killed by the horses?

#30N: After it was called out, ‘*shu-chik, shu-nyi, shu-sum*’ the horses, being animals that cannot think, dashed against each other leading to the danger of someone falling underfoot and being trampled to death. It did not happen and [I] have not witnessed such but there was a great danger.

Q: Was this the main race or was this the race where the horses trotted around in a circle?

01:41:43

#30N: [The horses] being led around in a circle was also a competition. The horserace was called *gyukma*. *Gyukma* means to run. The other one is called *do* or *dodhur*. *Dodhur* means the horses trotted slowly and the rider had a good time. It was a slow race to find out who trotted faster.

Q: So the trotting race still had a rider on it?

#30N: Yes, there was a rider. This horse was adorned with many ornaments. There were bells, headdresses, saddlecloths and saddles beautifying the horse. Then it was ridden amidst the tinkling sound of bells. The race [horse] had nothing. There was just a rein and nothing else on the horse. There was a great difference.

Q: It must have been lovely, beautiful?

#30N: It was very beautiful. My description is not in detail but if one saw it, it was wonderful.

Q: Can you describe it in more detail?

01:44:06

#30N: That day the rider that rode a galloping horse wore a very thin attire, a *chupa* ‘traditional coat.’ In Tibet [we] used to wear *chupa*. [The rider] wore a very thin *chupa*, a pair of thin socks and tied a thin handkerchief over the head. There was not any other clothing so as to keep the rider light. The tail of the horse was braided tightly along with ribbons in the colors of prayer flags. [The tail] was braided stiffly like a stick. The mane was also braided with prayer flag [colored ribbons]. The hair of the horse here [indicates head] was tied upright on tip of which was fixed a feather of a bird called *gopo* or *thangkar* ‘white eagle.’ It was mandatory to fix a feather [indicates top of head] and then the horses raced.

Q: What’s the name of the bird?

#30N: The bird is called *thangkar*.

Q: *Thangkar*?

#30N: *Thangkar*.

Q: I've seen pictures of Tibetan horse races but your description makes it come more alive. Thank you.

01:46:25

#30N: I see.

Q: Thank you. It's been a pleasure to interview you and an honor. I need to ask you those two questions again. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would there be a problem for you?

#30N: There will be no problems whatsoever if we [Tibetans and Chinese] are cordial.

Q: And so we can use your real name for the project?

#30N: Yes, use it anywhere [you] like.

Q: Thank you. We'll use your name. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

#30N: [Joins palms] Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW