

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #31N – Tsekay
April 13, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #31N
2. Interviewee: Tsekay
3. Age: 81
4. Date of Birth: 1934
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Bungpa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Tashiling Tibetan Refugee Settlement, Chhorepatan, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 30 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsekay was born in Bungpa Bupthoe, Utsang Province where there were 100-200 nomad families living scattered on the hills in tents. As a child she had chores such as herding animals, milking and grinding *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.' She recalls the beautiful colored flowers that covered the hills and plains, which the children played with.

Tsekay describes the distribution of work between men and women. The men travelled to the Changthang 'Northern Plateau' to gather salt and then went to Nepal to barter it for food grains while the women stayed home to look after the animals and weave clothing. She says a nomad's life was hard but there was freedom.

When her family heard that the Chinese were coming they feared difficult times were ahead and decided to escape to Nepal. But without their animals and unable to speak the language, life was difficult for her in exile.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, customs/traditions, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #31N

Interviewee: Tsekay

Age: 81, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 13, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:10

Interviewee #31N: My name is Tsekay.

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?

#31N: There is no problem.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at anytime, let me know. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#31N: Okay.

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

#31N: There will be no problem.

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

#31N: Okay.

Q: *Ama-la* 'respectful term for mother,' can you begin by telling us how old you are?

00:02:18

#31N: Eighty-one years.

Q: And where were you born?

#31N: My hometown...the parents and everyone has passed away. I was born in the hometown.

Q: What's the name of the hometown, the place?

#31N: The name of the village is Bungpa Bupthoe. That is the name of the place, the village. Here you have the different states, likewise it was called Bungpa.

Q: How many families lived in Bungpa?

#31N: Yes?

Q: How many families lived in the village of Bungpa?

#31N: Families?

Q: Families.

#31N: There might have been 100-200 families. I was a child then. The families were not together like we are in the settlement here. Five to six families lived in the mountains in tents. There were no houses. [Families] lived in tents herding animals.

Q: Two hundred to 300 families?

#31N: There might have been that many.

Q: How many people were in your family when you were growing up?

#31N: In the family were my father, mother and us two siblings. There were four.

Q: Which sibling were you, first or second one?

00:04:20

#31N: I was the elder one. The younger one presently lives in the settlement of Clement Town [India]. It is a brother.

Q: When you were growing up, *ama-la*, what kinds of duties did you have as a little girl when you were maybe 6, 7? Can you tell us about that?

#31N: At the age of 6 or 7, the parents asked you to bring back *dri* 'female yaks' that ran away at the time of milking to nearby places or to bring back sheep. [My parents] gave such tasks. There were no other responsibilities.

Q: Did you have other children to play with when you were growing up?

#31N: There were a few children. There were not many since two or three families lived apart on the mountains.

Q: When you were getting a little bit older, what kind of chores did your mother wanted to teach you as a young girl growing like 11, 12? What kind of duties?

00:06:27

#31N: We were sent along with adults to herd yaks and sheep. After that one did tasks like milking the *dri*, churning curd, roasting grains and grinding the roasted grains with a hand-rotated grinder into *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ Then there was gathering wood [fuel]. Such were the tasks.

Q: *Ama-la*, how far did you have to go because I don’t think there was much tree life on the Tibetan plains?

#31N: One has to go quite a long distance. There were no trees in our hometown and [we] looked for dry animal dung; fresh [dung] was dried and dry ones also collected. In our hometown were no houses and not even one forest. There were only snow-covered mountains, lakes and grassy mountains.

Q: When it was very cold, how long...how many days would you stay in your nomad tent in the dead of winter?

00:08:53

#31N: Nighttime.

Q: Just at night and the daytime you would go out and care for the animals even in the winter?

#31N: One must go to graze animals during the day. In the evening at around—in our hometown there were no clocks—sunset brought the animals back home, brought back all the animals like yaks and sheep. Then all the children, the older people and the aged stayed home. When parents took the little ones along...the younger ones had to go to herd with the adults. [We] lived just caring for the animals and there was nothing else, no education, no writing, nothing whatsoever.

Q: Did the children have any special games that they liked to play, that you liked to play when you were a child?

00:10:41

#31N: As for playing—due to the fertile soil of the Northern Plains, different kinds of flowers grew. The flowers were plucked from the hills and adorned on the head and also stringed. Such were done. Otherwise, there were not the kinds of things available here in the Northern Plains. Many flowers grew during summertime that were not cultivated by us, but different colored flowers grew naturally. However, all the flowers and grass dried up in winter.

Q: Can you remember and tell us the names of some of those flowers?

#31N: There were *pangyen methok* ‘daisy,’ *serchen lukru* ‘marigold,’ *zonguru*, *ogchudarlo*; that is four kinds of flowers.

Q: Any other?

#31N: There was a riot of colors, but [I] do not know all the names. One did not take much notice as a child.

Q: *Pangyen methok?*

#31N: *Pangyen methok.*

Q: And...?

#31N: *Serchen lukru.*

Q: *Serchen lukru?*

#31N: Yes, and...

Q: [You] mentioned *zonguru*?

#31N: *Zonguru.*

Q: *Zonguru* and then *wochudarlo*?

#31N: *Ogchudarlo.*

Q: Were any of these flowers or other plants used for medicine that you would gather and make sure that you had...the family had medicine supply?

00:13:28

#31N: No, nomads did not have that knowledge. These days the Tibetan Medical Center manufactures medicines [from herbs] but it was not done then. There used to be doctors treating with Tibetan medicine, but [I] do not know how [the medicines] were made. [I] have no knowledge.

Q: If somebody got sick or hurt what kind of ...how did...what kind of treatment would they get?

#31N: There used to be doctors that treated; there were Tibetan doctors then. They dispensed medicines to the sick. However, our region was so good that there was no breaking of legs and arms or falling. The sick did take medicines but I do not know how [the medicines] were made. The lamas in the monasteries prepared blessed pills that one took. Otherwise, there were not any serious illnesses and no doctors. These days one goes to a hospital to give birth, undergoes caesarians and such. There was nothing then. Those that went to circumambulate Mt. Kailash brought fish from Lake Manasarovar for those that had difficulty giving birth. Such was used [as treatment].

Q: What from Lake Manasarovar?

#31N: Fish.

Q: Were you able, as a young girl to assist in women giving birth?

00:16:35

#31N: [I] did not. My children were born in this country.

Q: *Ama-la*, were the duties of the men and the women who were...the nomad men and women, were their duties, was one harder? Did women have more duties or more, you know, exhausting duties or did men have about the same kind or different?

#31N: The degree of strain was similar. The men had to drive yaks and sheep to gather salt from the Changthang 'Northern Plateau,' which took about a month. Then [they] brought the salt home and rested for 5-6 days after which [the men] journeyed towards the valley, towards Nepal, towards this country to buy grain by selling the salt. The women's tasks involved taking care of the animals and taking care of the children. Such were the duties that were similar.

Then the women must spin wool similar to what we do here and weave woolen cloth to make clothes for the children to wear, for the men to wear and for herself. Some wove on looms and made woolen cloth to make *chupa* 'traditional dresses.' [The women] must do all of these. Then saddlebags for animals...here you have plastic bags, but there one made saddlebags for animals by weaving wool. Such had to be made. So the duties of women and men were similar. The men must spin the hair of yaks. The tents of the nomads were made from the hair of yaks. It prevented rain from seeping in. The women did the weaving and the men spun. [They] worked together.

Q: The life sounds hard but also beautiful. I wonder were there any particular dangers that the nomad people faced either the women or the men or the children that would have occurred living in such a remote area?

00:21:15

#31N: There were no dangers as such. Some [couples] have arguments and separate. As for me I have not indulged in drinking nor given birth while living in the hometown. I do not have much to say. [I] suffered initially after arriving in Nepal not knowing the language. [We] only owned animals that died and were left with nothing.

I was little while in the hometown and then when [I] turned 23-24 it was said that the Chinese were coming and that bad times would befall. Then [we] fled here and fled there. I have not been subjected to suffering like being put in jail or beaten by the Chinese but [I] did see [them] for they passed by. I suppose they were deceiving the officials at that time but [I] was a child and do not have anything to say about it. It has been difficult after escaping to Nepal not knowing the language of the country, not knowing the work and missing the hometown. It was like that. I do not have anything else to say.

Q: *Ama-la*, did you ever see any Chinese come to your village?

#31N: Yes?

Q: Did you ever see any Chinese come?

#31N: No.

Q: Did you ever see any Chinese come? Did you ever see the Chinese?

00:23:47

#31N: [I] saw the Chinese. The Chinese came from Lhasa and proceeded to Mt. Kailash and then returned. For sometime [they] were not to be seen. Then Lhasa was lost and I came here at the age of 25. The Chinese arrived in the 11th lunar month, close to Losar 'Tibetan New Year.' That is how [I] left. The Chinese have not caused any suffering because [we] fled from their sight leaving the animals along the way and [some of the animals] dying. That comprises the wealth of the nomads; there were no farmlands. All nomads raised animals. [I] did see the Chinese.

Q: When you drove them along the way, were you taking them with you or were you leaving them behind?

#31N: [We] drove the animals along but they died or were left behind and then there were none left. Then [I] reached Nepal and lived in Mustang for 4-5 years and faced hardship. There were no longer any animals. All the clothes [we] wore were torn and it was difficult. One did not know how to do the work. Now one had to work in the fields. There had been no cultivation in the Changthang. It was hard not knowing the work and the language. It was like that. Then [I] came here and am happy.

Q: At that point *ama-la*, were you...did you have children yet or were they born later?

00:26:27

#31N: [The children] were not born then.

Q: Were they born later?

#31N: They were born after coming here. Two daughters were born at Thakhola. Then two daughters and a son were born after coming to Pokhara. I have five children.

Q: What's the name of the place the two daughters were born?

#31N: The two daughters...from the two older daughters, one still lives in Nepal.

Q: What's the name of the place they were born?

#31N: Thukjey.

Q: Yes?

#31N: It is at Thakhola.

Q: Thakhola?

#31N: It is called Thukjey, the name of the place.

Q: Yes?

#31N: The name of the place is Thukjey.

Q: Thukjey. Is that Nepalese?

#31N: Yes, that is the name of the place.

Q: When you think back of your life as a nomad, *ama-la*, are there any favorite memories that you have of those early days of your life?

#31N: [Life] was difficult for the nomads but there was freedom. Now [I] have become old. Otherwise, there is the opportunity to study. Now there is no time to study and [I] cannot even sign [my name]. Now [I] chant prayers like *Dolma* ‘Praises to the 21 Tara,’ *mani* ‘mantra of Avalokiteshvara’ and *benza* ‘mantra: *Om ah hung vajra guru Padma siddhi hung.*’ Thanks to the children I have visited many pilgrim sites and received the Kalachakra initiation at Bodh Gaya, Varanasi and Siliguri, and visited many pilgrim sites. [I] have seen the Buddha [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] many times. That is about it for I have nothing much to say.

Q: Sounds like a very wonderful ending for a story that had so many sad parts to it.

00:29:22

#31N: That is about it for I do not have anything else to say.

Q: *Ama-la*, do you have any advice for the children of Tibet? What would you like them to hold in their heart or keep forever?

#31N: To keep in the heart would be for the children to be able to stand on their feet. My two daughters brought *makpa* ‘son-in-laws’ and the older one had a difficult time. [She] became depressed and later...

Q: What advice would you give to the children of Tibet?

#31N: I tell the children this though I do not have little children, [I am] beyond that age. [I] tell the little children, “Study well in school. Be obedient. If you pass your tests in school, I will give you candies. Do well.” That is it, as there is not anything else to say.

Q: That sounds like a very, very good advice and a sweet ending. Thank you, *ama-la*.

END OF INTERVIEW