

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #34N – Namlang Tsering
April 13, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #34N
2. Interviewee: Namlang Tsering
3. Age: 74
4. Date of Birth: 1941
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Thoe Bawa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Tashiling Refugee Settlement, Chhorepatan, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 03 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Namlang Tsering was born in Thoe Bawa in Utsang Province, a large region with nearly 200 families. His family herded animals and as a child he enjoyed going with the servants to graze animals, especially to see the birth of lambs and foals. He gives an account of nomadic life and how they moved four times a year in search of grasslands but also had a permanent home where they kept their belongings.

Namlang Tsering shares his knowledge of house construction and the design, style, and materials used. Although nomadic families mainly lived in tents, they built homes to store their belongings and provide a place for the elders to retire. Namlang Tsering talks about his love of horse riding and how one can distinguish between a good and a bad horse.

When the Chinese first appeared they deceived Tibetans by giving *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins' even for small favors and bribed the local leaders. Namlang Tsering heard news about the uprising in Lhasa and His Holiness the Dalai Lama's escape. His community decided to follow the Dalai Lama into exile, leaving everything behind. He says they were forced to live as beggars once they reached Nepal until the Red Cross provided rations to the refugees. Namlang Tsering still feels saddened by loss of his nomadic life in Tibet and the separation of his family members.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, customs/traditions, first appearance of Chinese, escape experiences, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #34N

Interviewee: Namlang Tsering

Age: 74, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 13, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:07

Interviewee #34N: Namlang Tsering. My name is Namlang Tsering.

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?

#34N: Yes, of course.

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

#34N: Okay. Thank you.

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#34N: I see.

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

#34N: However much problem there may arise for me from China or Tibet, we have to overcome those difficulties. [I] do not have fear of any kind.

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

00:02:19

#34N: Okay.

Q: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' please tell us how old you are?

#34N: Seventy-five.

Q: And where were you born, *pa-la*?

#34N: Thoe Bawa. Thoe Bawa.

Q: Where is...in which area is that in?

#34N: The place called Thoe Bawa is located at a distance of 15 days from Lhasa. It is 15 days' walk from my hometown to Lhasa and 15 days to Mt. Kailash. Bawa is located right in the middle. It is a beautiful place and close to a pass. After crossing the mountain pass of Mustang one would be in Thoe Bawa.

Q: What was the size of the town or village where you lived, like how many families were there?

#34N: Thoe Bawa is a large region. Those living in the Thoe area had to pay taxes at Saka Dzong. [Thoe Bawa] was the mother of taxes. It was quite large with nearly 200 families.

Q: Two hundred?

#34N: Yes, around that because Thoe Bawa was the mother of taxes. When those from the Thoe area paid taxes at Saka Dzong, it was the mother.

Q: "Mother" meaning the highest taxpayer?

#34N: Mother meaning *tseyok* 'serf.'

Q: Yes?

#34N: Mother of taxes, *tseyok*; like a *tseyok* in a family. Saka Dzong must make arrangements for our leader of Thoe Bawa. Saka Dzong had to make arrangements for him. His horse had a *dhomdhom* [decoration tied on neck and chest of nobleman's horse.]

Q: Had to make preparations?

#34N: Yes. For instance, our Bawa leader if he needed to visit Saka Dzong, the Saka Dzong administration must make arrangements. His horse had a *dhomdhom*. In the foreign language one might call [the leader of Thoe Bawa a member of] Parliament. He was considered an important person.

Q: What did your parents do for a living, *pa-la*?

00:05:33

#34N: My father used to be a monk and then left monkhood. The livelihood was grazing animals. We stayed in one area for the three months of spring, in another place for three months during summertime, the three months of autumn in another area and three months of winter in another place.

[We] moved wherever there was good grass for the animals. However, there was a proper house at the main base. There was a house where belongings and such were kept but [we]

moved every three months grazing animals. For instance, this time of the year is spring. During springtime the animals must be moved away from the snowfall towards warmer area. In winter [we] moved to the cold area. It was like that.

Q: Where did [you] move during springtime?

#34N: Yes?

Q: Where did [you] move during springtime with the animals?

#34N: The grazing area during springtime was where there was less snow and the sun shone because snow melted quickly where there was sunlight. Then the animals could have good grass and water.

Q: And winter?

#34N: Although there was snow during winter, there was a particular area for winter. The grass collected during summer was consumed in winter.

Q: When you say a proper house, was that typical? Did most nomads or only perhaps nomads that were more well off have a proper house?

00:08:05

#34N: The majority of the nomads did not have houses except for those that were well off. That is one reason and secondly, our Bawa had two divisions called Shungthoe and Rithoe.

Q: Bawa Shung...?

#34N: There were two [divisions], Shungthoe and Rithoe.

Q: Shungthoe and Rithoe?

#34N: Yes. That is because the area was large. Those that lived near the snow-covered mountains were called Bawa Rithoe. [They] lived near the snow. We lived at a lower altitude. Those living in the lower region own houses. There were houses to store the belongings, large houses, extensive houses.

Q: Can you describe what the house looked like, *pa-la*?

#34N: The houses in our hometown...you know, mud...

Q: Mud?

#34N: Yes. Here cement is used while in our hometown its mud. The mud is packed in boxes and becomes harder than cement. It does not dissolve even in heavy rainfall. The soil of our Tibet, even in heavy rainfall the mud...bricks are made here. [Mud was packed in boxes] just like bricks are made here and used in building houses.

Q: Yes?

#34N: The mud, the soil was packed in square boxes exactly like bricks are made here for building houses.

Q: How many rooms did your house have where you lived, about how many rooms?

00:10:36

#34N: The rooms were...in Tibet the rooms were like this. Take this [room] for instance. The shape of our house in Tibet...the shape of our house in Tibet...if [we] take this [room] for instance, the gate is here [points to left]. Tied on either side of the gate are two big dogs. As one enters the gate, the whole area is for tethering horses, stables where horses are fed. Then there is a door leading inside and on this side [points to right] is the storage for salt and grain. Dry wood and animal dung is stored on the other side. Then another door leads to the kitchen, which faces this side [points towards self], the storeroom faces this side [indicates left] and the bedroom this way [indicates away from self].

Q: Was this all on one floor, *pa-la*?

#34N: Yes, single floor. We did not have two floors for our house in Tibet. It had just one floor. It was not like the family always lived there. It was like storage and a meeting place and to return from grazing the animals. That was the permanent abode. Sometimes the couple may come and at times a person or two to clean the house. [We] did not live there permanently. Important things were kept there. Except for such [we] did not live there permanently.

Q: What would be the reason why a family would come back to this house instead of staying in their nomad tents?

00:13:45

#34N: When the father and mother aged...younger ones of a family lived at the nomadic site with wives and children. When the parents became old, they stayed at home relaxing, without having to work.

Q: Yes, that provided shelter and comfort for someone. What would be considered an old age when a parent would live there? How old would they usually be?

#34N: That depended upon your family. If it was an economically sound family, one did not go to work after the age of 40 or 50 and lived at the permanent house. If it was a poor family one must run after the animals at the age of 50, 60 or even 70. It depended upon your economic condition. There was not any other standard but the economic condition.

Q: What would be kind of average or typical age that parents lived to be among the nomads?

00:15:58

#34N: One lived until around 80 years of age in Tibet. While some...in comparison to the present situation those people from Tibet, those that have drunk the water of Tibet live longer. I am 75 years old and I should be okay for another eight, nine or 10 years. However, when my children reach my age, they will be crawling. They do not have energy.

Q: So *pa-la*, tell me about your experiences as a nomad. How many children, first of all, were in your family?

#34N: At present?

Q: No, when you were little and living in Tibet.

#34N: When we were living in Tibet I was the youngest among the children. The oldest was a girl and then there were two younger boys. My mother's sister, my maternal aunt had two sons and four daughters. So there were 25 people that ate in this family including servants and everyone.

Q: Would the living and eating be in the *ba* 'traditional tent,' while you were in the yak herders' tent, while you were traveling or moving the animals around?

00:18:45

#34N: Yes, that is right. [We] must move with the animals. The reason for there being 25 people to herd the animals was...the 25 people were for...For instance, if a family owned 500-600 sheep, there would be 200-300 male sheep and 200-300 female sheep. A shepherd was required to herd the 200-300 male sheep and another to graze the 200-300 female sheep. Then a herder was required to graze the goats, another for the horses and another for the yaks. Therefore, the number of people was many.

Q: And were you assigned to take care of any particular group of animals for the family?

#34N: When I was a child?

Q: Yes.

#34N: As a child it was not necessary for me to go grazing animals. There were people to do the herding. However, I loved going with them to herd animals without telling the parents. It was not necessary for me to go because there were people to herd the animals. I loved going with them, which [I] did without the parents' knowledge.

Q: Why did you love it?

00:20:57

#34N: Because when the young ones were born...if one went with them...the young ones were beautiful at the time of birth. The young ones were beautiful at the time of birth. Since there was not anything for the children to do, I loved sitting on the meadows and holding the little ones at the time of birth. [I] went because I loved it.

Q: Did you have any favorite pets of your own that were part of the different herds? Anyone that you had a name for or you liked?

#34N: [I] liked all the animals and not one in particular. However, we had yaks that were given names like Gonpo or Norlha. Those with good fur were given such names. Those with black fur; the beautiful animals were given names like Norlha and such. These animals were taken special care of.

When I was a little child, when a horse gave birth, when a horse gave birth, [I] loved the foal very much. Foals are very beautiful at the time of birth.

Q: [You] loved foals?

#34N: Yes.

Q: Did you ride the ponies?

00:23:01

#34N: Yeah. How we found out whether a horse was good or bad was...it could be understood right at the time of birth. At the time of birth, a good breed's legs do this [sways body]. It cannot walk well. That is [the sign of] a good horse. If it was not a good horse, it walked almost immediately after being born. This was not a good horse.

Q: What was the reason for that?

#34N: Yes?

Q: A good horse cannot walk well at birth while a bad horse can?

#34N: The good horse sways while walking. Its two hind legs dash against each other. That means the horse will walk well when it grows.

Q: Will walk well?

#34N: Yes, walk well.

Q: That can walk well?

#34N: Yes, that can walk well. We consider a horse that walks well as a good horse and a horse that does not walk well, as not a good horse.

00:25:07

A person must check the quality of a horse. The quality of a horse can be found out immediately. A good horse's chest [touches chest] is broad like an old man's. A fat man or an old man has a broad chest. A good horse has one like that, a broad chest. That was considered a good horse. Then the ears are upright and the eyes look bright like glass

marbles. There are many descriptions of horses. A good horse can be spotted immediately. A horse that cannot ride well has small ears.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you become a horse rider of some expertise?

#34N: I was not an expert rider but I had been riding the whole life. An expert horse rider...a highly accomplished one would be someone that rode a horse like this [spreads out arms] and one that shoots while riding a horse. Those were expert riders. I could not ride like that but did ride horses all the time.

Q: What are some of your memories of those days as a nomad that you like to think about?

00:27:35

#34N: Now?

Q: Yes, memories of those days.

#34N: Presently when [I] recall those days, two thoughts comes to the mind. The two thoughts are...when [I] imagine the animals and surroundings of my hometown [I] feel sad. [I] feel sad and cannot sleep and tears fall from the eyes. Because though you imagine the animals, it is not real and cannot be touched. It becomes empty. "I owned such in the past and it has come to naught." One feels the loss. One feels sad and tears well up in the eyes, "Alas, it has come to such a situation. This is my destiny."

Q: Are there any time of year that you think of the most or any animal that you wish you could touch the most?

#34N: If there is a gale...if there is a gale...when a storm blows, my hometown comes to mind. One misses the parents and siblings. In our hometown when there is a storm, the children are given noodle soup or nice food at home. There is nothing like that now. Also when night falls and everybody gathers together, that is when you miss [them]. If there is a strong wind and heavy rainfall and you are alone at home, then you miss [them]. There is not anything else in particular.

Q: Those were very special times of closeness in the family. *Pa-la*, how did you...did you get any education as a nomad? Did you learn to read or write?

00:31:04

#34N: Singing songs?

Q: No. Did [you] get a chance to study like reading and writing?

#34N: I see. There was not any particular opportunity. However, if you had relatives that were literate [they] would teach the children. There was not anything in particular like schools, students, classrooms and such.

Q: Were any relatives able to teach you how to read and write?

#34N: When I was a little child, a relative taught me the alphabets. I was taught the alphabets as a little child. That was when [I] was a child but nothing later on.

Q: Relative?

#34N: My relative was a monk and [he] taught me the alphabet at that time.

Q: Did you get to see him very often, this brother? And where did you see him?

#34N: That was in the past in Tibet.

Q: Was it in the monastery or at home?

#34N: At home, when he came for holidays. At time [he] came on holidays during which [he] taught. I did not go to the monastery.

Q: You know, to be a nomad on the plains in the winter, I imagine... something, you would have to do... something to occupy your time in those long winter days if you stayed out with the animals. What kind of things did the family members do in the *ba*, in the nomad house or tent as it's called?

00:33:47

#34N: For the nomads to occupy time, the girls spun wool and wove woolen cloth. [The girls] did weaving, like weaving shoelaces, belts, *chupa* 'traditional dresses' and such to occupy time. The boys made shoes and also ropes for the animals, and also *tora* to tie horses. There were many things to do.

Q: What's *tora*?

#34N: It is a long rope to tether horses. Long ropes were made from the hair of yaks.

Q: And how long in the winter months would you be confined, you know, to stay inside? Would that be for days or weeks if there was a big storm or did you still have to go out and take care of the animals?

#34N: One must go out to graze animals even if it was winter. However, they that went to graze animals took provisions to make gruel and such if the weather was cold. Grass was plentiful for the animals. Everyone must go to graze animals. Those family members that stayed home made fire. They did weaving and spinning inside the tent. One could not remain idle.

Q: What kind of a young man were you, *pa-la*? Were you quiet or very active? Tell us a little bit about yourself growing up as a nomad boy and teenager. What were you like?

00:37:15

#34N: I loved animals and racing horses at the ages of 13 or 14. [I] used to do that like racing horses and loved to go to trade. However, there was not fighting or any such thing.

Q: What kind of relationships were the young...is that...the boys and girls 15, 16, were they allowed to, you know, hang out together, go on hikes together? What kind of activities did they do in the same age group, you know, youngsters, teenagers?

#34N: In the hometown boys and girls did become friendly and meet each other. However, there was not anywhere to go hiking together like it is done here because [they] must graze the animals. Nevertheless, there were boys and girls in romantic relationships, but marrying for life was decided by the parents and the boys and girls had no authority.

Q: Did you have any dreams for yourself that you wanted to do when you became an adult?

#34N: [I] have never had such thoughts then. If somebody had a good horse, [I] wished I could have one. If someone else had a beautiful thing, [I] wished I could have one. Everybody thought like that because that is a person's intrinsic nature. I never thought anything else specifically.

Q: Did anything happen in your land? Did the...was there any awareness or news of the Chinese in your area?

00:40:50

#34N: We heard about the Chinese frequently. I spoke about it earlier. We used to hear news about the Chinese. It used to be said, "You will have the time to eat and drink for nine years and then you will not." However, just before the Chinese appeared, all the families grew richer in terms of animal [population] and [success] in any kind of work. The families became richer but it was time to leave. I know about the suffering the Chinese caused; I know that the Chinese came to our region. At the time the Chinese came to our region, they did not shoot or stab but they gave money; they deceived us.

All the horses had numbers; all the Chinese horses had numbers. If you were to go...we were nomads and if [the Chinese] wanted a cup of curd, they paid *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins.' They made people happy. At that time the Chinese did not kill us immediately. They gave away money to make people happy. Then gradually...their thought was that whatever money was given out now, these will remain here. There was no thought that we would take them away. So the doings of the Chinese are the same everywhere. Just like it is happening in Nepal presently where all of its leaders' pockets are filled with money. Likewise in our hometown all the leaders were stuffed with money, altering everybody's views.

Q: You want to continue, please?

00:43:43

#34N: About the Chinese?

Q: Yes.

#34N: Then the Chinese...there was the uprising against the Chinese in Lhasa. The reason for us to flee was...the reason why we fled was that we heard that on the 10th of March the Chinese had invited His Holiness the Dalai Lama for a banquet at the Military Headquarters without bodyguards and that he was to come alone. When the Chinese said this, every Tibetan that eats *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ had exclaimed, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama cannot go. We will not let His Holiness go.” And protested throughout Lhasa. From then on people in the region of Thoe remarked, “There is no use for us to stay when the Dalai Lama has left.” That was the reason for the escape.

Q: When His Holiness left, when he escaped Tibet?

#34N: His Holiness the Dalai Lama left from Norbulingka at 10 o’clock in the night of the 17th of March 1959, at 10 o’clock. Norbulingka has gates on four directions. Since there were gates on four directions, His Holiness left through the south gate. There were Chinese soldiers everywhere. Through the south gate and then there were people in readiness at the Tsangpo River and such. Once [we] heard that His Holiness had left for India, we started out. [We] did not leave until His Holiness had left for India.

Q: Do you remember that day when you were getting ready to leave?

00:46:50

#34N: I cannot remember the day of escape. I might have been 16 or 17 then. [We] moved slowly, covering a short distance each day. Gradually we crossed over the mountain pass into another country. We made camps along the way. The saddest thing at that time was...we had made camp and when the Chinese appeared, left the tents standing along with the belongings and fled with nothing. Nothing—the tents were still pitched and the animals laden with packs. All the animals were laden. One was forced to flee when the Chinese came in pursuit.

After His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India, the Chinese began to arrest all the people in Thoe. Those that were given presents earlier were now...the servants and the beggars were appointed as aristocrats and the aristocrats were forced to become servants. Such things happened. You asked about what [I] remember of that time. If [I] were to recall those days there was tea and milk boiling on the stove but there was nobody. We came away leaving everything.

Q: Was it in the daytime that you left? Could you see the Chinese coming or did you hear gunshots? How did you know ‘this is the time we have to run’? How did you know?

00:49:47

#34N: Before the Chinese appeared...we were living there, living there then. Then the Chinese were there. The Chinese came in the evening and not early in the morning. [They] had come in the night. [We] had to leave everything and flee. For instance, when we reached Nepal, over there we did not have to beg for food; there was food and there were animals. After coming here we were begging for food. [We] came begging along the way, carrying packs on the back because there were no animals.

Q: What happened to you next?

#34N: Yes?

Q: What happened to you next?

#34N: And then we reached here. We fled to another country when the Chinese came. I came to Pokhara in the year '60, to Pokhara. There was nothing when [we] reached Pokhara. [We] had to beg for food in Pokhara from the Nepalese; the Gurung people gave rice. [We] were beggars and some of our girls danced while some performed *chod* 'spiritual practice of "cutting through the ego"' just to seek alms. No one knew how to do the *chod* correctly but just played the *damaru* 'small hand-held drum used during religious rites' to get some food. Some played the *damaru* and they gave rice. Some did some kind of dancing and that was it. Then at Yangsa the Red Cross extended help. The Red Cross gave provisions in the year '60. [I] survived for a year on the provisions.

Q: How many years?

#34N: One year. I stayed here in the year '60. During this time my mother and sibling passed away. My maternal aunt and relatives were in India. We were scattered everywhere. [We] were scattered like peas. I felt very sad then. In this situation, though I did not know the Nepalese language [I] fled across the border into India and joined the army in Dehradun.

Q: How long were you in the army, *pa-la*?

00:53:44

#34N: I was there for five years.

Q: *Pa-la*, it sounds like a whole new phase of your life begins when you join the army, but since we're not going to be exploring that today, I would like to ask, is there anything else that you would like to say about Tibet or your life experiences in Tibet before we end our interview today?

#34N: There is not anything left to say about life in Tibet. [I] have spoken about the way of life and also about the escape journey. There is not anything special to say. If you have any special questions, it will jog my memory. Otherwise, I do not have anything special to say.

Q: Well, perhaps some questions as we draw to a close would be...*pa-la*, what is your hope for Tibet and for the children of Tibet? What do you hope will happen?

#34N: As someone holding responsibilities here, I request the children, the young ones to take responsibility for preserving and promoting our religion and culture. Whether it is done or not done is up to them. However, I have lived for around 50 years in an alien land under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is my hope that the little children will do that.

On another thought, what I feel sad about the young people is wondering what will happen. There are no pure Tibetans. Everyone is mixing with the yellow heads and others. But for feeling sad and wondering what is going to happen, the fact of the matter is like [the Tibetan saying] “wishing to fly like a bird in the sky, yet in actuality unable to bite the palm of your hand.” You do feel sad in that way.

00:57:15

However, when [we] discuss the future of the issue between Tibet and China, my opinion is that the Chinese are afraid of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They know clearly that that they failed to capture Lhasa when His Holiness was there. Though they fly their red flag over the Potala Palace in Lhasa yet they do not feel in their mind that they have flown the flag but wait for His Holiness to pass away. My personal opinion...

Q: Waiting for death?

#34N: They are waiting to see when His Holiness will pass away. Therefore, what I feel satisfied about is that His Holiness has said in the past that there must be someone to bring about a conclusion to what has been begun. So His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s life...Personally I have three prayers. It does not cross my mind that Tibet will gain independence tomorrow. It does not cross my mind that the Chinese will accept the Middle Way tomorrow and that the Tibetans in and outside Tibet will get together. It never crosses my mind that they will accept the Middle Way.

Except for the United Nations talking about Human Rights issues, the fact of the matter is that they have to please the Chinese for trade relations. Hence, what I hope for is, “May democracy happen for the people of China.” Like this I pray. If the Chinese people have democracy, there is hope for Tibet. His Holiness has to live long. The Chinese people supplicate His Holiness. That is what I pray for. Otherwise, I do not think we will get Tibet through the Middle Way as advocated by His Holiness. Well, His Holiness must live long.

Q: That sounds like a beautiful wish and blessing and so I think we wish to thank you not only for that wish and that blessing, but for your time with us today. Thank you.

#34N: Okay.

Q: Thank you. *Pa-la*, how was it to do this interview? How did this feel today?

01:01:53

#34N: I did not have any special feelings as such but due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, there have been many like you that have come to interview the Tibetans many times. So I did not feel anything special.

However, one feeling that I had was that unlike in the past the people of the world know that Tibet is not a part of China and that Tibet is a very important [country] in Asia. I would like to thank you from the depth of my heart for you know about this and support His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I have nothing in particular to say. Thanks to the

benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, awareness [about Tibet] is growing in the world.

Q: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW