

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #37N – Sonam Tashi
April 14, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #37N
2. Interviewee: Sonam Tashi
3. Age: 80
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Gerge
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 14, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Paljorling Tibetan Settlement, Prithvi Chowk, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 36 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Sonam Tashi was born in Gerge in Utsang Province; his parents had five children. As a child he recalls herding animals and accompanying his father to the valleys of India and Nepal to trade salt that they had collected in their region. As nomads they spent their time taking care of yaks, goats and sheep, making dairy products and gathering salt. Sonam Tashi describes the kind of food they ate in different seasons and the preservation of meat.

Sonam Tashi recalls how the nomads became unhappy after the appearance of the Chinese. Although he did not encounter any Chinese directly, other people of the village spoke in fear about the coming of the Chinese army and began to move their flocks towards the mountain passes of Nepal.

Under such circumstances, Sonam Tashi's family decided to also flee. He recounts driving their large flock to Nepal, but the animals died due to starvation and a landslide while crossing over the mountain passes. They had to learn to survive by farming and serving as porters in Nepal.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, trade, escape experiences, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #37N

Interviewee: Sonam Tashi

Age: 80, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 14, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:09

Interviewee #37N: Sonam Tashi.

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?

#37N: Yes?

Q: You are going to be interviewed and photographed. Is it okay for the Tibet Oral History Project use it?

#37N: It should be okay.

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

#37N: Okay.

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.

#37N: Okay.

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

00:02:13

#37N: [I] would not be able to say anything about that.

Q: So it's okay?

#37N: It is okay. Please ask what you have to and I will answer if I can. If I cannot answer, [I] have to be excused.

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

#37N: Okay.

Q: *Pa-la* ‘respectful term for father,’ can you please tell me how old you are?

#37N: Eighty years.

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

#37N: [I] was born in the place called Gerge. Gerge.

Q: Utsang?

#37N: Utsang.

Q: How many...when you were a little boy, how many people were in your family?

#37N: There were around seven members in our family.

Q: Seven members. Were you in the middle or younger child?

[Interpreter interprets as: By seven members do you mean seven children?]

#37N: No, no. There were the two parents and us five children.

Q: Where were you in line, the eldest or youngest child?

#37N: [I] am the eldest.

Q: What kind of work did your parents do for a livelihood?

00:04:26

#37N: [My parents] earned a living as nomads. Animals were milked in summer and the milk products saved. Father loaded animals with salt and procured grain from the valley, procured grain. That was how [we] earned a living.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you go with your father on the salt trading mission?

#37N: I did.

Q: What was that kind of experience to go and gather the salt? What was that like for you? Can you tell us?

#37N: Salt originated right in our region. We loaded the salt on sheep. It took around a month and 20 days to travel to the valley with the salt.

Q: Loaded on sheep?

#37N: Yes, [the salt] was loaded on sheep. Then the salt was bartered for grain and one returned home with the grain. It took a month and 15-20 days.

Q: Up and down?

#37N: Yes, both up and down.

Q: Help me understand. What village, what border town was the salt being traded in?

00:07:01

#37N: The place where [salt] was sold is in India, in the *Gyakar rong* ‘valleys of India.’

Q: In India?

#37N: Yes.

Q: What’s *Gyakar rong*?

#37N: There are valleys in India like Shakorong and Koterong and such in the direction of Thoe.

Q: Did all these come under India?

#37N: Yes, [we] traded in India.

Q: *Pa-la*, you know salt is a valuable product for everybody but what are the uses that Tibetans made of salt? Were there...for their survival, for their food? How did they use salt?

#37N: [Salt] was for your consumption and some of it was fed to the animals. The main use of salt was to trade it in the valleys. It was to trade in the valleys of Nepal and India. We bought grain and food items that were traded for salt in the past.

Q: *Pa-la*, why was salt necessary to feed the animals?

#37N: If the animals did not have salt to eat in summertime they became weak. So a little bit of salt must be given.

Q: Did you use salt for preserving meat like yak meat and lamb and goats?

00:09:29

#37N: Salt was used for preserving meat but it was not of much use because the meat did become spoiled. Otherwise, salt helped to prevent worm infestation. It helped with the smell and also prevented worm infestation.

Q: *Pa-la*, how did you preserve yak meat? You know if you kill a yak, that's a lot of meat, right? So how did you preserve that food?

#37N: We did not slaughter yaks or [other] animals during summer in my hometown. The weather was warm and the meat would get spoiled and start to smell. So [nomads] consumed curds, milk and milk products and not meat in summertime. Animals were slaughtered in winter and the meat frozen. It did not turn stale because it was frozen. If kept for long it later became dry.

Q: Freeze dried.

Q: *Pa-la*, how did they decide which yaks to kill or to slaughter for food?

00:11:59

#37N: After many years a yak becomes old. Saying, "It will only survive for another year or two," that yak was slaughtered. One like that was slaughtered.

Q: And how is the meat from old yaks?

#37N: It tastes a little different from that of a young one. The meat of an older one is tough.

Q: And can you...*pa-la*, if you kill one yak how many families would that feed, I'd say in the wintertime? Would you divide it up or would you just try to freeze it and keep it in one family?

#37N: No. Each family, whether it consisted of five, six, seven or 10 members killed a yak or two, which lasted for 4-5 months. For this purpose yaks or sheep were slaughtered and [the meat] lasted for the winter. During summertime little quantities of the old meat might be consumed but animals were not slaughtered. Mainly it was milk products and little quantities of the old meat that were consumed. Rich families with more members may kill two or three yaks while poorer ones may slaughter a single one. It was like that.

Q: Were there some that did not slaughter?

#37N: Yes?

Q: Were there some that did not slaughter yaks?

#37N: Yes, there were some that did not slaughter, those that did not own yaks. There were some that did not possess yaks in which case goats and sheep were slaughtered for there were no yaks to slaughter. It was like that.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you have any...of all the animals that you raised and then you had to kill for food at times, did you have any meat that you liked the best of all?

00:15:29

#37N: There is no difference between the taste of the meat of yaks and sheep.

Q: Really? No difference in flavor?

#37N: There is no difference.

Q: In the summer when you had all that milk and yogurt and cheese, you know, what was your favorite food during summertime?

#37N: The curd of *dri* ‘female yaks’ is the tastiest. The curd and milk of *dri* are the tastiest.

Q: And a *dri* is a cross breed of...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Female yak.

Q: So *pa-la*, you know, as a nomad did your life continue very tranquil or did something happen that changed it?

#37N: In the past there had been no change in Tibet. However, it changed when a great number of Chinese appeared. Then all the people became unhappy. There was a change and you did not wish to remain in your country. When the Chinese came there was anxiety that they would do something bad. There was change and unhappiness. [People] did not remain in the region they had lived in the past but moved to other regions. So there was some amount of unhappiness.

Except for the change when the Chinese appeared, I cannot recall any changes that took place when I was little. [I] do not know. The Chinese arrived when I was 15-16 years old and then there was a change. Neighbors did not remain in the usual place but moved elsewhere. It became like that.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you have to migrate because the Chinese were following you or just so that they wouldn't know where you were?

00:18:56

#37N: [The Chinese] were not in pursuit then but we did not have much knowledge. Those people that were influential and more experienced understood and they fled to other regions. When such things happened [we] realized something was not good. Everybody started having doubts and left one's hometown and moved to the nearby mountain passes of India and Nepal. Everyone moved to the nearby mountain passes.

Then when the country was lost, [we] crossed over mountain passes like Dolpa and such. Then there was no grass for all the animals since animals from every region had converged. All the animals had no grass and died from starvation. Such suffering took place.

Q: Was the hope to be able to bring your animals into Nepal? Did you hope to bring the animals into Nepal with you?

#37N: Some animals died along the way and the rest were with [escaping the nomads]. After reaching Dolpa, there was no grass in the region; there was landslide and then it snowed in winter and all the animals died.

Q: When you left, how many animals that belonged to you or your family, your nomad family?

00:22:13

#37N: My family owned 50-60 *dri* and yaks, and 500-600 goats and sheep. [We] owned that many when leaving the hometown but half of them died crossing over the mountain pass from starvation. Then after arriving in Dolpa the rest died from landslide, lack of grass and snowfall within a year. When the animals die a nomad has nothing. Then [we] moved to the place called Tijorong and worked as farmhands or as servants to other people or as porters. That was how [we] earned a living for a year or so.

Q: It was a big...you lost your land, you lost your animals and then you lost your way of earning your living.

#37N: Yes, it was difficult. One had to carry loads that one had never done so in the hometown. After coming to an alien land, one was forced to carry loads, and not knowing how to farm, one found it very difficult initially. Later it became better after one learned to do it. Then earning a livelihood became easier as one became acquainted with the people and learned the language. Things became better. At times when [I] recall those early days it makes [me] sad but at times as humans, one tends to forget.

Q: *Pa-la*, how did you get jobs as servants? Who was hiring you to carry heavy loads and what kind of loads were you carrying?

00:26:21

#37N: [The employers] gave [the nomads] work in the fields. [We] worked in the fields and carried [the crops] to the house [of the employer].

Q: Did you look for work or did people provide you?

#37N: You looked for work and the local people needed laborers. They ask [us] to come and provided work.

Q: Was this...you were in Dolpa when you escaped with your family. *Pa-la*, who was with you when you went to Dolpa from your own family if anybody?

#37N: The family was together.

Q: Everybody?

#37N: Yes.

Q: Did everybody come with you?

#37N: Yes.

Q: In the journey you never ran into any Chinese that were shooting you or hurting you?

#37N: The Chinese did not give any problems during the journey. We fled over the mountain pass when it was said, “The Chinese are coming. The Chinese are coming.” [We] did not run into any Chinese during the escape but our animals died and that was... Otherwise, we did not have the Chinese pursue or hurt or beat us.

Q: How many days did the journey take the whole family to make?

00:29:22

#37N: From Dolpa it did not take many days.

Q: From the hometown?

#37N: It would take many days from the hometown to Dolpa.

Q: How many days did it take for you?

#37N: For nearly two years we had moved from the hometown towards the mountain pass near Dolpa. It would take a month from my hometown to Dolpa. We had moved to the direction of Dolpa from the hometown since 2-3 years. [We] had left the hometown and moved near Dolpa. It took only 5-6 days to cross over the mountain pass. The pass could be overcome in that many days.

Q: Not from the hometown but from the other place?

#37N: Yes.

Q: It would take a month or two from the hometown?

#37N: It would take around a month.

Q: You were making the journey all along.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Slowly. Gradually.

Q: *Pa-la*, is there anything else that you want to tell us about your life as a nomad that we can share with the world and the children of Tibet?

#37N: There is nothing else to say about nomads.

Q: Like how a nomad earned a living?

00:31:15

#37N: That is about how a nomad earned a living by taking care of animals, making dairy products and trading salt for grain in the valleys. That is about it.

Q: Are there any special memories that you think of when you think of back home where you lived in your original home?

#37N: [I] do not have many memories except about herding animals at a young age in the hometown and then accompanying father to the valleys on salt trade, driving animals laden with salt when [I] grew a little older. However, [I] could not yet participate in the trade but had the responsibility of grazing the animals, grazing the goats and sheep. That is about it.

Later, after getting older, I went to gather salt, load the animals and went to the valleys to trade the salt. [I] went on the salt mission from the age of 15-16 until 24. At the age of 24 Tibet was lost. I was 24 years old when Tibet was lost and [I] had to leave.

Q: Well, *pa-la*, thank you for sharing this story of your life and your experiences as a nomad. We really appreciate your story and hope that you have many fine memories of your homeland.

00:34:44

#37N: Okay.

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

#37N: What about Tibet and China?

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

#37N: I would not know whether it will be a problem or not. I would not be able to say that it will be a problem nor would I be able to say that it will not be a problem.

In general it is the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Chinese consider His Holiness an enemy. [I] would not know if they would give us problems based on that. Generally, the Chinese do not like [Tibetan refugees living] in Nepal. Due to strong influence of the Chinese on Nepal we do not have much freedom. Living like this seems okay but there is not much freedom for us in Nepalese Territory.

Q: Well, thank you for sharing your story with us, *pa-la*.

#37N: [Nods and joins palms]

END OF INTERVIEW