

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #41N – Karma Lhakyi  
April 14, 2015

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #41N
2. Interviewee: Karma Lhakyi
3. Age: 75
4. Date of Birth: 1940
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Kyenyar
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959-60
9. Date of Interview: April 14, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Paljorling Tibetan Settlement, Prithvi Chowk, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Karma Lhakyi was born in the nomadic region of Kyenyar in Ngari, Utsang Province. She grew up caring for goats, sheep and yaks and describes what life was like in this nomadic region. Their lives were completely dependent on their animals for food, clothing and shelter. She expresses her feelings about the difficult life that nomads led, especially when it rained during the summer. During winter everything lay covered in snow with hardly any grass to feed the animals. Water was difficult to find for animals and humans as well.

Karma Lhakyi explains how the nomads survived during the harsh winter months like sleeping next to their animals for warmth. She describes the process of producing butter and cheese from milk and spinning and weaving wool. Her mother taught her to watch carefully over the animals and if a wolf came Karma Lhakyi would scream and use her slingshot. She tells how illness was rare and about the use of healing herbs. She also explains which animals were slaughtered for meat and how all parts were consumed except for the horns and hoofs.

Karma Lhakyi's family heard stories about Chinese atrocities so her family left Tibet. Their goats and sheep perished in the heavy snowfall along the way. They suffered from the scarcity of food and were afflicted by various ailments that claimed the lives of her parents.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, customs/traditions, escape experiences.

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**Interview #41N**

**Interviewee: Karma Lhakyi**

**Age: 75, Sex: Female**

**Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway**

**Interview Date: April 14, 2015**

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:09

**Interviewee #41N: Karma Lhakyi.**

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama has asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

**#41N: Yes.**

Q: Thank you.

**#41N: [Silent]**

Q: During the interview if you want to take a break or stop at any time, please let us know.

**#41N: There is no need to stop.**

Q: Thank you. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let us know please.

**#41N: Okay. I will answer whatever I know and if I do not, kindly excuse me.**

Q: Thank you. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for you or your family?

00:02:05

**#41N: I do not have any family members [in Tibet]. My parents have passed away and siblings...I have three children who are here. There will be no problems. I came [to exile] as a little one.**

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

**#41N: Okay.**

Q: So, *ama-la* ‘respectful term for mother,’ could you tell us your age, please?

**#41N: I am 75.**

Q: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

**#41N: I was born in the nomadic region of Kyenyar.**

Q: Which province is that in?

**#41N: It is Ngari in Utsang.**

Q: How far away is Kyenyar from Lhasa?

**#41N: I do not know how far it is from Lhasa. It is a nomadic region.**

Q: So you grew up in a nomadic family?

00:04:04

**#41N: Yes, in a nomadic family raising animals, milking, taking care of animals and grazing goats and sheep. It was like that. There were no farmlands and such.**

Q: Can you tell us what you remember about grazing the animals?

**#41N: One went to graze a large number of goats and sheep. When it rained during summertime we did not have things to wear like these [looks down at shoes]. One wore the skin of goats and sheep and it was very difficult during rainy season. One must go out in the rain and then there was the attacker of animals that had to be chased. The animal attacker came.**

**There were a lot of difficulties. One wore leather [touches head] when it snowed and the breath turned into ice, similar to the ice here. It was very hard. One cannot do this [brings all the fingers together at the tips] with the hand. One can only do so [indicates finger tips cannot meet] with the hand. It snowed.**

Q: So when it was so cold that your breath froze and your fingers froze, what did you do so that you could survive?

00:06:44

**#41N: At night one slept among the animals. Sleeping close to the goats and sheep in the enclosure gave warmth. Winter was hard but summer was enjoyable. Summertime was very enjoyable.**

Q: Tell us about summertime. Tell us what you like so much about summertime?

**#41N: There was no ice in summertime and the animals had plenty of grass in the mountains. It was enjoyable. One did the milking. It was a little bit difficult during**

**wintertime. Animals could not find grass; all the grass dried and the animals faced difficulties. We faced difficulties; everyone faced difficulties. We were happy in summer.**

Q: Can you tell us about the hardships that you experienced in the winter when you were grazing the animals?

**#41N: The hardships were the cold and the lack of grass for the animals. Things froze and there was problem with water. Things froze; ice formed. That was a problem. Such were the problems. It snowed. That was the hardship.**

Q: So if there was no water what did you and the animals do to, you know, so you didn't have thirst?

00:09:26

**#41N: The animals found little pools of water at water sources that they got to drink while we melted ice to get water, melted ice.**

Q: Where did the animals find water?

**#41N: There were *chugo* 'water sources.'**

Q: *Chugo*?

**#41N: Yes, there were certain places where water did not freeze. Otherwise, everything turned to ice. There were water sources to drink from.**

Q: If there wasn't any grass, what did the animals eat?

**#41N: The animals...when the sun shone...when the sun shone the snow melted. When the snow melted, little bits of grass were found in dark spots and niches. [The animals] ate where snow had melted in some good places. There was not any stock of grass that could be fed [to the animals] except for the grass on the mountains.**

Q: Did you have to look for those little bits of grass or would the animals find it themselves?

00:11:25

**#41N: The animals ate [the grass]. The shepherd guided the sheep where there was grass and where there were dark spots and the sheep ate it. The shepherd need not look for it.**

Q: How old were you when you were doing this job?

**#41N: I do not know how old I was then. I do not know. [I] was fairly old when I went to graze and tend the animals. I have no education and when the parents went to graze, [I] followed the elders in driving the sheep at the age of 6, 7 or 8. I used to drive the sheep as a little one along with an adult or the parents.**

Q: So in this way you learned how to be a shepherd?

**#41N: Yes, one learned to be a shepherd. The one that attacked the sheep is the wolf. We call it wolf. It runs like a jackal and attacks sheep. [I] did not know about it. It used to take away sheep close to us, like a lamb or a kid. [I] told my mother, “Mother, something came and took away [a lamb] and ate it.” “Why did you not scream? These attack animals. [You] should scream then,” she said. Then [I] realized and used to scream.**

Q: How would you scream? Show us your scream.

00:14:18

**#41N: One screamed, ‘*kee, hee*’ and used a slingshot. It is a rope, a *wordho*. We call it *wordho* in the hometown. It has a flat part [in the center of the rope] in which you load a pebble and then folded [the length of rope] into two and did this [rotates right hand above head] and released it *tsak*. That is called a *wordho* by the nomads.**

Q: When you saw wolves and when you scared them away, were you ever afraid they’d come back later?

**#41N: If one does not watch the animals well, the wolves attacked them. One must look around and there was no time to sleep. One must watch the animals. If a wolf approached one must scream. The animals panicked. If one screamed all the goats and sheep came back. One must use the slingshot *tsak, tsak* that was loaded with a pebble. Small pieces of stones were loaded and slung *tsak, tsak*. Then the animals returned. One must watch, look everywhere for the wolves. Wolves are the worst. If one did not watch out, it ate the animals.**

Q: So the sound was a way to warn the sheep and the goats that they need to come towards you and go into safety.

00:16:39

**#41N: [The sheep and goats] came running.**

Q: You said that your mother taught you to scream when the wolves came. What other lessons did your mother teach you?

**#41N: The other training was milking. Other than that there were no teaching the scripts or anything like that. One learned to milk the animals and herd them. That was it. There was not anything else.**

Q: What did your mother teach you about milking?

**#41N: [Mother] taught that one must milk like this [moves hands]. One milked and poured it into a container. Then the milk was left to ferment into curd following which butter was produced. Then cheese was made. After removing the butter by churning the curd, cheese was made from the residual liquid, pieces of cheese that were dried...[not discernible]**

Q: Yes?

00:18:14

**#41N: It [liquid] was boiled. The milk was left to ferment into curd, which is known as *dahi* ‘curd’ [in Hindi] by the locals. After fermentation, the curd is churned. [The curd] is poured into a container and churned. Following the process of churning, a lump of butter gets formed. After the formation of butter, the residual liquid is boiled that forms into solids that is cheese. The residual liquid [after removing the cheese] cannot be drunk. It is thrown away. This is called *churkhu*. First it is the milk, then curd and then whey that turn into cheese by boiling. That is the animals’...that is our food and drink.**

Q: When you were making these foodstuffs, were there times when your mother said “Do it this way not that way”?

**#41N: One learned these things by watching. From a young age one was exposed to only this kind of work, so one learned it.**

Q: So you learned how to herd animals, you learned how to milk and make curd, butter and cheese. Did you also learn how to make clothes?

00:21:13

**#41N: To make clothes [I] learned to spin wool, spin wool. [I] used to knit shoes and then slingshots that are used for the animals. Except for these [I] did not learn to weave carpets or anything else. Things we wore...the wool was sheared and then spun and made into *chupa* ‘traditional dresses/coats.’ There were no fabrics like this in our hometown. [We] wore animal hide and wool of sheep that was spun. There were no fabrics.**

Q: You were often in very, very cold weather. The boots that you made from wool, how did they keep you warm and dry?

**#41N: Yes, [they kept you warm and dry]. The sole was the skin of yak, goat or sheep that was sewn. It kept one warm. It kept one warm within. The eyes got burnt a little because of the heavy snowfall. The eyes got burnt because of the snow. The eyes got burnt.**

Q: Tell us about that. How did you protect your eyes?

**#41N: There was nothing to cover the eyes. One applied a little black color around here [touches lower part of right eye]. There was nothing to cover the eyes. While moving in the snow for long periods the eyes got burned but there was nothing to cover them. There were no glasses, nothing.**

Q: What was the black made from?

00:24:37

**#41N: Applying the black color helped the eyes a little bit.**

Q: What was the black thing?

**#41N: It is coal after making fire. A little black was applied after burning wood. A little of the black from the fireplace was applied as there was nothing else.**

Q: Like charcoal?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Charcoal.

Q: It's interesting that Tibetans know how to protect their eyes from the sun way before American athletes used black around their eyes while playing in the sun.

**#41N: [Laughs]**

Q: So Tibetans have taught a lot to the world.

**#41N: [Laughs and joins palms]**

Q: I've seen a film about Tibet where they were going salt...

**#41N: [Interrupts] What it is about the Tibetans is that [we] never got sick in Tibet. I lived in Tibet as a teenager. If someone suffered a broken limb, two pieces of flat sticks was tied here [indicates legs] using woolen string. It was the same for broken arms and also if animals suffered fractures. There were no illnesses, surgeries or cutting away parts. There never was anything like this in our hometown. There were not any illnesses. Should someone be a little sick, a medium was consulted. If there was a broken limb, two pieces of sticks was tied firmly to it; it was so for animals and humans, too.**

00:27:26

**That is what I know. If one caught a cold, there was an herb in the mountains called *bhari*. It is an herb. *Bhari* was picked and consumed for cold and the illness got cured. That is what I know.**

Q: What does *bhari* look like?

**#41N: *Bhari* is a grass that can be dug out and is green in color. If one dug the earth one found a tiny *bhari* with leaves. Like *ramba* [an herb] it is spread around. Eating that will cure the cold. Otherwise, there were no medicines at all.**

Q: Did you want to say something else?

**#41N: Yes?**

Q: About the herb...

**#41N: One ate the herb, ate the one called *bhari*. Apart from that I have never seen anything else like medicines and such. As far as I can remember, we only took care of the animals in our hometown and [there were no] farming or trading. The salt...the female**

**sheep were milked while the male sheep were taken to the saltpans of the north to transport salt to Mustang.**

Q: Male sheep?

00:29:24

**#41N: Yes, male sheep. The male sheep were laden with salt and brought to Mustang. At Mustang the salt was given away and in return little amounts of grains were brought back. Little amounts of grains, wheat and such were brought from the Mustang region. In our hometown there were no farmlands at all.**

Q: The *bhari*, when you made it into medicine, did you boil it or did you rub it on your skin?

**#41N: No, it was not rubbed. It can be chewed.**

Q: What did it taste like?

**#41N: It is a little bit bitter and did not taste good as such.**

Q: Did you ever have to take it?

**#41N: [I] have taken it.**

Q: What about the animals? If the animals got sick what would you do?

**#41N: The animals did not fall sick. [They] did not fall sick as such. There were animals that were weak. There were very weak ones that became so due to scarcity of grass.**

Q: Like what?

**#41N: When one did not find good grass and good water, some animals became weak. Like humans, there were those that grew weak. [I] do not know of animals that got sick.**

Q: And when they grew weak, what would happen?

00:32:05

**#41N: Then [they] died.**

Q: Oh, they die. When they died were you able to eat the meat?

**#41N: The meat of an animal that died from weakness was tasteless and normally was not eaten. It was not consumed except by some of the poor who might as it had died from weakness.**

Q: And if you were to consume it, if it had died like that, would it harm you?

**#41N: I do not know about one becoming sick; it was not normally eaten.**

Q: Do you know why you didn't eat it?

**#41N: Because it was not tasty. It had died from starvation and extreme weakness. It was not tasty nor was it nutritious. So it was not normally eaten. [The meat] was fed to animals like dogs.**

Q: You ate a lot of milk products like cheese and curd and milk. Did you also slaughter animals for meat?

00:34:13

**#41N: Animals were slaughtered for consumption. A few animals were slaughtered. There was not anything else to eat, so [they] were slaughtered.**

Q: Which animals did you eat?

**#41N: Animals were slaughtered and the hide worn as clothing. The hide was worn as clothing and the meat eaten during wintertime. [Meat] was consumed in winter. During summer curd and milk were consumed.**

Q: Which animal?

**#41N: Sheep, goats and yaks.**

Q: Was every part of the animal used?

**#41N: Every part was consumed.**

Q: Can you tell us, you know, what each part was used for?

**#41N: Animals were slaughtered in winter. [The meat] was left to freeze. It froze and did not become stale. Then it was consumed in little pieces. One did not eat a whole lot but cut away small pieces to be consumed.**

Q: Did you eat the intestines and the liver and all of that?

00:36:25

**#41N: Everything was consumed. Blood was poured into the intestines; blood from the body was poured into the intestines. Meat and fats were also packed in the intestines. Blood was filled into the intestines and then the intestines were used. Lungs, liver and everything were consumed. Everything was consumed. Then the heart...lungs were given to the animal slaughterer. Not everyone slaughtered animals.**

Q: Did [you] say the heart or the lungs?

**#41N: The heart, which the locals call *mutu*. Not everyone did the slaughtering. There was one person that slaughtered the animals. It was given to him.**

Q: The person doing the slaughtering was it one member of your family or was there one person who slaughtered for various families?

**#41N: There was another. There was a person in the village that did the slaughtering.**

Q: So there was like a butcher?

00:38:18

**#41N: He slaughtered the animals and was given a fee that we called *dhigla*. [He] was given animals, the heart, lungs and entrails. He was given animals in case there was a lot of slaughtering. Slaughtering just one would not fetch him [the fee in the form of an animal]. If it was 5, 6 or 7...aged [animals] were slaughtered in winter and the meat did not rot. [The meat] froze during winter.**

Q: If it was just one animal what would he get?

**#41N: He got the heart, lungs, entrails and head but was not given any animals as fees for slaughtering.**

Q: What was the best part of the animal that you liked to eat?

**#41N: I did not take much notice of that. I never watched animals being slaughtered. [I] never witnessed animals being slaughtered.**

Q: And so when you ate meat you didn't know this was the, you know...

00:40:44

**#41N: I do not know which part it was. We used to chant *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara.' [We] chanted *mani* at the time of eating the meat of the slaughtered animal. [We] chanted *mani* and ate. [I] do not know which part it was.**

Q: Why was that?

**#41N: Because [we] were eating its flesh and blood. Because [we] were eating its flesh and blood, *mani* was chanted.**

Q: What did you think would happen if you didn't chant the *mani* mantra?

**#41N: [I] do not know what would happen if the *mani* was not chanted.**

Q: Just two more things. What did you do with the head? How was the head used?

**#41N: The head was consumed as well. The head was boiled separately and consumed.**

Q: It was just eaten, nothing else? It wasn't used for anything else?

00:42:43

**#41N: It was not used but consumed.**

Q: Not given to dogs or any other animals?

**#41N: It was not given.**

Q: What did the dogs eat?

**#41N: We fed the dogs *thukpa* ‘noodle soup’ and ground meat and bones.**

Q: And then the tail and the hooves, were they used also and the horns?

**#41N: Some carved *mani* on the horns. There were *mani* carvers. Some threw them away. The horns and hooves were thrown away.**

Q: Where was the *mani* carved?

**#41N: There were *mani* carvers that carved *mani* on fine quality horns.**

Q: Upon the horns?

**#41N: Yes, upon the horns if they were grand.**

Q: Who would carve the *mani* mantras on the nice looking horns?

00:44:45

**#41N: There were ones that did that. [The horns carved with *mani*] were left on huge *mendhang* ‘pile of rocks carved with *mani*’ and at stupas.**

Q: Were they placed on stupas or on the pile at special times of the year?

**#41N: No, I do not think there was anything like that. I have not taken any notice of such. I have seen such things while growing up as a child. I witnessed these.**

Q: We haven’t finished but you’ve told a lot about your life as a nomad and what you had to do. Is there anything else that you would like to add about that life before we move onto you talking about going into exile?

**#41N: There is not anything left out. [I] do not have anything more to say than this.**

Q: It’s very, very interesting.

**#41N: [Nods]**

Q: I’ve learned a lot. Thank you.

00:46:43

**#41N: Okay. I have spoken about what I saw with my eyes having being born in Tibet, born in my hometown in Tibet. Since I was born there [I] know how things were done and what things were consumed, which [I] have spoken about. That is it.**

**There were the parents and [we] lived happily. This is what I know about that time.**

Q: So how old were you when you went into exile?

**#41N: I do not know how old I was then.**

Q: Do you remember what year it was?

**#41N: That too [I] do not know.**

Q: Were you married?

**#41N: No.**

Q: And you didn't have children?

**#41N: No.**

Q: So what caused your family to go into exile?

**#41N: [We] fled because it was said that the Chinese were killing, wounding and...[not discernible].**

Q: After hearing that?

00:48:20

**#41N: Yes, [we] heard that there was killing and wounding in the Kham regions. We were children and when many people escaped, the parents left the house and everything and fled. [We] drove the animals, the goats and sheep many of which died along the way when it snowed heavily. Then [we] lost the animals on reaching Mustang.**

Q: So did you actually see any Chinese?

**#41N: No.**

Q: So you took your animals; you lost some of them. How did you lose them?

**#41N: The animals were lost [in Mustang]. Later it was learned that those that came from Tibet and had nothing to eat had taken away all the animals. [I] do not know how but there were no animals left; [they] were lost. [We] were left with nothing. Father passed away.**

Q: How did you react when you heard this?

00:50:35

**#41N: Thieves had driven away our animals and our father passed away. After father passed away...animals continued to die during the journey and the rest were lost one night. We were three siblings and mother. The four of us were left alone with absolutely nothing. [We] did not know the language, father was gone and [we] faced great difficulties.**

Q: How did your father die?

**#41N: Father passed away from an illness. There were no hospitals to get treatment. With nothing [he] passed away near Mustang. [Father] passed away at a place after escaping from Tibet.**

Q: And the *bhari* wouldn't help?

**#41N: There was no [bhari]. That was in the hometown, in Tibet. Now [we] were in a foreign land.**

Q: What were your father's symptoms?

**#41N: [I] do not know what the illness was but people said it was fever. [He] had fever after coming to the valley and passed away 5-6 days later. [We] had a few animals then but father passed away and mother was...we were little children and lost all the animals.**

Q: I understand that was a very hard struggle for you once you got to Mustang. You had lost your animals, your father had died; you didn't speak the language. Tell us about that hard life that you had in Mustang?

00:53:42

**#41N: [We] suffered a lot. We had necklaces of superior quality from our hometown and not like these [touches necklaces], which are just worth five or 10 *rupees*. I had corals and turquoise on my hands [bracelets] that were sold. [We] begged from people and sold these to survive. There was nothing to eat and the stomach remained empty. [We] suffered immensely.**

**Mother was...[We] planned to move towards Nepal and came begging along the way. People gave little amounts of *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.' [We] suffered incredibly. Then mother fell sick at the place called Naudara near Yangsi, suffering from fever and diarrhea, passing blood and pus. Mother could not walk and passed away there. Mother had said, "Do not remain with me. You, the three siblings should go away." [We] joined a group of people from Mustang that were driving horses and mules. We reached a place called Lochumik where some Nyeshang 'Manang' people...[We] had come begging along the way and suffered greatly not knowing the language. There was nobody from our region.**

**The Nyeshang took care of many of us children that were without parents.**

Q: What is Nyeshang? What are the Nyeshang people?

**#41N: The people of Nyeshang are humble, very good, caring and did not repress. However, if you argued, looked down on people and such... We were humble, did not have any arguments with people and remained humble. Hence, none of them repressed us and gave food and clothes. [We] got food and everything from them.**

**[I] became sick with sores, had no food and the Nyeshang people provided medical treatment and soup made from bones. [They] were very good. One must not act boastfully to them but be humble and [they] treated you very well. They performed virtuous deeds. They helped the orphans and those that did not have food just like the foreigners are doing now.**

Q: Are these Nyeshang in Nepal or on the border in Tibet?

00:58:22

**#41N: There are many of them in Nepal, in Kathmandu. There are many Nyeshang people in Kathmandu.**

Q: Where is the place Nyeshang?

**#41N: The place of the Nyeshang is up this direction. Nyeshang is called Mondang, Dakar. The Nyeshang are those that perform virtuous deeds.**

Q: Are they on the border of Tibet?

**#41N: [I] do not know if it is on the border of Tibet or not. [They] are actually Nepalese. They are pious and very virtuous.**

Q: In what language did you communicate with them?

**#41N: They did not speak like the Nepalese. They spoke their own language and gradually one came to understand their language. I was there for 3-4 years, perhaps 4 or 5 years. Then the Tashiling Settlement was established and [I] came here.**

Q: Earlier you said that you traveled with some tribal people. Who were the tribal people that you traveled with?

01:00:02

**#41N: I traveled with them after mother passed away. I followed them. [I] did not know the way, did not know where to go.**

Q: Were they Nepalese?

**#41N: They were people of Mustang.**

Q: Mustang?

**#41N: Yes, people of Mustang.**

Q: Thank you very much for sharing your very rich story with us.

END OF INTERVIEW