

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #52N – Lektse Norbu
April 16, 2015

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #52N
2. Interviewee: Lektse Norbu
3. Age: 83
4. Date of Birth: 1932
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Tsowar, Ngari
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 16, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Tashi Palkhiel Tibetan Refugee Settlement, Hemja, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 34 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Lektse Norbu was born in Tsowar in the province of Utsang. His parents had six children and his father had passed away while he was young. Lektse Norbu belonged to a middle class family which owned 500 sheep and goats and 30 yaks. He recalls grazing animals since the age of 8 and migrating every three months in search of fresh grasslands. As nomads, the family lived in a tent. Later, Lektse Norbu helped his elder brother in collecting salt and trading it for grain.

Lektse Norbu married at the age of 24. He describes how property is divided once a son or a daughter gets married to start a new home. A few years later people from Kham, having fled their region, told the nomads about the atrocities of the Chinese. Fearing the same would happen in his village, he escaped to Nepal along with 15-16 other people.

The refugees arrived in Mustang and eventually their animals perished and they ran out of food. He describes the beginning of a new life in the Tibetan Settlement in Pokhara, where he worked in construction and farming and the refugees received foreign aid.

Topics Discussed:

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

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Interview #52N

Interviewee: Lektse Norbu

Age: 83, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 16, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:08

Interviewee #52N: Lektse Norbu.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so 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?

#52N: Yes.

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

#52N: 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.

#52N: Okay.

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

#52N: There may not be.

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

#52N: Okay, and thank you.

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

00:02:18

#52N: Am 83.

Q: Where were you born?

#52N: Tsowar. The name of my hometown is Lektse.

Q: Is it Tsowar or Lektse?

#52N: It is the same place. The name of the place where we lived is Tsowar and the region is called Lektse.

Q: And that is in which province?

#52N: It is in Ngari in the province of Utsang.

Q: When you were born, how many children...when you were a little boy, how many children were in your family?

#52N: There were six children in our family. I can remember. I can recall that there were six children that were my siblings. There was Mother but Father had passed away from what I can recall.

Q: And what did your mother do for a living?

#52N: We were nomads that took care of animals like yaks, sheep and goats. [We] took care of animals and milked them. That was it.

Q: Was your family middle class or were they wealthy or poor? What were they?

00:04:47

#52N: [We] were among the middle class.

Q: Do you have a memory of how many animals you had as part of your herd that you were watching?

#52N: Our family owned a total number of 500 goats and sheep and around 30 yaks.

Q: Did you move many times a year to take them to new grasslands?

#52N: [We] moved to four different places; moving every three months to a new place. [We] migrated to four places in a year.

Q: So your family only lived in a *ba* 'tent made from yak hair,' not...they didn't have a permanent location anywhere. Is that correct?

#52N: Yes, that is it. We did not have a house.

Q: *Pa-la*, among those six children, where were you in that order of children?

00:07:04

#52N: There were two younger than me. The rest were elder, three were elder to me.

Q: Did you...at what age did you start helping take the animals to graze? What age?

#52N: One started grazing animals at the age of 8, at the age of 8.

Q: Did you like your job grazing animals?

#52N: One was a child then and except for hunger there were not many difficulties.

Q: Did you like grazing animals? Did you like doing that?

#52N: Yes.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you ever go on a pilgrimage when you were a nomad?

#52N: I have come to the place called Muktinath in Mustang, to Muktinath. I have not been anywhere else on pilgrimage.

Q: While [you were] living in Tibet?

#52N: Yes, while living in Tibet. Except for Muktinath [I] have not been anywhere.

Q: Did...Meant that [you] went on a pilgrimage while living in Muktinath?

#52N: No. I came to Muktinath, a place in Mustang, which is near Pokhara when [I] was living in the hometown. [I] have come here once on pilgrimage. There are monasteries and such to see. [I] have visited it once but have not been on any other pilgrimages.

Q: How was it for your mother to be, you know, the only parent of so many children? What was that like for her? Do you remember?

00:10:32

#52N: The animals were used to produce milk and meat. One of the children, the elder brother was much older. Since he was older, at times he went to trade and procured grain and foodstuff for consumption. Later when I grew up, I helped elder brother to trade and to gather salt and sold the salt, wool and butter with which we had to buy grain. [We] had to come towards Mustang to procure food grains for we did not own farmlands.

Q: *Pa-la*, may I ask how did your father die?

#52N: I cannot remember, but Mother said that he was sick for around two months and then passed away.

Q: Did your mother ever remarry?

#52N: Much later when [Mother] was around 40 years old [she] met another man.

Q: When she was 40 years old?

00:12:41

#52N: Yes, when Mother was 40 years old. My father had died when [Mother] was 33 or 32. And after the children grew up a little, they went to other families. Two sisters and I lived with Mother. Mother brought another man when there were only three of us.

Q: What about you? What age did you marry?

#52N: Me? At the age of 24.

Q: And you were still living in Tibet?

#52N: I was in Tibet where I lived until the age of 27.

Q: Tell me about your wife. How was that marriage arranged?

#52N: We were from the same hometown, lived in the same place and knew each other. Then [we] got married.

Q: Was it a choice that you made or did your mother and her family make that arrangement?

00:14:50

#52N: It was our wish.

Q: Why did you choose this woman to be your wife?

#52N: It was because we were compatible.

Q: What kind of qualities would a nomad look...a nomad husband or man look for in a wife? What kind of qualities would be appealing?

#52N: For a woman there would be talk about ornaments and such things.

Q: That's not it. You were a nomad wishing to bring home a wife. What characteristics should a woman have in order to become the wife of a nomad?

#52N: It was not necessary to look into any characteristics. All of us knew each other and trusted each other. We did not talk about [the marriage] not working out later or any such thing but just lived together.

Q: *Pala*, when you married did you move somewhere away from your mother to be with your new wife?

00:16:59

#52N: For a year I lived with Mother and then separately.

Q: After marriage?

#52N: Yes.

Q: Where did you go, *pa-la*?

#52N: It was the same place, but we did not have houses since nomads were those that lived in tents. One must keep moving from place to place in search of good grasslands. Thereby migrating four times in a year. That is how [we] lived.

Q: When a son marries, what happens to the...what happens to the herd? Do you get to keep some of the yaks and sheep for your own or are they still kept as part of the family?

00:18:29

#52N: The number of animals like 500, 600, 2000 or 3000—a rich nomad family would own many thousands while others owned 500 or 600—was divided among the family members depending on the number of people in the family. That is the practice with us nomads.

Q: So when you married, you got your share of the animals?

#52N: That is right.

Q: How long did your life stay peaceful in your marriage? Did anything change or happen?

#52N: I married at the age of 24 and lived in the hometown for three years, until around 27. Then fearing the Chinese would arrive; we fled to Nepal in the year '59.

Q: When you say “we fled” who were all the people that fled with you?

00:20:32

#52N: When we fled there were three other families who like us were owners of animals. There were 15-16 people that fled together. It was in the year '59.

Q: And how long did the journey take, *pa-la*?

#52N: There was not any need for a long journey. We lived on the border. It was a distance of two days.

Q: Oh, very close.

#52N: [Smiles] Very close. We lived on the border of Nepal and Tibet.

Q: And so when you crossed the border, what area were you in?

#52N: In Mustang.

Q: Mustang?

#52N: Yes.

Q: Since it was so close to home, two days, what did you take with you from your home?

00:22:39

#52N: [We] brought along the little amount of wealth we owned. Being close by we did not leave anything behind.

Q: And what was your reason for leaving your homeland?

#52N: Many people of Kham came fleeing saying that the Chinese were being very bad to the Tibetans and that people were being beaten and killed. The people of Kham spoke about many such things. The people of Kham lived in the lower regions and they came fleeing. They spoke about many things like the Chinese having come, that the Chinese had arrived on Tibetan soil and that the Chinese were being incredibly bad. When they spoke about such things we believed them. So when the people of Kham fled, we fled along with them into Nepal.

Q: Were they actually in your group, the people from Kham?

#52N: [The people from Kham] were not with us for there were many routes. They took other routes. We saw many that were fleeing and there were many conversations.

Q: I see. *Pa-la*, what were you hoping to do in Mustang? Did you have any plan or any idea of how you would survive?

00:25:07

#52N: There were none like that. There was no objective at all. [We] fled to Nepalese territory hoping not to encounter the Chinese. There was not any objective at all besides that.

Q: So when you got to Mustang, what happened?

#52N: At that time we possessed our valuables. We possessed valuables and drove the animals. [We] owned valuables and food supplies, having brought everything with us on the two-day journey. However, things started depleting after coming to Mustang. There was heavy snowfall leading to the animals' death. Then [we] ran out of food supplies and faced hardship. Hardship began and we did not remain in Mustang.

Q: Were there any organizations at that time that came to help them, the refugees right inside Mustang when you landed, when you entered?

00:27:06

#52N: We did not receive any kind of help while living in Mustang, did not receive anything.

Q: *Pa-la*, what happened when you ran out of food, etc.—food and your animals died? What did the family do?

#52N: Then [we] moved here to Pokhara. [We] lived in Manang for two years working for other families, in Manang.

Q: What kind of work were you doing?

#52N: [I] engaged in farm work, construction and whatever type of work the people assigned. There was cutting logs and various kinds of things to do in Manang that [I] did for two years.

Q: And then what happened?

#52N: And then [I] came here to Pokhara.

Q: What made you come here?

00:29:04

#52N: We could survive doing those kinds of jobs but the Tibetan Settlement had begun here. There were nearly a thousand people living in the settlement that were being provided aid by the United States. Believing it to be better for us to come where there were many Tibetans, we came here in 1964.

Q: '62?

#52N: '64

Q: And what did it look like when you came?

#52N: There was a lot of sickness then. There is a certain disease called *dumba* 'small pox' that caused many boils to appear on people's faces and bodies.

Q: Yes?

#52N: There is a disease called *dumba*, a serious illness. People afflicted with it were isolated to that side [indicates to the right] in tents so that majority of the people were not infected. Caretakers were assigned. They were not allowed to come into the settlement.

Q: When you came, did you help build any of the settlement?

00:31:25

#52N: No. At that time there was a sort of braided grass that resembled bamboo, which is not found now. Those were used to build temporary shelters. There were no houses like these then.

Q: I see. Did you finally feel safe when you got here?

#52N: Food rations were being given then. So there was no fear of scarcity of food since the government provided supplies. Provisions were given for around a year and [we] were very happy.

Q: *Pa-la*, it sounds like you had a long life after you arrived, but since we're trying to understand about Tibet... Thank you for telling me about your life as a nomad and I guess I would like to end with asking, what is your hope or your prayer for Tibet these days? What do you wish for?

#52N: Even though we do not achieve complete independence, yet as advocated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama we should gain complete autonomy through the Middle Way approach. If we can achieve such, that is the hope and real objective that [I] pray for.

Q: We share that hope with you, *pa-la*, and we want to thank you and also just ask you one more time, if this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

00:34:37

#52N: What problem would there be for us?

Q: Okay. Thank you for sharing your story with us, *pa-la*.

#52N: Thank you. Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW