

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

**Interview #53N – Tsewang Choezom  
April 16, 2015**

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #53N
2. Interviewee: Tsewang Choezom
3. Age: 69
4. Date of Birth: 1946
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Penche, Nagchu
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 53 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Tsewang Choezom was born in Utsang Province to a middle class family of nomads that possessed around 200 goats and sheep and around 20 yaks. In her region the men went to trade while women stayed home milking animals, churning curd and making *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’

Tsewang Choezom describes the biggest festival in Tibet called Losar, which is the New Year celebration. Family members decorated their tents and went to watch *cham* ‘religious dance performance by monks’ at the nearby monastery, Goyak Gonpa. Tsewang Choezom also talks about *yardong*, a horse racing festival held during the summer for five days. All the people of nearby regions gathered near to Tsewang Choezom’s home. The horses of various colors were decorated with elaborate riding equipment and the men competed in three days of horseracing.

After becoming refugees in Nepal, it was difficult for the family to earn a living. As an adult Tsewang Choezom worked in a carpet-weaving factory and explains the materials and preparations for weaving.

### **Topics Discussed:**

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

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## Interview #53N

**Interviewee: Tsewang Choezom**

**Age: 69, Sex: Female**

**Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway**

**Interview Date: April 16, 2015**

Question: *Ama-la* ‘respectful term for mother,’ thank you so much for joining us this afternoon.

00:00:19

**Interviewee #53N: Okay, thank you. I do not know the [English] language but I believe this is good. [I] do not know the language.**

Q: Well, I don’t speak Tibetan. That’s why we have Palden.

**#53N: Right, right.**

Q: So 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 rest of 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?

**#53N: It should be okay. [I] will go according to what the others [interviewees] are doing. I alone cannot say whether this should be used or not.**

Q: Thank you. By the way, you will get a DVD of your interview that you can share with your family or anyone else.

00:02:40

**#53N: [I] do not know if my interview will be useful.**

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

**#53N: Okay.**

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

**#53N: Okay. I was little then. So there may be some questions I do not know.**

Q: Thank you. If your interview were to be shown in China or Tibet, would there be a problem for you or any of your family members?

**#53N: How?**

Q: You are being interviewed and photographs being taken. In case the pictures were to be seen or shown in Tibet or China, would there be any problem for you?

**#53N: [I] do not know. Whether one will face problem or not, there are many other people being interviewed. If all of them face [problems], it is possible I too may, but if all of them do not, [I] do not think I shall face problems alone. One would not know.**

00:04:39

**In general, we are living here and since the Chinese and they [Nepalese] have good relation, we cannot be very active here.**

**Earlier there was a plan to send [people of] this settlement to the United States of America but it was stopped and only a few could migrate.**

Q: So do you have family members in the US?

**#53N: I do not have siblings, but there are some relatives.**

Q: When you say that the whole of the camp was resettling to the U.S., why is that?

00:06:08

**#53N: There was a talk of sending [Tibetans] living in Nepal [to the U.S.]. However, later it was stated that it was not those living in Nepal but...what is the name of the place? What is the name of the place from where many were sent? Which place was it?**

Q: India?

**#53N: It is not India but towards the border.**

Q: The Bhutanese?

**#53N: Yes, the Bhutanese. Yes, the Bhutanese were sent. Earlier it was said that those in Nepal would be sent but then it was said, "No, no, it is not those living in Nepal but those in Bhutan." So the Bhutanese were sent.**

Q: When did you hear this information?

00:07:23

**#53N: It used to be said that such a thing happened in the past when the Bhutanese were sent. Otherwise, I have no information.**

Q: How long ago was this?

**#53N: Perhaps it was 5-6 years ago, but [I] do not know. [I] did not take any notice of the year at that time unaware that such a question would arise.**

Q: Do you remember...was this sort of word of mouth one person said “Oh, I think we’re going to be resettled in the U.S.” or was there some kind of a document that was presented to the people?

**#53N: It is something [I] heard from other people. [I] heard from other people that something like this had happened. It was not something I saw or had knowledge about.**

Q: How did you feel about the idea of all being resettled in the United States?

**#53N: Whether I get to go or not, [I] cannot work and feed myself due to advanced age. However, if the children, the younger ones can go where everyone is going, they can work and would have a better life. That is what [I] think.**

Q: Have you been happy living in exile here in Nepal?

00:09:51

**#53N: After coming to exile...not being happy...in the past I struggled to earn a living by weaving carpets. Then I also wove bags and such and sold among the people. [I] did not feel much hardship then as I was young and could do any work. [I] did not feel that I was undergoing much hardship then. Presently, doing this business is extremely difficult. Not doing this would mean not surviving.**

Q: Where were you weaving the bags and the carpets?

**#53N: [I] did the weaving at home and sold. Presently [I] cannot even do that.**

Q: So what did you use to weave the carpets and bags?

**#53N: Carpets and bags...in the past the carpets were spread...**

Q: No, the question is about the yarn and such.

00:11:57

**#53N: The yarn has to be purchased; the yarn has to be purchased.**

Q: What’s the yarn made of?

**#53N: There are yarn made from nylon and yarn made from sheep’s wool. These used to be bought. Now they are no longer available.**

Q: What do they use today?

**#53N: These days after this hand [looks at right hand] broke [I] cannot do anything. In general, I am not alone for inside [the building] there are those aged 85 and 86 who have no option but to do this kind of work, to do this kind of business in order to survive. Such people are living here.**

Q: Which materials have you used to weave? You mentioned nylon, wool. What materials have you used to weave?

**#53N: There is nothing else to use. At present yarn made from sheep wool is not available but nylon ones can be bought in the market. However, this hand cannot do any weaving.**

Q: Did you ever weave with silk?

00:14:19

**#53N: Silk, meaning?**

Q: It's a fine thread called silk.

**#53N: [I] do not know.**

[Interpreter to interviewer]: What is silk?

Q: It comes from an insect. It's very fine thread that comes from a caterpillar.

**#53N: [I] do not know.**

Q: Which is easiest to weave with, nylon or wool?

**#53N: Easy wise, nylon is easier.**

Q: Why is that?

**#53N: However, it involves a lot of labor. After buying it has to be rolled [into a ball], then pulled and smoothened. Then it is stretched [on the loom], woven and sewn. It involves a lot of labor.**

Q: Is this process the same for both nylon and sheep wool?

**#53N: It is the same for sheep's wool. The same must be done for wool. The process is the same for both. The wool has to be spun while the nylon need not.**

Q: So what's the extra step when you are weaving with sheep's wool?

00:16:44

**#53N: Sheep's wool was used when weaving carpets. In the past we used to have a carpet store here. There used to be a carpet factory. The long building used to be a factory in the past. Then there was no sale and it had to be abandoned.**

Q: So the carpet factory, was it here in Pokhara?

**#53N: Right here—here. It used to be here in the past.**

Q: Oh, so why did the carpet factory close?

**#53N: [Speaks before question is translated] There used to be around 150 people weaving carpets.**

Q: Why did the carpet factory close?

**#53N: The carpet factory closed perhaps because there was no sale of carpets and no export. That could be it. If there are no orders, there is no one to ship to.**

Q: About how long ago did it close?

**#53N: It is 20-odd years since it closed, perhaps 25 years.**

Q: So did you work in that factory?

**#53N: Yes, yes.**

Q: Now there's a shop here in the settlement selling carpets they said are made here in the settlement? Where are they made?

00:18:47

**#53N: They are made right here, but there are only 2-3 Nepalese weavers. There are only four Nepalese.**

Q: How long does it take to weave a little rug like this, like two feet by two feet, one and half meters by one and half meters?

**#53N: It takes time. These days the carpets are woven using fine yarn. It may take nearly a month, more than a month.**

Q: A small one?

**#53N: Yes.**

Q: Made from nylon?

**#53N: Not nylon, wool. There is not any nylon in the factory.**

Q: And a big carpet, you know, for like here—what will that be like—three meters by four meters, how long will that take?

**#53N: [I] do not know. In the past when we used to weave the yarn was thick. So it took around a month to weave a carpet [three feet by six feet]. These days the carpets are thin and the yarn fine, but I do not have any experience weaving such. So I cannot say.**

Q: Did you, when you were weaving those, did you ever weave a big three by four meter rug?

00:21:16

**#53N: [I] have woven in the past, woven in the past. Since I do not weave these days I cannot say how long it takes someone to do so.**

Q: We have to take a quick break for the camera.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: What's your name?

**#53N: My name is Tsewang Choezom.**

Q: And how old are you?

**#53N: Sixty-nine years.**

Q: We're the same age.

**#53N: Poor thing.**

Q: How come you have black hair and I have silver hair?

**#53N: I have never dyed it black. It is natural.**

Q: Should I have been a nomad?

**#53N: [Laughs] Not all nomads have like this. The hair is heredity. My mother had much grey hair by the mid-40 but my father had black hair.**

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: So before we started filming, we were talking about birthdays and you said that birthdays aren't celebrated in Tibet, right?

**#53N: There was not any tradition like that in Tibet. Probably not, because [I] have not seen it.**

Q: In Tibet, what celebrations were there?

00:23:29

**#53N: The biggest festival in Tibet is Losar 'Tibetan New Year.' Tibetans consider Losar as the most important. Then during summer, there was *yardong* when horseracing and such took place.**

Q: *Yardong*?

**#53N: Yes, *yardong* during which horses raced and people gathered together. [I] do not know much else being a child then.**

Q: If you close your eyes...

**#53N: [Smiles]**

Q: Close your eyes...

**#53N: [Closes eyes]**

Q: Now think back to your childhood.

**#53N: [Laughs]**

Q: Imagine that horserace, best horserace you ever saw.

**#53N: How to describe that memory?**

Q: Tell us what you remember.

**#53N: About that [festival]...there were 5-6 days of show time and horseracing.**

Q: What did you have to see? Tell us about what you have to see.

00:25:25

**#53N: Many tents were pitched and horses gathered from different regions and a horse race took place.**

Q: Tell me about the horses. How big were they? What did they look like?

**#53N: The horses were big. There were big horses. When a foal is born, it is small and then grows into a big horse.**

Q: Bigger than us? Smaller than us?

**#53N: What?**

Q: Bigger than people?

**#53N: About the size of a person.**

Q: And were they decorated with any special saddles or anything?

**#53N: Yes, they were. Even foreign countries have many horses; there are big horses. Horses in Tibet have different fur colors whereas most of the horses in foreign countries**

**are black. Horses in Tibet have different [colors] like white, spotted, russet, red; there are various types.**

Q: And brown?

**#53N: There are brown ones too.**

Q: So these blue horses...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Bluish.

Q: What shade of blue are they?

**#53N: The color of water.**

Q: Like aquamarine?

00:27:45

**#53N: Yes, the color of water, blue.**

Q: Now water can be different colors. It can be black. It can be very bright blue. It can be very pale blue. It can be grey. What kind of color?

**#53N: Blue water, it is blue like blue water. It is there [points to left].**

Q: A horse?

**#53N: Yes. Did you not see?**

Q: No.

**#53N: It can be seen from there [points to the left]. Yes, there are two or three horses. There are three mother horses, a russet, a blue and a brown one.**

Q: Right over here? By the school?

**#53N: It is on the ground there.**

Q: By the school?

**#53N: Yes.**

Q: I'm going to go look at it. I've never heard of a blue horse unless somebody painted it.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Blue means, like, you know, it doesn't mean literally blue. Blue means the color of water, like greyish color.

Q: And yellow then?

**#53N: There are not exactly yellow.**

Q: Like this color?

**#53N: This is white [points to wall]. Something like that [gestures off camera].**

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The curtain color.

**#53N: Yes, like that.**

Q: Sort of brownish. And these horses that were brought to the horseraces, were they decorated in anyway?

00:29:53

**#53N: The horses were adorned with various riding equipment but there are not many different kinds that can be made for a horse. There were different kinds of riding equipment; some possessed fine ones and some had poor riding equipment. There were poor families that did not possess much riding equipment and some rich families that adorned the horses with fine riding equipment.**

Q: So what would a good-looking saddle look like? What was it made from? How was it decorated?

**#53N: You have to weave the riding equipment some of which had lions and some dragons. They [interview team] may have seen carpets like that.**

Q: So the saddles were made from wool or were they made from leather?

**#53N: Yes, the middle one is made of leather. Below it is a carpet. In the middle is leather and on top of that is a small seat cover woven from wool.**

Q: And then I've heard that there were different kinds of races. I've heard that, you know, the horse that goes fastest and I've also heard about the trotting race. What did you have in your community?

00:32:14

**#53N: When [we] say horseracing, it is not about moving slowly but sprinting. It has to be seen who reaches first. That is horseracing.**

Q: Was it just horseracing in your village, to see who reaches first?

**#53N: Yes, yes, horseracing.**

Q: Were there other kinds of horse races?

**#53N: Riding a horse slowly or fast is not called horseracing.**

Q: How many races would be there over these five days?

**#53N: [Horseracing] happened for around three days.**

Q: And did the same horse race for three days?

**#53N: No, no. Different horses raced. If a certain horse raced today and won the first place, in the next race it may lag behind or finish ahead.**

Q: So the same horses raced against each other over and over again?

**#53N: It was not the same one. Different ones raced. The winner raced again. The winner raced for three days. If it won, there was a prize.**

Q: So there are all these horses. There's a first race and whoever wins that race, then races this group of horses and then whoever wins that race races those horses. Or is it more like elimination where you have groups of horses and the one...the horses that win then race against horses that win from another group?

00:34:57

**#53N: Horses raced and...for instance when people race, there is a first and a second place. When people run these days there is a first and a second place. It was the same with horses.**

Q: The winning horse has to race against others?

**#53N: It need not run after winning on the third day. He was declared the winner.**

Q: So it's like elimination?

**#53N: The losers are eliminated.**

Q: You mentioned that the poor people might have saddles that weren't as elaborate or as well decorated. Typically where did the riders come from? Who were the riders?

**#53N: Where from? All of them were those that lived in Tibet. Take this region for instance—if *yardong* was to take place today in a certain place, those from Tashiling, from Paljorling and from Jampaling arrived and those of us from Tashi Palkhiel would go there. Then horses that belonged to them raced.**

Q: And was it children, young men, old men, women, girls, who raced?

00:37:06

**#53N: Women did not. It was only men that raced, only men raced.**

Q: Why didn't the women race?

**#53N: In those days in Tibet, poor things, girls did not have equal rights like here. Girls were considered somewhat weaker. Girls were not capable of going to trade and did household duties. Men went to trade, could go everywhere, while the girls stayed home milking the animals, churning curd and grinding *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.' [Girls] did such kind of duties at home and not the others. It was not the tradition.**

Q: Did you ever know any girls who would have loved to have ridden the horses and ridden in the race?

**#53N: [I] do not know of anyone.**

Q: So what did the girls and the women and people who weren't racing, what did they do during these five days of horse races?

**#53N: They gathered and watched the show. Presently there are those that play ball and those that watch. It was exactly the same.**

Q: Would you get together with maybe family members and friends who lived in different communities who came to the races?

00:39:28

**#53N: Yes, yes.**

Q: And would you have special foods?

**#53N: At that time you ate your own food. You ate at home and went there.**

Q: And the people who visited from other communities, what did they do for food?

**#53N: I was a child then and do not have much to recount. [I] do not know.**

Q: Can you remember if family members and friends from other communities, would they come to your home to eat with your family?

**#53N: [Speaks before question is translated] The place of gathering was close to my home. So I ate and went there. I have no idea how others ate.**

Q: And then you mentioned the other celebration, the New Year celebration. Please tell us about that. When was that and what did you do? What was special about it?

**#53N: On the first day of Losar, everyone gathered, ate good food and wore good clothes.**

Q: You decorated. What did you decorate?

00:41:33

**#53N: The homes were not decorated much. Some lines used to be drawn inside the tent. At that time it was not a house but a tent. Lines were drawn using *tsampa*, drawings of snow-capped mountains. Lines were drawn on the tent called *gurthik*. Then during the day [we] went to [the monastery] called Goyak Gonpa to watch the *guthor* ‘offerings on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> Tibetan lunar month.’ I spoke earlier about the Goyak Gonpa.**

Q: That was on the first day of Losar?

**#53N: The third day of Losar.**

Q: What kind of entertainment did you go to see?

**#53N: There was *cham* ‘religious dance performance by monks’ to watch at Goyak Gonpa similar to the *cham* at the monasteries here. It was the same.**

Q: I’ve never seen a *cham* lama dance. Could you describe it, please?

**#53N: There are many [characters] in a *cham* like dragons, yaks, lions...there are many kinds.**

Q: Doing dances?

**#53N: It is *cham*.**

Q: How did you know that this dance was the lion dance and this was the yak dance? How did you...how did you know which dance was...?

00:43:36

**#53N: [Interrupts] Everyone performed together. Wearing different costumes, everyone performed together.**

**During a *cham* 20-30-odd monks performed together.**

Q: Was it just monks who would dance?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, *cham* is a lama dance, monk dance.

Q: What was this *cham* lama dance celebrating?

**#53N: On the third day of Losar...if they [interview team] had done a lot of study, [they] may be aware that on the third day of Losar people here gather together and make *lhasol*, ‘offerings to divine spirits,’ and such. It was like that, but I do not know the reason for doing so.**

Q: How far from your home was this monastery?

**#53N: It was not far; it was close by.**

Q: Close by?

**#53N: Like the distance from here to Tashiling.**

Q: How long did it take the family to get there?

**#53N: Leaving in the morning [we] watched the *cham* and returned in the evening.**

Q: A day?

00:45:29

**#53N: A day. The third day of Losar was the last. Then it was over.**

Q: How long did the lama *cham* dance last?

**#53N: Except for a lunch break, [they] performed the whole day.**

Q: Did people take gifts for the lamas on this day?

**#53N: Having been a child then I do not know about this.**

Q: Could you tell us what did your family do for a living?

**#53N: It was rearing animals, just rearing animals.**

Q: How many animals did your family own?

**#53N: There were around 200 goats and sheep.**

Q: Yaks?

**#53N: There were round 20 yaks.**

Q: Did you own these sheep and goats and yaks?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Were you considered a wealthy family or poor or middle class?

00:47:20

**#53N: [My family] was not among the wealthy but among the middle class, among the middle class.**

Q: And as a young woman, what kind of jobs did you have to do?

**#53N: When I was little it was just grazing animals, going after the animals.**

Q: As you got to be 13, did you have extra jobs?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: When she was 13?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: When she got to 13, around that age.

**#53N: When [I] got to be 13-14, [I] left my country and came to an alien land. [We] fled leaving all the animals behind. Then there was bound to be hardship. Then [I] worked in the fields of Dolpa. I had an aunt. My father and mother worked as herders in Dolpa. Mother and I worked and also cooked food to take to Aunt and [Father]. That was how [we] earned a living.**

Q: We need to take another quick break.

[Discontinuity in video]

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

00:49:36

**#53N: That I do not know.**

Q: Can we use your real name?

**#53N: You have interviewed many people. So how was it done? I cannot be the only one.**

Q: Most people have said that they are okay using their own names, but I think a couple of people have said that they'd like to use a pseudonym.

**#53N: [I] do not know about that. [You] can do anything. Yesterday some Nepalese came to interview but I declined. Today you [interpreter], a real Tibetan came. So there being no harm, I have agreed to be interviewed. Otherwise, yesterday some people came asking for an interview but I declined.**

Q: Thank you very much. We really appreciate your helping us in this way. As I said earlier, you get a CD, a DVD, and you'll see what you have said. Who were you afraid of if you were afraid of anyone?

00:51:35

**#53N: If one were to go to where the Chinese are or if the Chinese who have good relations [with the Nepalese] were to see [my] picture and name, and come here to ask questions, one would be fearful of that. Otherwise, I have not spoken about anything to be afraid of.**

Q: I don't think you said anything about China or Chinese...

**#53N: [Interrupts] That is one, and secondly, I have not said anything about the Chinese having done something that they have not done. I have said nothing to be afraid of.**

Q: I don't think you said anything about China. In my notes I have not written anything about China or Chinese.

**#53N: Okay, that is what I think. I have not spoken anything about China but only about my livelihood, the present situation, trade and such. I have not spoken anything [about China].**

Q: I sort of underline the topics that people talk about and I don't have anything there about China or Chinese.

**#53N: Yes, yes.**

Q: So it's okay to use your real name?

END OF INTERVIEW