

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #74 – Tsering Wangmo
July 4, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #74
2. Interviewee: Tsering Wangmo
3. Age: 87
4. Date of Birth: 1920
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Toe Zonkar
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 4, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 10, New Camp No. 3, Dickey Larsoe Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 37 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Tsering Dorjee
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Transcriber: Yeshi Dolma



Biographical Information:

Tsering Wangmo is from Toe Zonkar in Utsang and lived a typical nomadic life, which began early in the morning with milking, churning curd and making dry cheese. Her regular chores also included raising animals and weaving woolen dresses. She describes the food eaten in daily meals.

Tsering Wangmo still fondly recalls those days when the people in her village used to sing and dance during festivals, weddings and even while performing their normal daily tasks. She was often selected to dance at weddings and used to teach traditional songs and dances.

Tsering Wangmo performs *mo* 'divination,' which is a type of fortune telling done with rosary beads. She now spends her time praying and feeding birds outside her home. At age 87, she lives an independent life, away from her daughter and grandchildren, one of whom is a reincarnate lama.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, nomadic life.

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Interviewee: Tsering Wangmo

Age: 87, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: July 4, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview #74, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: First of all, please thank *Ama-la* for agreeing to share her experiences with us today.

Interviewee #74: Okay.

Q: If she needs to take a break at any time, let us know and we can stop.

#74: Okay, but I don't need to take a break. Will it take long?

Q: It will take some time.

#74: That is fine.

Q: If there is anything she doesn't want to talk about or answer, that is perfectly fine.

#74: Okay. I will tell you about all my experiences in Tibet.

Q: Do we have her permission to use this story for the Tibet Oral History Project?

#74: Yes, that is fine. You can say that you have been to this house, videotaped me and that I spoke about the customs of Tibet, the way we ate and worked in Tibet. You can offer a copy to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. You can do whatever you want with the story.

Q: Wonderful. If this were shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for her?

#74: I saw His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I pray to him and recite my *mani*. I have lived a long life and seen His Holiness. Yes, you can.

Q: First of all I apologize for the long wait in setting up. Could she describe her house where she grew up in Tibet?

#74: Don't worry [about the delay]. I am a single person. It is trouble for you who have come here, not for a single person like me. [Speaking in Hindi] You can stay here for an hour or two.

Q: Thank you. Could you ask Ama-*la* to describe her house where she grew up in Tibet?

#74: We had yaks, sheep and horses. There were my father and mother. We had tools for combing the wool, weaving looms and made woolen cloth for dresses. Many people in Tibet were *samadok* 'both farmers and nomads,' however, we were solely dependent on raising animals.

Q: Who lived in the house with her?

#74: There was my father, my mother and all my relatives. Now my father, mother and everyone have passed away. We were a prominent family in Tibet. We were leaders and used to pay taxes to the district. Now all my siblings are no more.

Q: When she says relatives, did her grandparents live with her?

#74: In Tibet, there was my father and my mother. If there was a son, a bride would be brought home and they would stay at the nomadic camp. If there was a daughter, a bridegroom would be brought home for her.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did she have?

#74: I have one brother who lives in Tengyayling [a village in the settlement in Bylakuppe]. The rest have scattered. There is one brother who is abroad. He works for the news media and has two sons. I have a daughter here who has a son and a daughter. The son lives close by and works as a tailor.

Q: How many family members were there when she was living in Tibet?

#74: In Tibet I had my father, mother, older brother, older sister and a host of them who are dead or scattered. I am 87 years old now. My generation is gone. I have led a long life.

Q: Remind her that we are asking about her life in Tibet. Remind her that we are going back in time to when she was a young girl. Ask her did they get up very early in the morning?

#74: In Tibet there was my father and my mother and we got up very early. We had to go to graze the yaks, the sheep and the horses. Then while coming back, we carried firewood on our backs and made a fire. We obeyed our parents, did the milking and tended the calves of *dri* 'animal bred from a yak and cow,' female yaks and sheep. You cannot stay idle in Tibet. It was no fun.

Q: What were the tasks that she had to do mostly?

#74: I got up early in the morning, did the milking and curdled the milk. Then I churned the curd and made butter. I then made tea, roasted grains, ground the flour and ate *pa* ‘dough made from roasted barley flour’ and meat.

Q: So when she got up in the morning, before she had breakfast or anything to drink or eat, did she go out to do the cows? When did they have breakfast?

#74: I got up very early in the morning, when the stars were shining in the sky and made food for the children. I had to churn the curd, dry the cheese and wear a hat and tend to the yaks. The children grazed the yaks and the sheep. There was no happiness.

Q: How many times a day did they eat?

#74: We ate breakfast in a wooden bowl like this. We drank gruel from the wooden bowl. The gruel was cheese, butter and *tsampa* ‘roasted barley flour’ and we ate it by adding tea to it. Then I went to milk. After milking, we ate *thukpa* ‘noodle soup.’ The *thukpa* contained cheese and meat pieces. Later, we went out to work taking with us *pa*, buttermilk poured into the stomach of sheep [made into a container] and *tsampa*. We had plenty to eat in Tibet. Here it is pathetic. The youngsters here are arrogant though they don’t have money or anything to eat. It was very nice in Tibet.

Q: How old was she—was she very young when she first learned to milk the cows?

#74: I was about 15 or 16 when I milked the *dri* in a wooden bucket after tying its legs.

Then I was given in marriage and did weaving and wool combing. There was work as well as joy. Here youngsters are conceited and consider the aged dirty. No one touches me. They say, "Look at your eyes and your clothes. They are dirty." I feel sad, remembering Tibet.

In Tibet there was no time to wash the dirt away. We ate *pa*, drank gruel, ate grains, meat and *thue*, which is a mixture of butter and cheese. He says, "Look at the dirt in your eyes and on your hair. You have no teeth." The youngsters do not like to visit [me]. They feel dirty. That is why we had to partition the house.

Q: She has a wonderful memory.

#74: I am very old and the attitude of the youngsters today is very bad. I feel so sad, which is why I speak that way.

Q: Where did they get their water from?

#74: We got water from the river which flows a long distance. Snow falls and then enters the river. The water is clean and then there are large rivers. In Tibet you do not have to purify the water. It was clean naturally. During winter, in the 10th, 11th and 12th Tibetan lunar months, we broke the *dharka* and loaded them on yaks. Then we made a fire and melted the *dharka*. It was a very difficult job. The youngsters here act like royalty.

Q: Does *dharka* mean ice?

#74: Yes, ice. The whole region froze into ice. We had to break the ice with stones or iron tools and transport them on yaks. The ice blocks were broken into small pieces and then poured into utensils. A fire was lit, the ice melted and you drank it. It was very difficult.

Q: Did they used to heat water to bathe or did they always bathe in cold water?

#74: We bathed in any water in the forest. We didn't heat water. We bathed in cold water. We would be shivering like this [demonstrates shivering] and even our heads. While bathing, the children would cry from the cold. The young boys bathed in ice. There was no custom of heating water to bathe.

Q: So it was not a very popular thing to do. She didn't like bathing?

#74: We had to wash with cold water. People did bathe. The water must be warm. We went to bathe in the flowing water. If one wanted to wash head and body, a fire must be lit. One must wash with ice. It was no fun.

Q: Did people heat water for a bath?

#74: We needed water to drink. There was no water to drink because all [the water] was frozen.

Q: Did people make hot water to take a bath?

#74: No. Everyone went to bathe in the river.

Q: Did they do anything special to keep warm in winter apart from putting on ...?

#74: We wore clothes made of very thick woolen cloth. The skin of sheep was treated and worn. We wove a *tsukduk* 'woolen blanket' and wore it. Thick clothes had to be worn.

Q: Did they used to go to bed, like at sundown? Did they stay out much past dark? Did they tend to go to bed when sun set?

#74: We only went to sleep when we felt sleepy. Otherwise, we sat spinning or doing some wool work. People sang. The nomads sang a lot. Then we danced. Like the dance groups here, we danced often. We didn't go to sleep unless we were sleepy.

Q: What kind of song would they sing?

#74: I cannot sing now. However, in Tibet I used to be one of the dancers. I danced when brides came home to the boys' house. I danced during Losar 'Tibetan New Year'

celebrations. Then there was dancing when bridegrooms came to the girls' house. Now I cannot sing. My legs are also bad.

Q: Can she remember any of the songs?

#74: No, I cannot. I cannot hear well and my health is not good. I will start shaking. Earlier I used to sing and dance. Often I used to go to teach songs and dances. Now I am not sound of health. If I sing and dance now, my body starts to shake.

Q: Would they also tell stories when they were working in the evenings?

#74: We used to tell stories then. It is no use telling stories of Tibet to the children here. We did not sleep, telling stories, going dancing and horse riding. People of Tibet were happy.

Q: Were they scary stories, frightening?

#74: If I talk much, I get chest pains. I am not able to sing songs. I am not well. Now you are here and I must try my best. Otherwise, I am not able to. I am 87 years old.

Q: Tell her we won't take too much of her time. Is she okay now?

[Interviewee takes rest and the tape resumes with a request for *mo* 'fortune telling.']

Q: We are both going to Tibet very soon and we want to know if our trip will be successful.

#74: [Interviewee prays and counts the beads of her rosary thrice] It will be moderately successful. The *mo* is not a very good one.

Q: How did she learn to do the *mo*?

#74: I used to do *mo* right from Tibet. My father was one who did *mo*. My late father used to do *mo* like this in Tibet. In Tibet a *mo* by an elder person came true.

Q: Tell her thank you very much for doing that.

#74: Don't mention it. It was a moderate result from the *mo*.

Q: We are going to go [to Tibet].

#74: Do you know your birth sign?

Q: I am water-rabbit and he [videographer] is fire-boar.

#74: [Interviewee once again counts the rosary beads after learning the birth signs.] The birth animals match. Rabbit and boar match while monkey and tiger do not. The lady's birth sign and the gentleman's birth sign are a good match.

Q: We have been married a long time. It seems to be working.

END OF INTERVIEW