

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #68 – Dickey
July 4, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #68
2. Interviewee: Dickey
3. Age: 76
4. Date of Birth: 1931
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Phuma Changthang
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: July 4, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 41, Old Camp No. 6, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 59 min
12. Interviewer: Sue Gershenson
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Dickey is from the village of Lhopra, which is located near a large lake where people traveled for pilgrimage. Her father passed away when she was young and the burden to raise four children fell on her mother. So at five years old, her mother “gave” Dickey to her uncle as an adopted daughter. She explains that adoption is an accepted practice among Tibetans, especially among siblings when one has many children and the other none.

Dickey describes her early life at her uncle’s home as a happy one. Then the family endured many hardships when her uncle was captured by the Chinese and labeled a rebel because he was wealthy. Dickey recounts horrifying memories of *thamzin* ‘struggle sessions’ in which Tibetans were beaten and tortured under the direction of the Chinese. She was also imprisoned.

Dickey was married at age 23, but became separated from her husband when he fled to India in 1959. Dickey was able to escape in 1960 after being released from prison. Although she searched for her husband after reaching India, she could not locate him. Finally, she received the sad news that her husband had died in Bhutan. To sum up her experiences Dickey says, “My whole life has been suffering and nothing else.”

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, nomadic life, life under Chinese rule, imprisonment, Chinese oppression, brutality, *thamzin*, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interviewee: Dickey

Age: 76, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Sue Gershenson

Interview Date: July 4, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview #68, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: Could she please say her name?

Interviewee #68: Dickey

Q: May the Tibet Oral History Project have her permission to use this interview?

#68: Yes, you can use it.

Q: Where was she born?

#68: I was born in Lhopra.

Q: Where is that? What else is near it?

#68: The town closest to my village is Phomo Changthang. There is a large lake near my village called Yangdok Yuntso.

Q: Describe the lake for me. Was this a lake that you went to? Did you go in the lake?

#68: In summer when there was no ice, people went for pilgrimage to this lake. We circumambulated the lake. In the center of the lake were two hills, a bigger one and a smaller one. When the lake froze we could go there, but not when there was no ice.

Q: What was there on the hills?

#68: On the top of the hill was a temple. The hills were covered with grass.

Q: Was this temple used frequently? Did people go there for festivals and to pray?

#68: It was a small monastery. There was nothing in it. It was an old monastery, which was in ruins. During the time when the lake was frozen, a few people went to make incense burning offerings. Other than that there was nothing.

Q: How about her village? How big was it? How many families lived there?

#68: There were houses like in the settlement here. Next to every rich family, there were about 20 humble ones living nearby. Actually, there were many villages in the region.

Q: How many families were there in the village she was born?

#68: Lhopra, the place where I was born, was a big town. It was a large area.

Q: How many houses were there?

#68: There might have been about a hundred or two hundred.

Q: Were all the families' nomads?

#68: No, they were farmers. My mother and siblings lived in Lhopra, while I was given to my uncle in Phomo Changthang as an adopted daughter. He was quite wealthy, but did not have children.

Q: I would like her to talk about that, but I have just a few more questions about where she was first born.

#68: I was given to my uncle at the age of 5.

Q: How many other children were there in her family?

#68: My mother had three daughters and one son.

Q: Where was she in the order?

#68: I was the one next to the youngest among the four.

Q: Was she the youngest daughter then or was there another daughter after her?

#68: I was the youngest among the three daughters.

Q: Does she remember her parents?

#68: Yes, I remember my parents. I wrote to them [from India] through people who went there, but my mother had passed away. My elder sister was there.

Q: Her father?

#68: My father died before I came away.

Q: I am very sorry to hear that.

#68: Yes, I have suffered so much. When the Chinese arrived, all the wealth that my uncle owned was confiscated during the reformation. I was desperate and alone. My uncle was old and I couldn't bring him with me. My husband escaped earlier for fear of being captured by the Chinese. I had no one, no relatives with me, when I fled.

Q: I am sure that was very difficult.

#68: It has been more than difficult. It was only by the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama that I was able to come here. When I think about it, it feels terrible that I cannot see my relatives and others. It is by the grace of His Holiness that things are okay now.

Q: Did she ever receive an answer to the letter she wrote to the parents?

#68: Yes, I received a reply to the letter I wrote home. My older sister wrote that she was alive and that I should come there [to Tibet]. However, since I have no funds and do not know the [Indian] language, I couldn't do so.

Q: Can she tell us, as a little girl, before she was given to her uncle, what does she remember about her parents?

#68: I knew my parents, but I was too young—only 5 years old when I was given away. So I do not have much to say.

Q: Maybe she could begin by telling us what she remembers about being given to her uncle? What was she told about why she was being given?

#68: They didn't tell me anything. They said, "Obey your uncle and work hard. Your uncle does not have any children." Because my uncle was somewhat wealthy, they thought the wealth would come to me later, which was why I was sent there. Except telling me to work hard and obey my uncle, they didn't tell me anything else.

Q: So they were really trying to ensure that her future would be better.

#68: That is right. My mother had three other children and since my uncle had none, they thought that I would be happy there. Of course, I was happy when I lived with my uncle, but after the Chinese arrived, there was no happiness.

Q: Ask her if she remembers at all what she felt leaving her family at such a young age?

#68: I was too young to feel anything at that time.

Q: Had she met her uncle before she was given to him? Did she know him?

#68: My uncle used to come to visit us.

Q: It sounds like her uncle wasn't married? He was just a single man?

#68: My uncle had a wife. Since they couldn't have a child, I was taken.

Q: Had she met her aunt, his wife also?

#68: Yes, I had seen her.

Q: I am wondering was it common in her village or among the people she knew that a child would be given to relatives who had no children.

#68: Yes, it was common in Tibet. For example, if one sibling had no children and another had many children, a child would be given in adoption.

Q: Was it usually the daughter who was given?

#68: It was anyone.

Q: Does she know why her parents chose her of all the children?

#68: I was lucky because my mother was poor. My mother separated from the [father's] family along with the children and she was poor.

Q: Were all the children living with the mother? Were none with the father?

#68: Since the death of our father, the children were looked after by our mother.

Q: Her mother was a widow when this happened?

#68: My father had died earlier. He passed away before I was given for adoption.

Q: Was she ever told what he died of? What happened to him?

#68: I was young and my mother never told me anything.

Q: Did her aunt and uncle come to get her and take her to their village? Was it very far?

#68: My mother took me there. It was at quite a distance.

Q: How many days journey was it?

#68: It took about three days.

Q: By walking or on horseback?

#68: On the back of a yak. In our village, we used only animals.

Q: What was her aunt and uncle's house like in the village where she lived with them?

#68: They did not have any problems with survival. They were nomads. They were among the higher taxpayers. You could say they were among the richer families. The houses in our village were nothing great to look at. They were made of sod. Sod was cut out and piled to build the houses. On the roof sod was also laid out on wooden supports. Though we needn't worry about leakages, the houses were not beautiful like we see these days.

Q: Did her uncle have a large house?

#68: My uncle had rooms of many sizes. There was a kitchen, a large room with two pillars used for storing meat, butter and *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and a prayer room. There were around four to five rooms.

Q: It sounds like it was a very nice house.

#68: Yes, he had a nice house.

Q: How about her aunt? What was she like?

#68: She was good. She cared for me like a real parent. She was good.

Q: So she brought great joy to their life?

#68: Yes, and I did all the work and cooked for the servants. Then they brought a groom [for me] from Nyero. I gave birth to two children, but both of them died. I have no one left. I am alone. One child passed away at the age of six and the other at two.

Q: She had great sadness.

#68: Yes. When I came here [Bylakuppe], I missed my kids when I saw other people's children. But there was nothing to do.

Q: I would like to hear more about that, but first just a little bit more about life with her aunt and uncle. Were there other children around or did she have an opportunity to play and have fun? If so, how?

#68: Yes, there were many children around. I used to play with them.

Q: What games did you play?

#68: The children of Tibet were not like the children of these days here. We used to play at making tea, using dirt and made a tent out of *chupa* 'traditional dress.' It was like an omen of our escape [when refugees lived in tents]. We took a piece of stick and put a *chupa* on it

like a tent. We pretended to make tea and played father and mother. That was how we used to play.

Q: She said they were nomads. Did she go with the animals when they would travel to other pastures?

#68: I did not go because I was an only child. We had servants who went to graze the animals. I worked in the house when I returned in the evenings, but I did not go to the hills.

Q: Back to feeling that her play was an omen. Did that frighten her or what was she feeling then?

#68: At that time, it was just play. Who would ever think that we would come to such a situation?

Q: So she stayed with her aunt and uncle and at what point was the marriage arranged?

#68: I was about 23 years old when I married.

Q: Who did they pick and how?

#68: He was from Nyero.

Q: How far was Nyero?

#68: It was very far away.

Q: How far away was Nyero from Phomo Changthang?

#68: It would take three days to walk to Nyero from Phomo Changthang.

Q: How did her aunt and uncle know him?

#68: They had friends there who knew [the groom's family] and asked for his hand. In Tibet one's caste was a consideration. One who came from a good caste background and had a [well-known] family name was asked for in marriage.

Q: What did she think when she met him?

#68: [Smiles] I didn't think anything. He did his work and I did mine. We became separated during the escape when the Chinese almost captured him. He escaped earlier when he was to be captured by the Chinese. Though I followed him later, I didn't meet him here [India].

Q: She never met him?

#68: I couldn't locate where he was.

Q: Before that happened, the children were born?

#68: The children were born in Tibet.

Q: She went to live in his village then when they married?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He came to live with her.

Q: Did they all live in her aunt and uncle's house?

#68: Yes.

Q: He helped work with their animals and the land?

#68: Yes. In our village there was no farmland. We were purely nomads.

Q: The children were born and at what point then was she separated from her husband? And how did that happen?

#68: The Chinese arrived in 1959. The Chinese said that we were rebels and then they carried out reformation. My uncle was imprisoned and when that happened, my husband thought he too would be arrested by the Chinese and escaped.

Q: Why were they labeled as rebels?

#68: They called us rebels because we had wealth. We had worked hard to make a good life. Labeled as rebels we were not allowed to talk to the poor families.

Q: How did she feel about that?

#68: If I couldn't make the escape, the Chinese wanted to send me to China. So my uncle said, "It is not worth it for you to remain here. They [the Chinese] won't let you stay in the house. They say that you have to go to China for education. They will not leave you. I cannot escape. So you must go." So along with some neighboring families, I made my escape. I couldn't go to my family because they were living in Lhopra. We [Uncle's family] were not allowed to contact my mother in Lhopra because we were labeled as rebels.

Q: Her husband had already fled at that point?

#68: Yes, he had already fled. He had fled in 1959. It was 1960 when I escaped.

Q: Were the Chinese in her village for any amount of time before the arrests happened?

#68: The arrests started soon after the Chinese arrived. All the influential people were captured and imprisoned.

Q: They just entered the village and started arresting the people?

#68: Yes, they did.

Q: They didn't sweet-talk them first?

#68: They didn't do that.

Q: Does she have any idea how many Chinese came?

#68: Many Chinese came to our village. They made our monastery their base camp.

Q: Did they do other things as well as arresting people?

#68: They divided our animals and properties among the poor people. They called us rebels and did not allow us to live in our own homes. In Tibet there used to be sheds where animal saddles were stored. We were made to live in such a house. Our servants and the poor people were made to live in our house. We had no house.

Q: Where did she live then?

#68: We lived in the place where we stored the saddles. It was like a cow shed.

Q: What was that like for her?

#68: Of course the hardship was terrible as my uncle was imprisoned. We couldn't even lift up our heads. We were burdened with anxiety. Labeled as rebels we were not even allowed to speak aloud! It was panic and suffering all the while.

Q: [Not allowed to speak aloud] to anyone?

#68: Not to anyone. My uncle and I were imprisoned. When food was given, we couldn't ask each other to eat. In Tibet our main food was *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa* and water.' When *pa* and meat were brought to us, my uncle and I passed the food to each other, but couldn't tell each other to eat aloud. We were not allowed to speak.

Q: She was actually in prison with her uncle?

#68: I was imprisoned with my uncle for one month.

Q: Let's go back then to the day that happened. What does she remember about the day that they were arrested? Were they arrested together at the same time?

#68: My uncle was captured earlier and I was taken in later.

Q: Then?

#68: We were imprisoned with many other people, but we were not allowed to talk. If a person was brought in after undergoing *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' with his hair pulled off or with a bleeding mouth, we just stared at him, but could not ask him what had happened.

Q: That sounds terrifying.

#68: They [the Chinese] were terrifying and subjected us to a lot of suffering. They did that from 1959. I waited until 1960 hoping to be able to bring my uncle who was in his 60's with me. But he fell ill and I couldn't bring him. So I fled alone. I am alone and do not have any relatives here.

Q: What was she told when they came to arrest her? Her uncle was already in prison. In the meantime where were her aunt and the children?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The children were already dead.

#68: When they arrested me they said, "You rebels have ill-treated the people." We worked so hard for what we had and they called us rebels for that.

Q: Did they take her aunt as well?

#68: She was in the house.

Q: She wasn't arrested?

#68: She wasn't arrested.

Q: Her children had passed away by then?

#68: Yes, they had passed away. They were dead before the arrival of the Chinese.

Q: Why was her aunt not arrested?

#68: They did not arrest the women. I was much younger. They did not arrest the old women.

Q: She began to tell us some of what she saw in prison, the people who had been tortured. Were they harmed in any way?

#68: They [the Chinese] did not beat me. However, they beat my uncle.

Q: What did they do to him?

#68: They beat him saying, "You rebel! You have ill-treated the poor people." He was old and just before I escaped, he died.

Q: He didn't die in prison from what I understand?

#68: He didn't die because of the beatings. He was beaten and he died after he came home.

Q: Did she actually observe anyone being tortured or she only saw them after the Chinese had done that?

#68: Yes, I saw that. They would say, "Rebels, come out!" and all the prisoners were brought out when a *thamzin* was happening. We sat there with bowed heads, not looking up. They ordered us not to look up. We sat with our heads bowed and couldn't look up.

Q: What did they do?

#68: Those that carried out the *thamzin* were our people. They slapped them on the cheeks, pulled at the hair and said, "You rebel, how much have you ill-treated us? What did you do to us?"

Q: What did they beat with?

#68: They used their fists and kicked. They hit at them [the prisoners] with whichever. Some would be bleeding from their mouth, while others had their hair pulled out.

Q: She must have heard them. It must have been also awful to hear them cry out?

#68: They didn't make a sound. They dare not cry out. They took all the beatings quietly. Those that beat them could beat them like cows and they bore it. When they did the *thamzin*, they would say, "We'll root them out. We'll eliminate rebel 'so-and-so.'" When they said they were going to root out the rebels, I had a rich aunt whose husband was in a separate prison cell from ours; when he heard about eliminating, he somehow managed to get a sharp instrument, and the next morning he was found dead with his neck cut.

Q: He cut himself?

#68: He cut himself. He learned about the elimination and was subjected to *thamzin* a lot in the day. So he cut his neck. The people exclaimed, "There is a dead dog thrown over there." There was no one to take charge of the corpse and it was thrown on the ground.

Q: Where did her aunt's husband die?

#68: He died in the prison. His body was thrown out like a dog's.

Q: By the Chinese?

#68: Yes, that's what we say, but most of them were our people.

Q: She recognized him?

#68: The body was thrown in the pasture where we used to graze our animals. I didn't see it, but those who saw said that the dogs were eating at the body.

Q: That must be so disturbing to her whole sense of how a body should be treated.

#68: They [the Chinese] looked down on us and said that they had thrown a dead dog there. Speaking about Tibet brings back pain because I have seen and experienced all that.

Q: Is she okay to continue?

#68: Is it enough?

Q: Can she tell how she escaped?

#68: Nearby where I lived were some smaller neighborhoods [whose residents] were going to escape and I came with them.

Q: Did they tell her they were going?

#68: When I lived in Tibet, I was very cordial with people. One of my neighbors said, "Your uncle is dead. If you live here they [the Chinese] will make you suffer more as you are labeled a rebel. Come and flee with us." So I escaped with them.

Q: What about her uncle's wife?

#68: There was no way I could bring my uncle's wife with me. She was very old. She told me, "You go. I cannot walk." And so she was left behind.

Q: Her uncle was released or escaped from prison?

#68: He was released during the leniency period and ordered to think over [his past deeds]. They [the Chinese] said that it was the Policy of Relaxation and released him and he died.

Q: What was the Relaxation Policy?

#68: During the so-called Policy of Relaxation, they released those prisoners who carried lighter offenses.

Q: What year was it when she escaped with this group of people?

#68: It was 1960. We lost Tibet in 1959 and I lived there one year after that.

Q: That was a year after her husband fled?

#68: That is right. He fled earlier.

Q: How many were in her group and who was in her group?

#68: There were about 30 people in the group.

Q: From her village?

#68: Yes.

Q: What was their route? How did they travel and where did they go?

#68: We traveled to Thari and came through Bhutan.

Q: How many days were they traveling to reach Bhutan?

#68: It took us two nights traveling from our village. We walked only during the nights.

Q: Were there Chinese along the way?

#68: We heard that there were Chinese, but we traveled in the night.

Q: Were they on foot? Was anyone able to bring anything with them?

#68: We drove yaks with us, which were laden with our food. There were a few yaks.

Q: Can she just go on with the story? What happened when they reached Bhutan?

#68: At Bhutan we sold the yaks and carrying our belongings on our backs, the Bhutanese escorted us to Dhangla. Dhangla was the border area between Bhutan and India.

Q: Directly? No stop in Bhutan?

#68: We stayed in Bhutan working on road construction.

Q: Where was that?

#68: We lived at different places doing road construction.

Q: Was that in Bhutan?

#68: It was further inside Bhutan from Dhangla, where we stayed on road construction camps.

Q: Where in India did they do road construction work?

#68: From there [Dhangla] we came to Buxa. It was like—we sort of escaped from Dhangla. The Bhutanese were not letting us go and the [Tibetan] official in Dhangla and another official from Dharamsala helped us escape to Buxa.

Q: The Bhutanese escorted them to Dhangla.

#68: Yes, they did bring us up to Dhangla. They said that if we went to the plains of India we'd die and they wouldn't allow us to go further. We [Tibetan refugees] said that we wanted to go to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all the people came away. We reached Buxa and stayed there for one year. From Buxa I went on road construction to Simla.

Q: What was she doing in Buxa?

#68: At Buxa we were provided with food rations. There was no work.

Q: Did she have hope of finding her husband at some point?

#68: When I escaped [to India] it was with the hope of meeting him. I searched for him and sometimes heard that he was in the [Indian] Army and at times I heard that he was in Bhutan, but I couldn't locate him.

Q: Where did she go then from Simla?

#68: From Simla, I came to this settlement [in Bylakuppe].

Q: You finally did get word of your husband? What had happened to him?

#68: I finally heard that he went to Bhutan and died there.

Q: When?

#68: When I was in Simla I heard that he joined the [Indian] Army and then went to Bhutan to meet relatives and died there.

Q: In the meantime she remarried here?

#68: I met my present husband here. In Simla I lived alone hoping that my husband would come, but then I heard that he had passed away. So when I came to the settlement I met my present husband. I am a member of the Tibetan New Settlement [of Bylakuppe]. I live here as my husband belongs here [the Tibetan Old Settlement].

Q: Is there anything else about her life or journey, her escape that she hasn't told us or we haven't asked about?

#68: You have not left out anything. My whole life has been of sufferings and nothing else.

Q: Has she found any joy in her life now?

#68: Thanks to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I have joy now, but I wish we had our independence. I could then go to Tibet and meet my relatives, though my parents are dead. Except for this anxiety, I am happy due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I cannot work hard or cultivate the lands now. We have leased out the lands and depend on the proceeds from that.

Q: How does she feel about the Chinese these days?

#68: I wish we could get our independence through the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I am angry at the Chinese, but His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, "If you curse them [the Chinese], that will not come into being." Otherwise, I would swear at them to die! That's what I think in my mind. They occupied our country, they seized our wealth and they caused suffering on the people and killed them.

Q: Is there any advice she would like to give to the next generation of Tibetans?

#68: Would they listen to us? They would call us green brains [unripe, uneducated] if we advise them.

Q: If you were to advise them irrespective of whether they listened or not, what would you advise them?

#68: I would say that they should dress in the traditional way and obey the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Look at how the youngsters are behaving these days. The boys smoke and drink and the girls wear different kinds of clothes. I do tell them, "Don't wear such clothes. What do you think by wearing such a skirt?" and they tell me, "Grandma Dickey, it's enough if you don't wear it." I do advise them, whether they listen or not.

Q: Please thank her very much. Tell her I know her story was hard to tell and I wish her for the rest of her peace and I pray that she has a chance to return to Tibet.

#68: *Tashi delek* 'Good day.'

[Interviewee puts her thumb impression on the release form. Gifts are presented to her.]

END OF INTERVIEW