

**Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project
Oral History Interview - Diaspora Public Hearings Participant
Project Organizer: The Advocates for Human Rights, Minneapolis, MN, USA
Funder: Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, MN, USA**

Interviewee (J): Jane Samukai

Interviewers (I): Diana Morissey, Theresa Dykoschak

Date: January 14, 2011

I: Today is Friday January 14th 2011, and we are interviewing by telephone Jane Samukai, for purposes of Project of the Minnesota Historical Society, and Advocates for Human Rights in order to primarily gain our understanding of your experience with the TRC process and the hearing at which you testified. Jane, can you please state your full name.

J: My full name is Jane Alison Samukai.

I: Ok, and can you tell us what prompted you to participate in the public hearings?

J: Well, what prompted me was my... I was trying to figure out what was going to help me to get over my trauma, and I discussed it with my sister who is in Liberia and I tried to talk to her about it and, I needed to talk more about what happened to me during the war. Because I have lived in denial and you know, I have lived in confusion, I have lived in just blaming myself. And so, when I heard of it and my sister called me and she told me that now there is this thing going on you know, and you have to, if you want to, you can participate in it. Hopefully, it might help you emotionally.

I: So..

J: And I discussed it with... Excuse me?

I: I'm sorry, and I will really try not to cut you off, I'm really bad about that sometimes. So it was a call from your sister that actually got you thinking in that direction?

J: Yeah.

I: Did you talk...

J: But we had talked about it because when she heard about the TRC, she said that there is TRC coming to Minnesota and you know, since you want to talk about it, you need to think about if you want to do it. It was my sister who brought it up.

I: And did you talk to anyone else before deciding, or was her suggestion enough to prompt you to get you to do it?

J: I discussed it with my ex... my, well he was, my ex-husband, my children's father, because he was present when the incident happened to me in Liberia. And I told him what I was planning to do. And I also talked to a lady that I met, Judith Baker. I also discussed with her what I was planning to do. Yes I did, I discussed it with two persons.

I: Okay, and you said... what is Judith's last name?

J: B-A-K-E-R.

I: Oh, Judith Baker, oh okay. And how did you get to know Judith?

J: It was through my sister who knew another like Liberian lady and I was referred to Judith.

I: Ok, well that's great, we are really glad that you made the decision to testify, we have read your testimony and found it very powerful. How did you feel about your decision to testify, was that a tough decision for you?

J: Yes it was, it was very tough.

I: What... what made it difficult? What did you have rolling around in your head as you were deciding whether to testify?

J: Cause I've, up to going to testify, when I had to make the decision, I've lived a life of a victim and I wanted to move from that victim level to being free, you know. And so when I had to go and testify, now I was going to bring me back to the day the incident happened, so I had to fight it off, you know. Because every time I have talked about it, it's like one on one, but now I had to appear before you know, a mass group of people and talk about what happened, it's like going to be a lot of flashbacks you know. So it was very tough.

I: Did you experience a lot of flashbacks as you were getting ready to testify?

J: Yeah.

I: What kinds of emotions did you experience?

J: I was having like anxiety, my anxiety level was high. And I was very nervous, and I was scared!

I: Yeah. What did you do to prepare for your testimony?

J: What did I do?

I: Yes.

J: Well personally, I prayed about it, and the human rights personnel I was working with then tried to reassure me, Laura Young, she reassure me that I was going to have a lot of supporting groups, that there were people there to help me emotionally you know, to overcome a fear. So that prepared me too, you know.

I: Did you ask others to...was there anyone you asked to come attend the hearing, to provide moral support for you?

J: My foster sister who lives in Minnesota, who didn't know the details because I never really shared with any of my family, she was among the audience, she was there, she was there to support me.

I: That was your foster sister. Is she also a Liberian?

J: Yeah.

I: But you didn't know her at the time of the events that you testified about?

J: I knew her!

I: Ok.

J: But I mean, I knew her but I did not discuss the details of what happened to me during the war. They knew that I was raped, that's all but you know, but the details of what went on that night they didn't know because you know, she's like a little sister to me so they respect my privacy.

I: Between the time of the horrible events that happened to you in Liberia and the time of the hearing, how many times had you told anyone the details of what happened?

J: Well, the first time I actually told anyone was in Liberia when I had to go through counseling when I attended the... there was a program set up for abused women and girls in Liberia, that was the first time I ever you know, talked about it. And after that, I never talked about it again. My husband and I never even discussed it until the rebel that raped me suddenly appeared and then we had a talk about like, me leaving the country. That was just the rape but the details of what happened that night, we never talked about it.

I: Did your husband attend the hearing?

J: No, he is in Liberia, he is not here. That's my ex-husband.

I: Right, your ex-husband, I'm sorry. What did you expect the process of the public hearings to be like?

J: Well I guess my expectations, I mean, it was met, like I told you I didn't know, It was like fear of the unknown, so I didn't know what to expect until Laura explained to me what it was going to be like. That I was not going to be in this alone, that they were going to protect me emotionally. Emotionally, I wasn't really prepared to do that. But when she told me and I had prayed about it, and had encouraged myself and talked to my sister, what I expected was like, having somebody to talk to before getting on stage and those were the things that Laura told me to expect and those were the things that happened.

I: So until you talked to Laura you didn't really know what to expect?

J: No.

I: Did you talk to Laura before deciding to testify or had you already decided to testify by the time you talked to her?

J: I had decided to testify because I had two ladies come to Judith's office and I spoke to them and I gave them... that's how my story was elected. I gave them, I talked to them, I talked to two ladies so I gave them details of what happened to me during the war so they took my story to the human rights and that's how I was selected before I talked to Laura, who gave me the

assurance that you know, what to expect and who was going to be there to support me emotionally.

I: Okay. And where does Judith work?

J: Judith works with HIAS. Oh my gosh. She works with HIAS, is it HIAS. It's H-A-S...I forgot what the acronyms stand for, she's in Philadelphia, she is the Executive Director for HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Service & Council of Migration Services in Philadelphia, PA].

I: Oh, okay and it was in her office?

J: It starts with an H-A-S... It's the HIAS some council [Council of Migration Services], its in Philadelphia... hold on let me give you correct information, I don't want to give you the wrong information. I'm sorry, I didn't know that... It is HIAS. It's a migration service of Philadelphia, who works with immigrants and refugees in Philadelphia.

I: Oh, OK. Tell me what you remember about the public hearing itself.

J: Um... What I remember about the public hearing, it was very, very emotional. We... I had, I gave my... the day of the hearing I gave my statement, and I was questioned by the commissioner. Prior to going to the hearing I had to talk to a psychologist, I had to talk to talk to another, I think he was an actor, who had to teach me how to deep-breathe and how to pause and how it feels like, and so I did that before the hearing, thirty minutes before the hearing, before my appearance on stage. I had a support group there, I had a doctor there, I had a psychologist there and then I had the actor that was preparing me to appear on stage. And during the hearing I gave, I was sworn in, and then I gave my statement and I was questioned by the commissioner.

I: And how did you feel about giving your testimony? At the time you gave it, what were your feelings?

J: At the time I gave it, I knew I was doing the right thing. I knew I had to finally let the world know what had happened to me. And at the time I gave it I felt that I was being the voice for those that were victimized during the Liberian war that were there, and couldn't speak up. So I felt that I was doing the right thing.

I: Did you hear anyone else giving their testimony at the hearing?

J: Yes but, honestly speaking I can't remember much about what they were saying, as I was like, concentrating on myself.

I: Right. And did you hear any testimony before yours or was it after you had testified?

J: No, it was before mine.

I: Okay. How many days of the hearing did you attend?

J: The day I arrived from the airport I, they drove me straight; they actually asked me if I wanted to go to the hotel, or if I wanted to go to the hearing. I said I wanted to experience you know, just sit in the audience and you know... So I did, I went in there and just sat there briefly and went in the back and met Laura and the other group. And then I went back to my hotel.

I: And then was your own testimony the next day?

J: Yes.

I: Okay. When you first entered the courtroom the day that you arrived, what did you experience? What were your thoughts and feelings?

J: When I entered I saw the set up the stage and everything, and somebody was already giving a testimony. I just started weeping.

I: And tell me about that, what feelings were going through you at that time?

J: Emotionally I was completely destroyed, like you know, why do we have to go through war, why we have to go... you know, why did we have to turn against each other? Why do we have to come and testify? You know, it's just like... at some point I just—there was this faint voice in me that didn't want to go further, that didn't want to let everybody know that I was raped again, that didn't want everybody to look at me as the girl that was raped, you know. Then and I just threw off this feeling and stepped up to do what I wanted to do. I had planned, I agreed to do it, and I knew that I was doing it for everybody else, especially like I said for those that were already dead. Somebody had to do it, especially when it comes to those that were raped during the Liberian war.

I: And so between that day, and the next day when you actually gave your testimony, did you start to change your mind at all, or were you determined to go forward?

J: I was determined to go forward. Like I said, when I entered, and just sat there briefly I started to cry. That's... in there, while I was sitting there, I wanted to give up, but I said no, I can't give up. I had to go forward and do what I needed to do. I strongly felt that I needed to do it, so I wasn't going to give up.

I: So then the next morning, the day of your testimony, were you the first witness to testify that day?

J: (Sobbing) I am sorry, I'm just trying to wipe my tears.

I: Oh, I am sorry, should we take a break?

J: No, it's okay. I'll be good. Hello?

I: Yes, okay yes so the next day when you arrived at the hearing at the day of your own testimony, were you the first witness to testify that day or did you hear anyone else before you testified?

J: No I wasn't the first, I think my hearing was two o' clock in the afternoon, but I didn't hear anyone else, I decided not to listen to it, because the hearing was very, it was emotional. Everybody had their own specific issues and it was very emotional and I couldn't go through anybody else's you know, hearing.

I: Okay, so you arrived just in time to give your own testimony then that next day?

J: Yeah. Yes, yes.

I: Okay. As you were on the stand giving your testimony, was the experience what you had expected or were there different feelings than what you were expecting to have?

J: Well, when I was giving my testimony, I think it was the experience what I was expecting and what I had planned so nothing was changed, actually they did not change anything for me, they told me that if I wanted to just stand up and say it I could say it, if I wanted to read my statement - so I went between reading my statement and then explaining, so it was exactly how I planned to do it so you know, it was expected so it was nothing that had changed for me.

I: Can you describe your emotions during the time you were testifying?

J: During the time I was testifying I was really.....It brought back the emotions of being hurt, of being wounded again, of being a victim. And, it just destroyed me because I felt that, you know, I didn't deserve what happened to me, and the rest of the Liberian women that were raped or you know, tortured. We were innocent of the war, and we fell victim to the war and our government could not even protect us you know. And it really hurt me you know, that we had to reach to this point where we were not protected and we were victimized, so I was really, really destroyed.

I: Did you end up reading your statement or did you give your testimony from memory?

J: I read, I read my statement. I read along and explained while I was reading.

I: Okay. And you talked a little earlier about what the experience meant to you but, can you me again when you had finished your testimony, how did you feel about having given that testimony?

J: That's the first time I felt good about what I did, you know. Because I felt that at that time I believed in the commissioners, and I knew that they were there to listen to us, and I just knew that whatever we told them, those things that happened to us, those, our voices and our statements, were going to be taken seriously. They were going to know that we were in pain, that we had been in pain all this time, and we needed somebody to listen and they were there, since they were there to listen, we were going to tell them all about our story, and we were the only story tellers, we were the only group that could tell our own story. So since they were there to listen we were giving them our story and I believe that they were going to take our story back to our country and find the perpetrators, and they were going to be the solution for us. So that whatever happened, it won't happen again.

I: Was there anything that you didn't testify about that you now wish you had talked about?

J: No.

I: Okay

J: No, I think I said everything that I wanted to say.

I: Okay. Were you surprised to have commissioners ask you questions?

J: No, because I was told that they were going to ask, that they might ask questions. And I didn't have to answer their question, that's what they told me.

I: Okay. Were you asked any questions that you were uncomfortable answering?

J: Um...No.

I: Okay. How did you feel about the questions that you were asked?

J: I felt good. I felt very good and, well yeah, I felt good about the questions that were asked. Unfortunately, I mean, one of the questions they asked me, I'm in this country, I don't know where the rebel that raped me, I don't know where he is in Liberia, that was one of the questions they asked me. And at the time I testified, I was going through my divorce, I had you know, me and my ex-husband. So I didn't have any contact, to find out from him whether the rebel was still in Monrovia or where he was so, that question was the only question that... I mean I did answer, I didn't know whether he was in Monrovia or where he was but besides that every question they asked me I think they were the right questions to ask.

I: Is there anything that you now regret talking about at the hearing?

J: No, I don't regret anything.

I: Good. Were there things that you heard or learned about for the first time at the hearing?

J: About me?

I: Well, about you or listening to other people testify.

J: Yeah. There were things that I read about after, because after the – I testified – I came back to New Jersey, I started reading other testimonies on the internet so there were things that I didn't know about and I read about you know, and it was very shocking.

I: What – can you tell me any that you remember specifically?

J: Well I read about some family members that were killed you know... Some that... their arms were amputated; it was just a lot of distressing stories on the internet. Some times they were burn, you know. Some families were abducted from their home and they never saw them again, so...

I: Did anything that you learned about through the hearings change your own beliefs or impressions about the problems in Liberia?

J: (Sighs) Well... What I learned from the hearing is that we have to stay together as a country. And we have to prevent what happened, not to happen again. And we have to speak out, you know. They have to give Liberians this time, the space, to speak out. And people should not be judged, you know, so that everybody can have the right to say something when they want to say it. And they will not be ostracized by society. And I learned that because we have to be willing to support one another. If someone is afraid we have to be there for them. And not talk about them and not sideline them and not listen to what they have to say but be judgmental, we have to stop being judgmental and listen to people because they have a story to tell and unless we listen, we wouldn't know their story.

I: And can you think of any changes either in the society in Liberia or in the government of Liberia that you think would help prevent things like this from happening again?

J: Well, as the government of Liberia is concerned, I just think the government of Liberia needs to protect her citizens you know, it needs to protect her citizens and they need to educate the Liberians and they need to stay united and support one another emotionally because there is a lot of hurt and pain still in that country. I had a chance to be... to get treatment; since I've been here I got a treatment here. I had a chance, but there are some Liberians that don't have the chance. They don't have the opportunity and there is no treatment for them. They are still living with this trauma and they are going to live with it for the rest of their lives. So right now Liberia needs to, the government of Liberia needs to incorporate that healing process into their budget where people can freely go and talk to people and have their support groups and have people overcome and tell their stories, there are a lot of stories to tell in that country, and unless we tell out stories, the hurt will continue. And the government needs to provide those avenues and opportunities for people not to be afraid, so that they can speak up. But once they have the rebels in power and the rebels are ministers and the rebels are leaders, people are still going to be afraid to speak up. Because, when you speak up somebody is going to know where you live and if something is going to happen to him, you never know, it's still going on. There is no justice, people are still being raped. So, those are things the government needs to work on. That is very serious. Somebody has to tell the story, and somebody has to be willing to listen. And where are the support groups to listen to these people that have stories to tell? People are hurting in Liberia. Unless we tell the story, unless they find a support group, unless they find somebody who cares, they are still going to be hurting. Post-traumatic stress is a very dangerous thing for people's health.

I: Do you believe that your testimony was a step in your own healing process?

J: Yes, I do.

I: And have you talked to anyone else for whom... Did you talk to anyone else who testified?

J: No.

I: Okay.

J: I've not spoken to anyone who testify.

I: Okay. When you decided to testify was that in part as a step in your healing process?

J: Yeah.

I: Okay. And did the testimony help you as much as you hoped it would in your healing?

J: It helped me, it helped me... It helped me find a way to healing. It just like directed me, after testifying, I knew I had to find a way for proper healing in my life. Once I've told my story.

I: And you feel like you have been a lot better since then?

J: Yeah, I feel a lot better since then. After that I had to go for counseling so I feel a lot better for post-traumatic stress disorder. And I completed my counseling last year because it had to be

financed. I'm still going through my emotions with the immigration because up until now I have not gotten my political asylum yet.

I: What do you think the TRC process meant to Liberians in general?

J: Well, it was... The TRC process the Liberians welcome it because, like I said, it helped them to open up to people that they could trust, it helped them to open up to people felt, they felt that those people care a lot about them and they wanted to tell their story to the world. So the TRC process was like a healing process, it should have been a healing process for Liberians. A healing process for everybody to move on to heal and find somebody to help them and move on in their daily lives. So I think the TRC process is bringing healing and reconciliation to Liberians. Unless you tell your story, the hurt continues. Unless you tell your story to someone who wants to listen, someone who believes you, the hurt continues. So bringing the TRC was like unifying Liberians, it helped us to understand that we need to tell our stories. So people could know that we were still hurting and that these were the things that were happening to us. And we are glad that we had Liberians to listen to us.

I: Have you read most of the hearing testimony on the internet?

J: No not most, I read some of them.

I: What was your perception of the involvement of non-Liberians in the TRC process?

J: Non-Liberians?

I: Um hum.

J: Oh! I was very like... I was happy that we had non-Liberians involved in the TRC process.

I: And why was that, tell me more about that.

J: Because, for me it was like going to a therapist who doesn't know you. So he is going to be willing to listen to you instead of being judgmental. He is going to be willing to listen to you instead of putting his problems first. And that's how I felt about it, about having non-Liberians who were concerned, and willing to listen to our story, and willing to tell the world what we have been through. How we were hurting.

I: How do you feel about the TRC public hearings as you look back now? You know, now two years later, looking back what are your thoughts and impressions of that whole process?

J: Well, two years now looking back I still think the process, I mean I don't know what's going to happen next, but I still the process had good intentions, and I still think the process was good. Because the process, like I said, the process helped me to find a leeway to healing.

I: After coming to this country, and before the hearing, had you been in counseling and therapy?

J: Before the hearing I did go to counseling but I didn't complete my counseling. Because the doctor I was talking to was a male doctor and I was ashamed to go into detail about what happened to me and by then I couldn't talk to anybody and I just stopped going to counseling.

I: And after the hearing, your counseling was more effective?

J: Yeah. I did go, I did complete my counseling.

I: With the same....

J: I actually went for therapy.

I: Did you complete counseling with the same doctor or with someone else?

J: No someone else.

I: Okay. And did you seek out the therapy yourself or how did you wind up in therapy as well?

J: No, I got help from Judy Baker.

I: Okay. Have you been part of any of the reconciliation activities, or TRC related activities or community activities since giving your testimony at the hearings?

J: No.

I: Have you had the opportunity, has anyone approached you about taking part in any activities like that?

J: No.

I: Have you ever returned to Liberia since coming to this country?

J: No. I don't have political asylum, so I can't leave. I'm still fighting my political asylum.

I: Would it be your hope some day to return to Liberia?

J: Some day, yes.

I: Tell me about that.

J: (Crying) That's my home..!

I: Actually, why don't we take just a break for a minute and I'd like to check and see if Teresa has some other questions that she'd like me to ask. Or ask herself, actually.

T: I think, maybe just a general question if you know, if there is anything that you would like to add at this point.

J: No, I don't have anything to add, I just want to say, the hearing was emotional but I thank God that I was one of those that was selected to tell my story. And I am very grateful... to the human rights organization for giving me the platform to tell my story. I'm very, very grateful. And through telling my story, it was a big help for myself. And to finally talk about what happened and to finally read books, and to finally watch the news and to finally just write the word rape, which was very difficult for me to write. I'm very grateful for that.

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I: Thank you very much; we really appreciate your participation in the hearings in giving your statement, and in giving this interview today.

J: You are welcome.