

**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 (A): Ali Sylla

Interviewer (L): Laura Young

Date: January 21, 2011

L: Can you remind me what year you left Liberia?

A: Well I left Liberia in 1994.

L: Ok... for the first time. And did you arrive in the United States that same year?

A: No I went to Egypt and I came to the states in 1996.

L: Ok... Do you want to give me actually your, are you still using your email address on file?

A: Yes.

L: do you have a phone number in Liberia you want to give me?

A: Yes.

L: What is your date of birth?

A: January 8th, 1973.

L: Ok... Excellent. You know, it's been, whoa, been two and the half years since the public hearing. I think I Ahmed told you that we want to talk to people who participated in the Public hearing and know what the experience was like for them...as they look back on it. Can you tell me a little bit on why you decided to take part in the Public Hearings in Saint Paul?

A: As for me, I was, um... I was speaking for many people whose voices had not been heard to kind of discuss some of the issues openly so our nation can come to through this healing process. It was a very good thing so that we can reconcile with one another. And understand some underlining factors of the civil war, so this is why I participated in the Public hearing.

L: Yeah, great... ok... And I mean.... What kind of decision making process did you make to come to that choice... what things did you think about, did you talk to anybody specifically or did others give you advice or anything like that.

A: Well for me, it was a major challenge actually...to make the decision to go public. I was putting many people's lives at stake. I talked to my family; my parents back home, those in authority back home as well. It was very challenging and daunting but I think it was a good thing to do.... Holding people accountable but also letting go of some of the issues that I was going through as well.

L: This is kind of a related question.... But how did you feel about your decision to go public and what emotions were you experiencing as the public hearings approached or got closer.

A: Well...it was a lot. You know there's always the fear of what happen... understanding the history of the civil war, you know 300,000 got killed, I mean... viciously got killed, there's a lot of guilt because of my own ordeal and letting go of what I was going through. It was a lot of anxiety.

L: What kind of things did you do to prepare for your testimony? What processes did you go through or what kind of things did you think about?

A: Well... I am a very spiritual person... I depend on spirituality a lot. I think the advocates did a good on preparing people on what the process would look like, what the expectations would be. I think they made me very comfortable in the preparatory stage. I think I just kind of bear with some of these issues, talking to people, speaking in a way that it does not unfold it such a way that I won't be affected. So those I the things I did to prepare myself.

L: That's very helpful. And you know sort of putting yourself back in that moment of the public hearing back here in St Paul, what you remember about the hearing, who was there, how the experience of giving testimony went.

A: Well I think for me, when I got there, I felt I was very safe to give my story, my testimony. I think the preparation like going back to talking to a male health professional, understanding were you are at that time, was an added advantage. All the people were very sensitive, too. Many of the people invited, were people I knew, more government officials were there, those who participated in the process, ladies were there. Secretary of States for African affairs was there, it was good.

L: And actually being up on stage and telling your story was powerful, what was that like? What was that process like for you going through that experience?

A: It wasn't my first time being on stage, but there is always a fright when you are on the stage in front of people. I think for me the preparation was helpful. Once I got on the stage I was very nervous, once I got my story out, it helped me lift a burden by telling my story in the public. I think was sitting on that story for a long time, 19years. I think as the quote "let go and Let God in" and I was doing that by letting go of my burden and letting God take over.

L: And this may sound like a funny question... but is there anything you left out of your testimony at the trial? That you didn't have the chance to talk about or that you didn't have the chance to talk about. Or is there anything you talked about that you wished you had not talked about?

A: I think for me, one of the things that...I was expecting was to follow up on those who committed the atrocities to some of us, understand them, lets forgive one another. Everything I said, I meant.

L: So... you would have appreciated the opportunity to have a follow-up interaction?

A: That's correct.

L: That's good to know. Well you know, as you look back on the Public hearings especially those that took place in the United States, what do you think that process meant to you as a Liberian and what do you think it meant to Liberians in general.

A: I think it puts our history in retrospect. I think it allows all of us to know our history. For me, I did not know so much information about the Liberian history. I got a lot out of it. Some of the Public hearings from back home are very interesting because some of those people were key actors in the process. I think the public hearings were good things for nation building and nation healing.

L: Ok. When you think about healing, how do you think the public hearings have contributed to nation healing?

A: Well I think it did. I think those who had the opportunity to speak their story, got some healing. I can speak for myself, it led me to not be stagnated but to get over some of those fear and put it out there. I think it was good.

L: That makes a lot of sense. Since you participated in the hearings, have you been engage in any other sort of hearings or any other healing and reconciliation activity?

A: Well... I did not get involved in any TRC activity... what I did was form an organization called the Center for Counseling Restorative Dialogue... it is in Monrovia right now... actually I am trying to do a youth initiative with a Christian group... I work with youth organization; I work with many young people. When I was in Philadelphia, I initiated a conference between Africans and African Americans... we must understand that some Liberian children are experiencing trauma and coming to America and going through the school system without counseling is hard. Since I have been here, I have being going there every Thursday.

L: You have been so deeply engaged with the Liberian Diaspora and Diaspora issues.

A: Liberians should be doing this but we are not doing this because we don't have social positions. Even in the Liberian organizations in Minnesota... everyday there is fighting, it's challenging...

L: Yeah, I hear you.

L: I have one sort of final question and I want to give you the opportunity to add anything you liked about the process and your experience. How did you perceive the involvement of non Liberians in the TRC process and the TRC public hearings?

A: Well... I think it's good... I think it gave us another eye to look at ourselves. And also tooIt gives us the perspective to understand that we are in a village... that if one person is affected... the entire world is affected. I think it was a good thing for non Liberians to be involved in the process. Look at the assistant secretary of African affairs; he was deeply involved in Liberian affairs. I did not even know that until we got to the public hearing. Having him involved provided some light that we are in a global village and we are connected globally, socially, economically. I think it was a good thing. Their experiences were important.

L: Were there other things that came out at the public hearing that you were surprised by? Anything else?

A: I think so people were not honest though, in the process, some were honest. I wanted to know how the State Department was involved with those running our country at the time of leaders like Charles Taylor, them not participating or stopping the war and they not stopping the war when they had the chance which led to many people being killed. Those things did not come out until the public hearing and those are the things I learned.

L: That makes a lot of sense. That is an interesting comment actually. Well as you know... as you look back on the experience, is there anything else you like to add, to be documented about that process.

A: Well... it was my first time going to Minnesota and then knowing that we had a large population in Minnesota which did not show up for the public hearing. I would add that a massive campaign should had been done to make more Liberians know about the civil war., tell them about the benefits of the public hearing. The atmosphere was very good.

L: Yes I understand what you are saying, it would have been great to see more members of the community there and people learning from that experience about their country and history. Well... his has been really fabulous, I am sorry that we had to do it over the phone; it would have been great to see you in person. When are you heading back to Liberia?

A: In a couple of weeks.