

**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): Bishop Bennie Warner

Interviewers (I): Mark Kalla, Ahmed Sirleaf

Date: January 26, 2011

I: Hello sir.

A: Yes.

I: Mr. Vice President?

A: Yes sir.

I: This is Ahmed Sirleaf your fellow Liberian here with my colleague Mark...Mark Karla, hello Bishop, I was one of the volunteers at the hearing in St. Paul and I also volunteered for this Oral History assignment.

A: Wow.

I: Yeah...so we have a technician here Bishop setting with the recording device to make sure that he can record our voices properly...he should be ready in a minute.

A: I hope that recording machine got good ears to hear.

I: We hope so too, because this is important to us.

A: That's right.

I: Yeah, we've been tracking you down, now we finally got you....we are grateful for that...so we are about to start now, are you ready?

A: I am ready.

I: Great....we will like to thank you very much for sending us back the paper work, and we have it before us here, so we just wanted to confirm some of the information you provided to us so we can record today's date and commence the interview.

A: Yes sir.

I: Ok, so I won't go over most of the other stuff, but your full name is Bennie D. Warner as you wrote here, is that correct sir?

A: Yeah, that is correct, that is my name.

I: Ok, and let me see here, you just some other basic information, you are affiliated with Bong and Margibi counties in Liberia right, as well as Grand Bassa county?

A: I was born in Margibi County, but I chose Bong County as a choice of county where I spent great deal of my life in there.

I: Ok, ok.

A: In there, I got married there...Bong county is contributed to me a great deal and so I owe it to Bong county and...I belong to two counties.

I: It's understandable.

A: Alright.

I: And your current profession here in the United States is clergyman and educator?

A: Yes sir, I am a fully ordained clergyman at the United Baptist church and I am a professor of number of colleges here, but I m retired now, but I am still a teacher and a preacher.

I: Ok, as I think you know from some of the information we sent, first of all I am Mark Karla and I am [a volunteer with The Advocates for Human Rights].

A: Hi, Mark Karla.

I: Thank you, I am participating with Ahmed Sirleaf in this interview and we want to record your impression of the TRC process and particularly the public hearings in Minnesota.

A: Yes.

I: And I think we.....initially if you could sort of elaborate on why you decided to participate in the hearings.

A: Yes, well I was invited, to come over and participate, so it was based on the invitation, I didn't volunteer to go there because it's always good to go where you are invited, then you feel secure to speak what you have to say, so based on the invitation from the TRC, I was very glad to come over and also to have an opportunity to express my own feelings.

I: Right, but Bishop you understand that even though some people were invited, they declined for a number of reasons, so for instance some people might have been discouraged by family members or just other emotions, that's why we are asking, once you were invited and all the information was provided to you, what was that decision process? Why did you decide to do it, did you talk to family, friends, former colleagues? You know, what was that decision making process in your mind? And around you?

A: Well in my own mind I felt I had the obligation to respond to the invitation, on my own will, because I didn't have anything to hide, I wanted the Liberian public and the TRC to know where I stood at the time and even now, and the reason why I responded was because I held a very important position in the government of Liberia, I was vice president, and so I was under that obligation, as vice president elected by the people, to come and tell the truth based on the questions that were asked, so that was my own will, without consulting family or friends, you

know, because it was my personal responsibility to respond to the invitation and to take part in the hearings.

I: How did you feel about the decision to participate as the hearings approached?

A: Well, the format, I was not quite happy with the format, because it was questions and answers, there were no time to rebut as you heard the other people, there were no time for interactions, no time for the audience to ask questions or to rebut or to state otherwise, so there was not that interaction, it was sort of like one way, question-answer, question-answer, and that's it, because there were times when some of the people who came and made testimony said something, said some things that were not true, that people knew that there were not true, but the people didn't have the opportunity to challenge the respondent, the reason that was been asked the question, you know, so to me that part did not go too well.

I: So it did not meet your expectations?

A: No, not at all, because I would have liked to see a forum which the audience, the witnesses, the people who witness the people who were making the testimony, carried out some activities and they were not challenged to the veracity of some of the things that they were saying, and some people felt that some people told outward lie, before the TRC, to make their pictures look good, it was good impression, but you know but the truth did not really come out in some areas.

I: Would you have made the hearings longer if you could have?

A: Oh yes, yes, definitely...it requires time, and it requires probing to leave no stone unturned in terms of the questions, you know it was not a...to me it was not an investigation, but it was a matter of telling the truth, and you cannot tell the truth by coloring it or making your side look better and put the blame on somebody else, there were only one instance where I noticed somebody taking personal responsibility, I did this, or we did this, you know, personally, but most of them were blaming other people for what they did.

I: So I take it as you expected more of a cross examination?

A: Yeah, exactly, yeah, cross examination, so if somebody made a testimony, then you say what about this? I saw you do this or there were some witnesses saw you do this? How do you explain that? How do you exonerate yourself on that case? Or that incident?

I: How do you feel about your own testimony?

A: Well my own personal testimony, I could have been even challenged, you know from the audience and what I said and so you know, part of the question, or for clarification kind of things, or what about this? What about that? You know, so there were not that kind of rebuttal or further inquiry for clarification and things like that so, what I said stood as it was without any challenge, and in my own case, I didn't put blame on any particular person, I took personal responsibility for whatever it was that I or didn't do, you know, that's what true reconciliatory is all about, it's to take personal responsibility and accountability, but not blame somebody else or somebody did this or that. For example there was a guy who said he was with Doe all the time, he stayed with Doe, he slept with Doe, they ate together, but he has no idea of who made up the list for the people to be executed, at that point, he was very vague, how did the information get out? Or did it get to Doe? Was Doe in on the making up the list for the people to be executed? So that part was very vague and the truth did not come out.

I: Well, given what did happen at the public hearings, what did they mean to you as they occurred? It must have had some value for you.

A: Well, I think it was a good thing for people to get out of their chest, and of their minds and of their conscious about the truth, and guilt or no guilt or remorse and those kinds of things, and as I record, even the TRC hearings in Monrovia, many of the people who came out there, there were no perhaps maybe one or two exceptions, there were no remorse about what happened, you know, you got about half a million people died, and nobody has to my understanding to this point taken any responsibility or accountability or to say we regret or we are sorry for this or that, that was happened to our citizens and to our people, that part just went out as a smoke, so it was always somebody else did something. What about you? What role did you play? What did you become accountable for? And do you have any remorse or regret for that? There wasn't that, so my own feeling is the people died almost for nothing, they just died for nothing, and furthermore, I did make some suggestion about recommendations, about follow up, what should happened, one of them was held up to be a National Day of mourning for half a million people that perished, a National Day, there ought to be also a National Museum where the recordings and the writings, all of the papers and documents of the TRC could be kept, preserved, so the coming generation, succeeding generation will see that, almost like the Holocausts' museums that people have in American here, in Israel, they have it there, so we have our own type of Holocaust, but all gone now, all evaporated and the likely hood is people may forget what happened, may repeat it, so there are some unfinished things that need to be done, there should be like I said a national day, not just little segments .

I: Bishop have you been involved in sort of reconciliation type since the hearing?

A: No, no I've not. I have not been involved in any, but I have studied the National Reconciliation hearing in other parts of the world, South Africa in particular with Desmond Tutu chairing that, and also seen what happened in Sierra Leone, they had their reconciliation thing and books have been written, the is one particular pamphlet that was written by the ex-soldiers, the perpetrators of the crimes and all of that and those on whom the crimes were committed, it's a little book with title "Friends Again." Which is a sign of reconciliation, we did this to you, but I forgive you and we are friends again. That came out, but where are documents of the testimony, except of the report that were made, we don't have copy of it, we haven't seen it, but those things shouldn't get lost, there should be a place where those things are kept, some of the weapons, you know all those other things that could fit into a museum type of thing.

I: So you really wanted to see some reconciliatory value come out of this so like a memorial?

A: Exactly, like an end result, not what you report to government or the NGO or whoever set you up to do it, but how does the nation profit or benefit so that it can be a future deterrent and future generation read and hear and see the devastation and destruction the crimes that were committed so that we don't go back to doing that again, so what was the lesson that was learned? What was the lesson that was learned? Instead for some old people to tell us that oh this happened and just the other day I was watching a DVD somebody made of the destruction of Monrovia, the dying, I saw people carried people in wheel barrel, I saw fields littered with humans skull the pictures of those things, those videos should be reserved, placed somewhere in sort of a museum place or a library with that information available so people can see it, then they could see what happened in Liberia, it's not anything that should be forgotten very soon.

I: So Bishop I am going to ask you this because you mentioned that you where in, you held high office in Liberia as the vice president, that's very historic, and now that you are talking about this need for memorial, and memorialization museum and to preserve all these memories and records, what do you think about what we are hearing from the political side of things that the TRC made its report and represented to the government of Liberia and it doesn't seem that they are implementing some of what they are asking for, although some of what you are asking was recommended actually in the report to the government of Liberia, to the national legislature and to the current president, but we haven't heard anything much other than just silence.

A: Yeah, because you see the thing is, the problem here is, the TRC was set up by ECOMOG or whoever authorized the TRC to be set up, but it did not give the TRC enough authority to implement their recommendation, so that is the weakness of this whole process, they don't have no legislative authority, they don't have no way to incarcerate people, they don't have no power to fine people, and the government are people to whom you make the report to have people who hands are not that clean in terms of their role, culpability in the crimes committed or in the things that happened, things that lead to the destruction, no body, except for the International Court of Justice where Taylor is, and Taylor has not been brought to court by the TRC or by the Liberian government, it is the government of Sierra Leone that is taking Taylor to court of justice for crimes against humanity, what about the thousands of Liberians that died at the hands of Taylor soldiers? What's about that? How do we hold Taylor accountable, responsible for what he did? So none of that is going to come out, so it's the TRC is what I think is like a bull dog that can bark but cant bite, it doesn't have the authority to implement, so how do to get pass that? How do we get over that impasse, of where the TC is now? So what is happened, is like the TRC is like a joke. So is their work going to go in vein? What's going to be the outcome of their work? So I think the TRC people need to go back to the people who set them up to find this out, was it the Liberian government that did? That set them up, you see what I mean? You following what I am saying?

I: Right, right.

A: It's like sending a man with, giving a man the authority to do something, and he does it and brings the complain to you, the report to you, but them it looks like the bucks stops the.....these are at the Executive mansion, or at the Liberian legislature, because many of the people at the legislature are guilty, what's the man name, Prince Johnson, that's the man that killed Doe, and he's a Senator, Senior Senator, so how do we resolve those problems, the issues of justice and mercy? How does that come out?

I: So let's come back to St. Paul.

A: Ok.

I: Because this interview is part of the Minnesota History Society, they try to record significant historical events that immigrant communities have engaged in, so they consider the public hearings as a significant historic even the Liberian community and its partners undertook in 2008 in St. Paul here, as an elder-statesman who came and testify and participated in this reconciliatory process, were you shock by certain people you saw there, did it invoke certain emotions for you? If so, who were those people? What where those emotions like?

A: Not at all, because I have never seen or met any of those people except for my, I had a relative there, who I didn't expect to be there, and this the guy that said they took part in the rant-sacking and bursting people's windows and stealing watches and stuff like that, that's the

only surprise I had, but the rest of the other people, like one Colonel or one Army man and all that, I didn't know them, I never met them, therefore, it didn't invoke anything in me except that some of the things they were saying, the truth did not come out, from what we have heard and allegation so forth, for instance, there is a report that George Boley took the soldiers to the, Tolbert house and open the safe and they got the parts out and demand that he brought the suit case without opening it to Doe, now you know and I know that's not the truth, you will go and open a safe and find a suit case full of money, and that's the money Tolbert was taking to Zimbabwe, for Robert Mugabe's independence day program, and the story behind that or the allegation is that the open the thing, took all those money out and took the empty papers to Doe, so where is the truth in this whole matter? You see what I am saying? The same thing happened in the Minnesota, St. Paul, and it was too brief, it should have lasted longer than that.

I: Are they things that you heard of in the testimony that was the first time that you heard?

A: No, no I didn't hear much of what I expected to hear, so there was no surprise, for instance how about the raping of women? How about the pregnant women they opened their gut and took out their babies? No body, I haven't seen anybody who took ownership of that. And say this is what I did, you know back home in Liberia they got a man called "big butt" or "butt" or something like that who said they ate human beings and all those kind of stuff.

I: Butt Naked.

A: Well that's about the few instances where some segment of the truth came out, just one minute, ok?

I: Sure.

A: Ok, yes sir, I am back.

I: Ok, you are back?

A: Yeah.

I: Ok.

A: What's the man name? There is kind Butt man or some kind of?

I: General Butt Naked, you mean General Butt Naked guy?

A: Yeah, Naked Butt, General Butt Naked.

I: Joshua Blahyi, I think that's his name.

A: Yeah, Butt Naked is about the only man I heard of that came out and said this is what I did and this is what we did. You know eat human beings and stuff like that. But many of those things, Boley for instances when out there and justified his self. I was in Monrovia when Boley, either I was in Monrovia or had come back from there when Boley when for his testimony, I mean for the hearing, lot of other people, they just went and bragged about what they did or what they didn't do.

I: So was there anything you would have loved to say but you didn't the change to say at the hearing that you will like to say here? Or clarify here.

A: Well, personally, I would have loved to have seen some interaction, like rebutting and the audience didn't participate, the audiences were only there to hear, they just sat down as listeners, silenced listeners. It didn't open up enough in terms of the participation, I would have loved to have seen that, some interaction, questions and so on, the only people that raised the questions were the TRC members, so the questions only came from the TRC side, what's about the audience? Liberians who experienced in their own life time some of the atrocities committed by some of the very people that were sitting down in the hearing, either testifying or confessing, so that was the weakness in my own perspective of the hearing in Minnesota.

I: So what do you think now in addition to everything you have described about the memorialization and museum and you know, about how documents should be preserved and all that, what do you think as a leader in Liberia and a religious leader as well, that Liberians should do, friends of Liberians should do to reconcile, or what, I guess I question is what reconciliation activities will you suggest or do you see as a way forward to deal with all these different points of contentions?

A: Well, I think though that without confession, without honest and true confession, there is no forgiveness, because it is through the true confession that you have forgiveness and reconciliation. Where is justice? So the justice about justice has not been answered, because the TRC recommendations apparently are not implementable or if they can be implemented, then people who suffered may see a redress in their problem and issues facing them to bring the kind of reconciliation. So, the situation has not been resolved in that it is hanging there, recommendations are there and it has come to a dead end and therefore my concern is how do we get to bring in justice to the people who suffered injustice? Because justice will only come through the implementation of the TRC recommendation.....Some people, they recommended that they cannot take part in politics for thirty years or twenty years, some people I believe have been fined, but TRC cannot fine anybody, it has got to go to maybe the justice department for the execution of the recommendation of the TRC, where is the TRC power to bring about justice? I am confused in terms of how do you reconciled when the people who have suffered have not seen any justice come to them.

I: What sort of justice are you talking about?

A: Justice seems to be that whoever committed the crime must pay for it. Nobody has, has anybody paid for the crime they committed? No, because in fact many of them has turn out to be millionaires in Liberia, they are millionaires, they are living well, the very people that perpetrated the crimes, they got top level positions in government, crime and punishment, question of crime and punishment.

I: How will you answer your own question Bishop about what to do now?

A: The thing to do now, the thing to do now and is how do we break the impasse between TRC and the government of Liberia. What was the mandate given to the TRC? That I don't know because I have not read the instructions, the authority given to TRC, and who were they suppose to submit their recommendations to? Was suppose to be the body that instituted them or was it the Liberian government? And if it was given to the Liberian government, suppose to be given to the Liberian government, does the Liberian government have any obligation at all to obey or to carry out the recommendation? Is there something missing there? You know my own

feeling is it sounds to me that something is missing there. It was just an exercise domed to end on paper and nothing else, then I think we need to go beyond that and try to restructure and develop or move on to develop a society and hope that thing like that don't happen again, and then you face with questions of employment, unemployment, education, Liberia facing a lot of issues there, for development, how do you go from what happened there to how you develop a wholesome functioning society? You know I have a feeling that some people even to now still hold some bitter feelings about what happened in Liberian, the mothers and the fathers who lost their wives, husbands, children and all of that, the people who committed the crimes.

I: Do you think there is something wrong in handling with the nature of the Liberian society or the way the system was set up? I ask that question because during the TRC process we heard a lot about tribal divisions and Americo Liberians versus quote unquote country-people, it seems that there were a lot of structural hatred and structural inequality issues that precipitated the conflicts and that off course responsible for the ensuing difficulty to reconcile.

A: Yeah, many of those things, which we ourselves experienced in our own life time which is the process of development, evolutional process of development, all of that, but if you look at the role of education, the role of education, good education in breaking down those barriers, those barriers are able to be broken down by education. Look at me personally, I am from the Bassa tribe, the Marbhan Bassa tribe, and because I have a relatively good education, I was not affected that much by the Americo Liberian discrimination or segregation, even though there were some feeling regarding me own experience in politics and government, but I overcame all of that and I was able to embrace the tenants of a democratic society, and lived in it and functioned well, so where you have lack of education you have this problems of discrimination and we still feel those burden of discrimination of tribalism and so forth, but all of those things were brought to abbey the alibi or the reason for the coup, the tribal things have been around us a long time and many of the administration, Tolbert administration, Tubman administration did a lot of things to break down the barriers of tribalism, so to use tribalism as an excuse to stage a coup, I think is a poor excuse, what fueled the coup in most cases is greed for power and somebody wrote a book in which they a number of things power, greed, money and women, as the motivating factors, principled motivating factors that brought down the government of Liberia and you know this whole thing was not perpetrated primarily by tribal people and if you look at how many people were in government of tribal origin, then you can understand that the tribal thing was just simple used as a scapegoat, when I became vice president, the first thing I observed after a while was the cabinet, the president's cabinet, I said to the president that the cabinet did not present Liberia at all because most of those people in the cabinet then were people from Monrovia and Americo Liberians, and upon my presentation to the president about my observation on that, the face of the cabinet changed, I was vice president, Jinbha Brewh was the Minister of defense, Minister of lands and mines, we had Troko Kpaharhier, minister of post and telecommunications, the man who is now speaker, Geologist was minister of lands and mines and all of that, so the color of the cabinet changed and then you look at the legislature, senators, representatives, representing various counties which has moved from the time during Tubman time when you had Americo Liberians representing Bong county, Lofa county and all these other counties, where during Tolbert time, you have indigenou people representing their county, you know, so great strides were been made and changes were been made and education played a very important role in that.

I: Do you think Bishop that the TRC process particularly in St. Paul had any educational value or do you have any last comments on your testimony there or what you thought about the process?

A: Yeah, of course, I think more education, you heard, some of you may have heard Obama's state of the union's address last night and I think he spent great deal of time emphasizing on education, I am very much discouraged about the educational system in Liberia now, it seems to me that we don't have an educational vision, we don't have a post civil war educational plan and we playing with education for the future, if somebody went and research on J. J. Roberts, who in my mind was the only president of Liberia who had a vision of education for the future of the country, it will be J. J. Roberts, he took his personal property, whatever left over and gave it to a board so that Liberian children will be educated, he had a vision to build a school in every county for education, and today you go to Liberia, and the people playing with education, there is no educational vision, no educational standards, teachers are not satisfied, they got multiplicity of little schools, which are not standardized, their education, there is no emphasis on direction, I n a county recovering from civil war, every body should be educated, especially those child soldiers who are now adults and soon to be grand children who never went to school and so the unemployment in Liberia is 85%, people here in America crying because the unemployment has gone to 9% or 9.something %, look at Liberia, people are not employable in Liberia, we got this problem of education, so education will be one of the solutions to lot of the problems that we have in Liberia, if more people are educated, they know the voting process, you know, you got 15 to 20% literacy in Liberia, you got 85 or there about percent illiteracy, how does democracy function well in a society that is half educated and half illiterate or a society in which the majority of the people are still f the tribal mind set and other half is mixed up with western concepts and so forth, so we got those problems and education would be a solution to those problems, so I think one of the outcomes of the TRC ought to be a good recommendation on educating the public, public education and reduction of illiteracy which will in the long run prevent the kind of chaos that we had in Liberia.

I: Well, and I think that's part of this Oral History Project and the form that you signed giving the right to the Advocates to use this going forward I think can be used for that purpose and we thank you for your involvement and it's very important in this process of documenting what we've done and giving the new nature of doing these hearings outside of the country is an important project but we want to thank you.

A: Yes, let me just make one last comment, we will not have enough schools in Liberia and therefore I am leaving next month first week in February to go have another Elementary School, I want to go build an Elementary school from donations that I received and on my own vision to add another school, because that's the seriousness of how we need education in Liberia and I thank you very much for this opportunity to share my views.

I: Thank you so much Bishop, we know your time is, you're very busy, you talked about your school project in Liberia and so we are very grateful that you could take some time today to participate in this Oral History Project with the Advocates of Human rights alone with the Minnesota History Center, and we just want to note that on the form that you return to us that we recorded that today January 26, 2011 was the day that we recorded this interview that we did this interview and you signed the form down here.

A: Yes.

I: So we thank you for that and we wish you good luck on your trip in Liberia on the school project sir.

A: Yeah, call me anytime for follow up.

I: Yes, great, we will do it, thank you very much.

A: Alright.

I: Bye-bye.

A: Bye.