



Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Ololade Benson (Part 1 of 9)



Role:	Translator
Country of Origin:	Nigeria
Interview Date:	23 October 2008
Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewers:	Donald J Horowitz Robert Utter
Videographer:	Nell Carden Grey
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

Ololade Benson speaks about her role as a translator and the challenges of communicating sensitive material such as witness statements concerning rapes and killings. She discusses her personal engagement with an international non-profit organization that she founded in 1998 to help single mothers, widows and children in Rwanda. She emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability for charitable organizations operating in post-conflict settings. Benson draws attention to the targeting and suffering of women in Rwanda during and after the genocide.

The transcript of Part 1 begins on the following page.

Part 1

- 00:00** Donald J Horowitz: Good morning. My, my name is Judge Donald Horowitz. I'm from Seattle, Washington in the United States and I'm interviewing you today for the ICTR Information Heritage Project and you're aware of that. Are you not?
- 00:16 Yes, yes I am.
- 00:18** DJH: Okay, and would you give us please your name, the country you're, you're originally from and your job title?
- 00:25 Yeah. My name is Ololade Benson, originally from Nigeria. Now I live in the UK and I'm an English translator with the ICTR.
- 00:35** DJH: And you translate what languages to what languages?
- 00:38 From French into English.
- 00:40** DJH: Okay, and when you say you live in the UK, you mean Great Britain?
- 00:44 Yes, Great Britain, yeah.
- 00:46** DJH: And how long have you worked for the ICTR?
- 00:51 I joined the ICTR in September 1996.
- 00:54** DJH: Okay, and before that, when you – we've talked before, we've had a brief conversation. You, when you were I gather in Nigeria or, or in your earlier experience, you had had some concerns over problems with, that children have.
- 01:14 Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 01:14** DJH: Can you tell us a little bit about that?
- 01:16 It just breaks my heart to see children running around half naked, hungry without shoes and . . .
- 01:23** DJH: Whe-, where was, where did it first sort of gr-, grab you . . .
- 01:26 Actually, it first struck me in Addis Ababa.
- 01:28** DJH: Okay, in Ethiopia.
- 01:29 Yeah, because . . . In Ethiopia, yeah. It's a cold country and I just could not understand how children would roam about the streets without shoes, without the proper clothing, you know, for the, for the weather. And sometimes they run after you, pull at you, my, my trousers or something asking me for money, and . . .

- 01:48 DJH: So let me go back and let's put a context to that, okay? You grew up in Nigeria.**
- 01:52 I grew up in Nigeria.
- 01:54 DJH: And when did you I-, – did you have your education in Nigeria?**
- 01:58 Primary, secondary, yes. Then I spent four years in Togo, then I did a post-graduation in translation in Belgium.
- 02:05 DJH: Okay, and in Togo is that where you went to up-, upper . . .**
- 02:08 First degree, four years.
- 02:10 DJH: Yeah, and what was your degree in?**
- 02:11 In French, first degree in French then I . . .
- 02:13 DJH: Is French your native language?**
- 02:15 No, English. We speak in Nigeria.
- 02:16 DJH: English is. Bec-, bec-, in, because of Nigeria.**
- 02:19 Yeah.
- 02:20 DJH: And where, where in Nigeria did you . . .**
- 02:21 Lagos, I am a Lagos citizen.
- 02:23 DJH: In Lagos. Okay, and then Togo and then . . .**
- 02:28 Then I went to Belgium, for a post-graduate in translation and interpretation.
- 02:32 DJH: What led you to be interested in that?**
- 02:35 In French or . . .
- 02:36 DJH: In, in translation.**
- 02:37 In translation. I think my father had a friend who had a hotel in Togo at that time so when I finished my O levels they were looking for something for me to do and he said, "Okay, why don't we go visit my friend in Togo?" And he knew the dean at the faculty of European languages and they got talking and that was how I was enrolled for the course.
- 02:58 DJH: Mm-hmm.**
- 02:59 And I haven't looked back since then. I'm very happy with what I'm doing, yeah.

- 03:02 DJH: That's wonderful.**
- 03:03 Yeah.
- 03:04 DJH: More people should have that, as part of their (___) . . .**
- 03:05 Yeah, I'm v-, I'm really happy because, I mean, the exposure, you know. You meet a lot of people and all that from different parts of the world.
- 03:12 DJH: What year did you get your degree in language trans . . . ?**
- 03:16 '77.
- 03:17 DJH: S-, (___) . . .**
- 03:18 No, se-, s-, sorry. '77 I finished my O level. '81.
- 03:22 DJH: Okay.**
- 03:23 Then '83 I, I finished my post-graduate in translation, yeah.
- 03:26 DJH: And from '83 on why don't you give us, tell us, what was, w- . . .**
- 03:30 I, I worked briefly for the government of Nigeria while trying to find my feet in, you know, in the translation fie-, in the field of translation, because it's very difficult when you come in. Everybody considers you a rookie. You don't have experience. They don't want to give you a chance.
- 03:44 Then I did a few jobs for ECOWAS. ECOWAS . . .
- 03:47 DJH: For what?**
- 03:47 . . . Economic Committee of West African States.
- 03:49 DJH: Okay.**
- 03:49 The sub-regional organization for West African countries. And they had an office in Lomé. And since I had lived in Lomé for four years I found myself shuttling between Lagos and Lomé, and . . .
- 04:00 DJH: Tell me where Lomé is.**
- 04:01 Togo, Togo.
- 04:01 DJH: Okay.**
- 04:02 That's where I did my first degree.

- 04:03 DJH: Right.**
- 04:03 Which is like four, five hours away from Lagos, you know. And then somebody mentioned my name to the guy who recruits at the OAU, Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa and that's how I started doing OAU meetings as well.
- 04:18 DJH: And that's when you went to Ethiopia.**
- 04:19 That's when I went to Ethiopia.
- 04:20 DJH: And tell me what year you, you came to Ethiopia.**
- 04:23 Ethiopia – between '90 and '96, sometimes two to three times a year.
- 04:27 DJH: Okay, and it was there that you, () first ki-, the kids, the kids first came to your attention.**
- 04:29 First, yeah, yeah, yeah, came to me, yeah, yeah.
- 04:32 DJH: And what was your job specifically at, in Ethiopia?**
- 04:37 Translation, English translator.
- 04:39 DJH: Now, is there a difference between translation and interpretation?**
- 04:41 There is, there is.
- 04:42 DJH: Tell us the difference.**
- 04:43 Translator it's more – we, we write. We translate documents. Interpreters interpret people who are talking, speeches. Yeah, so.
- 04:50 DJH: Okay. Have you in, in the course of your career done both?**
- 04:53 I have, but I'm not very comfortable with interpretation, yeah.
- 04:57 DJH: Okay, we'll get to that in, in a bit. Okay, so you were in Ethiopia from . . .**
- 05:02 1990 to 1996, on and off.
- 05:04 DJH: Six years.**
- 05:05 Yeah, six years because I was a freelance translator.
- 05:07 DJH: Ah, okay.**
- 05:08 Yeah, freelance.

- 05:08 DJH: You weren't employed by . . .**
- 05:09 No, no. I wasn't employed. I was freelance.
- 05:10 DJH: But you . . . Right.**
- 05:12 Any time they needed someone to relieve somebody who'd gone on leave or they had a big meeting and they needed more hands, then they'll, they had a list from which they just recruited freelance. They'll send you a ticket and . . .
- 05:24 DJH: Okay, and during that period of time did you do almost exclusively translation?**
- 05:28 Translation for the OAU, only translation.
- 05:30 DJH: Only translation.**
- 05:31 Only translation.
- 05:32 DJH: All right, and then in 1996 . . .**
- 05:34 I joined the ICTR, September '96.
- 05:37 DJH: Let me go back two years.**
- 05:39 Yeah.
- 05:40 DJH: April 1994.**
- 05:42 Yeah, okay.
- 05:43 DJH: Okay. Do you remember where you were?**
- 05:45 I was in the UK then. I had moved to the UK.
- 05:47 DJH: You were in the United Kingdom.**
- 05:48 Yeah, in London, yeah.
- 05:50 DJH: What would you, what were you doing there?**
- 05:51 I had just, I had a – there was an OAU meeting in Tunis, a summit, a summit and from there I moved on to the UK. I just started I think one, two hundred dollars for the ticket the OAU had bought for me and I moved to the UK. And there were problems in Nigeria; election problems, rioting and all that, so my brother just decided to send my two, I have two boys, two sons; so he sends my sons to me.
- 06:14 And all the schools were closed and all that and he said, "Why don't you register your kids in school?" And that is how I moved to the UK. Yeah.

- 06:21 DJH: Okay. And in, so in April 1994, you were in the UK.**
- 06:24 I was in, I was in the UK.
- 06:25 DJH: And di-, is, did you hear about what happened in Rwanda?**
- 06:27 I did and I saw loads of images on the TV.
- 06:31 DJH: Mm-hmm. Had you had any previous connection with Rwanda or the (), or the states around Rwanda?**
- 06:36 Not really, but an interesting thing happened. While I was trying to get a job in the UK, I started doing voluntary work. I was working with Concern Worldwide; they have an office in Rwanda and with Africa Rights, (), and they also had an office in Rwanda. And I was doing some translation and just odd jobs, bits and pieces around the office.
- 06:57 And the more I read materials, the more interested I was in, not just Rwanda as such, but in doing voluntary work, you know. And then, and that really aroused the passion that I had to do that kind of thing more in me.
- 07:09 DJH: Okay.**
- 07:09 Yeah.