



Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Colette Ngoya (Part 3 of 8)



Role:	Translator
Country of Origin:	Cameroon
Interview Date:	13 October 2008
Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewers:	Lisa P. Nathan Donald J. Horowitz
Videographer:	Max Andrews Nell Carden Grey
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

Colette Ngoya reflects on her role as translator during the early days of investigations in Kigali, Rwanda, and later during trial proceedings in Arusha, Tanzania. She addresses challenges of translating difficult material, such as evidence and witness statements regarding rape and killings. Ngoya also discusses difficulties in translating legal terminology, learning differences between civil and common law systems, and with the Tribunal's system for three-way translation using English, French, and Kinyarwanda. She emphasizes the importance of public education in law.

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Part 3

- 00:00** Lisa P. Nathan: **So you have worked at the ICTR as a translator for over ten years.**
- 00:07 Yes.
- 00:09 LPN: And what have been some of the challenges of being a translator?**
- 00:14 One of the most important problem that we encountered is that most of us were not lawyers. Most of us were not lawyers. I am not a lawyer as tr-, in my training so – and you know that the lawyers they have a very particular language; the, the, the idioms, so we had to learn the way lawyers think.
- 00:44 You had to be able to write a document that a lawyer will recognize as a legal document because if you write it as a lay person, they feel, you know, they have their specific language so you have to, to make that effort. So we had to learn law in a way and at that time the chief of section organized some legal classes. We were given the training on, you know, not, not in depth but so that we know the language, we know the way they function.
- 01:20 We had to learn about the civil system and the, and the common law system. Know these things and before you could, you know, be efficient, yeah. That is one of the most difficult things, part of it. But fortunately this is a closed circuit place and so the language is almost the same. Things are most of the time the same thing so if you really put your mind into it you can, yeah.
- 01:52 LPN: And once you learn it then there's (___) . . .**
- 01:53 Yeah, yeah, you become conversant kind of. It's not too difficult to know what it is but you, you know with time also because at the beginning we didn't have, like, appeal trials. Now we are having. So you go on learning and because it is different, the type of thing you're supposed to work on is not exactly the same thing as in the first instance, yeah, that kind of thing.
- 02:18 So that is the challenge and in the same time it's very interesting because you learn new things, you learn how lawyers think, and – personally I feel everybody should be trained in law. Not in-depth but since our lives is administered in a way, there is no way you can escape law, so maybe – I feel, you know like in the secondary school they should give people some basics knowledge of law because you really need it to function I think.
- 02:51 LPN: So earlier in other, you were mentioning the difficulty when you were in Kigali and I imagine it might have come over as well when you came to Arusha. The difficulty of translating witness statements – the, the descriptions of what happened, what people were relating. How, wo-, would you call that, a challenge to the job or . . . ?**

- 03:17 The, the work of the, a translator in Kigali and in Arusha, now it is the same thing because of the internet and, but at that time we were dealing with slightly different material. That is, we were working mostly on witness statement and whatever the Prosecutor – because at that time they were still doing the, how do you call it, the ‘Acte d'accusation,’ the indictments. They were still doing the indictment in Kigali.
- 03:49 We were not this far gone into the trial so we were working on the indictment, the witness statement. And when I came here I moved on to the trials document so, but it was more or less the same thing because when you work on the indictment then you know most of the time what the trial is going to be about. So it wasn't too different. After four years you kind of get conversant with whatever they are doing so it wasn't that difficult.
- 04:23 LPN: So as far as the descriptions that you were translating that's – what I was trying to find out is how, how did you handle – you were talking about when you would translate these things, these sad things that were, people were relating and you would just cry. How, how did you deal with that? Like how . . . ?**
- 04:52 Not – we didn't have any specific way of dealing – you know I'm from a community where we gather often so that was helpful in the sense that after working, during the weekend, we would get together. Sometimes talk about it and that was it. There is not – there wasn't much we could do about it because in any case that was the situation.
- 05:22 LPN: Were you aware that that would be the situation before you arrived in Kigali?**
- 05:28 No, I didn't measure how, how bad it was, no. Not really, no.
- 05:33 LPN: If you were going to talk with a translator who was going to have a job similar to yours in the future, do you think there's a way to prepare or support them in doing that? Anything you would want them to know about?**
- 05:54 I suppose so. But no, no amount of, of, of coaching can really give you an idea of what you are going to deal with, you know. Unless you have been there and you sit the person down and you give them examples it's, it's very difficult to, to, to give the extent of what went on here.
- 06:22 LPN: Do you think having examples of that might help for people to understand?**
- 06:30 I suppose so, yeah.