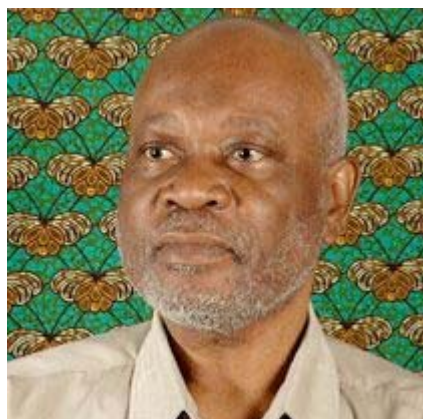




Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Theo Nkembe (Full Interview)



Role:	Archivist
Country of Origin:	Cameroon
Interview Date:	28 October 2008
Location:	Kigali, Rwanda
Interviewer:	Lisa P. Nathan
Videographer:	Nell Carden Grey
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

Theo Nkembe talks about how he has been personally impacted by watching footage from the genocide in his role as an ICTR archivist, noting that images from the tapes haunt him ten years later. Nkembe then discusses the responsibilities associated with preserving ICTR records, reflecting that people often have political motives for seeking access to archival material. As such, security must be a top concern. Nkembe also expresses surprise that so many accused have failed to accept responsibility for their actions.

The transcript of the interview begins on the following page.

Part 1

- 00:00** Lisa P. Nathan: To begin, would you tell us your name . . .
- 00:04 Yes.
- 00:04** LPN: . . . your country of origin and your title here?
- 00:07 Yes. My name is Theo Nkembe. I am from Cameroon but also a Canadian citizen. I'm working here as a Canadian citizen. I've been in Canada for many years so from Canada I came here. I'm working as archivist in the OTP here in Kigali.
- 00:32** **Note: Gap in Interview (Approx. 25 seconds in duration) Gaps occurred due to interruptions during the interview, technical issues, or corrupted data files.**
- 00:42** LPN: So could you walk me through your timeline at the ICTR . . .
- 00:45 Yes.
- 00:46** LPN: . . . when you first started to work here . . .
- 00:47 Yeah.
- 00:48** LPN: . . . and what jobs you've had, if you have had different . . . ?
- 00:50 I was recruited here in October 1998, which makes me ten years exactly today in October. In few days I will be ten years working in evidence, evidence as you have seen in Arusha. Evidence unit was created here in Kigali. Kigali was the base at the beginning, so evidence as you know was, is keeping all documentation that we have to send to court that the Prosecutor uses to prove or to support his case.
- 01:33 So that's where I've been working for the last ten years, although I change little by little because when things moved from Kigali to Arusha, so I was assigned the job. I was working with the archives of OTP.
- 01:51 Especially I was, I am in charge of the administration of all missions that are carried out by the investigators – national missions and also international missions. Before they go on mission, when they come back, all these sensitive document archives are kept under my custody. That's most of what I've been doing these years.
- 02:22** LPN: Thank you. Can you go back in time a little bit to 1994, in the spring of 1994. Can you tell me what you were doing at that time, do you remember?
- 02:35 At that time I remember I was in Canada, as I told you and I was working with a private organization and a library system, archiving system. So I was – when we, I had first heard

about the genocide, it was very troublesome for me because I was member of one church in Canada and we involved, is () how we knew that about the genocide in, in Rwanda.

03:12 I heard it by newspaper, tele-, television, radio but we were practically involved in our church to send, to collect money in Canada and send the money here to help orphans, to help widows and so on. So we had – I was, I was really informed about the genocide in 1994. I was in Canada at the time.

03:39 LPN: Do you remember how you first learned about ICTR? How did you come to work for the ICTR?

03:47 Yes, as soon as, as I told you, knowing the genocide and knowing about () information about the genocide, when there was a delegation who, which came from Rwanda to Canada and we managed to meet some people. And I was informed that Rwanda requested the UN to, to start a, a fresh tribunal here and that's the way, that's how I knew that there was going to be a tribunal.

04:28 But I didn't know that I'm coming to work here at that time, so just, it has just happened that I saw that there was a possibility, that I say, "Okay, let me go and help for one year." Because nobody was expecting me to stay more than one year here because of the magnitude of the, the problem. My family could not accept me to, to go, to stay for so long.

04:51 But finally, after one year they renewed my contract. After one year, they renewed my contract and this week I am, I'm ten years old here in Rwanda.

05:01 LPN: So why did your family not expect you to stay?

05:05 Because of they said this () was very dangerous. Pictures that we saw on TV about the genocide were – nobody can support this type of, you know, madness. So, they say. Even they did not agree that I should come, but I said, "Let me go and try to help." As a, as a Christian, I said, "Let me bring my drop of what I can do," and that's why.

Part 2

00:00 LPN: Can you tell me about your job, some of the responsibilities of your job?

00:05 One of the responsibilities as I told you is, is to be a custodian of all sensitive document, documentation, documents and archives. We have, maybe you have to see them before you go. If you have seen the same what you have seen in Arusha with Madam Ayo in the, because now the, the, the hea-, headquarters, everything is there.

00:29 But see here in OTP, Office of the Prosecutor, we still have some documents and these documents are on missions, so when people come for missions, they bring very sensitive information. That's . . .

00:46 LPN: Could you give an example of what that would be?

00:47 Example, the reports, mission reports. Mission reports are document-, doc-, documentation that have to be kept in a way that's only people from the unit or from OTP (___). Even sometimes, some investigators do not have the right to know, for example, information that is coming from the tracking team.

01:15 Tracking team which is – I think you met them this morning – tracking team that operates mainly outside the country. They go to Europe. They go to Africa, outside Rwanda. They go to North America. They go all over the world, tracking people that the OTP is looking for.

01:35 So this is very sensitive information. If it falls on the hand that are not supposed to fall, it might jeopa-, jeopardize the work of the Prosecutor. It's a type of – so I'm like somebody who to be trusted. Because somebody can come and say, "Oh, we were just . . ." I don't know. I don't. I didn't see. I do-, didn't hear so I cannot talk. This is my principle. To make sure that my job is done properly. (_____).

02:16 LPN: Can you speak to some of the challenges of your job?

02:20 The challenges goes with what I've just st-, say you, for to you or on the responsibilities – because if I am not responsible enough to keep what I'm supposed to keep, then as I told you, it's, it's a danger. It's a danger because not only inside Rwanda, some people inside Rwanda would like to know what we are doing, would like to know what we are keeping, you know.

02:50 So, although these documents can be, some of the documents can be at the (___), later stage public when they go to, in front of the court, things become public as you know. But before, if we don't keep things hide, we don't keep them properly, we might be surprised. So, for example, sometimes the defense want to know "XYZ," so come, you know. Do you see what I mean?

03:21 LPN: Yes.

03:21 (_____).

Part 3

00:00 LPN: So, as a, as a human being and as you said before as a Christian, the type of documents and the things that you have seen pass before you in your job as archivist since 1998 I imagine, have, some of them have been quite difficult for you to see as a human being. Can you speak to that at all?

00:21 Yes, very difficult. I remember particularly this, we had a, we have a collection of tapes that record (___) film, that record, what do you call it? Some pictures on the genocide and I can

assure you, if you have seen some, you can stay many days without eating. It's horrible. And that maybe even after ten years, some images are still coming.

00:56 When you see them at the first times, it's, it's a shock to see that human beings can treat other human beings in this way. It's unforgetta-, you cannot forget. It's a, it's a, it's a real problem. And beyond that, you have, like, witness statements where – when the, when witnesses give details of what happened, what they saw, you know, and sometimes you cannot, you have to be very strong to read some things. You c-, it's, it's unbelievable only.

01:39 You cannot believe it but, you know, these things, as long as you are in Rwanda and you see people in Rwanda, you see that all these things happened here. It's hard to believe and to accept that it's possible.

01:58 LPN: Do you feel like your thoughts on humanity have changed at all?

02:03 Yes, changed because I understood that we don't respect the limits. Human beings, there are limits that we should not cross, so when a human being crosses that limit, it, it can change the perception of other people. Maybe not those who are living here, but when you just come as somebody, as a foreigner that has seen it with other eyes, you know, you see it.

02:37 You see that when you cross the limit of genocide, not only here in Rwanda. I read about genocide before, you know, in other countries, other places. But the way it was done here, it's very specific, specific. Even in, in Europe I think the Jews is not so f-, so fast, you know.

03:02 It was, it's so, it is te-, terrible, terrible, terrible in my view.

Part 4

00:00 LPN: So in your time here, in the past ten years, you've had many experiences with the ICTR in the Office of the Prosecutor working with evidence, hearing all sorts of stories from the field, stories from the courts. Has there been anything that really surprised you about the way the court and the ICTR works?

00:23 Yeah, mainly what surprised me a lot is the attitude of people that go in front of the court. I'm really surprised because what they did, in front of court they, they don't accept what, what they did and this really surprised me. Maybe apart of one or two cases, three cases where there a plea of guilty, guilty plea says, "I know what I've done. It was planned," you know.

01:06 Even if you don't say I'm sorry but if you agree on what you have, you ha-, you have done, for me I (___), I can understand. But you see in the, to say that in the majority of cases, they say, everybody says, "No, no. I'm not guilty. I've not done anything", and in some cases even they try to justify what they have, they have done. So that, this is also for me, I don't

think that, because if you do something that you knew that what you are doing, you should stand and accept what you have done that.

01:40 “Yes, I’ve done it. I knew what I was doing,” and maybe try to justify but not say, “I did not do it,” and justify in the negative way. That was, me, I was, ‘till today I am, I’m very, I’m very surprised of the attitude when we have accusation in front of the court.

02:01 And even (___) now, with the lawyers, you know, the defense also will, they, they will do their jobs, say that, “Okay, do not accept,” as you know. I don’t, I don’t learn anything (_____) to you but the defense being there, the defense is there to, to protect, to protect those who are indicted in the court.

Part 5

00:00 **LPN: So when you (), unfortunately it looks like in the future, there will be more need for international courts of some form . . .**

00:09 Mm-hmm.

00:09 **LPN: . . . and there will be people in your role. Might be you, might be others who have a very similar, who are in charge of evidence in an area where the crime was committed. Do you have any recommendations for that person either in terms of training or maybe in terms of, I don’t know, any thoughts that you might have to help someone do their job?**

00:36 No, this is very difficult because you know when you are recruited in the UN system or anywhere else, the, the project you are doing today, you are carrying it on because you have ideas. You have personal, you know what you are looking for and maybe if they recruit somebody else that is sitting in, in your, in your place, the person might not do exactly what the way you are doing it.

01:14 So if I like, I can give an, an example. You are a minister somewhere, so Minister of Culture, Minister of Defense. Anyhow because you are there, you do things that you think that, so it’s very difficult to say, to tell another person that as a Minister of Defense or Education or Agriculture, “This is how maybe you should do.” Because what is, what I see is that the challenge is very big for the job.

01:46 The challenge is very big. We have to – the person has to accept what’s, what is going on. Try to understand. Try to understand, not only doing your job, but go beyond your job. You have to read too much. You have to listen to people so that you understand well what you are doing. Otherwise you just be like a, a puppet, you, you know.

02:11 You do, you do this because I ask you to do that. By understanding what you are doing, you can be prod-, you can be productive, more productive, than only pretending to do what

you are supposed to do. But as I, I just want to tell you that it's very difficult to say if I'm, if I was not, if somebody else was, was in my place, it may be why you will not carry the job with the same, you know . . .

02:40 Because the person, those who have the same value as I have, as I truly have Christian values so which has, which makes me feel very as a unique person, you know. So somebody without any belief, you know, will just say "Okay, that is normal. You can kill everybody. You can () everybody. At the end of the month, you, you take a check and that's it." I don't know if you, you, y- follow.

03:09 LPN: So, do you have anything else that you would, we've already gone beyond five minutes and I'm very aware of your time is precious but is there anything else that you would like to share with us, thinking about people watching this in the future, any other thoughts that . . . ?

03:27 Yeah, one, one thought is coming in my mind is the tribunal – I think overall there's a lack of education in the region and in the world. Because people hear about the tribunal, in Africa, if we take Africa for example, but it's still, I think that we are not doing enough to educate people, politicians, you know . . .

04:01 To tell them, "Now be careful, anything you do, tomorrow or after tomorrow you might be held responsible of this." The culture of impunity is still like, you know, is like normal. I am in power. I can do anything I like and I will not be held response-, responsible.

04:21 So I think that what, what I will say at the end of that by seeing this – what your job, you're, you are doing now is to make sure that this project or () other projects might help people to say, "Be careful. Be careful. Somebody is watching. Although you don't see, somebody's watching because you may pay what you are doing today tomorrow." I think this is what I can add.

04:51 LPN: Okay. Thank you so much.