

Clark University

Clark Digital Commons

Interviews

Gatumba Survivors Project

4-9-2021

Interview with Noella Uwagasosi

Noella Uwagasosi

Dan Raleigh

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.clarku.edu/gatumba_interviews



Part of the [African History Commons](#), [Holocaust and Genocide Studies Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Uwagasosi, Noella and Raleigh, Dan, "Interview with Noella Uwagasosi" (2021). *Interviews*. 2.
https://commons.clarku.edu/gatumba_interviews/2

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Gatumba Survivors Project at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact larobinson@clarku.edu.

Noella Uwagasosi was interviewed over Zoom on April 9, 2021, by Dan Raleigh.

-

DR: Where did you grow up?

NU: First of all, I was born in Republic Democratic of Congo [DRC] - it's on the east [part of the DRC], it was in a village. But I came to Uvira - that's where I grow up since I was maybe, four years old. I don't know if you know that Uvira it's in Congo, it's a part of Congo in the east. That's where I grow up, until when I was fifteen years old.

DR: Was it at age fifteen when you became a refugee?

NU: Yes.

DR: Where did you go once you became a refugee, when you left your home?

NU: When I was fifteen at that [inaudible] we landed to Burundi as refugee. After that time that I will stay at the camp for about two months, if I'm not wrong, from June to August. That's when the massacre happens. So after the massacre, I have family in Rwanda. My auntie came and took me after the massacre, and then took me to Rwanda. So I stay in Rwanda, 2004 till 2012, before I came to United States.

DR: So when you traveled from your home village at age fifteen to Burundi, did you travel alone, did you travel with your family?

NU: No, I was with my family.

DR: And then what was the event that made your family leave your home village, to leave to Burundi?

NU: It was a war. We just left there because they were killing us. So we went to the place that we are going to be safe, that's in Burundi. That's where we were. That's the reason why we went there.

DR: How would you describe the camp - the general atmosphere there - before the violence? So you're there two months about - or from summer, August - what was the camp like?

NU: Oh Lord. Ok have you been at camps before?

DR: No, I've seen photos, I've talked to refugees about their experience, but.

NU: It was hard - I mean, I'm not saying that it was horrible because we were safe out there. And the life where we living it was not really, the good life that I can say that it was perfect life. But on the same time, might say that it was good, because we were safe with our families. Yeah we were ok. I know life was - we didn't have anything, we didn't have a house, we didn't have all that or we left that in whatever we were living before in Congo. It was difference but we were so grateful because I was there with my family. And then safe, that's why I can say. But the life on camp, it's not easy. It's not easy life, but, well, I survived. [chuckles]

DR: So after the massacre, what was the atmosphere like? Were you at the camp very much longer? Did you leave immediately?

NU: After the massacre, I stay there, maybe around two weeks. Maybe two weeks after the massacre, that's when I left.

DR: Do you have any memory of what the camp was like there after the massacre?

NU: Yes.

DR: Are you comfortable sharing, maybe what your experience was following the massacre - in those two weeks?

NU: Yeah, I am comfortable actually. But after the massacre, it was very difficult because, of what I go through there in the camp, because I lost my both parents in the camp. And my three siblings, and the member of my family, and a lot of friends - my friends - a lot of people that I know. So after that it was very difficult for me to come normal again, just to put my mind together and, just put my life together - it takes me a long time. That's what I can say.

But after that, in two weeks - before I went to Rwanda - I don't even know where I was. My mind - I don't know, sometimes I was like, I couldn't even recognize some people. I was just like losing my mind, I was not there, I was just having this memory, this kind of like, the thing happened because, everything happen while I was watching. Whatever they killed my siblings, I was there with them. I was [inaudible] with them. I'm the only one who survive. It was horrible, it was, the bad memory that I had - it takes me a long time to recover, it did, really. Yeah I don't know if I explained the way you wanted.

DR: No, no I mean that's your experience. And you were just at age fifteen, correct?

NU: I was, yes.

DR: So, of all your family members, you were there with your mother, your father, your three siblings who were also killed - did you have other siblings with you, or was that your entire family?

NU: No, I had two big sister, but they were married - they were not with us on that moment. And then I have one siblings - the one who comes after me - she was not there. She was in Rwanda, she went to school before we land to Burundi. So she was not there. But they're here now.

DR: So in theory you were all alone, you were the only survivor.

NU: Yeah I was [inaudible] survivor in my family, yes.

DR: And once you left to Rwanda, you had family there that you stayed with - was it cousins, aunts, uncles?

NU: It was my aunt, from my dad's side. That's my daddy's sister.

DR: What was your experience with them? Were they supportive, did they help you, how did that work?

NU: Yeah they did help me really did. I was grateful to have them. My auntie she was really nice with us - the way my auntie and my uncles, they were all in Kigali, so, I had a family who support me and helped me to recover, and put me to school, just to get through that, you know, having these memories. Because you know Rwanda people, a lot of people, were survivor from this genocide, from 1994. It was a lot experience to be with those kids who had those kind of, like the same - I mean, we were having the same memories, the same - I don't know how I can call that -

DR: The same horrors.

NU: Yes, yes. So they took me to school, not going to school like at home - I was just away. Let me say that. They took me away so to get to see those kids, how they survive, just share our stories together, and it helped me to recover, really. And then my family was there, they support me - yeah, I can say that my family was there for me, the whole thing. And that I'm grateful for that.

DR: And even the community you were with, was very good support system?

NU: Yes it was. It was very difficult but we tried to help each other.

DR: Had your relatives who were living in Rwanda - were they there in 1994 for the genocide?

NU: No.

DR: Were there some challenges that your aunt experienced, losing - your father was her brother, correct?

NU: Yes.

DR: Was it difficult for her, challenging - I'm sure - for her to lose her family?

NU: Yes. They were best friends actually to my dad [laughs]. It was not easy for her but to be strong for me. It was not showing me how hard it was for her, she just tried to be there for me, showing me that it happened for reason, I survived for reasons. She was strong. She tried really hard to not showing me - but I know that she was hurt.

DR: How do feel justice should have been done, or how should justice been served for those people who committed these crimes against your family, and against you.

NU: Hey everybody need - they want justice to be done, really. It hurts, for any survivor or any - even you, if you think that there is some people who did commit that crime, and then they still there, and then they go on social media and then they said that, "we did kill those people" but they still there. We see them, every time, and then some of them, they put some candidate to be a president, and then then they there, they just say, "I was one of them who killed those people." It hurt and it is so hard for us. And then there is no justice - it has been more than ten years. So we just keep telling the stories so we can go in and help. We just not to want this thing happen in Burundi to happen again for those people who still there. We just try to search for justice every single day. It will help us if the justice commit - maybe it help us to feel better, somehow, and then that's what we want. Giving our testimony - it's not easy, for me either, to say whatever happened. It's just like, when you talk about, it's just like it's happening right away, you know. It's kind of hard, but we try - the reason why we are giving this testimony or having the [inaudible] with a lot of people - different people - is just to try to have justice to be happening. If it happened, really it would help us to feel better, it would help us to feel

like, "yeah, maybe people knows what happening to us." It's not easy. There is a lot of kids out there they don't have the parents, they don't have anything - now I'm married. I have one daughter, and then I'm going to have another one in two months.

DR: Congratulations.

NU: Thank you. So it's kind of hard to teach my daughter there is no justice happens. Your grandmother died, but we're still searching for justice - it's kind of hard. But if we have those people who can just understand us, and then [inaudible], it just is - do this and the justice happen - it would help us a lot. That's why we searching every single day as a survivors.

DR: And do you have faith or hope - you believe - that justice can be served?

NU: I do. I'm a Christian and I do believe that one day God will heal us, will heal our pain, and just - I don't know - yeah I do. It will take long time maybe, but it will - I hope so.

DR: Do you feel that it's anyone in particular - whose responsibility is it to get justice, or to solve this?

NU: No, I don't think so. Maybe everybody, it's not just like - I'm not going to be, to say that I'm the one who needs that. It's just like, everybody do, deserve that.

DR: In a way, all of us have a responsibility, as humans, to try to achieve justice, for atrocities - for injustice.

NU: Yeah, any person who understand that, and then who, giving the time to help us like you do, right there, this is good thing. You feel like, any person who's on this world, who knows that this thing happen, and then, you know, it's not just me - it's everybody. It's any person who understand that. That's what I can say.

DR: Just one more question about, just justice, and for those who did commit these crimes. Do you feel there still needs to be some sort of justice fully achieved, there needs to be further trials for perpetrators, or there needs to be memorials for the massacre? Do you in terms of, politically, or the justice system, do some things need to happen still there in Burundi? For this particular event?

NU: I think so.

DR: Any ideas what you think or what you would want if they were to do anything more?

NU: I mean the memorial - it will help us. Because some people, some countries, they don't want us to have the memories. But this memories help even our kids, to know exactly what happen. To me or to my parents. Ok, I have my sister, she have a daughter, she was asking her "hey, Mama where is your mom?" It's kind of hard to tell her this story and, then every time her mother went to memorial, and then it's said, "hey, I'm going to memorial that's when my parents was killed so we have to remember them, and giving them those respect. So there is some countries or there is some people they don't understand that. But it's really important to us, to keep having these memorials every year. It helps - and then that's, that's why we are searching for justice to tell people what happened to us, to tell anybody who doesn't know exactly what happened. So having a memorial it's one thing that I will hope to happen every year. And any country if it's past [inaudible] we have - I don't know we don't have any Banyamulenge in every countries, yeah we don't. But if it was really necessary - that we have all those people in different countries, so every year on August, all of us to have those kinds of memories - we help, maybe, people to understand what we are going through. Having memorial, it's good. I'd like to have that every year.

DR: It's been about fifteen years since the massacre - how has your life been different because of what happened?

NU: My life have been a difference - I'm going to say, from 2012 - since I came here - that's why I can say that my life have been easy. More than the year that I was living in Africa. The reason why I'm saying that is, after the massacre, after maybe one year - two years, I start losing my mind. Feel like - I mean like, forget things. Let give you for example, do you know the password for the card, the credit card or the debit card or something? It was so hard for me to remember that. I was like, "what is happening to me?"

So I didn't want to tell anybody, so the only person I told that was my sister, my youngest sister. We were best friends, she was there for me the whole thing. So I told her - when I was having those kind of difficult moments - that I don't know, something's happening to me, and I feel that like, after one year, so I started like - because I didn't have anything, because I'm the one who survive and, tried to take everybody out through the tent, it was burned out - so I saw a lot of things - so I didn't even get shot, I didn't even get burned, or anything. And then I was - I'm going to somewhere with all these survivors who was not, having any gunshot or whatever, let me say that - but it did not affect me through my body or anything, but it affect me through my memories.

So I keep praying, and then I say, "oh God, ok, I survive the massacre, I survive the gunshot, I survive the whole thing, so I'm not going to be crazy, or to be like forget

anything, or be like - I don't want this life. I try just to keep me strong, by myself. So people, my sister, are trying to tell me, "hey you have to go see a therapy, just talk about it, just express how you feeling. Maybe it will help." And I'm like, I don't feel like that I need therapy, really. I feel like I'm going to be ok on my own. So I try to go through that by myself after the massacre - it was kind of difficult years for me. Even when I came here to United States on 2012, I was still having those kind of trouble, and problem, forget things. I couldn't even go to school, I feel like, "ok, if I'm going to school, how am I going to go through this, I forget, I don't know."

I feel like, but, I was having another voice on me, saying, "hey you can do this, you can do this, you can do this." The more I was talking about it, the more we are having those memorials, so I keep talking about it. So the thing changed. My experience right now, I'm ok. I don't forget anything. My memory it's ok, let me say that it's great. I'm not forget anything right now and I didn't not to go to see any therapy or anything, or counselor, or whatever. It was a difficult, from the beginning, but right now I feel like I'm grateful - really - that at the moment I decided not to get married, because I was so scared. I'm like, "hey, if I get married, then in one day, losing my mind, what is going to happen. It's going to just end with a divorce or hurt me again more than, you know." I just take that out on my mind; I'm not getting married. My sister she got married before me because I told her, "hey, go ahead and get married. Because I'm not getting married at all."

But, I don't know what happened - when I talk her say, "hey, I decided to get married now." She said, "hey what happened to you? I thought you told me that it's not going to happen" and I'm like, "hey, I feel like I need to have a kids, maybe it will help me more to have my memory back or stuff." In 2017, so I decided to get married. So my life it's now good, but before it was very difficult. That's what I can say. Since I moved here to United States, really it helps me, but before that we were having trouble in Africa to survive, as girls. I know I had my family - they tried - but some of them they did not have a jobs, to take care of me or to do my sister. She was the one who was working - it was kind of difficult. It was very difficult for us to survive there. After when we came here, here you can work no matter - you didn't go to school, you didn't have any degree, you can still have a job or, have your life together, so we are grateful that our life it's good. We can have anything we want right now - so that helps me too, because when I was in Africa I was thinking a lot. I was like, "oh my gosh, I don't have anybody else to go. I don't have my dad, I don't have my mom, who going to - if I need something, I am a girl, I'm going to need a lot of stuff.

So that thing, it was keep getting on my head, and then I'm having that kind of problem about losing my memory, and then having those kind of trouble to, get clothes, to get something to eat, get whatever - it was so difficult for us. But we survive - me and my sister - we did really. We were there for each other. And then now my life - it's kind of

different. Very different, yeah. So I'm grateful for that. I don't know if I answered the way you wanted. [laughs]

DR: No, that's amazing. I'm very grateful that you are where you are today. Now, you came to the US in 2012. You're about 23 years old or so?

NU: Yeah.

DR: And you did you come with just your younger sister, or who did you come-

NU: -Yes. I came with my younger sister.

DR: Just the two of you?

NU: Yes.

DR: Where were you living? And was it easy to find work?

NU: Yeah it was very easy really. I stay there for two months, and then I start working. It was easy, because one of the agents - the people who brought us here - they first job it's kind of them who just go ahead and look for your jobs. So it was easy. I know we didn't know the English, or whatever, but we work.

DR: Which state did you come to?

NU: I was in Texas.

DR: And you still live in Texas?

NU: No. I'm in Washington, Seattle now.

DR: Ok, Northwest.

NU: Yes.

- end transcript. 1:12:00 - after this NU asks questions about the research project. Well that might be interesting to some readers, we can give a more concise explanation of the project in the introduction to the digital archive.