



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

An Interview with:
Alain Nahimana

Interview Conducted By:
Keith Ludden

Portland, Maine
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Transcribed by Jesse Ahearn

Keith Ludden: Let me just take care of a little housekeeping first.

Alain Nahimana: Mm-Hmm

KL: It is March 25, 2016. And, we are in Portland, and we are talking with Alain Nahimana.

AN: Correct.

KL: Am I pronouncing that correctly?

AN: Correct. Can I just do something

KL: Ok, sure.

AN: Just one second.

[BREAK]

KL: Yeah. And I'm gonna double check again to make sure those numbers are rolling. Yup, okay, good. Um, am I pronouncing your name correctly?

AN: That is correct.

KL: Okay, good. Do you mind if I ask when you were born, what year you were born?

AN: I was born November 4, 1970.

KL: 1970

AN: Yup.

KL: Okay, I had it figured at about 1971 but I just wanted to make sure. Where was that?

AN: Ah, in Burundi.

KL: Okay, was it a small town?

AN: The capitol city of Burundi. Which is Bujumbura

KL: Okay, Bujumba?

AN: Bujumbura, I can write it down.

KL: Okay, sure, yeah. Or if you would just spell it.

AN: B-U-J-U-M-B-U-R-A. This is the capitol city, and the country is Burundi, B-U-R-U-N-D-I.

KL: Okay, great. That's a large city then?

AN: It's the largest in Burundi anyway.

KL: Okay, great. Can you describe that city a little bit for me.

AN: It's a city on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Lake Tanganyika is between Burundi, DR Congo, Tanzania, and Zambia. It's one of the deepest lakes in the world. One of the deepest lakes in the world, one of the deepest. That has some specific and special species of fish. And it's not. It has water that is not salted. The water is not salted. And it is between this lake and some hills, kind of a valley. Very beautiful.

KL: What kind of shops would you see as your walking down the streets?

AN: What kind of what?

KL: Shops and businesses.

AN: Oh, there would be, there is a main street, as everywhere. It's not called main street but it is like the main street in the town. And then, you have the outskirts of the city, divided by two different rivers. You would have any type of shop, like anywhere. The thing is there will be some areas with some specialty shops. Like, if you were looking for construction materials, there would be one areas the city. If you were looking for clothes there will be a specific road for clothes. And, there would be a central market, where you find everything, food, non-food, or any other articles.

KL: Now, you lived there as a young boy?

AN: I was born there. And I lived there as a young boy. Then though the course of my youth, when I was fourteen, my father had to go to work to Europe. He was working for the government.

KL: So, what do you remember about the city when you were a young boy?

AN: I just remember, like, walking down the street, and going to school. I remember many things. The main sports center with a swimming pool. I started swimming when I was five. Yeah.

KL: And, what was the school like?

AN: The school was a big school. It was an elementary and a.. the elementary school was in the middle of, kind of an administrative area. Where you find many of the government ministries and stuff like that. It was just huge. A huge school.

KL: Did you say it was a military school?

AN: No.

KL: No, okay, sorry.

AN: Not a military school. Elementary school.

KL: Oh elementary, okay, and it was very large?

AN: It was very large, cause it was built in a space not a building high. So it was large, many playing fields. And, there was always an area for the youngest to oldest to play in different areas. It was quite interesting.

KL: What kind of games did you play?

AN: When I was young I played soccer. I loved soccer.

KL: Were you pretty good?

AN: I don't know, I don't think so.

KL: (Laughter)

AN: But, I liked it so I spent enough time playing soccer.

KL: What were the people in Burundi like?

AN: So Burundi has two different tribes. Actually, three different tribes. And, life has been kind of uneasy. Because there were ethnic issues, and there was war two times or three times. And, even now the country is still in kind of a messy situation. Because of the ethnic

differences, and not good leadership, political leadership. That was fueling those wars. So, I even remember, I was born in '70, I remember there was a war in '72. And, I remember there was another war in '87. Another war in '93. And, I came here fleeing persecution too. So, I would say that Burundi's history is just a history of war and civil unrest. And, unfortunately that's what we have.

KL: The war started in the early 70's I think. Is that right?

AN: I mentioned what I saw. I think also there was some unrest in the 60's. It started in the 60's with the process of independence, after the colonizers left.

KL: So, a lot of this was going on when you were a young boy?

AN: Yeah, and still now. Still a lot going on.

KL: And, that's been kind of frightening?

AN: I wouldn't call it frightening. I would just call it dramatic. Yeah, because fear, you go beyond fear. You go beyond thinking, "what's wrong with this country." A lot of men have died, and I would say that I was probably lucky because probably my placing and where I was living, that nobody would say that it was completely safe.

KL: No, the two groups, the Hutu and Tutsi. What's the source of the friction between them?

AN: As far as I know, probably was the colonizing, Belgium at that time. Which kind of broke the social peace that was there, with the king and the two ethnic groups, who have different kinds of social status. And then, started dividing the groups and kind of did a divide and rule system, that was pitting each one to each other. And then, independence in '62, the divide was already there. The Tutsi took over. The prince who fought for independence, was assassinated in '61. Then came a government of, kind of unity. And, by '65, '66, there was a coup that overthrew the monarchy. And then, the Tutsi took over. In the meantime, in neighboring Rwanda, there had been a genocide in Rwanda in 1959, where Tutsi were killed to bring in Hutu rule. So you had the Tutsi ruling Burundi, and Hutu ruling Rwanda, because they have the same ethnic configuration (in Rwanda). So, by '72, there was an attempt by Hutu's to take over. Which was followed by oppression by the Tutsi regime. And, they killed a lot of Hutu. And, people considered it a kind of genocide, against Hutu's. I am a Tutsi, I believe that, and I totally believe it's true, that people were just killed because of ethnicity. Then the Tutsi rule continued until '93. Burundi's been ruled by Tutsi's until '93. [In] '93 a President was elected, democracy, with the waves of democracy in Africa at that time, the '90's. And then, a Hutu was elected. Three months later, [he] was killed by Hutu army, Tutsi army, sorry. And again, we

went into another civil war, until 2005. In 1996 there was another military coup, by Tutsi again. And then, we went on until 2005, where there was a (inaudible) elections. So now a Hutu government can replace. The Hutu rebels, joined the army. Now we have a dual ethnicity army, fifty percent are Hutu, and fifty percent Tutsi. 2005 till 2015, in the course of those ten years, we went back to a Dictatorship, again. But, this time, a Hutu led the Dictatorship. Not a Tutsi, this time. It was a Hutu led Dictatorship. What we see now is worse than what the Tutsi were doing, because today there is in a position of Tutsi's and Hutu's. And, there is a government of, that brings blood repression. Killing both Hutu and Tutsi's, and complete civil unrest. Our President was supposed to do two terms. He gave himself another third term, that was contested, and by the end brought civil unrest.

KL: Do you think that friction will ever be resolved? What are your hopes for that?

AN: I feel that we have evolved a bit in terms of, in the past there was friction, [who] was ethnic best. An ethnic group against the other. Now it's more political differences, and political vision, because when there's war, when there is a Dictatorship, it touches everyone, whether your Hutu or Tutsi. Bad governance will catch up. So now what we are seeing is that more, most probably, of the Hutu and Tutsi are ready to fight together for Democracy. For real change, not just a change of people, of oppression of Hutu by Tutsi, and Tutsi by Hutu. It's more about, lets change the system, the way it works. Because bad governance has no ethnicity. Bad governance can come from anyone. So, how do you build a nation based on principal and values, rather than on ethnicity.

KL: So, you lived in Burundi until you were thirteen did you say?

AN: It was thirteen, thirteen, yeah. And then, my father at that time was working for the government.

KL: He was an ambassador, is that right?

AN: And then, he was appointed ambassador at that time. And then, we had to go to Switzerland.

KL: Tell me about your father, what was he like?

AN: My father was a smart person. That is one of the things I remember about him. I grew up knowing he was doing a good job where ever he was. He was a man of vision, he could anticipate the challenges that would come in the next five years in his life. And then, he would anticipate, and do something to be ready at that time. For example, my father was brought in to government before he finished his university studies. So, because he was studying at the

University of Makerere in Uganda, So, he came on vacation, and the then President decided to give him a position, before he finished his studies. And, after years and years under the government, he had a good position in government, in the ministry of education at some point. And he decided to go back to university and finish his Bachelor's degree. And, after that it was clear that without doing that, he wouldn't have gotten a promotion, and climb ladders, and get a lot of positions. Which happened to be true. And again, when he came back from being ambassador, he was like, "I'm not going back in to government, but I need to be more specialized in something else." So, he went back to Scotland to study, to get a master's degree in English literature. And, when he came back, he opened up a translation and interpretation agency. Until his death he was still doing this work, not only on a local basis, but even working for important international missions. The main translations were English to French, French to English.

KL: This was in Burundi?

AN: No, he died here, he was living in California, but he was still doing that for some of the original organizations in Africa.

KL: Oh, I see. Representing Burundi during a lot of this upheaval, must have been quite a challenge for him?

AN: It was a challenge, because, I remember very well. It was during the president [Jean Baptiste] Bagaza.¹ Which was the second president of Burundi. I remember when Bagaza was overthrown. He was on his way to Canada, for a Francophone conference, a conference of French speaking countries. And, he stopped in Europe, he stopped in Paris. He called and asked to to meet the Burundi ambassadors in Europe, and my father was the elder. And he was asked by his colleagues to speak on behalf of everyone else. I remember him telling us that it took him some courage to tell the president that his policies are not working. The countries that were representing Burundi, were closing their doors. At that time, president Bagaza was having an anti-church policy, fighting the Catholic church in Burundi, and all this stuff. So, when he left Europe to Canada, before he even gets there, there was a military coup against him. My father was like, "I was either scared that when he got back, I would be fired, brought back home, and jailed, because of what I told him. But again, it was already late, and my father had done what he could to represent Burundi. Sometime the ambassador has to sell the policies of his country. But, sometimes you can't.

KL: So he did not go back to Burundi?

¹ President Jean Baptiste Bagaza. 1946-2016. Bagaza ruled Burundi from 1976 to 1987.

AN: He went back to Burundi. He went back to Burundi, there was a new president. And then, he worked a while for the foreign affairs ministry. And then, he retired and started his own agency, interpreting and translating.

KL: During the time of this upheaval, did that disrupt the schools when you were a boy?

AN: No, I don't think so. I was okay. Where ever he was going, I was following. When we came back to Burundi, I finished my French baccalaureate, which was at the French school in Bujumbura. Then I joined the University of Burundi.

KL: And, there was a lot of suppression of political oponents though, is that right?

AN: At that time?

KL: Yeah.

AN: I wouldn't say that. No, not really. That was probably '96, no, no, '86ish, 88ish. This was after the upheaval in the north of the country. There was an upheaval in the north of the country with some rebels who came in fuel by (inaudible) president, yeah.

KL: Okay, so what do you remember about Switzerland? You would have been a young man.

AN: Yeah, I remember the cold. And, I just remember commuting, cause we were living in Bern, which was a German speaking town. It is the capitol of Switzerland. And then, we were studying in Fribourg. That was a commute everyday by train, probably three hours back and forth. That's what I remember. The train, and waking up in the morning in the cold, and then go to the train station, and go to school. Spend the day at school. And then, come in the evening. Yeah, that's what I remember.

KL: Did you continue to do studies in Switzerland?

AN: When, after?

KL: When you were there with your father? Or, were you already out of school when you were there?

AN: No, no, I was still in high school.

KL: Yeah

AN: Yeah.

KL: Yeah.

AN: Still in high school.

KL: Okay, how were you accepted in Switzerland?

AN: I mean, it was... I usually tell that story but, being the... Me and my sisters being the only black people at school. We were like stars. All the girls liked me. That's what I remember about school. I was the only black person over there.

KL: You were like stars?

AN: It was like stars, because everybody wanted to be with us. It was amazing because we were the only people, black people at the school. And then, it was just amazing. Just amazing, because kids, your just someone from somewhere, and then, your more attractive than somebody the see every day, all day, have known for a while.

KL: You were something exotic?

AN: Exotic, yeah. Something exotic, yeah. And, the other thing is, I want to get out one story that I also remember was, because we were coming from Africa, it was a school with Catholic nuns. I remember them telling my father that, because they come from another system they have to go one year behind the grade we were supposed to be. My father said, "No, either you take them, or I'll take them somewhere else to study.", "Let them go to the grade they belong, if they don't do well, they can redo the grade.", "But, don't punish them before you see the work." And then, she accepted. And then, that year I remember, me and my sister did well, very well. The sister who was in charge, told my father, "You were right, I think I was making a mistake." This was kind of prejudice, or a kind of stereotype that if you come from Africa then you're probably behind. That's not a realistic kind of stereotype. That was the first time I was encountering some stereotype in my life.

KL: The language spoken in the school, it was French?

AN: French, yeah. It was French. In Fribourg they speak French. It is a French canton, in Switzerland.

KL: So that really wasn't an issue for you, because they spoke French.

AN: Yeah, language wasn't an issue, no.

KL: So, how long were you in Switzerland?

AN: It was for probably three years. Three years, yeah.

KL: A fairly short time.

AN: It was a short time, yeah. But, at that age, it was an age that was very important. I think I took some of my...you build your character when you're probably, fourteen, sixteen, fifteen-sixteen, that you forge your character. And not being (inaudible) at that time. Being at school with probably fifteen different nationalities, was important for some openness, mind openness. Like, you don't see the world the same way as... I was not seeing the world exactly the same as the people I left in Burundi. So, I would say that it really helped me grow up, in terms of being open to different cultures. I mean open to different people from somewhere else. And also, to forge a kind of self-confidence that there's no—there is nothing that makes me feel inferior to someone else. Except what you have in your heart, and what you have in your mind. But, the color of your skin, or the country you come from, doesn't make you be left, right or bad and good. And, that was important in my life.

KL: So there was a fairly international character to your school.

AN: Yeah, it was an international school. It was called International School of Switzerland. So you will find that most are the kids of diplomats, where they were speaking French. You will find (inaudible) of some people, like French people, in Switzerland. Probably their parents working in Switzerland. But they wanted to be in a French speaking (inaudible). Yeah.

KL: So, after three years in Switzerland, you went back to Burundi?

AN: Back to Burundi.

KL: Okay, and what was that like, going back to Burundi after three years?

AN: It was okay. It was at the end of my high school, doing the baccalaureate, so I wanted to get in to the baccalaureate in the French school. Which in the system was akin to what we had. And then, after that, joined the University of Burundi and a (inaudible).

KL: Were things fairly peaceful then?

AN: At that time, it was not really peaceful. Because, there was, just after that, war, that happened in the north. But, it was kind of stabilized. Stabilized, it was no like, war everywhere. But, there was some corners of the country that were unsafe, but others were okay.

KL: As a young man that must have been a little unnerving. To go from Switzerland, which is a neutral country, very peaceful. To go back to somewhere there is still a lot of friction?

AN: So, I don't really recall getting nervous about that. For me, it was, I never imagined that I was in Switzerland forever. I knew I was there because my father was working there. And Bujumbura, at that time, was safe, kind of. And, to adjust your life to start again. Finding old friends, and getting new friends. Yeah.

KL: So, you connected with a lot of old friends?

AN: Yeah, and I met also new friends at the French school, and if you have the time, leave your neighborhood and go somewhere else. Create another neighborhood and other friends. Going somewhere, you develop kind of, you can adapt yourself anywhere. So, it's just a matter of just getting in somewhere new, and you will get used to that. I think it helped me to feel like I can leave anywhere, make new friends, and start a new life. That came to be useful when I came here.

KL: I read one story about you having been arrested, on a political issue of some kind. Can you tell me about that?

AN: So, in 2003-2004, when there was these peace arguments. The rebels coming back, the rebels were Hutu. I found out that some of the people coming with the rebels, coming back home after the cease fire, were some of my classmates, actually some of my classmates in university. They were Hutu's and I knew them very well, they were not extremists. And, I came to wonder, if I was a Hutu, with all of the injustices that has been done to Hutu's over years. In terms of exclusion in politics and exclusion in other things. Would I have been a rebel myself? I said, "Probably." I would understand a young Hutu at that time joining the rebellion and fighting the Tutsi element. I probably would have done the same thing if I was Hutu. But, again, when they came back they were reconnected, and they were in this party, which was a former rebellion, becoming a political party. So, I am looking around, I said, "There is now two other parties. One is exclusively Tutsi, the other one is exclusively Hutu. But, this new party, with these young people, is part of the future. And, we need to get together, Hutu, and Tutsi, young people eager to change the country, to change the system, and work together. So, I joined that party. There was many Hutu and also Hutus joining. The leaders were young. They have no background of bad governance, they are just new. And, they want to change the country. They were welcoming us as Tutsi's, so I joined the party. So, after joining, very quickly I

climbed ladders in the party, and became a member of some of the key commission's or committees in the party. Had a small office at the headquarters of the party, became very close to the leader of the party, president of the party, chairman of the party. And then, I had my entries with ministers, with the office of the president. I was really involved. And then, as usual what happens, the president and leader of the party, went against each other. And the chairman of the party was jailed. After being jailed, whoever was close to him was in the crosshair of the government and the secret services. And, that is what happened to me. At the time I had resigned my position in the party. And, at some point I got some troubles, because I had decided to write a blog criticizing the government, anonymously, but some of my colleagues recognized my writing style and started suspecting me. And then, I was arrested, interrogated, and was able to get released, because of friends. And then, after that I was tipped by some of my colleagues in the party.

KL: You were what?

AN: I was tipped. I got tips from some workers in the party.

KL: Oh.

AN: That I was in their crosshairs, I should get somewhere safe. And then, my father was here, my sister lives here and had been living in the states for many years. So, they sent me an invitation for me to apply for a visa.

KL: They sent you where?

AN: An invitation.

KL: Okay.

AN: For me to go apply for a visa.

KL: Oh.

AN: And I applied for a visa at the U.S. embassy, and was about to (inaudible)

KL: Okay, so that was the catalyst for you leaving Burundi?

AN: Yup.

KL: And, you went first to San Diego, is that right?

AN: I went first to San Diego, yes.

KL: Okay, and why did you not stay there?

AN: So, San Diego, if you come from where I came from. And then, you go to a city like San Diego. You're still probably under depression from all you have gone through. You don't see yourself starting a new life in San Diego. It's too big, you don't feel belonging to anywhere. So, I came here to visit a friend, he was a classmate. And, when I got here, people in the community I saw, people from Burundi, and other people. I was like, okay, this is where I should start my life. It was cold, but I said, "I feel comfortable starting a new life here, than in San Diego." I remember looking at where people walk, when you go to work. Where you go to hang out, and where you go to do something else. It's like forty miles difference in a big city like San Diego. So, you don't belong anywhere. You're just a drop in the ocean. But like, the life I have now, seems important. Where ever I leave, if I go to a neighborhood bar, I recognize people and we say hi. And, I can leave my home in Portland, and go to work, walking. And, I can probably go to the same bar, I get used to and create new friends. I can find people from different communities again and socialize. It is right, it is the kind of life I wanted to have if I was new and wanted to start a life. By the way, I don't think I would be even having the job I have if I was in San Diego.

KL: What caught you're eye about Maine? What made you say, "Yeah, that would be a good place to live."?

AN: I just came to visit a friend. I was in distress, I wanted to see some other places, and I came to visit a friend. After that friend of mine said, "I'll buy you a ticket to come here." We started to get (inaudible) Burundi and he said, "I'll buy you a ticket to come visit me." Then I came, and I decided to stay.

KL: What were the first few months in Maine like?

AN: It was the end of the spring, kind of beginning of spring, actually. So, I didn't know, 2009-2010 winter was past. The first days in Maine was just discovering friends, and people who had been here for a while, Burundians/Burundi's, and people from Africa and saying, "This is a community almost together. And the second day, a friend of mine picked me up, and I went to Saco. We were playing soccer with a lot of people, and they were having a party. And, I was like, "This is the place, this is where I want to spend my life.

KL: So, what did you think that first winter?

AN: First one was okay, it was almost done. But 2010 winter was the worst. It was a very bad winter, and it was really, really... I can't forget, because... Then after years, after months you're here, you have to deal with surviving. I didn't have an income at the time, so I had to live under welfare. I was doing workfare. I remember that first year, the first months, I was not going to do workfare, because the workfare was going and cleaning the shelter, not that cleaning the shelter is bad, but, put yourself in my shoes. I just came from Africa where we have domestic workers that do that. Where I had a company and I had stuff. Now, my new life is, I am cleaning the bathrooms and all the things in a shelter. I was feeling that it is like, (inaudible) this is what I become in my life, feeling really down. Then, I would go the last week of the month and I would tell the person in charge of the workfare, "Can I do five days in a row? So I can continue having my assistance, general assistance?" She said, "so why didn't you come?" I said, "I am depressed." (inaudible) Can I do one or two weeks in a row. I am going to do it because of the workfare I am having, the assistance I am having. Then she figured out there was something wrong. She said, "Do you speak English?". I said, "Yes." She said, "We have a position here." After all that time, there was two hours a week of shelter. There was (inaudible) for me. Then, she said, "We have a position here, the front desk. Do you want to apply for that?". I said, "yeah." And, it ended up at a computer at the front desk, answer the phone, connect people to caseworkers. I'm busy every single day, five hours, twenty hours a week, actually twenty-five hours a week, but I was happy. Cause I feel that I'm doing something meaningful. Interpreting for folks who don't speak the language. Guiding them, being the first contact between them and the services. I was feeling like I'm fulfilling actually something useful. And, I did it for many months before I was able to have a work permit and had my first job, yeah.

KL: And, now you work with immigrant rights?

AN: Yes

KL: How did you make the connection there?

AN: So, I have been always fighting for justice, even before I got a job. I was already organizing my community, and organizing with other communities from other countries here(living here). I am a person who stands up whenever there is injustice. That is how I was born. That is how my parents were. My mom was a woman's activist in Burundi for many years. Probably one of the first women fighting for women's rights in my country. And then, actually someone sent me an e-mail on a Saturday saying, "This job being advertised, is probably the job for you.". Because she knew my involvement. And, I remember that I sent my resume the same day, the same evening, and the Tuesday I had an interview, and Thursday I'm hired. When I'm hired on Tuesday, I'm told that, it was the end of March, '11. And they are

telling me that, “You have to pull off a rally for (inaudible) in Portland, on May 1. And, that was like, should I resign now? (laughter). Then I did it, I did it. We had probably five hundred, six hundred people. And after (inaudible) I was supposed to do six months, so that they could confirm me the job. After three months they say “You’re confirmed. We don’t need anything else.

KL: So, justice is central in your life?

AN: No, it’s just want to impact peoples lives as much as someone can, and provide people with opportunities, and make people to live all they can. And, especially in a country where we see a lot of entitlement sentiments. And where, there are some situations where, without some specific policies to encourage people to move from here to here, they will never move.

KL: Well, you have been very generous with your time, I promised I’d get you out of here by about now.

AN: Yeah.

KL: I do want to ask if there is anything that I am overlooking that you want to point out?

AN: I would say, we could talk about the challenges of being an immigrant in Maine. The fact that we are in a state where for the last two years of my work, being on the defensive. Fighting negative policies against immigrants. And being a scapegoat. And at the same time we’re in a situation where even those I would feel that are the most likely to be our allies. I would call for the African American community. Just last week, this week, we had a hearing in the city of Portland, office of new Americans, where leaders of the African-American community were completely opposed to. And then, you wonder, which allies do we have at the end of the road. That doesn’t frighten me, if you can’t be with me or I can’t be with you. I will fight by myself, it’s just disappointing, to see that the ones that would think to be our most likely⁹ allies are not bringing— “Why them, not us. Supporting immigrants is decisive, is not inclusive.” That is completely, for me, I don’t know what to call it. Probably don’t want to call it any name, but this is not the type of leadership I would expect. I just wanted to share that. Where we are now, that’s where we are. National anti-immigrant, with all this national campaign we’ve been hearing. We know that (inaudible) for a while, and now even in our own neighborhoods where people should be our brothers and sisters, disenfranchised populations that should be with us. If we are not working together, how can we change in this society to help. I usually say that, if you look at white churches, there’s so many immigrants because white people have welcomed them so generously, and are willing to push them to the next level in terms of opportunity and employment. Now does pulling down our own brothers and sisters. Is not, kind of, doesn’t discourage me to keep fighting. But a kind of reassessment of where we are.

KL: It must seem a little discouraging sometimes?

AN: Not with me. I will have a night or two, not good nights. Where you keep thinking. And then, I'm on my feet again,

KL: Well, great. There's one thing I want to do real quickly. And that is, I would like to get a photo if I can?

AN: No problem.

END OF INTERVIEW