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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Selma Shejavali

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 20, 1999

Windhoek, Namibia

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Interview with Selma Shejavali

Interviewer: Jean Krasno

March 20, 1999

Windhoek, Namibia

Jean Krasno (JK): To begin with, Mrs. Shejavali, could you just tell us a little about where you were born and where you were educated and a little bit about growing up here in Namibia?

Selma Shejavali (SS): Thank you very much, Jean. My name is Selma Shejavali, as you know already. I was born in the far north of our country, the place that is called Ovambo, and I was born in the village called Oshali. I am always proud to say that I was born in my parents' house. I was not born in the hospital; this is quite traditional. I went to school, the nearest school was about 5 kilometers away from my parents' house, and so it took me quite a while. I was a little bit older than I should have been when I went to school. I started school really officially when I was about ten years old because I couldn't bear the distance I had to walk to the school and back. Five kilometers one-way, so it's a long way together. Some days you had very hot sun and rain and the kindergartens and preschools were not that common at that time, otherwise I could keep busy with the nearest kindergarten maybe in the village. But otherwise it was only Sunday school and primary school. The preschools were close to the primary schools so there was nothing like it.

JK: Okay, so it was far. Was the school run by the church? What kind of school was it?

SS: It was a government school, but the teachers were really church-oriented, I would say. It was quite like a church school because Christianity was very strongly taught in the schools. We never started school without morning devotion. We never started our class in the classroom without a prayer and a bible. Christian education was quite strongly taught. So, I would say that it was a mixture because I remember also that the inspectors at that time were Finnish missionaries. I remember one lady, I can't remember her name now, but I remember one lady who used to come to our school for inspections. She used to travel with a cart, an ox and wagon. So it was a little bit mixed, but we enjoyed it.

IK: That is really interesting. So, was the school free? Did you have to pay anything to go to school?



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SS: No, I don't think at that time we paid anything. I could remember only that maybe we had little money for books, but those books we bought by ourselves, not necessarily from the school. Only a few exercise books were distributed from the school.

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IK: Did you have to wear a uniform or did you just wear regular clothes?

SS: No, at that time we didn't have uniforms. The uniforms came later, like now. We could wear anything.

IK: Did most of the children from your village go to school?

SS: Most of them started the school, but not many of them have finished the school. So most of them were able to complete the primary school, but not many of them have continued to do the secondary school and reach at training colleges or nursing or something like that. Sometimes because of the payment, although the payment at that time I remember after I finished my primary school. Then we went to the school called the girl's school, the girl's hostel. There was a boy's hostel and girl's hostel, not in the same place. I was telling even one of my nephews today, that in our days we used to pay, instead of money, the grain, the omahungu, what we would cultivate in our farms. The [unsundia] in the north. You would have seen, maybe, the grain growing? So that is the grain that our parents have to pay seven bushels and then maybe one bushel of the dried spinach. That was all of our payments in those days because money was quite scarce.



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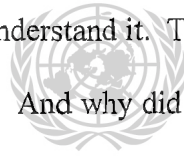
JK: In your family, growing up, can you describe your village and your houses and different things?

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SS: I grew up in a big family, actually. I had four brothers and five sisters, so I was the fourth sister. In the number, I was number seven in the family, so there were only two younger ones after me. Otherwise we had also an extended family, as it is very typical in Africa especially. Although we were many children already in the family, we had also, or my parents also had to raise some other children, for one reason or another. Maybe it was not necessary, but it was quite common in the custom, the more people you have in the house, the more you feel honored or something like this. As you have seen the structure of the Ovambo houses that we have huts, many different huts in the house, e.g. one hut is for the boys and one hut is for the

girls. It could be also that there are five boys and they are big, so each one of them has their own hut. There may be a certain area just for the visitors, for the very important visitors who come for parents, not any kind of visitor, and then there is also a place just for men, for the husband, where he greets the visitors that come, who come especially to him. Then there are some special places for the girls and so on. There is a kitchen area where there are some huts as storerooms and for those of cooking. It is quite a big kind of corral with many different huts, and each hut has its own function.

JK: That is so interesting. I am really glad that you described this because when we went up North we could see this, but we didn't understand it. There was a very tall wooden wall or fence that went all the way around the outside. And why did you have the big, tall fence?



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SS: Well, I am not very sure, but I think that it is for protection of the house. To protect all of those huts within, because even the cattle, sometimes when it is not the rain season, but the dry season, the cattle just go around by themselves so they can be easily attracted by the grass which is covering the roofs of the huts.

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JK: Really? They might eat the thatched roof of the hut?

SS: Yes, so that is why the outside fence has to be quite strong and also people might put something at the entrance when they are going out or something so that the cows don't come inside it. And maybe not only from the cows, or from the animals, but also so you can't go inside the house from just anywhere. You have to go inside from the entrance. I could

understand that in the past when I am describing this to my friends, my foreign friends who are not Namibians, they think that when I am talking about the house, they think that I am talking about the hut, like there are so many small houses within one fence. When I am talking about the house, I am talking about the whole surrounding, the whole fence and everything in it. That is the house.

JK: The space between the huts is actually living space.

SS: Exactly. It is also part of the house. It is just like we are walking in the corridor to go from one room to the other.



JK: I like that. It is really nice. When we were going along, we were wondering if the fence was for wild animals like the jackals or the other big cats or something.

SS: It is probably for many different reasons, to protect the house from wild animals, from the cattle, and from just strangers – you don't leave the house like that so that anyone can just go in. You have to make sure that somebody comes through the entrance and then to ask also permission or to introduce him or herself before she comes inside the house. If I come to visit you, if you are in that kind of corral, I don't come in just like that. As soon as I enter the entrance, then I have to introduce myself or I have to make a sign that there is somebody. I can say "Hello" or "Good afternoon" or "Good Morning," and then I get the response. And then if I call and no one responds, that means there is nobody at home and then I have to go out.

JK: OK, so just to understand a little bit more. If someone greets you, than do you touch them? Do you shake their hand, or do you hug? In some cultures you don't touch each other.

SS: It is true. I don't know traditionally, traditionally very far away, but what I have seen and observed when I was a child, usually if you come to my house and then maybe I am a child, you will sit at a certain place not too much inside the house, and then I come and greet you. I will just come and kneel down and greet you. It's a sign of respect. But when the big people are meeting, probably sometimes they do shake hands. I believe that the shaking of the hands comes from western culture. I am not from the old, old ways, but I do not think that there was too much of the shaking of the hands. So usually the people just greet. But, it doesn't happen now. Now, if I meet you and we don't shake hands, that is like you are not too welcoming. I think that traditionally, traditionally the shaking of the hands was not very common.

JK: Now, in the fanTI you said that you had cattle and you also grew grain. So where are the fields, I didn't see that they were fenced in, are the fields open? Can the cattle just go in herds and have someone watch them?

SS: When I was a child, not too many gardens or fanns were fenced. But everybody in our community was responsible. If you have cattle and you know that it is summer time and [he people have grains or have plants growing, you have to make sure that there is somebody looking after your cattle so they don't just wander off. The house is strong, as we have said already. Now it is something different. In the old days, usually the people who have been taking

care of the cattle were children, boys, the boys or the big men. If there is a need of the boys, or the husband, or the father, than the girls also can take over. Even the women too. But commonly the cattle are taken care of by the males. So in that sense some of the boys lose a lot of their education because they have to be dedicated to take care of the cattle. Although there are some girls also who lost their education because of the responsibilities or tasks they were given by the parents.

JK: What was the role of the church in the north before independence? What was the traditional role of the church? I understand that it was primarily the Lutheran church.

SS: The Lutheran church is the majority there, and then later comes the Roman Catholic church, and the Anglican church and so on. But until now is the Lutheran. As you know, maybe you have heard already that the missionaries who have been active in the north were from Finland, from the Finnish Mission Society, and their role was first, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the other one also was education, because many of the schools, as I said, they were quite Christian, they had very strong emphasis on Christianity. And then also, health, the hospitals. The missionaries came and built the hospitals and clinics there, and so on. They tried to teach the people about hygiene. I would say that it is the role of the church because **it** comes from the people who taught the gospel, not only the gospel, but an overall way to a better life.

JK: So the church became the focus of the community because they were doing education, and spiritual training and health, and everything.

SS: Christian education was really spreading. It was quite strong, not only in the schools, not only in the ordinary schools, but in the Sunday schools, confirmation and so on. And then also, it was very strongly taken by many people in the homes. You heard that in Christian families, not only in the pastor's families, people would make their devotion by themselves.

JK: So was it important to be able to read then in order to be able to do the devotions properly?

SS: Yes, it was important to read. I think, as I remember, for example, in our congregation, seeing the old people. As long as the person knows how to read, it very important, because the person was able to read the bibles, they are able to sing with others and they are able to read the church magazines or newsletters in their own language. Especially reading in your own language was very important.

JK: I wanted to ask you, what language were you taught in the school? What language was it?

SS: At the very beginning everything was taught in Oshivambo in Oshindonga. That is how I was taught. So the education to me was given in the Oshindonga medium of instruction. There was also the official language at that time which was Afrikaans. Afrikaans had to come in, especially at the later stage. It comes at the grade three and higher. But it is really a language that you are not able to practice everyday because you don't speak it to anybody. As a matter of

fact, most of the time the people learned by heart, would just name something by heart and recite it. Sometimes you didn't even know what it means. You just learn in order to pass your exam. Until now, my Afrikaans is quite poor.

JK: Oshivambo is written, I mean, when I have seen it written, it is written in Latin letters. Or what kind of letters do you use to write it?

SS: It is the same letters as English. It is only that the pronunciation is different, and the way of saying things is different.

JK: I was interested to see all of the road signs and everything were in letters that I understood, so once I figured out how to pronounce it, it was good.

SS: I really do appreciate very much that side of our teaching that we were taught in our own language. We feel proud and enriched. We feel secure with our language. Although it was also very good to learn other languages in order to communicate as I am communicating with you! If I didn't know English, then I wouldn't talk to you, unless you knew Oshindonga. Now, on the other hand it is really sad to see that the children are growing up without knowing their own home languages. Because many people believe that it is more than education. When the person doesn't know how to speak his own language, then the person doesn't know who he or she is, without knowing his other own home languages. Therefore, I appreciate also our government that, after independence, the educational system is that children should learn in their own languages, especially in the first four years of primary schools. Later on they can learn in

English or something, but English should be only a subject in the early years. It is why we are putting very much emphasis right now on the pre-school teachers. We try to put emphasis that they teach the children in their own language. There is no problem of doing it. Especially in the rural area almost everybody in the community is speaking the same language. It becomes difficult for the people who are teaching in the city where the people are mixed. The teacher maybe speaks Oshindonga like myself, and then maybe in my class I have many children from different languages. It is very good that I have all those children because they feel like we are Namibians; we are not a part of the groups as in the apartheid system where we come from. But on the other hand, it is very difficult for that teacher to teach each child in their own home language, English unites people then in the classroom, so there has to be many different teachers speaking many different languages because you don't want to divide the children. At the same time, you are not able to accommodate all the children in their own languages. But I really do appreciate also that there are some teachers who are able to communicate in all the languages. It is amazing. Maybe not even fluent, but at least they can communicate. If a child cannot understand her or him, then they can switch to their own language.

JK: That is important. Now, I want to ask you about the whole system of apartheid, from your own experience for the first part of your life living in the North. What kinds of things did you observe happening?

SS: In the North, actually what I observed is that there was very much different than what I observed in the cities. Because we live in the community, we speak the same language; we don't live in the cities to see how the people were divided and so on. We could also observe that you

are not having the rights you are supposed to have. Although it was not very strong at the time, it was kind of being politically open, if people are speaking about the colonial system or the apartheid system. Although it didn't come to your mind at first, when people are speaking about it, you would say, "I think that it is true." Because it is true that maybe you went somewhere to the bank, for example, and there you are in the queue and then there is another queue just for the whites. Then you could say, "Oh yeah." Until somebody speaks about it, you would say, "Oh yeah, there is something here, but it is something beyond my control. I cannot just impose myself like that. I am either locked up, or something like that."

JK: So, when you were growing up and living in your community you basically had your own traditional life. The only time that you would really see that would be when you would go in the city where there were shops and banks and those kinds of things, and then you would see it.

SS: That is when it was really clear, especially when we moved from towns to townships. The things that you have been hearing you can experience it at that time, because for example apartheid is an evil system of divide and rule. That was not only when we were far away there in the village, we know that there is a division between whites and blacks, but we experience it then, to see it with our own eyes, to see that the system is not only between blacks and whites, but it is also among blacks, but not among whites. Here in Namibia we have also the white Afrikaans-speaking people, English-speaking people, German-speaking people, and so on. But they live together in the city. When it comes to the color of skin you see that the colored people who are between whites and blacks will be in their own area, they are not with the whites and not

really with the blacks. And then when you go to Katutura for example, you see the division not only between the color of skin, but also the ethnicity, the language groups.

JK: Now, I understand that even the address on the house has a sign for what ethnic group one belongs to.

SS: That is right. It used to be "OV," which means that area is for Ovambo speaking people, and then "H" for Herero and "D" for Damara and so on.

JK: What is it that makes Katutura as a township outside of Windhoek, it is part of Windhoek but it is separate.



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SS: It is separate. It is meant really as a place for the black people.

JK: You married a pastor in a Lutheran church. Can you describe a little about when you got married and what your husband's group was?

SS We got married in 1968. It was quite a while ago. We got married in my home congregation. My own father was also a pastor and he is the one who married us. Although he was really willing, it was very difficult for him to marry his own daughter. My husband originally comes from Angola. His name is Abisai Shejavali. He was born in Angola. His mother was a Christian and his father was also a Christian, but he was kind of withdrawing and then he wanted to marry many wives and so on. His mother decided that she wanted her children

to grow up in a Christian atmosphere, so therefore she left Angola with her two younger children and came to Namibia. She was accommodated in the pastor's house, in the old pastors house with her two children - a daughter and then my husband. They grew up there and the mother later on went to build her own small house there nearby, but my husband remained in the pastor's house. He grew up there. He went to school at the boy's schools and the teacher training college. Then, he became a teacher, and then later on he went to the theological seminary. Then he became a pastor and then he was sent, immediately after he finished theological seminary, he was elected as one of the young people who was sent to Finland. He got his masters degree there in Theology in Finland. He had to start from scratch to study Finnish. He came back, and then he taught at the Lutheran Theological Seminary. At that time it, the Seminary was in Otjimbingwe. It is a place between Windhoek and Swakopmund, one of the off roads to the left-hand side. It used to be one of the first mission stations in Namibia where the German missionaries came. When the Finnish missionaries came, also, they had to make a kind of orientation and at Otjimbingwe before they could proceed to Ovamboland in the North. The theological seminary was there. He taught there for probably about two years, and then we got married, and we stayed there for two years, and then he went to the United States.

JK: Right, and you had told me before that you went to the United States and you studied there. How many years were you in the United States?

SS: Six years. I stayed there for six years, he stayed there for seven years because he went and stayed for a year and a half before I followed him.

JK: You had told me before that, when you were in the United States, you spoke about the impOliance ofNamibian independence while you were there, and when you came back after spending those years in the United States, you were pretty much immediately arrested. You, and your husband first?

SS: Yes, my husband first. We were there in USA, my husband went there in 1971 and then I followed him at the end of 1972. We were there until 1978. Those were the years in Namibia, the really crucial years. The war was getting stronger and more people were leaving the country and harassment was getting severe. While we were there, we were hearing this bad news. So then, we spoke about it. The people were also interested to know what is happening and in the theological seminary, where we were, there were also students from various parts of the United States, from different states. Some of them had heard about Namibia but they didn't really know what was happening and they were interested. We had to speak very often to the students, either privately or fonnally in the bigger groups and we were called to various places to speak. I was invited to the women's groups and so on. Then my husband was called to the congregations to conduct the church service and at the same time to speak about the situation in Namibia. After the church service, maybe we were divided into groups to talk about things like this, or in Sunday school. We also had adult Sunday schools. Our speeches sometimes were recorded either in the radios or in the newspapers. South Africa said, now these are the people who are talking about us. Here, in Namibia, you were not able to be free to speak about what you want to speak about. Outside you can say whatever you want to say. Before we came back, there was a fear already especially among our friends who said, why do you have to go back? Why don't you just wait until the country gets independence? Me and my husband would say, "No, we

have to go and suffer with our people." We really were kind of homesick too, because you hear the news and then you don't know how your brothers and sisters are, how your parents are. One of the shocking news also was that my father-in-law, my foster father-in-law, the one who brought my husband up as I said, the pastor, and his wife, their house was visited by the South African army and they were beaten up, and my mother-in-law was raped. So, it was a horrible situation. When we got that news, we were just shocked. We have been talking about all of those kinds of things happening. It is painful to talk about it, but we talk about it so that the people know what is happening. When we came back, immediately we were arrested. My husband first was arrested, and he had to spend the night in the military camp in Ogongo, and then the following day I was arrested at the same time as the local pastor of the congregation. I was blindfolded the whole day, made to sit on the very hard floor with kind of thorns. Until now, I don't know on what I was sitting because I was blindfolded. We were not allowed to speak to each other, to say, "are you there?", or something like that, here, because everyone was blindfolded. Even when we were coming out of the truck, one would have to hold your foot to say, Ok, put your foot here, something like that. You lost your trust. You don't know if you are told the right thing or not. Late in the afternoon, our children were also arrested, our two children and they were put in the truck by military people. At that time fortunately Bishop Dumeni arrived at our congregation, immediately at our house.

JK: Bishop Dumeni, was he in Oniipa at that time? He had to travel a long way.

SS: Yes, he was. He had to travel to go to Ongenga. He came to intervene in the matter but they didn't want to listen. They were so aggressive, you know, the military at that time. He said

"I am going to take the children in my car", but I can follow you to take them where you want to take them, but they have to be in my car. He was allowed to do so. One thing the children would say to the South African soldiers is that "we are not going with you because we do not know you". But after they arrived at the camp, my husband was released and he was at the gate of the military camp, and then I was also released so we met just there. I don't know where he is coming from and he doesn't know where I am coming from. While we were there, the children were on their way led by the soldiers.

JK: Why did they arrest the children? How old were the children?

SS: The eldest one was eight and the youngest was five. They were terrified, poor kids. But anyways, these kind of things happen. They torture you psychologically and make everyone shaky and show their power, because what does a child do. I think that they were curious as to "what have these people been saying in the States." They wanted all of my husband's documents, everything. They went through all of the papers. Later, we were released. We rejoiced. Although we were not feeling depressed, we thought about our people who were tortured, who were beaten, who were imprisoned for a long time. This was just a small drop in the sea, what happened to us, but on the other hand we were also thankful just to have a feeling and to participate in harassment everybody had been participating in.

JK: Was Bishop Dumeni particularly well respected in the community, that his presence or his voice in the matter made a difference.

SS: Yes. At that time he was not a Bishop, he was a Bishop-Assistant. There was Bishop Leonard Auala who had come before him. He was young, he was active, and he was doing many things. It's just like the President and the Vice President. Usually, the Vice President is the one who is doing the action.

JK: What I was curious about is, did the South Africans fear Bishop Dumeni in some way? You know, he seemed to survive all of that even though he took a strong position, and I was wondering why the South Africans would tolerate that.

SS: I really do not know. Probably they would see also that these people did not put themselves in the power and they were working with the gospel. They don't have literally weapons; they have spiritual weapons, and I think that they have respect on that anyhow, although not always. Some pastors were also jailed and tortured. It is really a good question, for example, some soldiers who would see that they could come to the church service and the pastor is there. They come and interrupt the whole service. They were able to do that. But if the bishop comes, I think that the situation goes down a little bit. It's not only Bishop Dumeni, but church leaders who were also respected. If somebody else could have come to the situation at our house when they took the children, I don't think that that person would have survived. They would not have respected his demands. Because this was a Bishop, he was not a Bishop at that time, but a church leader, they were able to do that. They cannot do everything, the respect, just to be on their knees, but at least until the situation could calm down a bit. I think that we can use the example of the respect of the church leaders, because the church was really the outspoken voice of the voiceless, because I am sure that you are aware of the "open letter."

JK: Tell us about the “open letter.”

SS: We were talking about how the South African army had respect of the church leaders. As you know, maybe you are aware of the open letter. The apartheid system is an evil. It was condemned very much, not only by the ordinary people, by SWAPO [South-West African People’s Organization] for example, but by the church, because the members of SWAPO are also church members. It doesn’t matter if they are from the Lutheran Church, or the Anglican Church, or the Catholic Church, but they are church members, they are Christians. As you know very well also, the majority of the people in this country are Christians. Right now it is ninety something, so over 90% of the population are Christians. Therefore the church has to speak on behalf of these people, of its members. Also, since the apartheid is an evil and it is against the gospel, therefore the Church leaders have to raise up their voices to say what do they think, how do they feel about this kind of evil system happening in their country, in a very well populated Christian country. So, they took a step, they had been having their meetings, I cannot go into details, and then at last the church has made an attempt to say, let us write an open letter to Mr. Foster, who was the head of the South African system. His office was in South Africa. Anyhow, they wrote a letter, an open letter, to say that we condemn the apartheid system. I am sure that open letter is also in the office of the United Nations. One can quote that letter. I cannot remember in all of the details, but what I know is that it condemned the evil of the apartheid system. That is why probably, the message from the churches, or the actions from the churches, was somehow being also respected. Although the open letter was there and then it was not really respected as such immediately, it was a step forward.

JK: The open letter, was it published in the newspapers so that the world in general could hear?

SS: Yes.

JK: In 1978 the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 435 establishing the independence of Namibia, but of course it didn't happen until many years after that. Were people in general here in Namibia aware of that Security Council resolution?

SS: Yes, they were very happy and also they could see that something was probably really coming in reality, because they could see also the representatives, the members of the UN. Their presence makes the people feel secure, that at least the United Nations is taking a step. Everybody knew. Even the small children, they know that these people are on our side. Now we could walk free.

JK: So there was an awareness of the UN?

SS: Yes.

JK: That is really nice to know! When did you actually move to Windhoek and begin your work here?

SS: We moved from Otjimbingwe to Windhoek in 1983.

JK: And you began to do your work here?

SS: Yes. Actually we moved here because of my husband's work. At that time he was the principal of the theological seminary, and then he was elected as the General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia.

JK: And General Secretary is the top position of leadership?

SS: Yes. We came here, and then he became a General Secretary. I was kind of helping the schools in the primary schools, especially because I didn't get a post offer of teaching, although I am a qualified primary school teacher. At that time also, we had a small baby and so on but I wanted to work for survival, but at the same time my hands were full. We stayed here until 1986 when I was called by the Katutura community. They wanted to start a school. Actually they had started a few months earlier, but they wanted somebody to head that kind of school. They heard that there is a teacher here and she doesn't have a post in the government schools, so why don't we call her. Although the salary was very low I was more than happy to work in such a community school.

JK: The school is something that was started by the people in Katutura, they wanted to have this school. And what was special about this particular school?

SS: It was special because we talked earlier about Katutura divisions. The people were divided like that. In the communities, there were also some schools, like if there is a Herero

location, then there is a school there. That means that the Herero children are isolated from the Ovambo children or the Damara children. Then the people in Katutura, some few parents, they had an idea and say, here is the UN Resolution, and we know that one day we will be independent. When? We don't know, but one day we will be independent. When we become independent, what are we going to say if we don't prepare our children to live as Namibian children, not to live as Herero children or Ovambo children. Let us start our community school where our children are going to meet as one Namibia, one nation here. This is number one. Number two, even if we get independence, I don't think that we will have Afrikaans all of the time. Afrikaans will be maybe a subject, but I am sure that the official language will be English, because English is the international language. Afrikaans is spoken only in Namibia and South Africa. Let us teach our children in the English language.



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JK: And also Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor.

SS: Yes, that is right, of the oppressor here. We cannot say that English was not also a colonial language. It was also a colonial language. Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor. So English was kind of like preparing the children for independence, to be prepared better to be one nation, and to be prepared to have a new vision, like a new language for example, to say that the official language will not be Afrikaans. We want our children to be prepared in English, to be taught in English, because we know for sure that it is going to be the official language. Also, to have a participatory democracy. We are not teaching only subjects like how to read and write and count. Those were there, but it became this type of teaching and giving the children the skills of being aware of everything, to participate democratically, to have freedom of criticism, to

ask questions in a free way; not to be afraid, or, how can I ask the teacher a question like this, maybe they will think that I come from a political family. Children can ask questions as they wish, and if we are able to answer your question we will answer. If we are unable to answer your question we will try to search for the answer. This is also what we have been trying to make the parents aware of. Don't cut the child off from asking. Try to be listeners, very carefully, and to give the child an answer, but the correct answer, not only the answer to please the child. Those are the kinds of things, especially to unite the people and to be ready for the others. It is really true also that because we started with the kindergarten, with the preschool, and grade one, each year we were able to add one more year until grade seven. Before we reached grade seven, independence had come. When the people were repatriated, most of the children were sent to the people's primary school. We were given money to build more classrooms and even a hostel of 600 children who need accommodation.

JK: Let me just clarify that. In 1989 when the process of UNTAG was started, UNHCR began to oversee the repatriation of many of the refugees or people who had simple been displaced from their homes, who weren't necessarily outside of the country. When they started coming back into the country, they came into Windhoek many times and would come to live in Katutura. The children of those families are what you are talking about?

SS: That is right, because almost everyone came from outside of the country when they were repatriated to come back home. They came to Windhoek first. Some were living in the tents for a few days until their families were able to come and collect them to take them home. But there were also some close families that were not available anymore. Maybe the parents had died or

they moved away or something, or it just took longer to trace where they are. Therefore, there were so many young children, and the children had to go to school. They cannot just follow their parents. It was also kind of strange for them and anything. So then, while the parents were settling, maybe getting jobs, we kept the children at the People's primary school. They could live there in the hostel. That time before the repatriation system came, there was no hostel. There was no need for a hostel. But when we were asked, "Can you accommodate these children?" We were ready. We had ground, but we did not have money to build. We needed more classrooms, we needed also a hostel for the children to stay while their parents tried to settle down. Then the hostel was built immediately and we were given food for these children, and everything like that.



JK: Who supplied the food and the resources to build the hostels and different things? Was it UNHCR?

SS: Yes, UNHCR, but also the other donors through the new government, especially SIDA.

JK: Was it a UN agency?

SS: No, UN agencies supplied some things, like maybe the blankets. The Swedish government also supplied things. It is a Swedish agency, which the government of Sweden also contributes. SIDA [Swedish International Development Agency] has donated so much to the People's Primary School. Actually the money for the building came from many different agencies, but the money was for emergency schools. Most of the money for the emergency

schools was given to the People's Primary School because we had to build a big hostel of 600 children and more classrooms and to pay more teachers. Some of the teachers who came in from exile came to join us because at the time of repatriation we were having more than 600 and something children. Then, the number doubled because more than 600 children came and they came with their teachers. So we had to have money to pay the teachers and take care of them.

JK: They had teachers in the refugee camps outside and so the teachers came also?

SS: Yes, so we were blessed. We started very, very humbly and then it was like a flower blooming. If you could see it blooming, it was really nice.



JK: The school and the Council of Churches worked hand in hand with the different agencies and UNHCR?

SS: The Council of Churches has done a lot. My husband was then the General Secretary so we worked very closely together with the UN to repatriate these people and to start the RRR office – the office of repatriation, rehabilitation and resettlement. We used to call it “Triple R.” There was a lot being done.

JK: Also, Bishop Dumeni was saying to me that when the people came back into the country, many of them were still afraid to return to some of their villages because they thought that they might be persecuted in some way or another because they had left. The church did a lot of work

to help the UN work with these people so that they could return home. Did you or your husband talk to some of these people and explain what was going on?

SS: My husband especially did that because I was especially concentrating on the school. But he had to travel a lot to many different parts of the country, before the people even came, so that the people were prepared to receive these people. In many cases the counseling took place already. Because also, the families were torn apart. You know that some parents have many children. Maybe some of the children went for SWAPO, and maybe two of the children went to the South African system. Therefore, now it is like being in the same house with two different groups, and now everybody has to come home. The serious unification is needed here.



JK: So in reality, there was some danger.

SS: In reality there was some danger because you don't know who is for whom. If I have a brother or a sister or something but they have different political ideas and I don't know what may break out. Therefore there was a need for a very serious and careful orientation to prepare the parents also. It was mllionced very strongly and repeated over and over again that this is now the process of reconciliation. We have accepted it but it was not very easy and as simply as that. You have to go sometimes physically to experience the situation.

JK: So you had to actually go and speak to the families?

SS: That is right. Especially my husband who was working for the CCN at the executive level, but also the churches, the member churches individuals have to do that also because they are right there in the grassroots with the people. The role of the church really played a very great role during repatriation.

JK: The Council of Churches is not only the Lutheran church, but also the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church?

SS: Oh yes, the Council of Churches is the Council of the Churches. All of the churches meet here together and have one voice. Not only the Lutheran church but all other churches also. There are some smaller churches that aren't members of the Council of Churches, but they may be observers and they support those kind of strong statements, which are done by the Council of Churches.

JK: That was a very, very important role for the church to play in repatriation. I think not enough is known about that. It is important to talk about that. I wanted to talk to you a little more about the UN and the UN's involvement. UNTAG, the UN Transition Assistance Group, was scheduled basically to start and the Special Representative Martti Ahtisaari was to arrive April 1st. What was the feeling or anticipation of the date of April 1st in Windhoek where you were, and of the people that you were working with?

SS: Everybody was excited. I was at that day, I still have a picture of that day – myself and my friends. People traveled a long way to come to Windhoek to celebrate and to honor the day.

Unfortunately we heard the news that some people were killed in the North. I don't know if you were able to go to the place.

JK: I didn't go to the actual place, but I was near. But here in Windhoek I wanted to ask you because I heard that day Mr. Ahtisaari was coming, everyone was very excited with a big march that was planned to go into Windhoek to receive him. What happened?

SS: It was quite a great day. It was a great day that the people came from different parts of Namibia, especially from the North. They were really celebrating and then we could feel like it was Independence Day. We could see that now this resolution is here – that means that nobody anymore can do nonsense. Unfortunately the fighting happened, but it didn't discourage people from carrying on. We received the day anyhow and people were really so happy and excited.

JK: So what did people think had happened? What was the attitude here as to what had happened up in the North? Did people really have any information?

SS: No, we really didn't have very much information. The information came later, but it came later and only said that people were shot. Of course some people were also asking, how could that happen; the UN came and Ahtisaari arrived and then people were shot there. Where was the UN when the people were shot? So that is the only day that I could see the hesitation of the people, but they were not losing hope in the UN.

JK: There were some questions?

SS: Yes, there were some questions and tensions and doubts, a little bit, but it didn't take very long because it was taken up and explained so that people could understand. Since the people were very hungry for independence, I think that they were looking forward instead of backwards as to what had happened.

JK: So they were willing to allow that there might be mistakes?

SS: Yes, there might be mistakes but it was an accident and they must keep going.

JK: In terms of the voter registration, did the Church participate in helping to register the people and educate the people on what voting was all about?

SS: Yes, very much. The Church had done a lot, at the congregational level and educational institutions, in any gathering and through the newspapers, through the radios. The Church and the UN especially had done a lot in educating the people. They worked together.

JK: Did you or did your husband go to meet with people at the UN headquarters here to talk about different aspects?

SS: My husband especially was working much more closely to them. I came in only for receiving the children at the school and so on. Also I participated in the election monitoring so I

remember that I was at the Independence Stadium. We were observing the election so that the people should do what they are supposed to do to make the election free and fair.

JK: In helping to educate people, did you explain to them that their ballot would be secret?

SS: Yes, their ballot would be secret. I think that people also had confidence of the people whom they were talking to. They were already explained at the local level, and when they come for voting, then they know what is happening. Then also, to see the people they trust and they know, they know that there are no hidden agendas here so I have to do something.

JK: By the UN being there as a symbol of the international community, but also people such as yourself being there, they knew and trust; they realized that it was going to be OK.

SS: Yes, it was very interesting and also exciting. The thing that makes me most happy is that the place where I was, (and I think that it also happened in other places), that people were so patient. There was no complaint. People stood in the long queues but really looking forward to that box to put their ballot in. There was no complaint whatsoever, such as “We were standing in the rain or in the hot sun,” but everybody was quiet and just wanted to vote. It doesn’t matter how many days it would take, I think that it could take years.

JK: Was it important that the UN actually was represented by people from all around the world, all different colors, all different languages and so on that came to live here?

SS: Yes, it was quite an education also for us as people, when we hear what the UN is and so on. The UN doesn't mean that it is the Americans, for example. We are talking about the global people united, doing things for the same goal, especially for peace and justice. That is why the presence of the UN people here before independence, during the independence process and afterwards, it gave the people the confidence, that, "Yes, you have started with us, you are with us now, you are going to be with us again until we know that everything is ok." So that gives us confidence. I am very happy also that the UN agencies are here still, not any more for monitoring only because of the political issues, but to monitor and assist us in the development, like UNICEF, for example. We are working together with UNICEF as an organization, which is taking care of the children. I am working within the Council of Churches – I am dealing with the children's issues. Therefore we work together quite often. I am very happy about that, because otherwise you cannot just assist somebody half way and then you go. You have to observe and make very sure that the person will reach their destination.

JK: At the time of the elections, like a few weeks before, there were election observers that came from around the world suddenly coming into Windhoek. Did that seem to be fairly well organized and fairly well coordinated with the UN and the work that was being done?

SS: That I cannot say. I think that it was because you could see that these observers were very much accompanied by the UN or by the Churches or introduced by the Church to the UN. Before they come, they cannot just come in like that, they were known. Before they come in, the

Church knows or the UN knows that such a group is coming from where for observation and so on. Then, they work together. They could not just come in.

JK: When I was speaking to Bishop Dumeni, he explained that there were several days where people were voting, the election took place over a number of different days, and then after that the election results started coming in and they came in over the radio. The first day of the election, results were mainly coming in from the southern part of Namibia and in that case the party DTA was actually winning. How did people react to that?

SS: Actually the people didn't give up hope, the other parties like SWAPO, for example. I am a SWAPO member and to listen to all of those announcements I was not doubting that we would win, but I was just hoping that nothing went wrong, because I knew already that the majority would support SWAPO. I was just worried that maybe, did something go wrong somewhere, that maybe somehow it happens. I didn't give up because I knew that if the announcement from the North took place, then if we are still down, then we lost. I didn't give up hope.

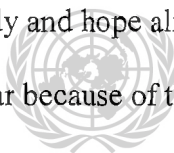
JK: But the counting from the North came in near the end. That must have been really frightening. Now I understand that Sam Nujoma lived in Katutura during that time. When he came in, he arrived in September and he lived there.

SS: Yes, and I know the house where he was living. It is not very far from the Council of Churches. If you stand at the Council of Churches, then you could see the house from the

distance. I remember that we went to visit him there several times when he was living in Katutura.

JK: Did he reassure people that as soon as the results would come in from all of Namibia that it would be OK?

SS: Yes. I mean he very much had confidence. I think that the people had confidence already – nobody was really doubting except psychological torturing because of the announcement of the first days. Otherwise, all of the time he was around. It was not only him to ensure people, but people had trust already and hope already that we are going to make it. Especially, they did not do it with any fear because of the presence of the UN, so they know that everything will be fair.



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JK: Was the UN a very physically visible presence around Windhoek?

SS: Throughout the whole country. We could see them every day. It was really nice. It was just nice, quite a good change. The prayers were going on and everything like that. I remember some women were telling me that the first night after the second day announcement, the last day announcement, that people spent the night in churches and they prayed and they cried. The elections should really continue to be fair and just and it was something.

JK: So there was still quite a bit of tension about the elections right up until the end.

SS: Yes, because you don't know what to make of the outcome, if you don't have a doubt, but still you don't know what is happening. You know that there is something, but you don't know if it is the reality.

JK: Then, once it was known that SWAPO had won the majority in the constituent assembly because that was the first thing that the elections were about, then what role did the Church play in terms of maintaining a sense of reconciliation, because now DTA did not get a majority, and so there could be a backlash from DTA. What kinds of things did the Church do?

SS: I really cannot say what they have done towards that, but what I know is that the church was trying to help all of the people regardless of their political background, whether they were the top one or the last one. It is only to try to comfort and explain also that we have been suffering for a long time. We have been fighting the same enemy anyway. You must have a family member who had been killed in the war or who suffered under the apartheid system. Then, we also suffered the same educationally. All of those things affected almost everybody, so why don't we accept what we have been looking for.

JK: Because people from all different parties belonged to the churches.

SS: That's right.

JK: That was a really important point. Well, I think that we have covered quite a bit about what I wanted to talk to you about, and didn't know if there was anything that you wanted to add about whether you felt that there was something that the UN could have done better.

SS: No, I want only to give my word of appreciation, especially for this occasion that we are able to talk and to recall the old things. I want also to give my appreciations to the UN. Before independence of this country, they have stood with us, and they were able to hear the cry from Namibia. That is why it was recognized also that SWAPO should be represented there. And that gave us the confidence that I see now. The UN had heard our cry and then they continued to be with us and to monitor the whole process of independence and to be with us after independence to make sure that everything was okay, and to be with us until today through the UN agencies. It is my hope and prayer that we should work together like that in the future. It doesn't matter how developed we will be, but we should work together to help each other. Plus, I believe that even if you come to help me, I am sure that you will learn something also from me. Therefore, I think that it is a two way process. It is true that sometimes my authority or my power is limited and then the UN power is not the same as the one of our own. That is why we need assistance. But at the same time I am sure that the people here who are here from the UN at the time of that whole process, and who are here even now, are learning so much from us. It is sharing the experience and the skills. It is why I am saying that we should continue like that, to share the ideas, to share the experience, to help each other in one way or the other.

JK: Now you had mentioned to me before, and I need to get that card again from you, that you were also doing an oral history here in Namibia. Maybe you could explain what you are doing with that oral history.

SS: This oral history came about like this: I try to think also about how I grew up, about the time I grew up, and to think about the time that I am raising my children. I see that there is so many valuable skills that we are losing that we have been enjoying and which will be of very much importance in the future, but we are losing them, for example, the telling of the story. When I was at the People's Primary School I realized it. Then also, when I went to the Council of Churches to train the teachers, I realized it. So, from my side I have been trying to encourage the story telling especially. It is contributing to the language development. It is contributing to the traditional or cultural values, for example, maybe respect, to respect the elders or to respect the people. It is based biblically, Honor your Father and your Mother, and your father and your mother are not only your parents, but honor the people who are older than you. We are talking now in the terms of the children for example. Then also, the way of education, to see that education did not come only when the Western stuff came in, but education had been there. We were educated at home and so on. That is why we were told all this kind of good stuff at home. I remember that when I was a child, for example, that we worked during the day and we went to school and everything like that. In the evening, the family got together and then we were told the stories by our parents, or by our grandparents. Then at the same time we were reporting what happened during the day – where did we go, what did we do, what did we experience. Then also we were told what our tasks were going to be for tomorrow; like maybe you, Selma, have to get

up early in the morning to go to so and so's house to bring me what, what and so on. When the sun rises you are back. So that is my responsibility.

JK: We were just talking about your developing an oral history and the importance of the stories in the family tradition of speaking in the evenings and sharing.

SS: That is very important because it developed the children's language and even their listening skills. You are listening to somebody telling you a story and then of course that person is going to ask you some questions, not that evening but maybe another time. To say, what did I say, what did we used to do, or what is good to be done and something like that. Then also, I think that we grow up in the community, I like to say that I didn't grow up only as my parent's child, I grew up as a community child, that everybody takes care of me. If I am doing something wrong that is not acceptable by my community or by my parents, then any adult or grown-up could come and advise me. If I needed a punishment, I deserve it, of which I know that I will be afraid to tell my parents because I will get the same hiding. The oral history is very important because it was history from mouth to mouth. Some of the things are not written. Some are just told. For example, I told you already about my foster mother-in-law. Her husband, the old Pastor, died some time back but the lady is here now with us in Windhoek. I should have remembered it so that I don't come here, but I think that he is a little bit quieter. So she is here. You are very welcome to make a time and come and see her, and maybe take a picture or maybe even listen to one of the stories she tells. Even today she was telling me a story on moral behavior of the past. She was telling me, for example, if you have a family, there are boys and girls and sometimes they are told things as a group, and sometimes they are educated separately.

The father is sitting with the boys to tell them and to prepare them for the responsibility from the past behavior and so on, and then the girls are done the same by the mothers, and to be prepared for their changing bodies and so on, and what they should say yes to or no to. So this is our education, isn't it? Those kinds of things we are losing. It is not very often anymore that the parents are educating the children like that. So the children are getting some ideas from outside of the home which are not very good skills, probably. Then we call ourselves more than parents. We are really so destructive, because the thing is that you never sit with your children and you are always tired. You are a working mother, you come back home and you are tired, and then the children don't get attention. Sometimes we don't even know where our children are. They say only, "She or he is with their friends." We don't know who those friends are, what they are up to, or something like that.

JK: In your oral history, are you recording some of the stories that the elders would tell from their experience?

SS: Yes, I am recording some of the stories, the grandparents, and the old people, used to tell their children or their grandchildren. Sometimes I just ask the questions to say what did you used to do in this regard, what was acceptable and what was not acceptable, something like that. I know that in the old days there were so many good things we are losing unfortunately, and there are also many bad things that we should leave. Also today there are some very good things and there are some things that we should be aware of so that we can avoid them. I think that the cultural or traditional values should be combined with the present values so that we can build on that. I would like very much also on the curriculum that we should establish things like that. I

encourage it already in the People's Primary school and then at the CCN that almost every center, the children's center, or the kindergartens, there should be an old person who becomes like a grandmother or a grandfather for that kindergarten. They celebrate together maybe the childrens' birthdays or something. They come in and tell the children a story from their own experience or how they grew up or something like that. It will help both parties. It helps the children to know that these people are not stupid people. They have the wisdom, the wise people, or the advice-givers. They are very important people in our nation. They are not there just to sleep and eat and so on. Therefore they have to be respected. When you see them around and they need assistance, please rush and help them when you can. Also, the old people will know that we are here for a purpose. We have to participate also in the education of our children and so on. Therefore, what was in the past should continue. Unfortunately, we only have me and my friend who is in the United States and we are looking for funds now because we would like to have this kind of project for maybe three or four years so that we can try to interview as many people as possible, but it is time and money consuming. You have to travel; you have to put petrol in the car; you have to write, you need paper, you have to record, you need equipment, just to mention a few. And then you have to pay the people who are doing the job. You have to give a token of appreciation of the time the person is doing that and giving you the information and so on. Therefore, it is really our wish and prayer that we will be able to get some funds to take up this matter because old people are dying also. The time is not waiting for us. Maybe the people who are supposed to give us more information tomorrow are dying. The later we start, the more we lose.

JK: Well, I appreciate you telling me all about this. I think that you've finished unless there is anything else you would want to add.

SS: It is really very nice meeting you. I am very happy that I am also a part of the people you interviewed. I hope that the information I give is valuable and will be useful.

JK: Very much so. Thank you very much.

Yale-UN Oral History Project

Selma Shejavali

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 20, 1999

Windhoek, Namibia

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