

Client: Wits University Historical Papers

Tape: 45 Meriam Nainda

Transcriber's notes: Interview was taped in Portuguese and translated into English.

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**INTERVIEWER:** Interview with Meriam Nainda 17<sup>th</sup> June 2005 in Pomfret. Mrs. Meriam please could tell us where you were born.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** I was born in Angola, in 1947 20 June. In the Province of Bie. Siva Cote Bie. In the area of Ciuca. Is where I was born.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you study there?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** After the problem of the Portuguese Colony, my parents had to leave Angola to go the Republic of Congo. Previously Congo, Belgian Congo. Then went there. I grew up and studied there.

Then 1973 I had to come back to my country of Angola. My husband was a revolutionary; I also entered the revolution for the cause of my country, Angola. In 1973, we came back to Angola. In 1976 when the war began, I left with my husband and other militants. We went to Oshakati (unclear), then to Calais. On 27 April 1976, we crossed the Okavango River to go into Namibia.

We went to Rundu. When we arrived, because we had Politicians with us they took us to the Bobuata. That is where we stayed for three months. Then we went back to Rundu in August, to join the rest of the refugees. 10 Kilometers from Rundu, a place called (unclear) is where we stayed.

In 1978, my husband had to go back to the Republic of Congo, to see the leader of the ruling party, (unclear) Roberto. He wanted to see if he could arrange that we go back to Angola, because it was near the border.

They took his ticket and passport away from him, so he had to stay there. He stayed there for a year. I stayed behind suffering with my daughter; my other children had stayed with our parents because of the war.

I continued to live in suffering in Rundu. My husband was frightened to come back. I also had no means to go there where he was. He was now in Angola. He had given himself back to the Angolan government, when President Agostinho Neto had died. He said he preferred to go back to his country and die, than to die in a foreign country. I continued to live as a refugee, with much suffering.

In 1980, I met a Soldier. He came to ask me if I would live with him. It was a very difficult decision, for Angolans in Namibia; it was very difficult to get work. We did not have any studies or qualifications to enable us to get work. Rundu was a small post, a small village. There were no jobs that we could do. There were garages, stores, and the Post office and the Police Station. I accepted that man's proposal, to go and live with him, in Buffalo. This was in 1981. In 1984, I entered the armed service as a Primary school teacher.

In 1986, I separated from that man. He drank too much, he created too much confusion, and he beat me. The Army then recharged him back to Civilian life, because of his problem.

From 1986, until today I continue to live alone with my three children that were born in Namibia.

I continued to work in the Armed Service as a teacher, until I arrived here in 1989. We lived in the tented Camp, with wind, cold, rain, until they finished constructing the houses. The first group moved into their houses in 1999. Until all of us moved in.

I continued to work, as a Primary school teacher, until 1998. I decided to leave the Armed Services, because I felt tired. The Political situation was very volatile, and might change, so I thought that it would be better to leave and get a package. This would help me to pay for my children's studies. My earnings were very little.

The money only enabled me to pay for the oldest daughter to study Public Relations and Computer for two years. The other children had to continue suffering until they finished Matric. Now they are in Johannesburg. My daughter is working and the two boys are studying Computers. I, their mother am still here. In 2003, we went to Johannesburg, to meet with some Angolan women. They asked us what do we do over there, and we said that we have nothing to do, no work nothing. We told them that we were there suffering with our children and husbands.

They told us that they would be able to help us. They wanted to open a school for the children. The Primary school children are suffering, because they have no crèche to go. They wanted a crèche there. They asked who would be able to manage the school. I have been a teacher for many years, even when I was in the Congo, after I finished my studies I taught.

I started to manage that school from September 2003, until today. In December 2004, that same woman told me that she was going to be transferred back to Angola with her husband. They helped us with milk, and sugar. They also gave us detergent to wash the floors, dishwashing detergent. The expenses were too much and she was not able to pay us, the teachers. Sometimes two or three months passed before she sent us 350 per each person, sometimes 400 each. That's how it was. Because we love the children, we continue to work. That's why we did it, because that money was not enough for anything.

In 2005, I decided that I didn't want to manage the school anymore. I had no support. When I had a meeting with the mothers, to tell them that I was closing down the school because I didn't have the support or the finances.

The mothers were very upset, because they said that if their children did not have the nursery school background they would not be accepted in Primary School. I took them from the ages of 4years to 6years. Once they have turned 6years they can go to Primary School. I then told them if that is what they, want, they, must pay more than the R10 each that they had been paying.

This coming year they would have to pay R30 each, so that we can buy some food for the children and the rest is to pay the other teachers. I don't need too

much, because the little my children earned they still sent me some. I still do sacrifice for them. I just need a little money, as I am older, I need a few medicines here and there, and the rest we leave in God Hands. The mothers agreed to pay the R30.monthly, but unfortunately, not all of them do. However, I continue in this task for Love. I keep looking out to see if there is somebody out there that can help us.

I am sad about one thing. In our Community, there is no work. There are many women out there who want to work and there is nothing that they can do. The Government promises job creation, but there is nothing and no help either. When we take the initiative to open or start a project. The army comes and says that the people will be leaving. How are we to start something when we are moving?

Since 1998, they have applied to start projects. Until today, no projects have been approved, not for the women or the men. They just keep saying that we must stay that they have projects for the men. Until today, nothing has materialized.

I am also sad about all the people that are dying here in Pomfret. The reason is that the men have no jobs here. They have to go look for work elsewhere. These the men can't be away from home for 6months and not be expected to have girlfriends, because the wives are here. Those girlfriends also need money. If a man earns R1500 or R2000, then he has to divide it between both of them and keep some for himself.

The wives here get about R500. How is a mother supposed to feed her children with that money? Sometimes they do not even get that amount; the mother can only suffer and cry.

The third thing that saddens me is that the men pick up many illnesses when they go out to work. These girlfriends have illnesses, and then when the husbands come home they sleep with their wives, and they contaminate the wives, then the husband and the wife die. What about the children? They become orphans.

We are the original Angolans. Many of our brothers have married Namibian women. What is going to happen to our children? They will never know their heritage. Because some of them were born in Namibia and some here in South Africa.

The mothers are also dying here. What is going to happen to those children? One day are those children going to discover their heritage? Or our children only going to benefit from going to Namibia, to find out about their Mothers' heritage? That is also a big problem we have here. When I think about it, I can't sleep. I don't know what is going to be the future of our children.

When you look around and you see that one of your brothers has died because of some illness, and left behind his children. It is a problem. We are also getting sick just from thinking about it. We are getting high blood pressure, stress. When you see an orphan home when the mom and dad is dead, what is going to happen to those children.

**INTERVIEWER:** Are there many orphans?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Here? Many! What is going to happen to these children? Three months ago, a father died first his wife had died. Now the family that is left with these children, how are they going to survive? They have their own children. The (unclear) government, are they going to be able to help those orphans? Because I can see that, it is very difficult. There has to be somebody there for them, to support and guide them. Even if the government helps them with some money for food, there still needs to be somebody to be by their sides.

Those children in future, what are they going to be? Are they only going to be classed as South Africans? Or are they going to go and look for their parentage in Angola? The suffering that is going on here is this.

In my school that I manage, I haven't yet found funds to help those children. That is how to stop children from being in the streets. It is also to help them from being sad because they have no food. They come to school and they can at least eat a little pap. This way, half the day has passed and there is less food needed at home. They are also learning many things, to pray, to read, and to love, to write. Together they are happy. But when they go home and find nothing they are very sad. God knows why!!! We are continuing to pray. All the churches are praying for us. God's will is more than Man's will. We can do things but Jesus Christ, His Hand makes everything easy.

That is how we are; we don't know what the future holds. On 28 January 2005 General Morani(unsure), told us that we have to leave here. This is the second time he came. The first was on 15 January 2005.

We have to integrate with the others. We are going to be forced to learn the language. We also have to suffer like the others. The houses are all small; the living conditions are not good. We are being treated like slaves, because of the South African constitution, and human rights, they should not be treating us like this. We worked hard. We eradicated communism, from Africa. Our brothers died in Namibia and continue to die. Until now, we have no reply to tell us what the government will do for us. Or they will promise us this.

Our husbands work as security and we continue to wait. We might see our husbands in the bush that has been stabbed to death. Or he has come back from the bush full of illness, to die. So that is the problems. This is our sadness!

**INTERVIEWER:** Who are the parents of the children? Were they the soldiers' children?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** The soldiers of 32 Battalion are the parents of these children. They are the men that are here. They married Namibian woman. Very few have bought their wives from Angola. The rest that came with their wives from Angola abandoned them in Namibia. Now they are married to Namibian woman. Some young men have now married South African women. That is why

our children are mixed up. Some consider themselves Angolan, some Namibian and some South African.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you please explain to me, when you arrived here, at the base (Buffalo), were all the soldiers with their families?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes, the men that lived there were only soldiers, with their wives that were civilians. Everyone that lived there had to be Army that was an Army Base. The wives lived at the Kimbo, which was called Pica Pau. That's where the wives, schools and churches. The stores and the Community Hall, for when they had any visitors.

**INTERVIEWER:** This Kimbo, Pica Pau, was it built just for you.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** First, we lived in a tented camp. Then in 1978, they started to build the wooden houses. The families moved from the tents to their wooden homes. We continued to live in those wooden homes until the time we left Namibia, Buffalo, to come to South Africa.

**INTERVIEWER:** The wives and children they stayed in the Kimbo whilst the men were at war.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes. Yes. We stayed there because that is where there were schools, churches and the clinic. The men went to the Base and from there they would be sent wherever to fight the war. It was so sad when they would leave and then they would send some bodies back. The children became so frightened of dead people. Sometimes it would be as many as twelve at a time; the children would all follow the cars with the dead in them. The Chaplin was even scared to go and tell the families. It was just crying and wailing. Then the

army would compensate them in some way and the children would be able to study.

**INTERVIEWER**: The widows, would they be allowed to live in the Kimbo?

**MERIAM NAINDA**: Yes, they continued to live there as before.

**INTERVIEWER**: Life in Buffalo?

**MERIAM NAINDA**: Life was like that. We knew that our life in our own country... as we knew it was no more: we had no more hope of going back. We just lived from day to day. We had no hope. We didn't know if we would live to the next day. We would just wait, and then they would send the men's bodies back. We would just wait to hear that so and so had died in the bush. That's how it was. Very seldom would they come back from an operation with all the men alive, especially when the war was in full swing, they would have two, three, four deaths. That's how it was.

When we lived there, there was a store. In the beginning, they would give us food, to the women. The men got very little. Then the women complained, then they started giving the men extra money for food and they would go and buy their own food to make. They would also have some for clothes. In 1980, they started sending the men to Rundu. From 1976 to 1978/79, they stayed at Rundu.

Some of those men, who married Namibian women, had great suffering. They married women who drank etc. if they came back without the woman, they would be fine R50, and received 50 lashes with the sjambok. In those days, R50 was a lot of money. Many women did not get on with their men. The men did not speak the Namibian language, they had no way of communicating with the woman, so they did not know of their whereabouts and how they felt. After 1983 /84 they

were in a better position. The women were the same age as they were. They also got to know their families; they spent a month or so with them.

**INTERVIEWER:** You mean to tell me the men were forced to get married?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** The single men stayed at the Base in tented camp. They also wanted money to buy food and clothes. Being single there was no one to take note of when they go, and when they came back from the bush. Often they would come back and find all their belongings stolen. So they preferred to have a wife, so that they could get a house at the Kimbo. She would take care of their clothes, their radio, what they need to purchase. They would also have a wife to cook and take care of them. That's how it was.

**INTERVIEWER:** Ok! That means that the Officials told the soldiers to get married so that they could go and live at the Kimbo.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** No! The Soldiers themselves. They saw how it was at the tented base. They would buy themselves clothes, and a radio etc. When they went out on operations, they would leave their belongings in the tent. The tent has no doors to lock. More often than not, they would come back and find everything was gone. Like that, they preferred to get married so that they could purchase their clothes, etc and there would be somebody to take care of it when they went out on operations.

**INTERVIEWER:** So the Single soldiers live in the tented camp, and the married men in the Kimbo?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** Explain to me that problem of the use of the sjambok.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** The sjambok... when we arrived in South Africa. Here in Pomfret. The men would get many beating with sjamboks. The smallest thing, they would teach them a lesson with the sjambok.

**INTERVIEWER:** Because they wouldn't get married?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** No! When they were in the bush, they used the sjambok as a disciplinary measure. Or they did something wrong. When they were in the Mauni base, they suffered. Many man suffered. Even at Buffalo, they just need a reason. Somebody said this or did that and they would get a beating. They only had one form of punishment and that was to get a sjambok beating. They would often end up in hospital. 50 sjambok lashes gets you pretty beat up. The next day you would still be expected to be back at work at the base.

That is what also made many soldiers leave. Many of them fled to Botswana, because there was a border near the training Base. They would run away at night. Some of them got killed, and some of them are still there today at a refugee camp, for Angolans. They leave the camp to go and work there. There were some that managed to go to Canada, and some to America.

**INTERVIEWER:** They fled the South African Army.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes, yes...

**INTERVIEWER:** To live as refugees? In Botswana?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes, yes, yes. They ran away during the night. If they were unlucky and go caught... the next day you would see the body, or not. Then we would only know from the others in Botswana, when they wrote to us to tell them they had not arrived. That's how it was. After 1980, many left the Army for civil life, because of all the suffering, at Rundu. Some of them went to Refugee camp for Angolans. Then they separated.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think that most of the Soldiers at 32 Battalion were refugees or FNLA soldiers?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Soldiers of 32 Battalion were the soldiers that Colonel Breytenbach called the carpenters. They had occupied. He saw that they were brave soldiers. In the 1975, War where they went into (unclear) until ... I can't remember where it was. He saw that they were very brave, they were in Rucua, till Macupa, they rest of the civilians were in Calais. From Macupa, we cross the Okavango River till the other side. From Macupa they also crossed to the other side of Rundu, where we were. Then we heard that we, the civilians would go to the Boboata. The soldiers we didn't see again. They went on to start the first Base called Zulu. The others that went to Cangai went on the start the refugee camp. We arrived afterwards in August. That was in April. We joined the refugee camp in 1976.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where was the refugee camp, in Rundu?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** In Rundu, but 10 kilometers from the town. The village of Rundu. When you are at Grootfontein, 10 kilometers on the left hand side there you will find the Base. The Refugee camp. There the army controlled everything.

**INTERVIEWER:** You Mrs. Meriam, you were a refugee twice. Here in Namibia, and when you were young in the Congo as well?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** When I was in the Congo, it was not as a refugee. At that time, parents just left, they arrived at a place and just started the motions to get life started. Get a job, we started studying. The war was not yet hot, so it was easier. When my parents went to the Congo, they did not go as refugees. They saw Portuguese government was suffering and they thought it would be for a better life. It was an emotional, move. With the studies he had in Angola, my Dad continued to study to be a teacher. He also had to learn the language. When he was done, he started to teach. Then he went on to do a theological course, and he became a reverend. Our life continued. Us, the children we all went to study. We had a good life, in that time in Zaire. Whilst it was Congo.

Then in 1973, or 1972, we heard that the people were fleeing Angola, and are arriving in Congo. That's when they made a refugee camp, but it was a small camp, in Congo in the area that we were in. Many Angolans would leave to go to Congo, and they had no work. They would go to the Kimbos, and go and farm, because Angolans are good with agriculture. They would then sell there wares on the roads. Many of them would get work as mechanics. You would see them working in the garages of white people. Then they got experience and start to work for themselves. They are like that. Just those that came in 73/74/75 they were like refugees. When they arrived at the Province of Xaba, they were be integrated into the army in Kinshasa. Where the FNLA leader was based.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were your parents members of the FNLA Party?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** No. when the FNLA delegates passed by our area, my Father would tell them that they had their war with guns, but he had his with prayer. He said he prayed to God to liberate his country. He had not accepted what was happening.

**INTERVIEWER :** But you had friends/soldiers that were members of the FNLA?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** In the Province we lived in, there was no Army. The Army was based in, Kinshasa, where their leader was based. Only when we fled did we meet them. The Army were many. Then I didn't serve the FNLA Party, I served the Accao Chitenda Party. My husband was a delegate of that Party.

**INTERVIEWER:** At the time of Independence in 1975, you decided to go back to Angola.

**MERIAM NAINDA:** In 1974, all the revolutionaries had to return to Angola with the Army, together with our leader, Julio Daniel Chitenda. He went to speak there. Then we went back to Zaire, in 1975 until today. I have not been back to Zaire.

**INTERVIEWER:** What year did you arrive in Namibia?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** 1976, Devil!!

**INTERVIEWER:** What happened in this year of 1975/76?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** When we got to Namibia, the Angolans were sent to the Refugee camp, and some went to the Army. The government did not want any more refugees. They destroyed the camp. The refugees then went into the Kimbos and to the Missions. Some of them lived in squatter camps and shacks, and looked for work. The women made pies etc to sell in town. They cooked sheep's heads, to sell. The natives then bought them. They didn't live in the refugee camps, but the Angolans stuck together, like family. They would rather be near another Angolan.

**INTERVIEWER:** The refugee camp was dismantled in 1976?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** No! In 1978.

**INTERVIEWER:** Before 1978, who was running the refugee camp? The Red Cross?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes, the Red Cross would just give us food, because the Army looked after us. They always sent us cars with food.

**INTERVIEWER:** The South African Army, they looked after you. The refugees?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes! We just got the food; the clothes... we always ate their food. That came with the cars to us. Bread, margarine, eggs, milk, dairies, those things, sugar, clothes. They bought it to us monthly.

The South African Army... the Chaplin from the Reformed Church. We met him in the Refugee camp in 1976. He came to visit us. Then we started with the Reformed church, until now we still belong to that church. When we came from our areas, we did not belong to that church. My uncle was from the reformed church. But each person has the own original church. My original church was Methodist. My parents, my grandparents. Our church was Methodist. I became reformed at the refugee camp from the Pastor/Chaplin Du Preez. He was the chaplain there at the Base.

**INTERVIEWER:** You met you future husband at that time 1975/76? When did you marry him?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** My husband, we left with him in (unclear) in Zaire. He lived in Zambia for the revolution. Then he went to Zaire to be involved in the revolution. Then he came back; we entered Angola together.

The man that I was with in 1981... I was suffering, and he came to fetch me to live with him. He drank a lot, didn't go to work. Eventually the Army discharged him back into civil life.

**INTERVIEWER:** But he was a Soldier?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** From Buffalo, 32 Battalion?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes! 32 Battalion

**INTERVIEWER:** Previously from FNLA?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Yes! Yes! Also from FNLA

**INTERVIEWER:** But he didn't stay too long?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** No! They discharged him in 1986. It was almost ten years. He was there from 1976 to 1986.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think he couldn't take the Military life?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** I don't know. The men thought of the families, or what. When they were back home and they heard that some other soldier had died when it was their turn to be in the bush, they'd think if it were going to be their turn to die. So they would turn to drinking to forget.

They would then forget about everything, going to work, the families, everything. The army didn't see it like that. But I worked for the armed service. So... the other officers spoke out for me. They said I was a good teacher and that they should

let me continue to work, in the school. So I stayed there with my children. Until today.

In 1989, General Geldenhuys, he went to Buffalo. He said now that the war is over, because you we all good soldiers, we are taking you back to South Africa. You are not going to be at war anymore. You will be able to rest with your families. There is no war in South Africa. You will get homes, and everything. You can't stay in Namibia, we fought against them and they will not receive you well here. When we, soldiers were in Namibia, we lived there but we were dependant on South Africa. Our visas everything was South African. That's why they had organized a new life for us. Here at Pomfret.

**INTERVIEWER:** Then they decided to end the whole of 32 Battalion?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** Ja, in 1992 we got the order that 32 Battalion had to be dismantled. Even General Meiring, came to end our unit, 32 Battalion. They had the last flag parade. We stayed. Then the troops were sent to other units, some to Ermelo, some to Phalaborwa, Bloemfontein, (unclear).some stayed and then the name of the Battalion also changed, it became (unclear). Then we received other soldiers, that came from I don't know exactly where from. The natives, they came to join the army.

When we left Namibia to come here, they didn't pay us anything. For the change, even when they dismantled the Battalion, we were officers, but the other soldiers didn't get anything. They didn't tell us anything, about the old unit and all about the new unit... we have something for you... No! We got nothing until today.

They also said that we constructed these houses and they belong to you. They were constructed with your monies. You were not paid anything for the move, etc. your money was used to build this area for you, to live with your kids. Even those who were in other units. If you die, then they can take it away. Everything you want will be here. You will always have a place to live. That is why we came.

We said we come and see how things would turn out. Then we saw that nothing happened. In 1998, we were tired we started to react. We went to the Provincial government, to speak to the Premier, Popo Molefe. To discuss with him that we didn't want to go to Zeerust. They wanted us to move there. The people in Zeerust were also saying that we couldn't move there. They had many people of their own who had no homes. How were they going to accommodate us as well? We wanted to stay at our place that was built for us. We had a nice school. It has everything. Let us stay here

Until things, get better and we can get work here. Until now, nothing has happened. We are still the same.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why did the government decide to take you away from Pomfret?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** In January, they said that there was asbestos which created water problems. We had a meeting, but they didn't want us to talk, because we were treated like slaves. We told them that before they took us away from here, we wanted a Dr to come and check if the water is not suitable. Not a machine. Then if there is asbestos in the water, the government must compensate us and any of our children, and grandchildren that have been born here. What is the point if we have already been contaminated by the asbestos; we are going to die anyway. So we may as well stay where we are, and get treatment. The government said no, they didn't want us to be isolated like an island. They wanted us to go and integrate with all the other South Africans.

We still don't understand what the problem is. If it is water, we now do have water. They just need to come and put more pipes. If it is asbestos, then why don' they do like the army and do something to block the asbestos. If the army / the Generals knew that, there was asbestos in this area, why did they send us

there, and not leave us in Namibia? Do they want to end our nation by having all of us die? Or what?

They know that we helped eradicate Communism from Africa. That we helped in the war. Why did they not give us a good place to come without problems? Now we are civilians since 1990. Since 2000, there was no more army. Now as civilians, why is the army still ordering us? The army didn't give us work, they don't send anything when somebody dies, no widow, no orphan, gets help. Here we only have a Social worker. Sometimes we have a contribution. We have to go with the Social worker to purchase a coffin, and it has to be the person whose pension it is. But it is not too much help. Last year the government, the Angolan government and the Angolan consulate helped us with coffins, when people died.

**INTERVIEWER:** The Embassy?

**MERIAM NAINDA:** The Angolan Consulate. When we told them we had no means to bury our people, they would help. Sometimes the Consul General would come and assist the funerals.

But here at the municipality they don't help. Now we don't know what we are going to do. We worked for the South Africa, now our country, and now this country is throwing us out.

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