

Interview Transcript:	An interview with Umu Jalloh about the history of Native Gara from Makeni to Freetown
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Duration:	35:51 mins

Bijou Harding 0:00

Today I'm here with Ms Umu Jalloh. And we're here to talk about all her beautiful fabrics that she makes and her wonderful collection of gara pieces. Hello, how are you?

Umu Jalloh 0:10

Hello

Bijou Harding 0:12

It's great to see you today. Thank you for meeting me.

Umu Jalloh 0:18

Thank you.

Bijou Harding 0:20

Today, I would love to, maybe first of all, to tell me about yourself, your history and why you started making fabrics how you learnt to tie dye and just like how you started working in gara.

Umu Jalloh 0:36

okay. That's funny. Actually, this is a long story. I did not start this myself. So, it's all started from my grandmother. Then she passed it to my mother. And I teach

Bijou Harding 0:54

It's a family thing

Umu Jalloh 0:56

Yes, A family thing. It's not just with women that are involved in it, all of my family, except my father, okay. My choice is only because most times when you are doing this thing, sometimes it has to stop you in being so focused in your school. Learning the other things because when we have kids in the morning, you wake up in the morning, you have to pray, hours of prayers then you eat, then that you take tea, then you have to do to Learn the Quran. Okay, because I'm a Muslim and a Fulah. So, after which then you go to school, okay. After school. If my father is not around, there is no day you will come to my house and not meet my mother doing Gara Tie Die.

Bijou Harding 1:56

okay,

Umu Jalloh 1:57

In any form, hobbies or process doing something related to that. So, after school, if my father is not around to stretch off, you have to go up the back to help out whatever it is, you can do. So that's how I started. So, I can't even say when it's all started. Yeah, because when I grew up, I met my mother doing this.

Bijou Harding 2:24

Yes. Okay amazing. Yes. So, like everyone did it and then learn from it.

Umu Jalloh 2:28
Yeah.

Bijou Harding 2:28
So, do you do gara batik as well?

Umu Jalloh 2:32
Yep.

Bijou Harding 2:33
Okay. And if you, could you tell me a bit about how you like how you do the gara process in terms of how you create your designs, how you kind of decide what colours and dyes to use

Umu Jalloh 2:48
Actually, this has to do with creativity. Yes, because I even have some style like this. It's called NPRC. Actually, I will say my mom got this style for herself. I don't know. Yeah. Got it for like she said there was a day when she was just like trying to get something new. Then this guy came in and said, oh, Aunty Marie my let me help you. I saw someone doing something recently when I was in Ivory Coast, but I don't know how to go about it. Why not just we try to find something so we can have a perfect look. Then both of them sat together. While the guy was like trying to demonstrate something there my mother, who was here was taking the fabric having a row sign just not in the fabric just like that. There at the end of this okay, lets dye it and, see how it looks like

Bijou Harding 3:54
okay random kind of like you experiment and be creative and you dye it, and you see what come down. And if You like it you, do it again

Umu Jalloh 3:56
Exactly you continue with it.

Bijou Harding 4:06
Because you always re-dye it if you don't like

Umu Jalloh 4:08
Sure

Bijou Harding 4:10
What type of What materials do you use to make your fabric to use cotton to like is the base or?

Umu Jalloh 4:18
Well, I can say this all cotton because though it's called brazzin which is the brillion. Yes. Just that we have various type of it. Yes, we have the locally local one that we call Africa number one, which is not too shiny and not too strong. But it will last you like for five six years.

Bijou Harding 4:44
Wow!

Umu Jalloh 4:45
Yes. Then we have the other one which we call Super Brillion. This is the Super Brillion. You can feel it. Yes, and it lasts the length of 10-15 years. I think that's the good one for gara. But you know how to take care of it. It can last you for even over 20 years long as you can. It will last you that period. Yeah. So those are the different types, but basically, it's Brillion, that's how we call it now, the French people have come in and they are calling in Brazzin

Bijou Harding 5:25
okay

Umu Jalloh 5:25
Yes. Oh yeah with the same name the same thing Yeah. That's what we use.

Bijou Harding 5:32
And with Batik, how do you do your batik? Can you tell me about that?

Umu Jalloh 5:37
Yeah. I'm trying to get fancy I made some delivery this morning. Okay.
Yeah, but actually Batik is we got from candle. You don't tie batik. But
you don't just die it and call it batik before you die if you have to go
through a process. It's either you draw, or you stamp here. What we use for
stamp is like, it's a stick. You go to a carpentry shop. You ask the
carpenter to just design whatever.

Bijou Harding 6:21
Like a Motif?

Umu Jalloh 6:22
Yes. Yeah. Then after that, that's the stick you will use. So

Bijou Harding 6:26
do you ever use sponge? Or you will use stick?

Umu Jalloh 6:30
Yes, we use sponge for that. Like I said, we have two types of batik.

Bijou Harding 6:34
Okay,

Umu Jalloh 6:35
we have the stick. Then we have the drawing, okay the drawing involves
brush sponge, okay. And all those other small, small stuffs. But for the
stick now. If something happens, go to a carpentry shop and prepare it
though it's easier. It's easier to do to stick batik than to do the
drawing. Okay. Yes, because the drawing

Bijou Harding 6:58
You need more skills?

Umu Jalloh 7:00
Yeah. you have to be Skilful. Yeah, you really have to know how to draw

Bijou Harding 7:04
So, for my research, I don't know if my uncle told you about me, I should
have said at the start. I'm Bijou you hear I'm from London, I have my
family here. For my project I'm basically researching Gara dyeing batik
dying and I'm trying to explore if it can be adapted for people with
disabilities. so, people who have visual impairments, how can they also do
dye so that they can use it as a form of work. so, I'm trying to like to
learn about the progress and then see how it can be like adapted for them
to easily use the Have you ever worked with anyone that has like blindness
or body impairments or anything like that?

Umu Jalloh 7:52
Yeah, I think the organization's I'm working for it started with blindness
international we used to have projects that are supporting people for the
blind. Yes, blind and disability but right now, we stopped having funding
for that. So, our support for them was more support in the Okay, like
maybe we tried to refurbish their home situation support them with some
equipment is key. Yes. that's basically that's what we've been doing okay.

But like, I've never got the chance like say Okay, now let's try to impact this via a practical idea like these to the blind to see how they can dye

Bijou Harding 8:53

yeah. What do you think if a blind person was trying to do gara dye batik what you think would be the hardest bits of like the process and feelings obviously like the hot wax is like hot so like, if someone can't see that could be dangerous?

Umu Jalloh 9:11

so, to be to be honest, it's a dangerous thing.

Bijou Harding 9:14

Okay.

Umu Jalloh 9:14

Yeah. If you go, I wish. I wish you would see we are we are doing this. Yeah, it was some more it will make more sense. Let me just don't Yes. Because when we are doing this, it has well, it involves caustic soda.

Bijou Harding 9:37

Okay.

Umu Jalloh 9:38

And of caustic soda is very dangerous. We have this thing called powder. I think I can so you some. I have so it doesn't smell nice. It has this awful smell that you won't like again. because the soda is very very dangerous.

Bijou Harding 10:04

Okay, and then your skin if it gets on your skin?

Umu Jalloh 10:07

Yes. Okay. it can hurt the skin, okay, all these fingers, Okay? Even us. Anyone using it. when we are doing the process, we'll always have the gloves, I'll show you all of that, we have gloves that we use for liking when you are trying to raise after dyeing. then when you are raising energy with that which will damage all of the fingers you will see lots of dyers with damaged fingers.

so, for a blind person there will be challenges. I'm working with a blind person right now

Bijou Harding 11:21

right now?

Umu Jalloh 11:21

yes

Bijou Harding 11:22

wow, Okay, can you tell me more about that? here how do you know you're working like in partnership trying to help them do their own fabric or like no one like working with them

Umu Jalloh 11:35

No, I'm working with a blind person, the one what I'm talking about okay with him okay, not on this at my office.

Bijou Harding 11:42

okay. Yeah, I can see that the difficulties Yeah

Umu Jalloh 11:45

Yes. Especially when it's out of the office house clean food etc

Bijou Harding 11:51
Getting around Freetown?

Umu Jalloh 11:52
yeah. you it's just hard, because how can that blind person was able to distinguish the colour. here when they are all on the fabric? they don't pack them differently or less even for us on occasion you have to test it otherwise you will miss the colour.

Bijou Harding 12:14
So, do you think if you had like maybe a blind person working alongside like someone who can see they could work together? Let's say to do like the stamping and then someone who can see could do the colour dipping that kind of thing.

Umu Jalloh 12:29
Maybe, it's just difficult I'm saying that because when you are using the candle which for me is the easiest

Bijou Harding 12:39
Yeah.

Umu Jalloh 12:41
you have to take off the fire okay because the candle has to do with fire

Bijou Harding 12:47
right, we work like liquids Yes.

Umu Jalloh 12:51
So, like having some you know, a blind person, taking these from the fire by God this is how (Demonstrates dipping stamp in wax) it goes. Yeah, Like I'm doing it now

Bijou Harding 13:05
it's like tricky. What about have you ever done like a cold starch method? You like I was talking to Nigerian guy who does more indigo dyeing and he was saying he could cassava starch instead of hot wax work sometimes. And it gives us similar effect not as clean or crisp as like normal batik. We'll have you ever tried.

Umu Jalloh 13:30
No, we are not trying to because most times those type of time they don't last

Bijou Harding 13:36
okay

Umu Jalloh 13:37
yes, as soon as you wash it nowadays it come out. That's the difference between our own dyeing even before they remember when I was a kid I was back home before we come to my water-to-water gara just because they'd say, "Aunty Marie e gara nor dye run"

ok e dey Las? (I will last)

Yes. But like likewise for the others is not like you wash it won't like yes, it will just fade away all that enters to where you are you do your mixture. And especially so when the powder on the soda is not

Bijou Harding 14:15
Is it the powder and the shoulder make it stay on the fabric?

Umu Jalloh 14:19

Yes

Bijou Harding 14:20

I see

Umu Jalloh 14:21

is not the Ink it's the powder?

Bijou Harding 14:23

okay? Okay, so when you're working in your studio, or the area which you do your dyeing. Do you do like your own fabric on or your own or do you work in a team? Does everyone fully dye their own pieces?

Umu Jalloh 14:41

okay, it's a huge work like the one I'm doing

Bijou Harding 14:45

where do you carry out your where do you go? Do you travel to Makeni?

Umu Jalloh 14:49

Yes

Bijou Harding 14:49

So, you travelled to Makeni from home? (She nods) okay, see! So, when you're there so you have to like to stay for a while or do you try to come and go like each day.

Umu Jalloh 15:00

Well, I only need to Makeni if I have a lot to do. Like if I just have like one or to do and now people, they like this t-shirt, I'll do it at home.

Bijou Harding 15:11

Yeah, we can make yes yeah, let

Umu Jalloh 15:13

Yes, rather than me going back to Makeni. But like most times the one that I'm doing now since I'm dying a large quantity, I can't do it alone. because before I even try it out, I have to do a lot of designing I can't do all the designing and looking at my job and also my workload for now even those that I used to do when I was a kid for now, I can't do it myself. So, unless I paid so much so like normally

Bijou Harding 15:40

when you work at home you do all by yourself

Umu Jalloh 15:42

Yes

Bijou Harding 15:43

ok that's a lot.

Umu Jalloh 15:43

Yes, that's a lot. So, which I can't do take Yeah, so like when I go home now, I'll distribute the white material that the white fabric distributes
[break]

[Break end]

Bijou Harding

So, when you do it in groups, so say one person you hit one person dyes, one person does the stamping. one person doesn't be drying or does everyone do a home piece by themselves. Step by Step?

Umu Jalloh 16:53

It's Step by step. we have people that can do the stamping. yes, they only meant for stamping. yes, we have those that will do the tying. They don't know how to stamp but they can tie very well.

Bijou Harding 17:08

So, everyone has their skill.

Umu Jalloh 17:09

Yes. So, we have then I have like for my own team. I have the boy that helps me to do my mixtures. So, like I will just sit and say okay, take this orange Take Mauve, take green Yeah, so that's how they also learn. So, like I have that kind of person. I have people that on their only there to do the washing.

Bijou Harding 17:43

So, say for one person do they say okay I want to learn to stamp, or I want to learn to tie or do you kind of assess what they're good at and you kind of give them a job you say okay, you're good at tying who do the tying or people say

Umu Jalloh 18:04

no well like this you are saying now what you asked? For now, it's hard to say.

Bijou Harding 18:10

Okay.

Umu Jalloh 18:11

Yes, because actually the gara, dyeing is fading away is okay. Yes. compared to what I used to for now, we are not even doing 10% Right here. Yes. Because the hometown but I'm coming from like, an evening the hour like this, each area you go. So, you have (bong bong bong bong) mumbo jumbo than when hear that the last stage, I'll show you all those videos I have them you will hear this noise (bong bong bong). But now, if you walk the entire Makeni it's only one person and that's one of the costs of having you had done with your work. You want your pieces to get them together to come to delivery when you are still like why to the person that is doing this last finishing for it too look shiny like this. Because all of our young boys, they've all gone. So, they are using now this Okada ride, Keh - keh. Some they've come to Freetown so it's hard to find them now.

Bijou Harding 19:23

So do you think it's like in Freetown like within West Africa do you think people like What do you mean the popularity of like gara is at the moment they still do use it. Some people give him this opinion some people say Gara is coming back people are starting to find a little popular some people shared Gara on the way-out people for West African wax print. Like you know, like the commercial one. what do you think? do you think like people are starting to like what? Bring back into vogue like the traditional fashion I think Vogue people want like more Western dress?

Umu Jalloh 20:09

No people are started bringing it back yes that's it bringing it back compared to the past years. Like if. I'll sell was it last year before last they had a launching. So young ladies in Freetown they did this African thing

Bijou Harding 20:30
like a fashion show?

Umu Jalloh 20:31

Yes. Like I'm not sure exactly what I was not invited, but they went from my mother Okay, and my elder sister back home. Oh, by the way, my mother was with me here she said let me help you, so my elder sister came through. They took them on like they went They did that showcase. Yes. Like trying to showcase our products, selling people that yes Gara can still fits. Yeah, so like, they brought our sisters and other young boys in Makeni. They all came in showing their skills, their talents, how they go about. So, it was after that. I started seeing people on social media started doing these little, little adverts, oh the best gara in town. then because me, for me. I have always been doing this. But I was doing it in a low key. Because I am not that kind of

Bijou Harding 21:44
showy person?

Umu Jalloh 21:46

Yes, I don't want to focus on social media. Yeah. So, I've never sent my work on social media. Yes, I was forced to do it was only after my sister's wedding because I did a lot and then everyone was asking where did you get this from? so, I started putting my work online. But it was after that launching is not the same people posting about oh, gara tie dye. I was even laughing. A lot of people don't even know how to go about maybe they'll just go on for instance, like my sister now. So, I want this I want this this I can just help me do this. Or maybe you can just buy from her. They will come not to freak out. But some people will not say I am not the one thing they will just click

Bijou Harding 22:50

on I he they tried to get Yeah. And they tried to oh if me I did. They kind of Yes.

Umu Jalloh 22:56

Yes. So, I still recall when I started putting myself social media like that the thing, I got up fights with people saying, oh, she always claimed that she's the one doing so I They pushed me to do a video of me making it.

Bijou Harding 23:21

[break] sharing in my wall who even me I knew I didn't do Gary, but I do like sharing like tailoring just like makes them like buy like no more like bag. Like, pursue stuff like that. And then my friends were like, we've never seen you so it's no easier. By the things. I was like no, I had to video myself, Delphi people, we think

Umu Jalloh 23:45

it the same with me. And I see or some people even like if someone comes to me and says, Okay, how much is this? Then if I show my first use is expensive, I say is my SX 10 Pick what 20 Because then you go and buy the cheaper one. And this is how because I used to tap into my busy Sunday my business loss skill. And I'm trying to mention my customers. I don't search you when you go you know, come back. And I'm getting all those kinds of good compliments with my customers. So, I'll make sure I give you the best. If you asked me, he said this. If I missed your call, I would not get any to go back here it gives me their colours without even showing me the colour just say I want me in green. What is this colour? So, like I'm getting these mixtures because we are not perfect Okay so I'm just trying to take this and make it make it work so like well I try it it's come on maybe deeper or lighter or I don't like the shade and how to go back I do because I

Bijou Harding 25:15

[break end] do you prefer to do design to sell them or do you like the request for specific designs from people, what do you prefer?

Umu Jalloh 25:26

I don't mind at all okay because sometimes when someone comes to you and say can you do me this and then you take the extra time to do it, then sooner you do it the way they want that they are happy, and they like it. I don't mind actually it doesn't matter Let me give you my own design or you bring your own design. As long as we can adjust and agreed upon the cost alone. I'm ready to do it watch that I can do I will tell you tell you straight away. yes, because what they agree for now. They will even go for these prints materials and send them to you and say I want this. Okay, you have to explain to them this is not gara.

Bijou Harding 26:15

that's the thing, too when I was starting my research, I found that a lot of people didn't know the difference between wax print and gara. especially the one batik when you stamp a lot of people think oh is this not wax print. they don't understand that wax print is not done by hand.

Umu Jalloh 26:51

I have to imitate it might not be the same as it is, but I'll get you something similar. Something close to what they want. [BREAK]

Bijou Harding 27:03

Yeah, it's like similar Yeah, it makes sense.

I will actually run them I was hoping to go to McKinney over the weekend Saturday and Sunday to you hearing you speak now. Do you think that in try go there aren't a lot of days still available? Like talk to yourself or you think it's still we're trying to see like the kind of traditional pays were like a lot of the day happened. What do you think? Are you think it's kind of not worth not worth going?

Umu Jalloh 27:54

for now? I think I'm doing nothing I don't think if you can

Bijou Harding 28:08

like if I go up like if I'm lucky I'll only like one or two people won't be like you know a lot of people doing it.

Umu Jalloh 28:17

Even if you go if you met if you meet someone during the day just do not get on because

Bijou Harding 28:30

[break end] okay where do you get your materials from? From? Them you didn't buy anything and

Umu Jalloh 28:49

I import them from Guinea, because they're too expensive in Freetown for large quantities [break]

Bijou Harding 29:24

is too expensive, too expensive

Umu Jalloh 29:26

and true for the ink. You will not get the wheel. Okay, that's one of the constraints when what they do. Do go and buy the original in Makeni family where they come with it in CO

Bijou Harding 29:40

and they meet here with everything.

Umu Jalloh 29:44

So, they are so called like, let's say if you want orange, I've got that kind of thing. I want just plain blue. Because I wanted to have something like quiet. There when I mix it. It gives me navy blue.

Bijou Harding 30:00

I hate adding. Not the pure because

Umu Jalloh 30:05

we are life. There is no way you can make the blue. navy blue without adding something to you. Yes, I see. So, for me, I'd say more or less maybe like desperate. Desperate. Exactly. So, I'll just go for small. Well, I don't even have Vironment because this particular one that I'm using here, it's hard to find. See?

Bijou Harding 30:31

Okay, yes. Okay, bye bye. You're tapping Guinea

Umu Jalloh 30:36

Guinea a multifamily Yes. And

Bijou Harding 30:38

[break ened] Do you use synthetic dye or natural dye is there a preference?

Umu Jalloh 30:56

For now, i don't use natural dyesdoes one and besides not every style will go with natural, and we used to have those times I have one of those cola nuts, but people like vibrant colours. [break]

Bijou Harding 31:16

people like cooler that yes

Umu Jalloh 31:22

I don't know how I wish I can show you I've got like 12 years down yes that's a natural guide but not all info to specific site design

Bijou Harding 31:47

okay can't use anybody Yeah, I get here, and can you mix like if you die a piece with natural dyes me then you can go can we combine them on the same fabric, or do they don't work well together?

Umu Jalloh 32:02

You you well one thing about these natural dyes did don't have this bright

Bijou Harding 32:11

yeah, yeah especially

Umu Jalloh 32:12

with the colour of the solo soon I put the fabric into the best colour you can have been round after round for some TV like

Bijou Harding 32:30

that. Yeah.

Umu Jalloh 32:33

Yeah, so you can

Bijou Harding 32:35

[break ene] Okay, I think we're almost done with the questions thank you so much. so do you think that adapting gara tie dye is something viable for people with disabilities or do you think it's something that they can be

interested in obviously it's like a lot of work but it's creative as well, so it gives people a chance to use their imagination as well. What do you think, or do you think it gets too hard for them dependent do?

Umu Jalloh 33:06

no, I think the only hard thing about it is for dangerous parts right. for me it's the best skill to have [End]

because he likes to low on the kids, she was me like i said i was twin Most times we do have Americans creatures coming into our I've used to work with them I know when they do come up so we used to access to talking about just that you have to come down otherwise to come back to the White House slow down not just that I can live by my my follow up Wow because I have this is just

Bijou Harding 35:10

gonna forget your skill it taught you excuse me grandma my grandma he's good at showing making my mom my dad show I say Why is he being said see but yeah, her kind of he did a lot of like fabric

things I show you know as your friends you

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