

Interview Transcript:	An interview with Victoria Renner regarding Gara Dyeing and her artwork
Date:	18/10/2021
Location:	Zainab Drive off Aberdeen Ferry Road, Freetown, Sierra Leone
Duration:	Audio Part 1 – 07:30 Audio part 2 – 34:21

Background to interview

During this interview session I visited Ms Victoria Renner during my time on the field in Freetown. During our conversation in her home, Ms Renner showed me a collection of her fabric pieces and told me her background in gara dyeing, explained her experiences with the fabric and trade and her process in making the different typologies of gara.

(Speakers: Bijou Harding (BH) & Victoria Renner (VR))

[Interview Start]

Bijou Harding 0:02

So today we are having an interview session with Miss Renner, who is going to talk us through her beautiful Gara fabric and tie dye work and tell us a bit about the work that she does and the history behind all the beautiful fabrics that she makes. So hello, how are you today?

Victoria Renner 0:18

I'm Good

Bijou Harding 0:20

So today, I just want to learn a bit more about your fabrics and kind of the process that you take to make all your beautiful pieces. So, could you tell me first, how do you get started with gara making and tie dyeing, what kind of brought you into wanting to create these fabrics?

Victoria Renner 0:35

Thank you very much Bijou. I started doing tie dye, back in the 90s. I've been in this world for more than 20 years.

Bijou Harding 0:46

Wow!

Victoria Renner 0:47

Yeah. So, when I came back to Sierra Leone, because I was in the Gambia, when I returned to Sierra Leone, there was not much that I could do. So, I tried to like switch to into doing something with my hands. And I found out that tie dye is fascinating. And it was the in thing for me. So, I learned it at a friend and then from there, I continue to

Bijou Harding 1:17

Okay, it's something that your kind of always had an interest in, and then you kind of developed it as you got older. And then you kind of worked full time into making your fabrics.

Victoria Renner 1:25

Yeah, since the beginning I've been very much interested in, in the arts, you know, so when I like kind of got attached to doing this tie dye stuff. It's just like, you keep going, going, going, going, going, you know, my

daughter too, she learned to do it as well. I was having other kids with me. And I taught them how to do it. Also,

Bijou Harding 1:54

Amazing! So how did you initially learn how to gara dye or tie dye? Was it something that a family member taught you? or you had to kind of go out there and learn yourself?

Victoria Renner 2:06

Yeah, as I intimated earlier, I am fascinated with the arts. So, I learnt it by myself. It's not only tie dye, there's also another well-known as Batik, yes, that's one we use candles. For the tie dye we don't use candles just ink and water. But for Batik it's much further than that, because we have to use candles. I remember one time more than 20 years ago, I had an accident, you know, my finger here, go twisted and you can see the scar here. And also, this one, there's another, this one this whole finger, there's a new whole new set of, of skin going up. You know, we're doing it at the east end of Freetown at that time. So, the candle was like, falls off. And there was no material that actively used to like to remove it from the from the from the fire. And I was thinking about because we were tenants at that time, I was thinking about the house getting burned. So, I had to do what I had to do. I use my beer and just removed the hot pot of wax from the from the stove and my fingers got burnt. I was admitted for about two days. Yeah, but I thank God.

Bijou Harding 3:28

Yeah, I think it's interesting to hear that because for my specific area of my research, architecture students at the moment University of Cambridge, for my project, I'm exploring how to adapt Gary dying and batik making for someone who has disabilities maybe like physical impairments or body impairments. So, I think a main thing that I think about as well, as you've just kind of brought up is the kind of dangerous aspects of the process. So, the things like burning or injury. So, would you say that Batiking specifically as that involved the hot wax is a dangerous process? Or do you think it's more an aspect of it, as you do it more and more you learn how to kind of navigate yourself. So, you don't get injuries? I can imagine now that your kind of an expert, you've probably don't have as many injuries at all, as you probably had when you first started.

Victoria Renner 4:19

Yeah, it's dangerous. But what I would advise to younger folks is to be cautious to at a time, you know, when whenever you're doing an experiment or whatever, you've got to have all your tools along with you. But around that time, I had accident I was washing to serve our customer. So, the necessities the necessities were not easily available. So that's the reason why I got into the accident. But if somebody is more cautious, I think Yeah. Accident or any other casualty will be minimised. Yes.

Bijou Harding 4:53

So, the main kind of procedures that your kind of do let me know if you have a preference is the Batik, tie dye and gara is guaranteed tie dye similar are they if there are difference between the process or the technique you can tell me about

Victoria Renner 5:09

Yes, tie dye gara that sample like the example. And the Batik. As I said earlier, you have to use wax, melted wax whereas, the tie dye you don't. I think you can even use cold ink, you know, and the cold water and hot water as well. So that's the difference for the Batik use wax. And for the tie dye, you don't use wax at all, but I prefer the batik Yes. though, it's, it's more difficult to do but I do prefer it because, it's kind of you know the designs after you are gone. You get a type of intricate design

delicately put together, you know, you have a way of playing around. And sometimes you use paint as well. You know, sometimes when the work wants to go bad.

Bijou Harding 6:07

Yes, you find a way around it.

Victoria Renner 6:12

For me, I prefer the batik to the tie dye I do the tie dye is easier to do. Take shorter time to do it as compared to the batik. Because you cannot do batik work in just one day. Except if you are doing like a frame and the weather is nice is sunny you can do the batik work for a day. Otherwise no because you have to spread the ink on a particular area and then put it under the sun until it is completely dried, then apply the wax on the dry surface. You know, so that's it takes time.

Bijou Harding 6:49

I see. And what would you say to you in terms of the cultural significance of gara like batik Sierra Leone or like throughout West Africa? How do you think people can receive I think I've always seen it? So, my parents are from Sierra Leone, I consider myself Sierra Leone. And it's always been quite an iconic symbol of like my culture and my heritage. Do you think that's still true today? Or do you think people like nowadays kind of geared towards Western style a bit more? What do you think?

Victoria Renner 7:19

Yeah, in former times, in those days, it used to be iconic, but not anymore though. We are trying to like to bring it back into vogue or into in fashion as at now, but I cannot say comparing those days and now it's like slowly dwindling, but we are trying to bring it back again. And the time it takes to do Batik and Materials, your equipment used are all expensive. So, and it is added you know so obviously when you invest so much you have to like

[Break, with general conversation]

Interview Audio Part 2:

Bijou Harding 0:00

Would you like to finish off on what you're saying about today's relationship with Gara dyeing, how you're trying to bring it back into Vouge

Victoria Renner 0:09

So, As I was saying we are trying to bring it back into vogue because it's not as unique as it was but gradually it is getting back into the forces, because we kind of like have this local content policy that we are trying to gain so that everything made locally will be available to people. And we are even thinking of exporting. If there's a possibility, you know,

Nylon thread. We did it like this. And then the first colour we did we mix the ink with Hot water. And some, we call it in krio, Powder, it has got a name sulphur sulphate. Yeah, it's got a pungent smell, you know, plus soda, we mix those two together. And then we add water. And then for this red, we apply the red ink as well, we have a thick constituent because if it is light, it will not come out well

Bijou Harding 1:12

So how would you know how much powder to mix

Victoria Renner 1:19

For every packet. For every packet of powder, we use one packet. For every packet of ink, it depends on the quality or the quantity, you know, or the quantity of the material you've got. But for us to add something very beautiful, we made sure that the consistency is thick

Bijou Harding 1:40

Ok its key for a vibrant colour.

Victoria Renner 1:43

So, for one packet of ink, we use one packet of powder and then two tablespoons of soda. And then we have some quantity of water, you will see that when we are doing the demo with the guys. And then after we have mixed it then because deep the colour that we saw desire, as I told you earlier, this one was already tight. To prevent the ink from going this way, then this is tied as well. So, we just did. And then we mix, we allow it, we put it in the sun or whatsoever so that it cools down a bit. So that's the fabric and the ink can enter into the different parts properly. And then the next thing we did was to mix the orange, the orange ink plus the powder salt for a soda, and then we dip you know. Thar's how we got these colours, you know, but for this one, this one is known as cloud, cloud gara. This one is a bit similar.

Bijou Harding 2:55

what's the difference between Cloud Gara, and this is still a type of tie-dye?

Victoria Renner 3:05

So, you can see the whites here, you know, so what we did is tie it, and then we mix the different colours of ink that we want to apply. And then we put it in a container like this locally made, because I'm talking about local content. And then we just sprinkle. We sprinkle on it on the areas that we want it. Here you can see it's green. And then here you have orange. And then here you have something like brown. And then here you have pink,

Bijou Harding 3:37

So, you tie the fabric and then you sprinkle the dye, or you just dip the fabric?

Victoria Renner 3:47

Sometimes you use stoppers, it depends on the design. Sometimes you use stoppers if you want that design. And then where the where the tie is the ink is not penetrated. You know, it's becoming impermeable, sort of. So that's it. This is cloud

Bijou Harding 4:10

So, in terms of teaching the girls different processes. Is it something that you kind of have specific designs and like tying methods that you want them to learn? Or do you is it more that you kind of allow them to tie the fabric in different ways and kind of apply the ink quite randomly, so every design is different, or you want them to decrease specific types of Yeah, but today we're creating cloud fabric today we're creating the more kind of like Stripe effect.

Victoria Renner 4:37

Yeah, we teach them to tie different types because the essence of the whole process is for them to go into the business world. You know, a customer might come and tell you that she wants stopper design. And if you're not versed in doing that, you are not able to sell to that customer So what we do is we train them in the different design so that they are fast in almost all the areas of the time that that they are being taught.

Bijou Harding 5:10

And so, do you have any batik fabrics with you today?

Victoria Renner 5:14

No, no, but have a picture. Okay,

Bijou Harding 5:18

Sure. In terms of different the threads that you use to tie, is it normal sewing thread?

Victoria Renner 5:25

No, it's Nylon. it's very difficult to cut scissors or knife. Yeah, we use it, we use gloves. Yeah. To prevent the Hands from getting scared of what we do

Bijou Harding 5:54

that I tried to do some like quick Friday before I came, and I forgot to wear gloves and my hands was stained for like a week and I was here worried to get on the plane, but think

Victoria Renner 6:03

Not only the stain but sometimes the power of the soda affects you.

Bijou Harding 6:12

Yeah, that's good, you bring me on to the actual pigments, but you do use a combination of like natural and synthetic dyes and do you have like a preference and like what type of dyes do you use and where do you source them from. Do you try to keep them all like locally available or are you quite open and is where you get your different pigments from?

Victoria Renner 6:35

Yeah, we are open if they are available, because the materials and short supply sometimes they are not readily available. People like to go to neighbouring countries like Guinea, for example, and family to get them. And you know, when you go across to get some materials, the price will like skyrocket. You know, so that's the reason why we normally prefer the ones that are readily available. But anything goes as long as it's available.

Bijou Harding 7:07

Do you guys use any natural dyes? Or like you go do stuff like gara is from like, the gara leaf? Do you ever grow the leaf? I don't know how you make the, the gara? Do you ever do that was easier to buy the readymade.?

Victoria Renner 7:27

Yeah, it's, that's, that's would really suffice, that would really work if it were available, but some people do use cola nut, because it's available but for the order raw materials No,

Bijou Harding 7:43

it's not here with you oh no, no,

Victoria Renner 7:44

we are not into that maybe we go into that in the near future. But for the whole idea some people do that

Bijou Harding 7:52

okay. So, you prefer to kind of focus on creating designs and then importing like buying the pigment?

Victoria Renner 8:03

Yes, I do. So, what we are doing now, what if there is a way or if there is a means of us doing it locally from scratch, then obviously maybe I will do the task?

Bijou Harding 8:15

Yes. Because I know I spoke to a Nigerian artist and obviously they do a lot of indigo dye. And so, he was saying they kind of grow a lot of their plants there he's moving to America he's called gasoline neutral how he's trying to grow the Indigo the in South America but in the particular climate it just won't grow. So, he kind of not really having much success with that. So, I was talking to him about why they use synthetic dyes, and he says he's going to try and do that because he can't it's not always sustainable to grow your own plants and it's hard to get the supply in quantity that you want. So, it's easier sometimes to buy the pigment than trying to grow it yourself, harvester yourself, make it, it's a lot to do!

Victoria Renner 9:02

is too much. But in production you have to focus on a particular so if you're in that particular process, you stick to it. Okay because you cannot start for every A B C you know, everyone has their part.

Bijou Harding 9:16

Some people will make the pigment, some make the fabric. Okay, so it brings me onto the next topic, tell me about the steps to the process. after you've made the fabrics you of focus on making like the raw material, that then tailors used to make outfits or do you kind of make the fabric and make outfits. Or do you focus on making fabrics which you then sell.

Victoria Renner 9:38

sometimes we do like this one. we are we took it to the tailor. We have it shown here and then this is what comes out. At the end of the day, we are going to have a tie dye designed for that. But like this one is just Walmart yes; we took and then we created a design that we want we sell it to our customers they are going to have their own styles as they prefer.

Bijou Harding 10:11

What type of fabrics do you ask the base material to dye? Is it mainly like pure cottons? Or do you ever like use a mixture of different materials or do you prefer to use like the white cotton is the base for your different types?

Victoria Renner 10:23

Yeah, we found the white cotton as the base or colour cotton as long as it is 100% Cotton, because when it is 100% cotton you see that the ink comes goes in and blends naturally well and everything comes out perfect. Like this blouse are pretty long, which is coming to us blue. It was blue originally. So, we decided to like change this it's 100 cottons. So, you can see it comes out really well. You know after it's been made, but if it is not 100% cotton then is like "white-ish" okay, it does not come out to well yes.

Bijou Harding 11:04

So, the pigments don't hold in the fabric, Yeah, I see I see. Ok so what do we'll do now is take another break [BREAK]

[5-minute Break in interview conversation]

Bijou Harding 16:08

[BREAK END] How do you create your more detailed ink designs

Victoria Renner 16:11

watch what we do for this one? Originally the material is white. it sewn we use black thread. So, like the white does not show Okay, so what we do is we leave the sides open. Because this material its being sewn yeah, so we open it up and we draw whatever design we want.

Bijou Harding 16:35

What do you draw it with? You draw by hand with pencil you draw like

Victoria Renner 16:39

okay, either pen or pencil. Okay, we have the article, the motif already, okay. And then we just put it on top of it plus is it stencil?

Bijou Harding 16:49

Like an outline?

Victoria Renner 16:55

sometimes like an outline and at other times to use. We call this the now

Bijou Harding 17:00

template?

Victoria Renner 17:01

no not as a template when you actually put it on a need so that you have a counter fit.

Bijou Harding 17:06

Ok I know what you mean. So, it leaves the impressions when you write the mirror?

Victoria Renner 17:12

Yeah, It's the kind of paper is the HR

Bijou Harding 17:15

Yeah, no, I don't you mean give me the signature they put one copy paper? carbon?

Victoria Renner 17:23

Carbon we put the carbon under there. Then we put the drawing on top Yeah, and then we draw. All these things are already available. We just draw and then for this particular one what we did. first of all, you see the white.

Bijou Harding 17:39

Yeah,

Victoria Renner 17:39

the white outline. We outline this one with the candle. Have you ever seen people doing Batik?

Bijou Harding 17:48

I've seen it briefly. I've seen the one where they melt the wax, and they use the stamp. And I've seen the one where someone soaks a sponge, or they have a pen

Victoria Renner 17:58

Yes, but you have to be very skilful. Otherwise, it drops right. Okay, yeah, so we added this cut out. This is the neckline as you can see the white and then this white like a tik (tree) or rain drops, as the first thing we did. And then this is a tree. We did the outline

Bijou Harding 18:18

So, you draw this by hand we have to go over all with the wax?

Victoria Renner 18:21

Yes, we would go over it with the wax. But if you're an expert you can just do it straight. But if you want something perfect you can first of all draw it. and then what else did we do? all of these outlines you can see the white outline? Then we lay it on the ground, we apply little bits of ink in different containers like this one we apply the green now that's the reason

why we decided to wax the area around. So that the ink does not go everywhere. It stays within, so everywhere that you've waxed the ink does not go out, it maintains that original colour that it was.

Bijou Harding 19:02

so, you define the area that you want

Victoria Renner 19:05

yeah, so you see the animal here yeah and after what else did we do

Bijou Harding 19:11

The kind of spot to the bottom? with like greens bluey around the head.

Victoria Renner 19:19

yes, the same green Yes. He kind of drew the outline yeah that's right yeah, the same good. But in addition to the sponge, we use different tools

Bijou Harding 19:29

Ok can you tell me what else you use?

Victoria Renner 19:36

We use Brush, we use a what else? We use brooms.

Do you every use the broom to flick (the wax)

Yes. Yeah. I like that design. Because it's easy. We use the brush like this (demonstrates holding the brush). Because if you want the three patterns, the different colours Because for the batik is three different types of colours that you use most of the time,

Bijou Harding 20:03

Okay

Victoria Renner 20:04

The first colour lighter and then you have the other colour which is thicker than the first colour. And then you have the last colour,

Bijou Harding 20:13

which was actually the darkest one? So, you have three, three steps, light, medium dark.

Victoria Renner 20:21

For me for each packet of ink that I use, I do three packets of sulphur. What's the what's the chemical name for that sulphur? it's got a scientifically name. it's got very big name, but here we call it powder You know. So, for every packet of ink, I use the packets of powder and then I use about

Bijou Harding 20:54

I've heard people have tried white table salt, have you tried this.

Victoria Renner 21:05

No, I don't do that, because I want everything to be perfect. I don't take risk because it was a lot of more years. It was a lot of time and patience and everything. So, after it comes out like when you are done it becomes so thick.

Bijou Harding 21:23

Yes. Yeah,

Victoria Renner 21:26

And stiff. Put it in boiling water. [BREAK]

Bijou Harding 23:35

[BREAK END]. Okay, so now that we've kind of gone through your gara tie dye fabric, do you want to just talk me through the process of batik here just briefly and then we can actually go in more detail about the making processes. Do you want to tell me maybe a bit about when you're using hot wax, how do you melt the wax, what types of stamps or tools that you use to create a different motif that used to resist the dyes?

Victoria Renner 24:12

Okay, well for the Batik. As I said earlier, we use wax we melt the wax. But first of all, before melting wax, you got to have your equipment put together. You need a brush you need sponge. The sponge has to be attached to a pen or a pencil with a pen that is not working so that the ink does not spill onto the fabric that you're going to apply the wax on. You know and also you need a broom and some other funny stuffs when you want to do batik work. Of course, we also need the white fabric it has to be 100% cotton so that the ink will hold firmly on to the material to when you're away the finished product. Like for this one. I've got a sample; a picture of a batik designs here.

I've got a picture of a batik these are back Is this a shed that the individual is putting on. Originally it was white, it was white all over. So, the area that we want to preserve is where we apply the wax. So, you can see on the neckline, we wanted to preserve the area. So, we apply the wax on the area, that's the white on the white with the white materials. And then you have some few drops that are white there. So, for that, it's the white is being retained. And for the different areas that we work on, you can see a tree here, these are the bushes. And you can also see some grass here. So first of all, we like do a baseline to prevent we wax this area with a sponge, so that the ink does not spill out. After which we apply the different types of ink that we have already mixed together. Now for me, when I'm doing my own batik, I usually I usually put one packet of ink mix up with a mix it with three packets of sulphur, and two or three tablespoons of soda. So that's the material is rich and the end product of the vibrant colour. Yes, you can see the different colours, there are three colours that I normally use. The first colour is light this one, the first colour is orange, and then we have red at the background, then the last colour now is a black. Now you can see this black is it's not purely black, because it's mixed up with the orange, so we have something like a brown there. But for the trees, because I want trees to pop out, I decided to put the fabric on the on the ground and apply this one with a bush so that we can see the different aspects of what we have here. So that's it for the Batik.

B.S.S. Harding 27:33

Ok amazing! So, do you ever kind of do any designs where you carve a motif into like a sponge? You mean? Like a stamp? Or do you kind of prefer to kind of freehand it with a sponge on the pencil? because I suppose if you create a stamp, we can create what is your repeating design? Or do you prefer to draw on with the pencil?

Victoria Renner 27:54

Yes, we do freehand designs with a pencil and sometimes we use Stencils That's one we use with x-ray, we go to the hospitals. Yeah, those x-ray products that you don't normally use. We get it from them. And then the design is being drawn. So that's what we do. Okay, we use the stencils to, to do that. I don't have any work of stencil here. Yeah. all these ones are freehand this is a different colour. This is mauve, red and black.

B.S.S. Harding 28:34

Yes, yes. Thank you. And that's kind of amazing to hear your process, as your kind of an expert, you understand the ratios, you need to get the

colours by popping how you want them to kind of appear on the fabric. So that's great. So, I think for this final part of the interview, we're going to kind of talk about the kinds of groups that you work with. And I kind of just asked you in your process of how you kind of develop the fabrics you kind of sell commercially. so, you kind of expressed before that you use 100% Cotton, white fabric, is your aim to make all your pieces work. So, you purchased those in four yards, which you then dye and then you sell each of your packs of prints with your four-yard kind of packages of fabric. And you kind of mentioned earlier that you work with young women that you teach how to use different techniques. So, would you like to explain to me a bit more about the work that you do with them?

Victoria Renner 29:34

I work with Excuse me. I work with young women, adolescent girls, between the ages of 15 and 19 years basically those girls as young can be the out of schoolgirls, they're early school leavers. Due to teenage pregnancy, some of them don't have the wherewithal to go back to school. So instead of them idling around I decided to incorporate them so that they can learn it as a trade. so that they might have a better future. So those are the groups that I work with. I also working for labour union as well. But for this particular demo didn't use other using does.

B.S.S. Harding 30:10

Okay? So, could you tell me a bit more about your kind of workshop where you guys do your work? Is it kind of like, somewhere in town like locally, that's close to you? Or do you kind of commute somewhere to get to? Shai? What's the workspace? Like? Is it liking an indoor space and outdoor space combination?

Victoria Renner 30:29

Yeah, it's a combination of indoor and outdoor space. Because when it's raining, we have to go indoors to prevent us from soaking, from getting wet, rather. And because the girls are only vulnerable groups, we work in communities. So, most of the time, it is me that has to commute to go see them, to teach them what to do. So basically, I do the going and coming. Yeah, in their own space.

B.S.S. Harding 30:57

Okay, make it easier for them. Yeah. So, you've kind of travelled to where they are, and kind of provide your teaching skills and teach them. That's amazing. And they kind of gained the skills and they can kind of go on into business. So, do you think that if there was like a centralised workspace space that they would like to come in and work? Or do you think because it is this mix of vulnerable young women? They prefer to be at home. Or do you think they would appreciate maybe a more, community aspect to say, for instance, where you could have like a room or a building? We you guys, did it like once a week? Do you think they will feel comfortable coming in to do it? Or do you think they would still feel quite shy to work

Victoria Renner 31:36

So, the thing is, they are not shy at all? But it is because of the finance, yeah, to do to be doing the commenting, it means that they have to have transportation fare, you know, that's where it does cost. But for me, it's minimal. Because I'm working with five of them at the moment. You know. But at the same time if there is a bigger space, we can incorporate more people more, including women, because I work with women from the onset women at a disadvantage place into society. Well, if there's a bigger space, we wouldn't mind going there to work. As long as it is comfortable.

Bijou Harding 32:17

Yes. So, for my research, I'm kind of focusing on how to empower people with physical disabilities. So primarily people with visual impairments, or body impairments or body limitations. Do you have? Or have you in the past

taught anyone that has any types of these conditions? Or do you know anyone that maybe those types of textiles work or dying, or batik that has these kinds of body conditions or disabilities?

Victoria Renner 32:45

No, not per say, there was a particular girl we were working with, but she was not like, totally deformed. She was unable to use one of the hands, but she was like coping. And the rest of them, of course, it's the psyche. They are like, because of traumas they have been in, so they are just not stable. For the physical aspects. No. But in terms of their psyche, some of them are not stable at all.

Bijou Harding 33:11

Okay, yes. Okay, that's great. And I think that's probably the end of our interview. Is there any kind of final thoughts or any kind of final ideas or words of wisdom that you want to share with me as I continue on my journey, to learn more about Gara dyeing?

Victoria Renner 33:35

I think it's a word of advice, that whatever you set your hands to do, make sure that you do it with passion. You know, make sure that you put your all into it, and then everything we come out with, I've been in this work for more than 30 years. You know, I paid my daughter's school fee with it. Now she's a medical doctor. She too knows how to do batik. I've seen other women as well. They are in the process of doing this thing now. And they are making money out of it. So, in a nutshell, whatever your hands find to do, do it with all you might. With all your strength. Put your passion into it, and everything will come out well, and for the better.

Bijou Harding 34:15

Thank you so much Ms Renner for your interview today.

[End of Interview]