

Helen Fallon, Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University meets African people living in Ireland. Through sharing stories we can reach a better understanding of each other and our hopes and dreams.

Sharing Our Stories

From Sierra Leone to Dublin: Binta Jalloh tells her family's story...

I was born in Sefadu, near Kono, the main diamond and gold trading town in Sierra Leone, in 1977. My family belong to the Muslim Fulani ethnic group. We are known for our skills in caring for cows, goats and other animals, that's how our wealth is measured. There are Fulani people – nomadic herdsman and women – in various parts of West Africa.

Family Life

In keeping with Islamic tradition, my father had three wives, my mother was the third. Each wife had her own house in the compound and they were great friends. My mum had six children, four boys and two girls. My Dad had twelve additional children and we all grew up together, sharing everything and looking after each other. Dad was in the Sierra Leone army. Mum was a housewife, who did some sewing as a sideline. I loved being part of a big family and helping to mind the children.

It was dark when we rose at 6 a.m. to the call to prayer from the nearby mosque. Five times each day we faced towards Mecca and prayed. When I pray now in my home in Adamstown, Dublin, I face eastward to the sunrise. During the day I helped my mother at home. We cooked rice, groundnut soup and potato and cassava leaf stew. Outside the compound we had a small plot, where we had fruit trees – oranges, mangoes, bananas and avocados.

Marriage

In the Fulani tradition, we don't choose our husbands. My parents selected my husband. I married very young. Mamadu Jalloh was employed by his father, doing business in different parts of Sierra Leone. I

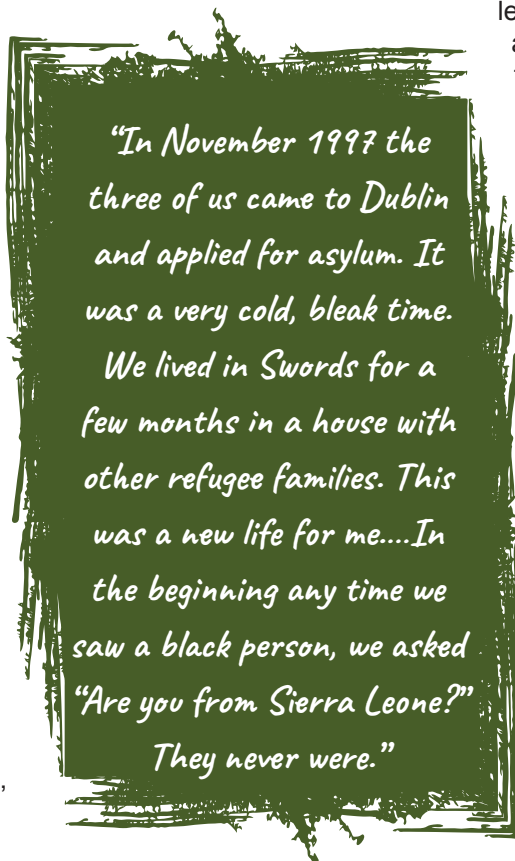
went to live with his family in Kailahun, in the east of the country. I really missed my family, but his mum was very kind to me: she became my mother. When my daughter Fatima was born, my family came to visit. I was so happy to see them.

War

Things were getting bad in Sierra Leone. The civil war began in 1991 and lasted ten years. My father-in-law knew what was going on because he was involved in business around the country. As things worsened, he suggested Mamadu, myself and ten-month old Fatima leave the country. I didn't know about any other country. I was very sad and frightened leaving all I knew behind. We left Sierra Leone, along with many others, as the war worsened and our villages and homes were destroyed. We crossed the border into Guinea with other refugees and stayed among Fulani people.

Dublin

In November 1997 the three of us came to Dublin and applied for asylum. It was a very cold, bleak time. We lived in Swords for a few months in a house with other refugee families. This was a new life for me. In Sierra Leone we grow up outside the door. We eat outside, we share food with neighbours and it is very much a community way of life rather than an individual way of life. In Ireland people kept to themselves. In the beginning any time we saw a black person, we asked "Are you from Sierra Leone?" They never were.



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Friendships

After some time we moved to an apartment in Parkgate Street. Around that time we met Tamu, a

Sierra Leonean student. He introduced us to other Sierra Leoneans. We became friendly with Reverend Sahr Yambassu and his wife Clodagh. They are both Methodist ministers. Sahr spoke some Fulah and was like a brother to us. They welcomed us to their home in Wicklow at the weekends. They took us around and explained things to us about living in Ireland. I felt like I was back in Sierra Leone, I was so happy.

Sister Maura Dillon from Crumlin, a Columban sister, and Father Michael and Sister Jamine also helped me a lot. They organised English classes for me. When I was pregnant with Umu, Sister Maura came to my house to continue the English classes.

Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership (SLIP)

I met Geraldine Horgan at an event organised by the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership in Kimmage Manor. She and her husband Jim Owens had worked in Sierra Leone. Geraldine was like a sister, calling to see us and coming to hospital with me when my children were ill. At this point I had three children. Umu was born in 1999 and Ibrahim in 2004. Through SLIP I met the late Sister Hilary Lyons and other people who had worked in Sierra Leone. It was so nice to find this connection to my country when I was so far away and homesick some of the time.

SLIP organised a diamond campaign to highlight that people in Sierra Leone and other places were dying in fighting to gain control of diamond mines. I attended the launch, where Conor Lenihan the Junior Minister for Irish Aid, spoke. Myself and the children were invited to meet him and have our photograph taken. We featured on the national evening news! I also got to meet his brother Brian Lenihan, when he was Minister for Children. I was on FÁS work experience in Corduff Community Centre, making sandwiches and snacks, when he visited.

Reunited with Family

In 2007 I travelled to Guinea, after 10 years in Ireland. I was so excited to go and see my mum and to bring my children to meet her. Our family home was destroyed during the war and she never returned to Sierra Leone. She died in 2012. My children speak Fulah and loved being in Guinea, eating outside and meeting their family.

Daily Life

I'm now living in Adamstown. Sadly, my marriage did not work out and my husband returned to Sierra Leone. I began working in the Clarion Hotel, Dublin, in 2011, first in accommodation and then in the restaurant. It is a nice job where I meet a lot of people and my



Mrs Binta Jalloh pictured at an SLIP event with the late Sr Dr Hilary Lyons MSHR (1924–2020) who was president of the organisation at the time.
Photo: courtesy of Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership. www.slip.ie

colleagues and the manager are like family. Now with the coronavirus I have to stay home and I really miss work. Fatima has graduated from Maynooth University and is now working in Canada. Umu is in Waterford Institute of Technology, Ibrahim is 16 and is in Transition Year in secondary school.

I love cooking. I cook rice, groundnut sauce and stews. I can't get cassava and potato leaf here, but I use spinach and palm oil instead. I go to African markets sometimes, there's a big Euro Asia market nearby and I can also get lots of things like spinach in Lidl and Aldi stores.

I pray five times every day. I pray for everybody – Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths and no faith. Now I pray especially for the coronavirus to end. My dream is to return to work and for my children to enjoy health and peace in their lives. I came to Ireland in 1997, when I was twenty. I still carry a sense of loss for my life in Sierra Leone, but Ireland is home now. ■

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