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INSPIRATIONAL INNOVATOR INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT – ISATOU NJAI

This interview took place during summer 2020 as part of SIE's Festival of Innovation. The video of the interview can be watched in full on the Scottish Institute for Enterprise's Youtube Channel. (youtube.com/scottishinstituteforenterprise).

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QC- Welcome one and all, short and tall and everyone in between to the sixth, last and final one of these Imagining the Future interviews as part of the Scottish Institute for Enterprises, Festival of innovation. In case anyone's not joined us before, hello I'm Quentin Cooper your genial host but much more important than these things is our guest. The person I'm going to be having the innovation conversation with someone who's going to give you tales to inspire, tales to intrigue and hopefully tales to encourage you to send in some questions and comments which we'll have time for at the end. Today that concept conversation with a bonus bit of conservation is with Isatou Njai co-founder of the baobab based beverage behemoth Drink Biotic I hope you like that bit of alliteration Isatou, welcome and where are you talking to us from?

Isatou Njai (IN)- well I'm talking to you from Bothwell today

QC- From where both well ah right

IN- I can never ever pronounce this properly but hopefully I got that right I think it will make sense

QC- now disappointingly if we were doing this face to face I'm hoping you'd have brought in a delicious drink for me of your own, since we can't do it that way can you at least run me through what it's made from, what it tastes like bearing in mind obviously you'll be prone to marketing it as well?

IN- Yes of course so currently we have three paella flavours: a ginger and lime and orange version as well as a mango and passion fruit so they all have a little bit of a tang to them that comes from the baobab and as well as some very nice tropical flavours coming from the passion fruit and mango.

QC- And I'm guessing Baotic is the name because it comes from baobab but also biotic.

IN- That is right, so baobab for the bio and the tic really is a play on words from the prebiotic side of it.

QC- So baobab has a natural prebiotic element because this is particularly targeted at the growing kind of gut health market.

IN- that's right exactly, so the gut health market has seen tremendous growth and from us understanding our microbiome a lot more the importance of fibres as well as the linkage now that research is established to our brains even and into our mental health.

QC- So yeah and did nobody say are you sure you want to have a product whose name rhymes with chaotic?

IN- Not exactly no, I think many people always pick up from the fact of the play on words from the biotic baobab but I like that chaos so it's worth a little detour.

QC- For those who are unfamiliar with the baobab and I'm no expert but it's worth saying how important and revered it is across much of Africa; known as the upside down tree in some places but perhaps more importantly is the tree of life.

IN- That's right yeah. So baobab, I grew up near lots of baobab trees in the Gambia, is a very old ancient trees that grows all across Africa, 33 countries in general and it's seen as a symbol of wisdom, knowledge and a lot of inspirations where elders say a lot of stories and folk tales under the bay about trees to children. The trees grow to a huge age, some of them are literally thousands of years old, very old trees so they're mostly carbon dated because they don't have the sort of like three lining that that you can't count the age so they're carbon dated.

QC- Yeah now you mentioned you grew up in a village in the Gambia and I think you're way in land, you're about as far in land as you can get, in the Gambia how much was this part of everyday life. I mean just to give us a sense is it about if you have a bear fruit is that a treat or is it something it's like oh gosh not baobab again?

IN- It's a lot but I guess the different ways we consume that still retains that fun part of it. So growing up my grandmother would put it into a porridge a traditional porridge in the morning called mono, my mother obviously sold it in a local market so would make you put in an ice block because Gambia is very hot so people really enjoy that when the sun is boiling and then you have it into lollipops. In modern Gambia it is something that everyone will have in a ceremony be the wedding ceremony and evening ceremony they always buy about juice available to serve.

QC- So it's clearly not an original idea to have baobab as a drink you say even your mother sold baobab drinks but your idea was to try and turn it into something that could be marketed to the gut health market.

IN- Most definitely and I think and in the way that's done so the Gambian versions are very different to what we do here; I think the health focus part of it not putting too much sugar etc and the innovation pipeline we have come to use a traditional thing, baobab drank mostly in the morning children are wean on it and if you have a stomach ache you tell any other person in the village they will say take by about but there wasn't any solid research to actually say why that was the case and I think coming to the UK and for the last few years we've gone back to actually understand those traditional and cultural beliefs and then work back on literature reviews and researches within universities to actually pinpoint the reasons for that.

QC- So it's the way actually a lot of western medicine if you like has worked in recent years, rather than poo pooing folk remedies around the world they've gone off to where it might be the Gambia, it might be Thailand, it might be Vietnam and asked people what are you using as traditional remedies and then gone to find out if there's actually any sound medical stuff behind them.

IN- Yes most definitely so a professor from Queen's College London called inspector in 2016 travelled to one of the last living hunter gatherers in the world in East Africa to actually look at why their microbiome where one of the most advanced in the world and he realized Biobab was one of the main stable ingredients in their diet consuming their diets for 12 days means that his microbiome grew 12, 20 sorry approach to average uh British person sorry so yes most definitely I think it's taking that step back to actually saying why did we always do it this way and how can science give us a validation on some things like that.

QC- Okay so we've established the health credentials of the baobab and the popularity and the reverence of the baobab now we need to get to why you and why in Scotland because you did well at school and then you applied successfully for a place at Glasgow Caledonian university.

IN- Yes so why me and why Scotland? So when I went to my agent in the Gambia looking at university and she asked me what I wanted out of the university or the surroundings and areas I said I wanted to go to somewhere that is really nice. She said okay there's so many places you can find

out what else I said well I've never seen the snow before and said Glasgow is the best place to go to but Caledonian university was viewed as one of the best universities in the world to study risk management and hence why I went there. Baobab came at the third year of my university when I was studying innovation models and entrepreneurship reading about Richard Branson and Brewdog and I got really inspired before that though ten years before that Paul and I my partner, who started the business always wanted to bring baobab, we kind of smuggled it into China when we lived there because we couldn't buy it there and while we were enjoying you said you know this is something we definitely need to bring into the UK.

QC- So it's one of those things that you always say you want it to do and there is no perfect time to do it and you just have to jump in at some point. I'm going to jump in at this point for the two little footnotes: one I'm sure the University of the Highlands and Islands, probably Dundee and probably Stirling are all going to say they're better for snow than Glasgow. Glasgow is the place if you want rain and secondly this podcast is not in any way advocate smuggling things into China, you're on the course and I think it's even as you're on the course you begin to actually go from having this as an idea to executing it so what were the what were the first tentative steps?

IN- The very first in the steps was a lecturer that taught us a lesson in innovation models and I spoke to him briefly about the idea and I tried to convince him to let me do it as my fourth year dissertation and you can imagine I was studying cyber security and risk management. I was speaking to RBS at that time to do an internship and a case study and suddenly I wanted to do my dissertation on biolab so it kind of wasn't a fit but he encouraged me a lot to look out at accelerators and incubators. At that time I joined the RBS accelerator in the city centre and really that was where the first step started, I started applying for grants to help me validate the product in itself because at that time I only had the liquid in an empty 250 ml bottle so those grants went through and I worked with the university to start validating the liquid itself in terms of what ingredients and compositions I can put together. At that very start we were very clear on wanting to keep the product clean and inclusive and I guess that's probably was inspired by my experiences and some sad experiences from the Gambia and our whole journey about supporting female cooperatives and wanting to make health at the centre of everything that we do.

QC- You don't seem to have suffered from what a lot of would-be entrepreneurs and never quite start-ups suffer from which is that they will have a good idea and they will think there's a gap in the market but they don't necessarily believe that they are the right person to do it. Given how popular this fruit is in Africa, were you surprised to find a this hadn't done before and were you surprised to find how confident you were that you were the right person this student this undergraduate to actually do this?

IN- Whoa that's a difficult question, I am still not sure I'm the right person to do it. I have a passion to take it to a place where I know that probably only I can do that with the experiences I have from the Gambia and the journey I have come through in life from my upbringing and my background to date. I know there needs to be a core mission because of the way by about is sourced I don't think

you can just do it in a lesser fair way and succeed in it coming into the UK there were some bioproducts available but they were using an extract and I didn't feel like it really paid homage to the nutritional benefits of it or to the people that actually sourced it so I think that passion it's probably why at this time at this point in time I do believe that I can take it to a stage where I can bring people in.

QC- Definitely and did you convince yourself you were in the right place because it's a slightly spooky coincidence you arrived in Glasgow when 2013, now I don't know if you know this but in 2014 so did a baobab because the artist Robert Coyer sculpted a baobab tree as part of the stuff around the 2014 commonwealth games in Glasgow out in Tollcross park. I don't know if you know this they built a fake wooden baobab so it seems like it was in the air it was in the ether to do something with baobabs.

IN- Oh that's incredible I didn't know the year actually but I learned about this structure and I went to the park to see it unfortunately I couldn't but I was gutted that I couldn't see the sculpture but I didn't know that was 2014.

QC- Are you going to be pretty good but I mean what I'm getting at though although it's joking but obviously Glasgow maybe there's there may also be one in the botanic gardens but it's obviously not a place where you can source baobabs very easily so did it occur to you that maybe you would be better doing this I don't know back in the Gambia or somewhere else were you were you sure this was the right place to be doing this?

IN- Absolutely, I think the sourcing of it obviously where I am the sourcing of it creates other geographical challenges but I don't think in terms of starting a business as a young entrepreneur as a graduate and as a female actually I think absolutely this is the best place to have started it. The amount of support and actually inspirations from the entrepreneurial community organizations like the SIE and my university, Caledonian university, I don't think I would have had that anywhere else in the world and I think all of those things coming together has helped to bring us where we are today. I think anywhere, even in the Gambia probably the challenge would have been how to access international markets so I think there is going to always be a challenge but most definitely my experience is from what I have in Scotland I don't think I can beat that at all anywhere else in the world

QC- Good well as you say you started to pick up support quite rapidly, you started to pick up seed funding and you seemed to make rapid strides and then the next stage was you started to pick up awards including I think one from Virgin Mobile whereas part of the prize you got to meet Richard Branson.

IN- That's right yes, that was an amazing actually experience because I applied for the whole application and the whole pitching was different rounds to it got to the big data pitch and it turned out to be a public square in the very open and that everyone can hear you and see you so I think the introvert in me got there and thought oh my god am I really going to have to do this. But I think it was an amazing opportunity and the whole experience that followed up from that in meetings Richard Branson and Richard Reed from Innocent Drinks through the experience as well has been amazing.

QC- Obviously meeting Richard Branson is one of those things it sounds great and it looks good on your company website and things like that but did you actually get anything from him that you thought right we can we can use this ?

IN- Yes we told him that we want him to come to the Gambia with us and he said yes let me know when you have preach Sarah, she runs is someone that's very passionate about human rights challenges and issues and wants to get involved with things like that. I think the discussion went down that route that's something he'll be open to in the future if we ever called on to him but I think it's the whole other opportunities then it opens up so that meeting him and then I was introduced to Richard Reed next to him who would introduce us to Innocent and there was a mentoring route from there. I think it's sometimes it's what builds on what comes after that sometimes it's a big thing because he has to meet so many other people on the day as well.

QC- Okay so talking what comes after that let's fast forward to where you're at now what are you immediately directing your energies towards?

IN- Now it is finishing launching the product and then pursuing some very strong international opportunities we currently have, so last year we went to a few trade shows in the United States where we've had some strong interest from two distributor programs which will see us selling and entering about 1200 stores in the States which is going to produce some very large volumes for us. The type of regional product we have that is essential for scale, so very excited to be working on that opportunity it takes a lot of work in terms of getting all the accreditations, the FDA approvals and so on but is the journey we're very excited to be embarking on.

QC- And I take it there isn't a limit in terms of the baobabs themselves, I mean these trees are huge and old and ancient and but quite slow-moving in some ways you can definitely keep sourcing enough baobabs for global domination can you?

IN- Most definitely 32 countries in Africa it grows in, so Zimbabwe alone they did research in 2018 that shows about four million Biotic trees alone in that country so it is in abundance. I think the world economic forum says if it's sourced properly the supply chain can bring about a billion dollars each year to the African continent so I think there's a huge opportunity, not only to impact the lives

of women that harvest it but, in commercial terms financial terms a huge opportunity as well. Though it is worth stressing this is an important part of what you do, you're always trying to kind of replenish roots in the community, give empowerment, give us greater strength to individual villages that are out there as well this isn't just a kind of something you say it's a commitment in the structure of the company. I think we have pledged about 10% of our profits going to these communities and for us it's because it came first supporting these communities what we've been doing for 10 years before biotic it has to be something that is part of us and how the business grows and we would want that to be more it just depends on how we bring in shareholders and how we grow as a business.

QC- Now you've come a long way in a relatively short time like you say it's only what, seven years since you first moved into Scotland in the first place anything that really stands out from the anything you're particularly proud of in that journey.

IN- Oh gosh that is a difficult one I think it is the network and the people in business. There's a lot of proud moments, the feeling you get as a young graduate when you break through a certain challenge or milestone so for example, for us securing Ocado and in the initial stages exporting to somewhere like UAE sorry the United Arab Emirates that is a big milestone for us. But connecting to a network where people kind of believe in you and buy into your idea and help your personal development as well as the business grow it is amazing. My relationship with Glasgow Caledonian university and organizations like SIE, Scottish edge has been tremendous for my personal development, the opportunities I've had to learn and grow, lessons learned throughout those journeys and I think I could have only have done that with those people on those networks. So whatever happens if I leave in Scotland I'll always leave with those memories and those and those feelings.

QC- Not that you're saying you're leaving Scotland at any point and what about the flip side of that any moments of resilience where you were you kind of nearly could have failed?

IN- Yes lots of them and I think that is probably the front side of entrepreneurship, not that you feel like that when it's happening at that point in time but it does help you appreciate and be grateful for where you are. Celebrate the successes because of those at the initial stages of us actually trying to bring this product to market it's almost like every single force is against you. I remember particular stories where we go to farmers markets that's where we really started selling the drinks to validate it with customers and once we turned up and the organizers have completely forgotten to put gazebos up for us but has done it for every other retailer and seller there and we were like okay we will just have to handle this the top way and five seconds later the rain was hammering down. Our alternator one went off on the motorway once with 4500 drinks that we had to sell at a marathon event and that day was the best sleep I've had we just put blankets down on the opposite field and just slept it off. I think there are and I think being a female and an African, I think in sort of like this industry or in the sort of times we live in it can be a bit harder sometimes trying to navigate both some personal

challenges as well as some professional ones but I think it's everything combined is what makes me who I am I guess .

QC- I'm going to open it up for questions and comments in a moment but before we do one absolute classic anything it's only been if you like a seven year journey which is still remarkable but anything you wish the you of now could have told the you of 2013 which would have helped you along the way

IN- Oh wow that's a good one I think I would say enjoy the moment and celebrate the little victories.

QC- Do you always know when it's a victory though?

IN- But that's the thing, I think sometimes we forget how far we've come as people, sometimes the focus is all on the business milestone but as individual we evolve with those business ideas and concepts and missions. I think where I started like for example, our plastic pouch we started with has always been a big downer for me because I wanted to move into environmental packaging and trying to innovate out of that was a big challenge. Sometimes I kind of wish that just being able to see that as a challenge and working towards it should be a relief of where I want to be rather than always putting that strain of when so I launched the perfect package.

QC- I'll put you in touch with a friend of mine, Mark Miadovnik who's an expert on plastic packaging and alternatives to it after this is over. Okay so as promised while we've been chatting your comments and questions have been flooding in well I don't know they might have been flooding in but I know who does know which is Fiona Godsman, the chief executive of the Scottish Institute for Enterprise. Fiona I hope you're going to cherry pick a couple of them for us ?

Fiona Godsman (FG)- Absolutely they have been flooding and some of them have been answered in the conversation actually but you're almost picking up on the last bit talking about your own journey. Is there one thing in particular you maybe have learned about yourself in your journey or is it just more has it been more of a journey of learning about yourself ?

IN- I think a lot but there is something around resilience. Sometimes when things are happening I'm like gosh how did I actually ever think that I was going to get out of that and maybe ability to problem solve, being resilient and problem solving even if it's the smallest thing at a time to get out of that challenge to be alive for the next one.

FG- Yeah a resilience is something that shines through any of the successful entrepreneurs that we've seen, absolutely having that drive and resilience so important. There's actually a few around the products and distribution which I'll try and pull together a little bit: initially in terms of the different elements of the product what did you decide to focus on for marketing because it was obviously the gut health the heritage the alternative drink and who are you targeting ?

IN- Yes that's a very good question and I think it's a for us because of our story and everything with the baobab is always very difficult to nail down the focus points but I think our journey in terms of from the farmers market, the different minimum viable product that we created without any sort of investment and backing to start with has helped us really create this engagement with the customer face-to-face events. We've travelled all across England and Scotland talking to customers and that really helps us and summarize things about the product that we want to talk about, what we know is important to the customer and I think that's what helped really nail down the marketing bit for us. It's a journey we're still we're still navigating this in a busy distracted world I think it is difficult to sometimes get through to the customer but the mission is vital finding your core as a person and as a business I think does help drive this as you go.

FG- Yeah that's a really interesting point, I think if you hold true to your mission and perhaps it becomes a little easier to make the other decisions as you're going forward there was a couple of questions around distribution. In part you've covered that because you talked about farmers markets but you've also talked about distributors in the US, so there's a vast gulf between the two of them when you were starting out how did you approach the distribution of your product beyond testing it in farmers markets?

IN- Yeah I think by the very nature of it we were an international company because of the sourcing mechanisms that we had so wasn't just even sourcing from the Gambia was mostly throughout Africa looking at the right suppliers and the people that had the right structures and female cooperatives in place. Then being in Scotland like you say. it was amazing in terms of the support that we have but it was a premium health project when we knew it wasn't going to be the biggest market for us so instantly from the very beginning was looking at who else or where else around the world that this appealed to. So from desktop research from linking with Scottish Enterprise and their research services, looking at who are the main distributor channels across the us was it be got big gut health market places like Germany and the Netherlands came up high so it is looking at the opportunity, cost right the amount that we need to enter the market and the time that it was going to take versus how much actually we can make and the US always came top of that. I think sometimes taking opportunities as they come right, so I had an opportunity out of the blue to go for a trade show in the US and I took it. It was the most craziest thing and went to this show, it's the most biggest trade show in the world and you can absolutely guess it's easy to get lost in it I was fortunate to come across the ex-Whole Foods buyer international buyer for Whole Foods for the whole of the States that absolutely fell in love with baobab so if I hadn't taken the opportunity I've never met him but meeting him probably absolute luck with everyone that's in that place so yeah think that answers your question about this.

FG- It does really and it's basically you're putting the customer first and then working out the best channel to reach these customers seems to be what you were saying, two quick questions: one are you planning more product lines or simply a geographical expansion of your existing products?

IN- I think for now we're kind of going with focus we kind of elevate it to a point now where we can actually strategically put the product in different sectors and segments so right now is through uh launching and trying to scale

FG- yeah and the final killer question there is really only one answer to that I'm going to ask it anyway is having your life partner as your business colleague a good thing?

IN- I'm afraid there's no one quick should answer to that I think it's a difficult one but yes it is just because we started as one of the best friends and we inspire each other: Paul's motivation to always do good and be the best version of himself as a learner and also to contribute in everything that he does the people around him has always inspired me as a person. Having us together always reminds me of why I'm doing things so I think in the midst of all the cares and not being able to ever switch off from business I think it's a godsend I'm sure he's very pleased to hear that and I guess it also just reflects the importance of being a team in business it's always better than one.

FG- Yeah I think that's it from me

QC- Grand very quickly I have to think this is the company you have together is hippo and hedgehog who's hippo? Who's hedgehog?

IN- I was dreading this question, yes I think I am the hippo, Paul likes to think that and he's the hedgehog just plays on our multicultural story.

QC- Okay there are so many other animals you could have gone for but I like the fact you went there. Okay well thank you very much indeed it's been a pleasure talking to him but this is I'm afraid where we must end the bay of babel so thank you to Isatou Njai. That is also my fight with this short series of six hopefully slightly inspirational innovation conversations comes to a halt as well, we have not stopped imagining the future but we hope this will help you continue to imagine the future in more in spectacular ways and maybe we'll come back from some more another day. My deep thanks to the Scottish Institute for Enterprise for putting all this together and particularly to Rali, Scott and Fiona who you just heard from. thank you to all the interviewees .thank you to yourselves for giving up a sliver of your free time to come and watch and now get back to whatever it is you're supposed to be doing maybe only slightly more imaginatively!