

The tailor, the kilt, and the ceilidh

The interior of the shop was pleasantly cool after the heat outside. It hadn't seemed much from the outside, a low blocky building with faded yellow walls next to a courtyard. I entered a doorway and was led down a short corridor into the workshop. Two battered sewing machines were sitting atop a table in the corner, surrounded by every type of material you can imagine. Bobbins of thread and brightly coloured Chitenje scraps jostled merrily with men's suits and curtains for space along the walls. A large mirror on one wall was framed by cut-outs of how to size dresses and pictures of models from magazines. It was here that I would meet Clara, the tailor/miracle worker. But why had I found my way to Clara's sanctum on a sunny June day?

As a Scotsman in Malawi, I had grown used to the Scottish references around the place. Blantyre's coat of arms is a Saltire, St Andrew's international school flew a Saltire proudly at its entrance and even the city's name was given after the birth place of David Livingstone back in Scotland. So I wasn't that surprised when I found out there was a Blantyre Caledonian Society, and even less surprised that they were hosting a ceilidh in aid of the children's hospital. This wasn't even my first ceilidh on Malawian soil. I had hosted one in Cape Maclear with mixed success (the kids seemed to enjoy themselves) and in our small living room in Blantyre with less success (you just need a certain amount of room for strip the willow). Both had been fun but rather chaotic due to the combination of a lack of Scots, tinny speakers and my attempts at calling. But this was the real deal. I was reliably informed that there would be a live band! A proper hall! And the pièce de résistance- a genuine bagpiper!

The bar was set high. I had to raise my game. What could be more appropriate at an authentic ceilidh than a kilt? Unfortunately, despite having two of my own kilts (one for formal occasions, one for... everything else) they were both at home in Edinburgh. So how was I to source a kilt in Malawi? Despite the bond between our two nations, along with Irn Bru and Tunnocks tea cakes, kilt hire didn't seem to have made its way over. And so this was how I found myself in Clara's small but charming creative hub. I had been recommended her services by some of my colleagues. "You have to see Clara; she makes the most amazing dresses. She even made Lederhosen once" I was told. Lederhosen? If she could make the national dress of Austria, she could surely make the national skirt of Scotland.

So it was with some trepidation that I had made my way to Clara's shop. Clara was everything I could have hoped for. She radiated warmth and gentleness in equal measure from her bespectacled eyes, a broad smile lighting up her expressive face. I could tell we would be friends.

"Clara, would you be able to make me a kilt?" I asked. "A kilt?". "It's a sort of Scottish skirt" I replied "for men" I added hastily, puffing out my chest slightly. "Ohhhh, you mean like William Wallace in Braveheart! I've never made a kilt before, but I will try."

So it was set. I had my measurements taken, answered some questions about kilts as best I could, and I was on my way. The next step was selecting the material. I opted out of the African chitenje material, beautiful though it is, feeling that it was more suited to the hardy Malawian mothers rather than a tall, skinny Scotsman. Through the wonder of Whatsapp I was sent various photos of different tartan-like materials, until I found one that I liked.

The morning of the ceilidh arrived and Clara informed me that the kilt was ready. I was nervous. What would it be like? Would it fit? Would I look ridiculous? I needn't have worried. Clara, it turns out, is a genius

with a sewing machine. She informed me with some pride that before any project she "did her research" on the internet and elsewhere. She even showed me the page in the encyclopaedia open at the "Scotland" entry. Sure enough there was a picture of some Scottish fisherman, Eilean Donan castle and a fully kilted pipe band.

She moved some of her other creations out of the way and picked up a bundle of checked material, and there it was, a fantastic kilt, complete with pleats, belt loops and a matching bow tie. Beaming I tried it on. It fitted perfectly. "You will need this too" and she handed me a homemade sporran/glorified handbag. "Thank you so much" I replied. I was so pleased. She beamed back.

I cycled home full of excitement and got ready for the big night. The ceilidh itself was a blast. There was a lot of dancing. There were indeed bagpipes (played magnificently by Megan, an American with an affinity for Scotland). I even shared the stage with Suzie, the energetic Glaswegian dentist/emcee to call some dances.

The kilt looked the business, and certainly performed well. My shirt, socks and shoes were all Malawian sourced too, having been bought from the market in Blantyre. I was not alone in my kilt wearing; a lot of the expats and even Malawians were sporting various different tartans. The biggest compliment I received that night was one gentleman asking "so what tartan is that then?" "It's not tartan actually, it's African material, and the kilt was made here in Blantyre". "Really? Wow!" His incredulity was a testament to Clara's skill. It had passed the ultimate test.

Needless to say Clara continues to be a big hit in Blantyre- and always has a project on the go from dresses and skirts to scrub tops cushions. As she says, you dream, we tailor it. She informs me that she hasn't made it over to Scotland yet but plans to in the future as she has family scattered all across the UK.

I was so happy to be able to share Clara's story with you. Her skill and ingenuity at making a kilt from scratch having never done so before seems to typify so many Malawians I have met- making truly wonderful creations using whatever is at their disposal. So if you ever find yourself in Blantyre, Malawi and realise your kilt is back in Scotland, look up Clara Mwase at www.claradressanddesign.com or email claradressanddesignmw@gmail.com. I'm sure she would be happy to oblige!

I'll finish with some wise words from the woman herself.

"Just remember, you can never be truly dressed without a smile".

