

CULTURAL FASHION |

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MULTI-TEXTURED

MALAWI

Chitenji fabric in Malawi is traditional, but previously worn clothes have become fashion items with a trim of this colourful fabric.

There are no borders any longer – the mere fact that you are on this flight, reading these words, is testament to that. Globalisation, melting pots, a world without boundaries – call it what you will, the sheer “internationalness” of fashion never ceases to amaze.

When researching African fashion one gets the sense that the continent always knew that borders were a farce. The principle behind the traditional dress of so many African cultures is similar in many ways, centred on simple cloth, colourful and lively, which acts as garment, light sheet, headdress, shawl and baby blanket.

It's ceremonial, traditional and casual all at once, with different colours and styles signifying the appropriate mood.

Malawi is no exception. Chitenji, the traditional cloth, is used in much the same way as similar multipurpose coverings in central and West Africa. But it's not as fashionable as the Western garments that flood Malawian flea markets.

Now, the hands of Malawi-based tailors, the vision of a Scottish designer and the “so-last-season” designer clothing shipped from Europe and the United States have met on the dusty streets of Blantyre.

Designer Mia Nisbet specialises in the re-imagining of what was once discarded into highly coveted fashion pieces.

Before launching MIA, Nisbet graduated at the Glasgow School of Art. She spent some time designing for Soviet, but it was with Junky clothing that she learnt the art of deconstructing, then reconstructing castaway clothing items. Nisbet calls her designs “upcycled”.

In 2008 she won the Make your Mark in Fashion Award for Ethical Fashion at London Fashion Week 2008. The award aims to get young designers to think about the impact of their clothing on communities and the environment. ■■■

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The appeal of Nisbet's clothing is that the fabrics she uses have already been printed or dyed once, thus making the process of manufacturing less dangerous to the environment.

However, the influx of foreign, second-hand garments is a trend which is worrying to local clothing producers.

A recent Inter Press Service News Agency article makes the point that although Malawi is able to export to the United States, the country's textile industry has been slow to advance. Combined with a high poverty rate meaning that locals do not have the funds to spend on locally produced fashion, this is a double problem for the local industry.

It's something Nisbet has noted, and she's made a commitment to work with Malawian clothing producers. In addition to using second-hand garments she's found ways of incorporating the traditional chitenji fabrics as trim on dresses, skirts and shirts. Although the designs are marketed mainly to an international audience Nisbet has put on shows in Malawi. According to her website, some profits are re-invested in communities in Malawi as well as in training and equipment to invigorate the local industry.

The collections are fun and flirtatious in a way that suggests travel and revelry on the horizon. There are hints of what the garments once were – the "A" and "D" of what once spelt Adidas merge on the red print of a T-shirt dress. A look at any item of clothing prompts the question – what was it before? Were these shorts a skirt? Was this dress once a shirt?

However, not everything originating in Blantyre has a previous life. Cathy Kamthunzi is a name you're likely to hear more often, particularly since she designed a dress for the 2009 Face of Africa pageant, which took place in Nigeria. Kamthunzi told Mywage Malawi that she also enjoys using chitenji as the basis for her garments.

She's set up a shop in Blantyre and is competing not only with the second-hand market but also with seasoned older



designers. At 24, she's taken on a huge challenge. But Kamthunzi said that she always aspired to be an entrepreneur.

"I wanted to be an entrepreneur when I was in secondary school, simply because I used to knit sweaters, but I loved fashion," she told them.

For those who love fashion and at the same time believe in supporting young fashion designers, these two women are perfect examples of believing in and attaining their goals while giving back to communities. **A**

COTTON PRODUCTION

Cotton has always been integral to the economy of Malawi, but the mostly small-scale farmers have been finding it more and more difficult to compete with cotton producers from bigger countries.

The cotton price has declined – the Fairtrade organisation reports that in 2001 and 2002 the price was the lowest it had been for 30 years.