

Patchwork by Candlelight

by Helen Fallon

Night after night the whirring of Abdullahi's old sewing machine can be heard as people make their way home along the dusty pot-holed road that weaves its way through the scattered village. On wet nights the croaking of the frogs in the nearby swampy rice fields competes with the sound of the machine. Abdullahi sits working the machine on the small shop counter, the path of the sewing machine needle illuminated by the yellow light snaking up the funnel of the kerosene lamp. From time to time he pauses in his work to sell a few spoons of the local coffee, a Leader cigarette, a cup of rice or maybe some sweets to a child who has earned a few leones helping her mother hawk oranges in the Freetown vegetable market.



Above - Mr Abdullahi's shop

The inspiration

Abdullahi's shop is a tiny square house made from galvanised zinc. At the front he has cut a large piece from the metal to make a kind of shutter held open with a wooden prop. Behind this is his shop counter. Overhead hangs a piece of white board, on which is painted a pair of large blue scissors and beside that the words – 'Mr Abdullahi Bai, expert tailor'. The painted scissors is one of many symbols used in a village where most people cannot read or write.

Like me, Abdullahi is a stranger in this small mountain village outside Freetown. From the Fulani ethnic group, Abdullahi came from neighbouring Guinea to Sierra Leone to set up his small shop and tailors business.

The flame spiralling up the glass of the lamp illuminates the dresses Abdullahi sews and lends a magical air to his drab home. Often in the evenings on the way home from

the university where I work, I stop to buy a Coke and watch him as he works. The cloth he sews was originally a type of white cotton damask. It was later patiently tied in sections with thread by the local women and immersed in a series of large enamel bowls, each brimming with deep shaded dyes. Later, untying it, intermingled shades of cerise and apple green, vivid purples, magenta and electric blue are revealed. The cloth is then left to dry, a process, which takes little time in the furious heat of the equatorial sun. Cloth is sold in the markets in the city and Abdullahi and other tailors later have the task of creating African costumes for both men and women.

A new hobby

The village was silent at night except for the whirring of the sewing machine and the chirping of insects and other creatures. Darkness fell at about 6.20. Because Sierra Leone is so near the Equator there was no dusk. I wanted something to do during the long evenings that wasn't preparing lecture notes or reading. I decided to make a patchwork quilt. I had a needle, a spool of thread and a postcard of O'Connell Street that my niece, Aoife had sent me. I asked Abdullahi to keep any spare scraps of fabric for me. I told my students what I was doing and they gave me small pieces of brightly coloured

cloths. I used the postcard as a template and made more templates by tracing its outline on the pages of my VSO manual and cutting it up page by page. At night I folded pieces of fabric around the paper template, tacking it down. When I had two pieces prepared I stitched them together and added on another piece and another and another.

The wet season made way for the dry season and the day came when I said goodbye to Abdullahi and all the people who were part of my life for those two years. I still have the quilt and in it something of the spirit of all those people who passed through my life and gave me a patch from a piece of their cloth. **P&Q**

My quilt of wonderful memories

