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Second-hand U.S. clothes a global business

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It's that wonderful time of year when Americans empty closets, load SUVs and head to Goodwill or the Salvation Army for their annual feel-good purge of unwanted clothing.

The poor receive free shirts, pants and sneakers. Jobs are created. Savvy shoppers find bargains. Donors receive a tax break and the likelihood that wardrobes will be replenished with the holiday gift-giving frenzy.

Everybody wins, everybody profits — including little-known clothing resellers in Atlanta; Houston; Toronto; Dakar, Senegal; Santiago, Chile; and Tokyo.

Secondhand clothing fuels a billion-dollar-a-year, globe-spanning industry. A Jay-Z-emblazoned T-shirt discarded in Cobb County, for example, becomes a prized possession in Ghana, changing hands a dozen times while profiting clothing brokers, bundlers, traders, shippers, merchants and peddlers.

Goodwill Industries, the Salvation Army, thrift shops and other nonprofits sell thousands of tons of donated clothing annually, bundling together items that don't sell in their stores for brokers who pay pennies on the pound.

The brokers — who bought nearly \$2 million worth of used clothes from Goodwill Industries of North Georgia last year — then divide the blouses, boots and belts depending on price, quality, style and demand.

Cast-offs may be cheap, but used-clothes consumers insist on quality. All items must be clean, untattered. Styles vary from country to country.

A cotton-picker in Mali prizes a hand-me-down Nelly T-shirt. A mother in Tanzania prefers conservative blouses. Cold-weather Chileans like flannel shirts. Old blue jeans and anything Mickey Mouse bring top dollar in Japan.

Used clothing is a commodity like any other, buffeted by the same global currents impacting the agricultural and manufacturing industries. U.S. exports topped \$259 million last year.

China, not surprisingly, threatens secondhand clothing brokers in the U.S. and Europe with new and cheap items sewn in Asia and sold in Africa. Rich-country castoffs are also blamed for stunting the growth of an African textile industry.

And critics exhibit moral queasiness induced by the sale and resale of donated and discarded clothing from the world's richest and most powerful nation to some of its poorest.

But even in countries that detest Washington's policies, people like the cachet afforded by Tupac Shakur, Bon Jovi, Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren. Used clothing plays a subtle role in the battle for the world's hearts and minds.

"I believe firmly that if you give something away, good things will come back to you," Smyrna's Pam Lea said last week outside the Goodwill Donation Center on Roswell Road. "Christ was really smart when he said cast off your material possessions. It's a sin to hold back."

### Secondhand's first stop

A stream of sedans and SUVs deposited years' worth of clothes, shoes, books, toys and more at Marietta's Goodwill Center last Tuesday afternoon. James Papp, a textile industry retiree, was surprised to learn that the clothes unloaded from his Lexus might end up in Africa.

"People tend to think that where they bring their [clothes] is where they're sold from," he said. "I'd like it a little better if they sold it here. But I don't have a big problem with it."

Americans, on average, give away or throw out 68 pounds of clothing and other textiles each year — 2.5 billion pounds total — according to the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles trade association.

Papp's clothes, plates and picture frames were sorted by employees wearing blue aprons and placed into plastic bins in the store's back room. The good stuff — mens' shirts (\$4.39 apiece), women's skirts (\$4.59), T-shirts (\$2.09) — fill racks and shelves in the cavernous salesroom out front.

"This is a very profitable business that operates on totally free merchandise," said Lea, who once scoured thrift stores for vintage clothing to resell. "It's a huge, hidden industry, and most people don't understand the amount of money involved."

Neither Goodwill nor the Salvation Army track donated clothing tonnage.

Goodwill's 20 North Georgia stores, though, earned roughly \$16 million last fiscal year from in-store clothing sales. The nonprofit employment and training agency took in an additional \$1.8 million selling clothes to brokers. All earnings, according to spokeswoman Elaine Armstrong, get plowed back into job training and placement programs.

In Atlanta, the Salvation Army weeds out one-fourth of its donated clothing before sending racksful of shirts, pants, pajamas and linens to six retail stores. Roughly three-fourths of the clothing sells within a week. The remainder is returned to the downtown warehouse, bundled and sold to brokers, said Kaye Hood, office manager for the nonprofit's adult-rehabilitation center.

"People don't want to think of an organization that collects [clothes] and helps the public making money," Hood said, adding that profits help treat alcohol and drug abusers, fix trucks, pay salaries and expenses.

Brokers pay the Salvation Army about 11 cents for each pound of secondhand clothing. Goodwill charges about a penny less.

### Atlanta via Africa

As a boy growing up in Sierra Leone, Lamin Bah coveted his Lionel Richie T-shirt.

"Wearing American clothes makes you feel like part of American culture," said Bah, who owns Global Clothing Industries, a fabric recycler off Fulton Industrial Boulevard.

He came to Atlanta a decade ago and transformed the immigrant dream into entrepreneurial reality. Bah, 37, sold used cars in Union City, then ice cream and water on the street during the Olympics. He rehabs and rents homes in Macon and Clayton County. He owns a hair and braiding salon managed by wife Zainab, also from West Africa. Bah, a U.S. citizen since 2003, bought the clothing brokerage last year.

Once, maybe twice a week an 18-wheeler filled with bales and bags of clothing, shoes, soft toys and more arrives at Global Clothing's 25,000-square-foot warehouse. Used-clothing middlemen charge Bah as much as 15 cents per pound for bales procured from as far away as Texas.

The clothes are whisked into the recycling room where a handful of Hispanic and African men and women alongside a conveyor belt separate the clothes by category:

- "Vintage" clothing: 1960s-era blue jeans, tie-dyed T-shirts, old cowboy boots, Disney-labeled products represent used-clothing gems. Specialty stores, especially in Japan, pay big bucks.
- Regular clothing: Grades 1 (almost new), 2 (fairly new) and 3 (worn out). Eighty percent is exported to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Sweaters: Cold-weather South Americans buy well-maintained pullovers. Lower-quality ones end up as insulation or mattress pads.
- White and color wipers: Overly faded T-shirts are turned into industrial fabrics or cleaning rags.
- Trash: Ripped, torn, stained, unsaleable clothing. Ten percent of the cast-offs get cast-off again — into the landfill.

Compressed into 1,000-pound blocks, the saleable bales are then wheeled into a large room with mountains of "tropical mix" shirts and pants, Beanie Babies, belts, shoes, boots, handbags, hats and bicycles awaiting shipment by truck or train to ports in Savannah and Charleston. The bales end up in Togo, Tanzania, Jamaica and beyond.

"What people look for is good, used clothing. Even the poor have dignity and pride," Bah said. "And everybody wants American clothes."

Blouses and skirts appeal to conservative Muslim women in East Africa. Latin Americans, further up the economic ladder, prefer stylish and expensive hand-me-down clothes made by Calvin Klein or Ann Taylor. Africans want Nikes and Reeboks; South Americans prefer boots. West Africans love Hollywood stars and African-American rappers.

"Just believing you are part of American culture is big in Africa," Bah said. "They admire African-Americans that have made it big knowing where they came from originally — slavery."

A global \$1 billion

The global secondhand clothing trade has zoomed tenfold since 1990 to \$1 billion annually, according to the United Nations. More than one-fourth of all African clothing imports have been previously worn.

African brokers pay up to 24 cents per pound for Bah's shipments. The thousand-pound bales are then broken into 100-pound blocks.

Hundreds of thousands of Africans handle, clean, repair, restyle and distribute used clothing. Critics, though, contend that American cast-offs inhibit the establishment of an African textile industry and thwart development. The industrial revolutions of the United States and Britain, they note, began with textiles.

Twenty-five countries, including South Africa and Nigeria, ban or restrict the importation of used clothing, mainly to protect domestic industries.

Yet even Oxfam, the anti-poverty nonprofit known for its criticism of well-to-do country trade policies, doesn't blame hand-me-downs for the sorry state of African textile production. Secondhand clothing is "indisputably beneficial for consumers in developing countries," Oxfam concluded.

"And maybe it will help people think better of Americans," said Marietta's Papp.

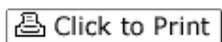
Bah, who said he has yet to make money on used clothing, plans for the future. Ukraine and Uzbekistan seem like profitable markets. Bah also plans to ship Tommy Hilfiger, Fubu and baggy jeans to Africa.

His industry's biggest challenge, though, is finding enough cast-offs to fill the world's sartorial demands. Bah has faith, though, that American profligacy and benevolence will make the world a better place.

"Even though brokers and thrift stores sell the clothes, the American people should be proud that they're making a difference in the world," he said. "Otherwise, some people would not have clothes to wear."

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