

Representing The Wiping Materials, Recycled Clothing, New Textile By Products and Fiber Industries

In My Opinion



It's Chic to Be Cheap

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If you Google “The Bolivian Battle Over Used Clothing” you’ll witness a fascinating seven-minute video that

is decidedly biased on the side of that government’s anti-import, pro-ban sentiment.

For five minutes or so, you’ll see falsely reasoned arguments against imported used clothing that depict our industry as one that deprives Bolivians of jobs and pride. A Bolivian Vice-Minister went as far to say, “It’s impossible to think that we can be dignified if, in the name of poverty, we wear clothing that has been thrown out by another country.”

In reality and practice, the importation of used clothing has an effect opposite to what the Vice-Minister of Bolivia seems to think. Northwestern University professor Karen Hansen, in her study of the sociology of used clothing in Zambia, reveals how used clothing represents something that is not only affordable to the masses but is also “new” and fresh in its wide array of choice in style and fashion. An entire industry revolves around the tailoring, cutting and sewing of used clothing into new indigenous styles and fashions.

The arrival of consignments in ports around the world is cause for an electric trade from Africa to Central and South America, where clothing takes on a new and meaningful life from bustling urban markets to remote rural areas where residents become connected to the global economy.

For further evidence of the dignity of these pursuits, what better example than our own country, the world’s number one user of secondhand clothing, where thrift ventures across the nation thrive. Here, high style without high cost is a coup. On May 22, The Today Show verified this concept with a “Cheap is Chic” segment, which featured models in remarkably low priced fashions from Goodwill, Savers and Salvation Army. These days, recycling is dignity of the highest order.

SMART has an official policy against bans of used clothing. In doing so, we replace false images and promote the incredibly positive effects and passions our commodity inspires in markets around the world.

It is fitting to close with a Bemba language poem cited in the above mentioned book, *Salaula*, a word that means “to rummage through a pile:”

*Select, select, select mother
 These nice shoes they are wearing
 And the nice trousers they are wearing
 And the nice shirts they are wearing
 It is Salaula, mother
 This year we are praising the Zaireans
 For this bale you have given us, father
 Because that is where Salaula is found,
 Mother pick from there*

NOTE: This column focuses on the subjective aspects of the used clothing trade. The strong economic arguments for the trade are the subject for another column.

SOURCES: *Salaula* by Karen Tranberg Hansen; Northwestern University and an article I found online called *The Secrets of Used Cloths: Western Cast-Offs reveal Surprising Insights*, www.thefreelibrary.com