

Western countries' exports of second-hand clothing to Africa have not only destroyed Africa's once-thriving textiles industry, with a consequent loss of skills and jobs, but have also led to a loss of pride and dignity.

# Second-hand cult debases Africa

Once upon a time, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, Africa had a thriving textile sector. A city like Kaduna in Nigeria was famous for its many textile firms.

Local prints of traditional African designs were produced in large volumes. Young men and women about to leave school were often filled with excitement at the prospect of working in the textile industry – the pay was good and workers were organised in unions – the Textile and Garment Workers Union was one of the strongest.

Citizens wore decent clothes, jobs were created and government earned revenue in a win-win situation. All that has changed; the textile factories are gone – turned mostly into prayer grounds. The jobs have gone as well, creating despair among young people, making them vulnerable to the lure of Boko Haram, and taxes earned from the sector by the government have virtually dried up. In economic parlance, this is called “de-industrialisation”.

South Africa, Africa's industrial powerhouse, has not been immune to the decline of the textile industry. In the immediate post-apartheid era, there were textile factories

all over South Africa and many of the garment-selling retail shops like Edgars, Mr Price, etc, sold high-quality locally made South African clothes.

By the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, South Africa's textile industry was in distress, and now it has virtually disappeared. No less than 20,000 direct jobs have been lost, while the figure for job losses in associated industries is close to half a million.

A 2017 study by Esther Katende on the impact of second-hand clothing on the East African region states: *“In the 1960s to the early 1980s, the clothing and shoes industrial sector in East Africa was thriving and producing for both the local markets as well as the export market, and employing thousands of people. Value chains in the sector were well established, right from the production of raw materials to the finished products.*

*“However, over the years, the clothing and shoes manufacturing industries have collapsed with the emergence of an informal sector dealing in second-hand clothes and shoes (SHC). At present, the majority of the population in East Africa source their clothing needs from this informal sector, which*

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*has curtailed efforts at revamping the clothing and shoes industrial sectors in the region”.*

A policy of trade liberalisation promoted under globalisation, which started with the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) had damaging consequences for Africa's textile sector.

### Killing African textiles

Cheap clothes from other parts of the world flooded African markets, even from countries that did not liberalise their own markets and protected their own producers from competition. The economic lexicon was that African textile firms were no longer competitive and needed to die natural deaths.

The onslaught on Africa's textile sector has taken a new turn with the ascendancy of second-hand clothing as a major component of international trade.

There is another, even more damaging dimension to this trade. Wearing and trading in second-hand clothes is not only about trade but also human dignity, decency and a sense of self-pride. It is debasing and dehumanising for a people to stash their wardrobes with clothes that others have worn and sweated in, repeatedly.

