

Purchase for Africa: An appeal for American apparel buys

Written by William Reed

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Labels do matter. When it comes to African Americans' apparel purchases Howard University business students say "Labels do matter" and encourages these consumers to engage in socially conscious buying and to "look for Lesotho labels" when they shop. African Americans consumer power can help change Africa. African Americans' buying power exceeds \$900 billion. Blacks' apparel purchases total \$20 billion each year.

In an attempt to re-define community service to Africa, Howard's Africa Business Club students have joined with the Kingdom of Lesotho toward setting a new trend among African American consumers. In a campus Homecoming event, Lesotho's Ambassador to the US joined in the collective to empower more Africans through socially-conscious buying in America. Participants in the "Purchase For Africa" initiative seek to increase the amount of apparel Americans buy from Africa and persuade other like-minded universities and retailers to source more African apparel.

Less than two percent of US apparel imports are from Africa, compared with 41 percent from China. Howard's, and expanding numbers of Historically Black Colleges and Universities' (HBCUs), business students, are petitioning their campus bookstores to specifically stock apparel supplies from Lesotho and Uganda and ensure that by 2010, 20 percent of HBCU universities' sweatshirts are sourced from Lesotho.

Most Black Americans have given little thought to focusing attention on, never-mind purchases from Lesotho, a landlocked country and enclave entirely surrounded by South Africa. Lesotho's claim to fame is its successful utilization of, and participation in, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Under the preferential trade agreement, and assistance from the architect of AGOA, the country has become the largest exporter of garments to the US from sub-Saharan Africa. Under the tutelage of Rosa Whittaker, the first ever Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for Africa, Lesotho has evolved a well-regulated, globally-integrated industry that assembles apparel for some of the best-known brands in the world.

Lesotho's apparel exports totaled over \$320 million in 2002 and employment reached over 50,000. Because of AGOA's advantages, Lesotho's products have been in American shopping carts more often than most know. Much of the denim Americans wear are made in the "jeans capital of Africa". Lesotho workers produce 26 million pairs of denim jeans a year at eight factories. The industry turns out 70 million knitted garments, mainly cotton, yearly at 28 factories. One of Levi's jeans manufacturing facilities is located there, as is a Russell Athletic plant. Lesotho garment firms specialize in the production of denim garments (mainly jeans, but some chinos/corduroys) and cotton knit fabrics (tee and polo shirts and tracksuits). Each year, Lesotho's 41 apparel firms make 90 million knitted garments and 26 million jeans.

Conscientious consumers should "look out for Lesotho" in the garment label. Lesotho's industry doesn't compete with China in the area of "cheap clothing", but its labels are among most designer clothing. Apparel manufacturing is a significant boom to economic development in Southern Africa, in addition to providing jobs and paying taxes, Lesotho's manufacturers produce clothing tied to socially conscious consumer campaigns. A range of Lesotho t-shirts are being produced for singer/activist Bono and the (Product) Red campaign for Africa. Brands and retailers sourcing from Lesotho include: Foot Locker, Gap, Gloria Vanderbilt, JCPenny, Levi Strauss, Saks, Sears, Timberland and Wal-Mart.

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In “Purchase For Africa” the students hope to use African Americans’ consumer power as catalysts toward Africans’ positive change and empowerment. The activity is against the grain, there’s always been an absence of trade between Africa and African Americans, in particular, and America, in general. Black Americans need to know more about Africa and tell others how to help there.

Blacks can help by learning more about helpful approaches there and spreading such knowledge to as many people as possible. Given the facts, most Americans will prefer to make sure they enhance trade with countries like Lesotho. The “Purchase For Africa” initiative is an excellent opportunity for African American consumers’ “fashion statements” toward trends that directly change Africans’ lives and opportunities. To join this cause, sign up to be a “Purchase For Africa” project fan on Face Book.

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