Clothes That Never Die: How Ghana Lives with the World's Waste

When I began my dissertation on second-hand clothing in Accra, I thought I was studying waste. I soon realised I was tracing a story about people — about resilience, silence, and unexpected forms of sustainability stitched together in the most unlikely places.

It all started after attending a public event in Ghana that screened a documentary on the growing mountains of textile waste washing onto Accra's shores. The images were haunting — bright fabrics tangled in seaweed, clothes buried in sand, and fishermen struggling to pull their nets through cloth-choked waters. I left with a single question: What happens to our clothes when we no longer want them? That question became the seed of this research.

Accra's Entanglement with Global Waste

Accra's Kantamanto Market is West Africa's epicentre of second-hand clothing. Each week, thousands of imported bales of obroni wawu — a local term meaning "dead white man's clothes" — arrive from Europe and North America. Some are treasures, others are trash. Traders pay large sums for unseen bales, hoping to make a profit. But as fast fashion accelerates, more garments are low-grade synthetics that unravel quickly, shed microfibres, and become waste within days.

Figure 1. People offload bales of second-hand clothes from a truck at Kantamanto market: largest second-hand clothing market in West Africa. Image by: AP Photo/Misper Apaw.

My research explored what happens next — how discarded garments move through Accra's markets, drains, and coastlines, and how people make sense of this endless influx of global excess. In coastal communities, textile waste mixes with organic matter, plastic, and silt, clogging storm drains and contributing to urban flooding. When these materials are burnt to clear space, they release toxic fumes, exposing nearby residents to respiratory and skin-related health issues. The cycle of pollution thus becomes both environmental and bodily.

The Field that Refused to Speak

Conducting fieldwork from the UK meant relying on virtual interviews and WhatsApp conversations. I expected logistical barriers; I didn't expect silence.

Several officials declined to speak, calling the topic "sensitive." One Assemblyman, from a community overwhelmed by textile waste, quietly told me over the phone:

"They came, they recorded, they left. We're still here."

That sentence reshaped my understanding of data. Silence was not absence — it was expression. These refusals reflected caution and disillusionment, shaped by years of unfulfilled promises and research fatigue.

Discovering Vernacular Circularity

While institutions stayed quiet, the market spoke loudly. Traders, tailors, and waste pickers practised sustainability long before it became a policy term. At Kantamanto, garments are repaired, resized, re-dyed, or transformed into cleaning rags and rugs.

"We don't use those big words," one trader laughed. *"We just hate to waste."*

This revealed a vernacular circular economy — sustainability born of necessity, not frameworks. Yet, despite its value, this system operates under precarious conditions and without recognition. As fast fashion quality declines, more of what enters these markets becomes unusable, overwhelming waste handlers and contributing to the city's growing environmental crisis.

Waste that Refuses to Disappear

Another revelation was the invisible life of waste. Environmental journalists and coastal volunteers spoke of microplastics breaking down from synthetic fabrics.

"The same clothes that wash up on the beach," one journalist said, "also break down into tiny fibres… fish eat them, and then we eat the fish."

Waste, I realised, doesn't just sit in landfills — it circulates through ecosystems and bodies. Microfibres travel through wastewater systems, enter lagoons like the Korle and Odaw, and flow into the Gulf of Guinea. Over time, these pollutants accumulate in marine organisms, affecting food security and public health. Textile waste, once dismissed as an aesthetic nuisance, is thus revealed as a complex ecological hazard — one that binds global consumption to local survival.

Figure 2. Coastal fishing community of Jamestown in Accra – Ghana. Image by: The Guardian.

Listening to Avoidance and Improvisation

Anthropology taught me to listen differently. Avoidance became data: NGO leaders who stopped responding, academics who withdrew, bureaucrats who sent one-line replies. Each silence revealed the moral and political weight of waste. Yet alongside avoidance, I witnessed improvisation — traders turning rags into products, and youth activists organising coastal clean-ups via Instagram. They navigate absence with creativity and persistence, embodying a form of everyday resistance against neglect.

Figure 3. Textile waste turned into a mop. Image by: OR Foundation – Ghana.

Threads of Reflection

Writing this dissertation was an act of unlearning. I began by studying environmental harm but ended up exploring human ingenuity and inequality. As a Ghanaian researcher studying my home from the UK, I wrestled with my own distance — part of the same global hierarchy my research critiques.

The environmental crisis I studied is not isolated; it is the outcome of global overproduction and uneven responsibility. The same systems that enable cheap fashion abroad externalise its costs onto places like Accra — onto markets, beaches, and bodies that were never meant to carry the burden.

Why These Stories Matter

Ghana's second-hand clothing crisis reflects global inequality: one world's convenience becomes another's burden. Yet within this crisis lies possibility. Traders, menders, and clean-up volunteers reimagine sustainability every day, crafting value from waste.

If anthropology teaches anything, it is that meaning lives in the margins — in what is discarded, silenced, or overlooked. In following those threads, I found not despair, but hope — fragile, persistent, and beautifully human.

By Judith Akoto