



Alaffia Shea Butter Cooperative members in front of the Alaffia Cooperative, Sokodé, Togo in December 2010.

African Self-Empowerment Through Fair Trade Shea Butter

by Olowo-n'djo Tchala

For the past 500 years trade with the continent of Africa has been unbalanced and in conjunction with rampant corruption and lack of democratic control, has led to the paralysis of economies across Africa. As a result Africa, with some of the richest resources and cultures on the planet, is still considered the poorest continent on Earth. The continent has also been quickly losing her great wealth of traditions and culture as young people increasingly yield to Western pressures and models. However, it is precisely these young people who can use their opportunities to sustain our communities by placing fair value on traditional resources and knowledge.

My personal history well illustrates the current situation of our continent. My mother has never set foot in school and worked long hours on her farm to raise her eight children in an 8' x 10' room. Like my brothers and sisters, I too dropped out of school in sixth grade. However, because of my mother's persistence, my opportunities were far greater than hers, and from an early age I understood that once I grew up I would like to help my mother have an easier life. This vision began to become real when I met my

wife Rose – a Peace Corps volunteer – in Togo in 1996. When I joined Rose in the United States two years later I began working as a janitor, while attending English as a Second Language classes at a local community college. From there I worked up to college level classes, eventually transferring to the University of California-Davis where I obtained my B.S. in Organizational Studies in 2004.

By my junior year at Davis it was clear to me that true African self-empowerment must begin with the continent herself, and that by placing fair value on our resources – tangible and non – we can support ourselves and our communities. I saw that sustainable community empowerment could come through trade in our resources rather than relying on foreign aid. In May 2003 my wife and I founded our fair trade shea butter cooperative based on these beliefs and a will to see them through. Seven years later our cooperative has over 300 members and is certified under IMO's Fair for Life Program.

As the key resource for our work we choose traditional shea butter for four main reasons. First, I believe that for Africans to rise out of poverty we must maintain and revive our traditional knowledge. Since shea trees are native

to the savanna of West Africa, the traditional crafting method still exists in rural communities, but is vanishing fast as younger generations do not see the economic return of participating in such work. Our recent recruitment of nine young ladies to the cooperative is proof that fair value on traditional knowledge can maintain our cultural resources. Secondly, traditional extraction of shea butter is an environmentally sustainable practice. Shea trees are adapted to the ecology of the savanna and therefore do not require fertilizers and pesticides. Thirdly, while traditionally women traded shea butter locally, the increasing international emphasis on this resource threatened this livelihood. Like my mother, most women that participate in the collection and crafting of shea butter do not receive fair prices for their labor on the international market. For this very reason, when we set up our cooperative, we made sure that every participant – from nut gatherers to shea crafters – is compensated fairly. Finally, traditionally handcrafted shea butter has real health benefits for our customers with proven skin moisturizing and healing properties.

In 2004 we made another critical decision, to create a line of body care based on our handcrafted shea butter. We felt at the time that for us to truly achieve our fair trade objectives we must completely eliminate the intermediate brokers and go directly to the market in the West. In this way our cooperative members gain a greater portion of the final price and customers are not over charged. In conventional trading systems the cost of intermediate brokers is compensated by lower prices paid to producers and higher prices charged to consumers. By integrating our entire supply chain through not only making the raw ingredient – shea butter – but also formulating, producing and distributing finished products ourselves - we are able to fulfill our fair trade objectives.

Foremost of these objectives was and continues to be our community projects. Since our first year, we have dedicated our sales to community empowerment projects in central Togolese communities. Our projects include providing bicycles to over 3,000 disadvantaged students,

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planting over 7,000 trees in the past seven years and currently supporting 400 women with full prenatal and delivery care. We conduct all of our projects with a long term goal of relieving poverty and contributing to a functional society.

In summary, while fair trade practices are not the only solution for Africa to rise out of poverty, our project shows that they can be an important force for community development. I urge our Western brothers and sisters to participate in fair trade whenever possible, and I strongly urge my fellow Africans to stand by their cultural heritage and employ morality when trading their resources and labor. As for Alaffia and myself, we have dedicated the rest of our lives to the empowerment of our communities through trade – on fair terms.

Alaffia's Community Development Projects

Bicycles for Education

We began our Bicycles for Education project in 2005. The idea for this project arose while we were brainstorming ways that our consumer community in Washington State could connect directly with the shea butter cooperative and support community projects there. Fair trade is a social movement and there is a need for people on both sides of the trade - producer communities in poor countries and consumer communities in wealthier ones - to participate in projects funded by the fair trade social premium.

Rural children, girls especially, are severely underrepresented in the Togolese secondary school system. While there are many factors leading to high dropout rates, time spent walking to and from school is one of them. Many children in rural Togo walk 5-15 miles to school making it impossible for them to have time to study. This is especially true for girls, who traditionally have more household chores than boys.

In June 2006 we shipped our first container of 600 bicycles to Togo. Since



Kousountou Secondary School student receives a bicycle from Alaffia's founder in December, 2010. This student previously walked 5 miles along a single lane path from her village to school each day.

then we have distributed over 3,000 bicycles in thirty villages in central Togo. Student participants are selected based on distance to school, family income and gender. Girls are given preference due to their much higher dropout rate.

Based on our follow-up studies, this project has been extremely successful. Not only are students who received bicycles staying in school and passing their exams, there have been other unexpected benefits such as a reduction in pregnancy rates for female students.

Schools Project

The causes for the failure of the educational system in West Africa are complex. A lack of funding is a major factor. Mismanagement and misallocation of the limited funds available contributes further to the educational crisis. General poverty makes formal education an expensive choice for parents and even more so when governments are unable to provide books, buildings or even pay for teachers. Even though the current education system has many problems beyond funding (curricula issues, lack of traditional educational models, poor training of teachers), we still believe all children should have access to the economic opportunities that education can present. Therefore we have supported education in our central Togo communities since 2004 through several projects.

Our very first project, which continues to this day, is providing school supplies

such as notebooks, pencils, pen, chalk and uniform fabric to 200 disadvantaged students each year. In addition, we carry out several school repair and furniture donation projects annually. Villages are often able to build a school using local labor, timber and bricks, but cannot afford critical materials, such as metal roofs and desks to complete the project. Alaffia provides bench seating for five schools each year to reduce overcrowding and increase class capacity.

Maternal Health Project

Rates of maternal mortality (MMRs), i.e. the death of a woman during or shortly after a pregnancy, remain alarmingly high in Africa, even as they decrease elsewhere in the world. The effects of maternal mortality on families and communities are obvious and varied. When a mother dies her children are left without their primary caregiver. Studies have shown reduced nutritional status and increased childhood mortality in motherless children in West Africa. These children move more frequently and are less likely to stay in school. Poor nutrition and lack of education during childhood exacerbate poverty situations. Thus, addressing maternal mortality in our communities is essential for alleviating poverty. Several in-depth studies at the community level have determined that the most critical of all the factors in reducing maternal mortality is access to quality maternity care and birthing professionals - physicians and qualified midwives - before, during and after childbirth.

Alaffia partners with several local health clinics in central Togo to provide prenatal care and post natal follow-ups for 400 women each year. Each participant in our maternal health program receives a monthly checkup, prenatal vitamins, any necessary medications (antibiotics, etc.) and delivery care – including any emergency or complication care. We continue to follow the mothers and their babies for six months after birth. Since our program began we have not lost a single mother or child. ■