

GLOBAL TRADING & ALAFFIA

Making 'fair trade' a redundant term

by Pat Tanumihardja

How many times have you bought Shea butter lotion off the shelf or purchased a hand carved teak table, without a thought for the artisans who made them? I admit it, I'm guilty.

Two Northwest fair-trade certified businesses are trying to change that.

Seattle's Global Trading Network

specializes in the trade of international merchandise, especially Africa. Its business

model promotes fair trade, develops self-sustaining jobs and funds projects in the regions where they do business.

Olympia-based Alaffia sells skincare products made with fair-trade, handcrafted Shea butter from Togo, West Africa. Ten percent of all profits are set aside for community enhancement projects in Togo and Washington state.

So what exactly does fair trade mean? According to the TransFair USA Web site (www.transfair.org), the Fair Trade Certified label

guarantees that farmers and workers received a fair price for their product, enabling them to feed their families and send their children to school at a very minimum.

The Impetus

Every business starts with a passion.

Coming from a family of historians, Global Trading Network's Mansa Musa found it only natural to return to his African roots. A fourth-generation African-American, Musa's mother is from Ghana and his father is from Mali.

"In our history, most African cultures were at their greatest when they were doing global trade," explains Musa who lives in Renton. "At 18, after reading a lot of African history books, I came to the conclusion that why should I consider anything else when trade is one of the oldest businesses on the planet?"

In 2000, Musa started trading between Ghana and the U.S., two countries he considers home. Just "as it would make sense for us to have clean air because we have to breathe air," fair trade makes



Mansa Musa at Imports an Things in the Super Mall.

sense to Musa, who wouldn't conduct his business any other way. "Sometimes I giggle at the term 'fair trade' because ... aren't we supposed to be?" he says laughing. "(In my company) we think that trade should always be fair and ... we should always go beyond fair trade."

For Alaffia's founder, Olowo-n'djo Tchala, it was a desire to give back to his community that spurred him on. Born and raised in Togo, Tchala collected Shea nuts and harvested the butter to help provide for his seven siblings as a young boy. "I would bring the Shea butter to market so we can find a few pennies to buy some food and go to school." This helped him earn a very small income of about \$2 a month as was common in central and northern Togo. Even then, Tchala knew "that something was not quite right within the society (and) I always felt something could have been done."

"There was always constant complaining, people were always

poor," he says. "When somebody was sick, they can't go to the hospital because there's not enough money."

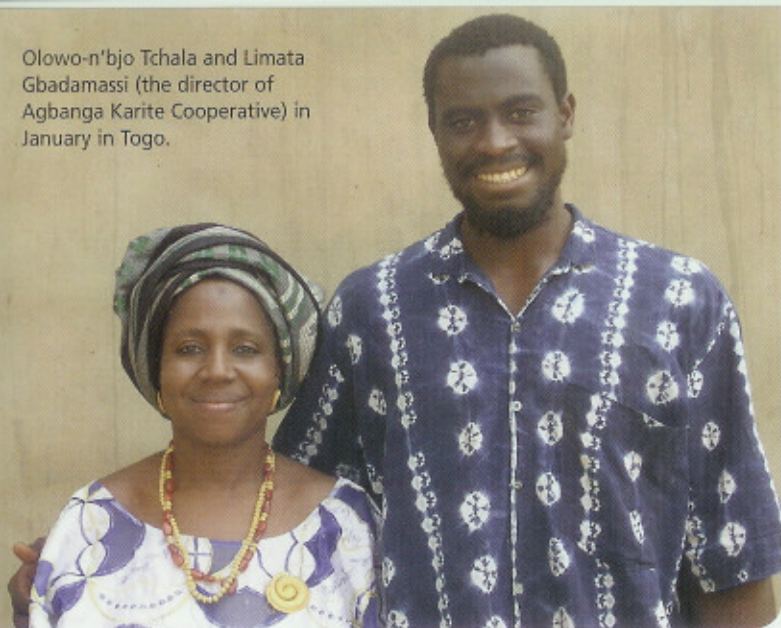
Tchala, 30, who is now an Olympia resident, saw a chance to make a difference when he first came to the U.S. (Wenatchee) in 1999 after meeting his American wife, Rose. He was shocked at the prices charged for Shea butter products compared to the amount people in Togo earned. "Looking back when I'm in Togo (and) how much we got paid, I felt maybe this is the problem and why everyone in Togo is so poor. It seems very immoral." He believed that Africans needed to be rewarded and paid fair prices for their resources and hard work.

At the same time, Tchala and his wife were trying to find ways to fund projects in Togo. "We were looking for what we can do without applying for grants (which were restrictive and inconsistent) and that's when the idea came," he says. In 2003, they founded Alaffia



Global Trading Network works in Ghana.

Olowo-n'bo Tchala and Limata Gbadamassi (the director of Agbanga Karite Cooperative) in January in Togo.



as a viable solution to provide Togolese with a fair wage and fund the projects they had in mind.

The beginnings

In Togo, Shea trees grow wild and thrive without having to be watered or fertilized. Plus, the knowledge of Shea butter production already exists in the locality. "It was the perfect thing to do," says Tchala. His first step was to set up the Agbanga Karite/Alaffia Shea Butter cooperative in the town of Sokodé. The cooperative employs 80 local women earning a monthly salary, including Tchala's mother, all of whom have the traditional knowledge and skill to handcraft Shea butter without the use of chemicals.

In the beginning, director Limata Gbadamassi had to go the rural areas to buy Shea nuts directly from the villagers. Now, word has spread that the cooperative pays 30 percent to 40 percent above market price and the nuts come to them. The market price fluctuates between 50 cents and a dollar for every kilogram of Shea nuts, which yields about four ounces of butter — equivalent to two jars of Alaffia Shea butter. For each jar that sells at \$5 wholesale, five to 10 percent goes toward the cost of Shea nuts, 15 to 20 percent to the cooperative workers and the rest to overheads and projects.

After the butter is extracted from



the nuts at the cooperative, it is shipped in big buckets to Tacoma. At Alaffia's plant in Olympia, the Shea butter, together with other natural, fair-trade ingredients such as African wild honey, coconut oil and red palm oil, is transformed into lotions, creams, etc. — according to their own formulations. "We do everything in-house which eliminates the middle man," explains Tchala. "Therefore the producer ... and the end user will benefit."

The final products are distributed for sale at stores such as Whole Foods, Central Market, Marlene's Market (South Sound) and through their Web site at retail prices ranging from \$3 to \$17.

For Musa, the fair trading began with the carving and weaving village of Aburi in Ghana. Musa first did an assessment of market prices in the U.S. and what other companies were paying the artisans. "Then we sat down (with the artisans) to determine a fair-trade price between us and them. The money goes directly into the hands of each

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artisan," he explains.

"We would buy all of our products in cash, enough to fill a 40-foot container – that's about \$20,000 into the hands of the 300 carvers and weavers there," explains Musa. "We would pay ... maybe a year's worth of salary at once." Eight containers have been shipped to the U.S.

On top of that, once items are sold in the U.S., the artisans receive a bonus. Considering that Musa allots about 20 percent of profits toward humanitarian projects, the business needs a fair margin on merchandise sales to remain afloat. So markups range between 50 percent to 300 percent, depending on U.S. market prices.

Today, the Global Trading Network imports from Ghana, Mali, Kenya and Ethiopia all kinds of African merchandise, including masks, statues, furniture – even frozen seafood – and their most popular item: baskets. Made from river reeds, these hand-woven baskets are strong, sturdy and biodegradable. "Before (baskets were) a big business, it was just their lifestyle... (now) each basket that we sell is helping out these villages."

Primarily a wholesale business with 800 clients across the U.S. – including Cost Plus World Market, Bed Bath and Beyond, and many smaller independent stores – Global Trading Network also has a retail arm, Imports an Things, located at the Auburn Super Mall and online.

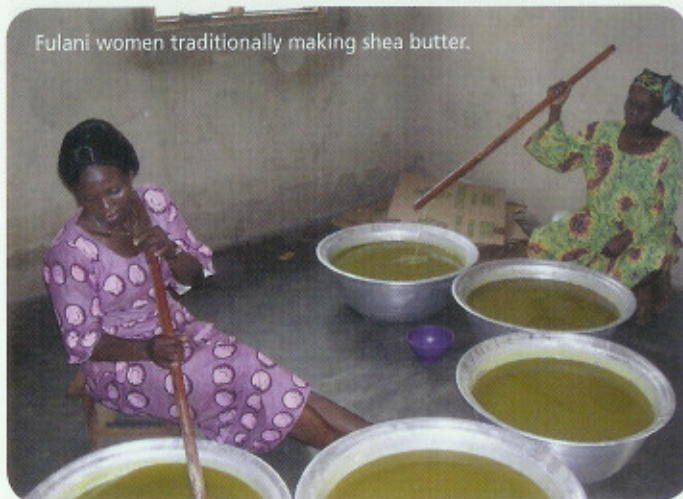
Why fair trade?

"I'm not the wealthiest businessman but someone has to show that this type of business model can work and somebody has to ... (demonstrate) that corporate responsibility is real," says Musa. "We're not rich, we're not powerful but we can show just with our small business model that a small company can have an affect on several villages."

Besides, fair trade establishes a mutually beneficial relationship. "The carvers and weavers we've been working with are totally loyal to us. They listen to our ideas, we listen to theirs," he explains. "It's enhanced the lives of all who've been involved and I can tell you, if I die today I'll die a happy man."

Tchala believes fair trade is the only way to improve the poverty and inequality that are a legacy of colonization. To do this, empowering women – the backbone of African society as Tchala describes them – is essential. During colonial times, women were largely excluded from the education system. Today, many of these women are deprived of opportunities afforded the literate, which results in a 50 percent unemployment rate among women. The cooperative alleviates this situation somewhat by hiring mostly female elders who are equipped with market information to understand their product's worth, which in turn gives them greater negotiating power.

Fulani women traditionally making shea butter.



One step further

"A true fair-trade organization is not (just) paying fair price or wages," emphasizes Tchala. "What is more important is how you participate in the community where you're operating and to empower the community long term."

Musa aims to develop sustainable programs that will carry on even without his company's help. "We're really trying to teach people how to fish rather than just bring the fish."

Through the "One School at a Time" program, they assess and address the individual needs of primary schools in the villages they work with. Since 2000, they have installed toilets and hand sinks, repaired sidewalks, renovated classrooms, and donated computers and supplies. In addition, they also pay the school fees for any child who cannot afford to go to school.

Global Tours, Musa's latest venture, also brings tourists to the

Alaffia Sustainable Skincare

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Olympia, WA 98508-1143

Global Trading Network

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206/329-1200

Imports An Things

Auburn Super Mall
www.importsanthings.com/
253/288-1077

villages to spend money and allows the villagers to make contacts and build a circle of affluence in the U.S. Each tour group brings donations: pens, pencils, and other school supplies; and the latest carving utensils for artisans.

With the help of volunteers and publicity in local newspapers, Tchala recently collected 430 recycled

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- Mansa Musa, owner, Imports an Things



Fulani women members of the Agbanga Karite Cooperative

bicycles and shipped them to Togo. With walking distances spanning 5 to 10 miles and no school buses, children don't attend school regularly. Speaking from experience, Tchala says, "You just don't want to walk so far to school and you're really just playing somewhere every day until it's time to come back home again." Girls are even worse off since they are required to do more chores at home. Tchala is hoping that by being able to bicycle to

school, girls can come home early from school and get their chores done with enough time left to do homework.

In honor of his sister who died after childbirth last year, Tchala established the Fousena Fund in March 2006. One in 16 sub-Saharan African women dies from birth-related issues compared to one in 2,400 in the West; some 250,000 women die a year.

The fund will pay for medical

supplies, medicines and community training programs. "We will work with women elders to bring about traditional ideas of healing and not assume primarily the Western way is the way to go," explains Tchala. "You have to think within the culture that you're working with. It's possible you can destroy what you want to protect if you're not careful."

Expansion and the future

In the next three years, Musa intends to tighten the infrastructure and improve the lives of communities in six focus countries: Ghana, Mali, Ethiopia, Brazil, Indonesia and Cambodia. He also has plans to develop sustainability campuses in Ghana and Ethiopia with the help of local authorities such as the secretary of state and the tourism board in Ghana. So far, he has acquired a 7-acre plot of land in Ghana and a 4-acre plot in Ethiopia for the project. Supported by alternative energy – a biodiesel plant and solar

and wind energy – the campuses will comprise a free health clinic, lodging for business or leisure visitors, and a complete business office that will provide villagers with all they need to communicate with overseas contacts.

Alaffia is still a young endeavor, so for Tchala, his goals are to expand the market for their products and continue to provide financial stability for the producers in Togo. He is also hoping to introduce other indigenous products, such as hand-woven baskets, into their inventory.

Global Trading Network and Alaffia may sell different merchandise, but their underlying mission is similar: to practice fair trade and to encourage consumers to take an interest in where their products come from.

"The U.S. dollar has a significant impact on other countries which people don't realize," says Tchala. "I want people to think about how they spend their money." ■

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