

GIANT HEARTED

Working for Change



Olowo-n'djo Tchala, 39, who now stands well over 6 feet, used to sleep with seven siblings and his mother, Abiba Agbanga Tchala, in a room measuring just 8 by 10 feet.

Like many children in his village of Kaboli, in the African country of Togo, Tchala dropped out of school in the sixth grade and did farmwork to help his mother provide for the family. His father had several wives (polygamy is legal and widespread in Togo) and couldn't support all of his children. This background may be part of the reason Tchala, one of the most inspiring stories in the natural industry, is not your average businessman. But it's not the only reason.

Tchala is the co-founder of Alaffia, a Fair Trade-certified company that makes personal care and beauty products from indigenous West African resources, including shea nuts, coconuts, neem, and baobab.

Togo is a small, narrow nation bordered by Ghana to the west and Benin to the east. It is also the 11th poorest country in the world. Which is why Tchala chooses to pay the farming ▶▶

Alaffia founders Olowo-n'djo Tchala and Rose Hyde; 2014.

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Top Left: Maternal Health Project recipients; Kadambara, Togo, 2012. **Top Right:** Rose Hyde and Olowo-n'djo Tchala arrive at Alaffia Village; Sokodé, Togo, 2015. **Bottom Left:** Olowo-n'djo Tchala gives a bike to a student participating in the Bicycles for Education Project; Togo, 2010. **Bottom Right:** Students greet Alaffia founders Rose Hyde and Olowo-n'djo Tchala; Kaboli, Togo, 2015.

collectives there 15 to 25 percent more than market price on some materials, including shea nuts. The female workers in his Alaffia Shea Butter Cooperative handcraft the raw ingredients into shea butter using traditional methods used by the women of Togo for centuries. They, too, receive generous salaries—more than four times the average family income in Togo.

After the ingredients are made into finished skin and hair products at Alaffia's headquarters in Olympia, WA, Tchala keeps the prices affordable so that more Americans buy them. He figures that with the

increased demand, more women in Togo can stay employed and help support their families.

So far, his calculus has worked. Alaffia experiences double-digit growth each year, even while Tchala remains less concerned about profit than he is about human dignity, empowerment, and improving the lives of his people, the ones he left behind as a young man, the ones he can't forget.

"This is why we can't have investors," he explained. "At the end of the day, we have to compete in the market, but our priorities are different." Not your average business-

man, indeed.

"Making more money doesn't matter to us," said Tchala's wife, Prairie Rose Hyde, who cofounded Alaffia. What the couple is most interested in, she said, is reaching a place of equilibrium within the business that will allow them to focus on figuring out ways to help others do similar things in other places.

Empowering Change

Alaffia channels money back to Togolese villages to fund community empowerment and gender equality projects. ▶▶

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The need is staggering. African women have a one in 32 chance of dying in pregnancy or childbirth due to extreme poverty and inadequate infrastructure. In Togo, many clinics don't have electricity. Even hospitals can feel like abandoned buildings, said Tchala, without clean needles and gloves or proper material for stitches.

With Alaffia's help, more Togolese women and infants are surviving childbirth, fewer women are turning to prostitution for survival, and more children are able to finish their education.

Small World

In 1996, when Tchala was in his late teens, he was told that a young Peace Corps volunteer with long hair had arrived to teach sustainable farming methods. Tchala was soon smitten with "Rose"—who had already traveled several continents—in part because she seemed to know just about everything.

Hyde was raised on a small farm in rural Washington state. Despite her parents' being very poor, they were "smart, intelligent people whose world view was very big," she said. She had asked to be sent to Asia, but the Peace Corps apparently decided her agricultural and biology background as well as her physical strength would be most useful in Africa. Hyde, now 42, still remembers the day she stepped off the plane.

"This feels like this is where people are *supposed* to be," she said. She immediately felt comfortable there, a feeling that never left her.

When she met Tchala, she knew right away that he possessed a drive that made him different from those around him, who were not thinking beyond survival. She called her parents and told them: "I met this guy, and I don't think I can leave him here."



Shea butter cooperative member, Alaffia Village, Sokodé, Togo, 2015.

A Family Affair

The couple married in 1998, attended the University of California, Davis, and started a family. Tchala earned a bachelor of science degree in organizational studies with an emphasis on global economic systems. He wanted to understand what kept Togo so poor despite its resources.

His studies reinforced what he'd experienced as a child: Colonization (Togo was a colony of France until 1960) creates hopelessness and helplessness among the poor. He believed the way out was for his people to realize they had something valuable to offer the West. Both he and Hyde believed that a female-centric business using indigenous resources sustainably harvested and processed in traditional, nontoxic ways might be an answer.



Tchala talked about the idea so much with Hyde, who earned a master's degree in international agricultural development and ethnobotany, that she told him to start a business.

"My wife got tired of hearing me talk about it all the time," Tchala said, with his easy laugh. He asked a bank for the \$50,000 he needed to start the company but, unfamiliar with American banking practices, didn't understand why the bank

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—Olowo-n'djo Tchala

wouldn't give him the loan without personal financial assets. Hyde's older brother offered his house as collateral, allowing the young couple to launch their company in 2004.

Hyde jokes that Alaffia is their "middle child," as daughter Abi, 14, was born in 2002, and daughter Yemi is now 12. The company's first focus was shea butter products. Shea trees grow wild in Togo, needing no fertilization or irrigation. Hyde's botany background allowed her to formulate the company's personal care products. They called the business Alaffia, a traditional

Togolese greeting meaning a state of peace, health, and well-being.

Rock Star Status

Alaffia is now the largest employer in Central Togo aside from the government, helping to organize the country's collectives into functional systems and working with 7,000 people in 300 collectives across 42 ethnic groups. In addition to the Alaffia Shea Butter Cooperative, the company runs the Alaffia Coconut Cooperative in Togo.

Tchala is popular in his homeland, and is greeted in villages with singing, dancing, and celebrating. When he and Hyde return to Africa, the government sends armed guards—ostensibly to offer protection. Their presence also ensures that the government can keep tabs on Tchala as he meets with chiefs and religious leaders to discuss business. As a

respectful insider, Tchala works well with many of Togo's ethnic groups. He professes no interest in political leadership but considers Alaffia to have a political mission.

"We consider ourselves a political organization fighting a war on poverty," he said. "We're talking about fundamental human rights and making sure women don't die."

A Bright Future

To date, Alaffia has funded more than 4,000 births through its Maternal Health Project, providing prenatal and post-delivery care. The Alaffia Women's Clinic Project provides education on nutrition, family planning, and female genital mutilation, which, while outlawed, is still widely practiced in Togo, often in unsterile environments. The practice leads to lifelong reoccurring infections that endanger women's lives as well as the lives of children during childbirth.

Alaffia has built 10 schools and delivered more than 7,000 used bicycles so children no longer have to walk 10 miles to attend school. In rural Africa, fewer than 10 percent of high school-aged girls and only 16 percent of boys attend school, reports UNICEF. Of the Togolese children who have received bicycles, 95 percent have completed their education.

Despite their many efforts, Tchala and Hyde often feel the unrelenting reality of unmet needs. Tchala's mother recently told her son that she knows he carries a lot of weight on his shoulders, but that he can handle it. It is a duty, she said. It is no longer a job. That's your path in this lifetime, she told him. And there's not another choice. **TFL**

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