

**Akua Wood**

From Ghana to Sonning

By Linda Serck

How does a northern Ghanaian nut end up as a skin-care product in Sonning? We find out about the journey of a particular crop of shea nut and how a Berkshire fair trade company is helping to sustain an African community of women.

Akua Wood, a happy vivacious woman, sits in her little office in Sonning, surrounded by natural cosmetic pots and colourful African woven baskets. Four years ago she wouldn't have thought her extreme dry skin would

lead her to set up a small business. And little did she know that her skin condition would end up forging a link between a community of women in northern Ghana and the picture-postcard village of Sonning in Berkshire.

The link to all of this is the humble shea nut.

"I was looking for something to moisturise my skin," explains Mrs Wood, who set up shea butter Cottage two years ago. "I had used shea butter in Ghana as it doesn't irritate. I then decided to start importing it in small quantities for myself. Then I realised there was a market for this ingredient."

It is only recently that western cosmetic industry have discovered the benefits of shea butter, even though it has been a highly-prized natural ingredient and mainstay product in Africa for centuries. Shea butter has many different uses, from being a decongestant and an anti-inflammatory for sprains and arthritis, to cooking oil and lamp fuel. But it is its protective and emollient properties that are most valued for skin care. In northern Ghana, workers use shea butter to protect their skin from the sweltering heat as it also has natural sun-screen qualities.

Mrs Wood's cousin works with Fair Trade co-operatives in Ghana, and so was able to get in touch with a community of around 300 women who pick the nuts from the Karite tree, then dry, boil, process, crush and then churn the nuts into shea butter by hand.

**Harvested shea nuts**

"Coming from what people would describe as a third world country," said Mrs Wood, "it's hard to get the money directly to the women." The co-operative spend around 20 to 30 hours to produce one kilogram of handcrafted shea butter. Fair Trade ensures that the women receive a fair price for their product and in turn helps to sustain the community.

Mrs Wood imports the unrefined shea butter, paying the women in Cedis (Ghanaian currency), and now the Ghanaian product inhabits

the shelves of her office.

Mrs Wood's customers who regularly use shea butter notice softer, smoother and rejuvenated skin. Shea butter has also been shown to help with eczema, dermatitis, stretch marks and skin allergies.

**Unrefined shea butter****Akua Wood in her office in Sonning**

"I don't like to label it as a miracle product but quite a few customers came back to me to say that shea butter really made a difference", said Mrs Wood, who herself is a walking example of the benefits of the product - her skin is now healthy and she looks young for 36.

Mrs Wood, who lives in Caversham, is now heading back to Ghana in April thanks to the shea nut. She's not only going to visit the women from the co-operative, but she is even going to help them harvest the nut. "I'm really looking forward to it," she beams. Little wonder, the nut from her home country has transformed her life and well-being in Berkshire.