

CHOC TACTICS

Much of Africa's cocoa production is synonymous with child labour and poverty. Not at Kuapa Kokoo. This Ghanaian co-operative owns almost half of the London-based Divine Chocolate company, and business is booming. Rose Skelton pays them a visit. Photography by Aubrey Wade

With dusk falling under a perfectly full moon, the village of Bayerebon 3, in the remote western region of Ghana, is nowhere near sleeping.

Smoke rises from cooking fires, logs crackle and spit from the clay fireplaces tucked in the side of every mud-brick house, and there is the bustle of activity as corn is fetched from the storehouses, cassava and yam is pounded in furious strokes and people, everywhere, chatter. The unmistakable smell of fermenting cocoa beans, an ever-present hot alcoholic steam, rises off the rows and rows of brown seeds that are turned, and turned again, until they have reached perfection. Before night falls, in this village without running water or electricity, the jobs of the day must be completed.

Elias Mohammed, a slender man with sun-darkened skin glowing under a tattered skullcap, sits at a desk on the porch of his cracked concrete home. Beside him are the weighing scales of his trade, and behind him, stacks of hessian sacks containing the crop that is the blood and soul of this small farming community. A cocoa farmer from one of the smallholdings near the village has just delivered, by hand, his crop of cocoa beans for Elias to weigh, check for quality and size, and then pay for.

Elias, and the farmer delivering his cocoa, are members of the cocoa co-operative, Kuapa Kokoo, which is also a major stakeholder in the

London-based Divine Chocolate Company. Elias is the village Recorder, a democratically elected member of the co-operative charged with paying for its members' cocoa. Despite still living without basic amenities, and working his two-and-a-half-acre plot of land with nothing much more than a machete, Elias has the air of a rich and content man.

"Kuapa Kokoo belongs to the farmers," he says proudly with a smile, in his slightly old-fashioned, broken English. "They do not attend school so they cannot do the office work. That is why having English people working for us is good! They represent us and get a good premium for the cocoa, and they established the chocolate factory that belongs to the farmers too. I hear they have offices in London and America too. When I go there, I will go and visit them."

These are not wild fantasies. Kuapa Kokoo, or "Good Cocoa Farmers Company", is a co-operative that is run by, and works for, Ghanaian cocoa farmers. It was set up in 1993 to protect farmers during the liberalisation of the cocoa market that took place in the early 1990s, and now has 45,000 members across 1,650 farming communities. It has a National Executive Council, as well as a council of elected members in each of the co-op's villages – all farmers – who attend AGMs once a year in Ghana and many of whom travel to the UK to meet their European counterparts.

In order to take their share in the added value of the chocolate that Kuapa's beans go to produce, the Divine Chocolate Company was founded in 1998 with the help of The Body

Shop and other charitable organisations. Kuapa now owns a 45 per cent share in the company, which turned over £10m last year and is set to grow by a further 20 per cent next year. Because Kuapa is itself owned by the people who work for it, farmers such as Elias are all stakeholders, albeit of tiny proportions, who receive annual dividends. For the first time and on a large scale, workers from the African cocoa industry, which is more often than not synonymous with child labour and extreme poverty, are the ones sitting on the board, and deciding where to plough the profits. It is capitalism turned on its head.

"We regard our greatest achievement as being the creation of a company which it was possible for farmers to own although they did not have the capital to launch it," says Sophi Tranchell, managing director of Divine Chocolate. "In the year to 30 September 2006, Divine Chocolate had pre-tax profits of £611,000. The 45 per cent the Kuapa Kokoo Farmers Union owns is now worth a considerable amount."

Last year, Divine made its first profit, and more than £47,000 in dividends was paid to Kuapa Kokoo. Half of the money, the board decided, was to be paid into the Farmer's Trust which invests the money in social projects like schools and wells for member villages. The other half was paid in cash.

"We each got around one dollar," says Elias laughing at the memory of being paid his share in the company profits. "We pray for them to bring us three dollars next year, then we can really enjoy it."

Dora Arthur, a woman in her sixties who →

Aminatu Kasim with cocoa pods from her plot. She belongs to a women's association that was set up with a loan and training from Kuapa Kokoo



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wraps a green cloth around her chest as she doubles over to grind spices and home-grown tomatoes in a clay mortar, talks earnestly about her involvement in Kuapa Kokoo's women's association, which runs its own small commercial farm. It was set up by the women, with a loan and training from Kuapa, to create a fund that could be drawn on, and to develop trade activities away from cocoa.

"It is a real comfort being a part of this association," Dora says, looking up from her grinding. "We can take out loans to pay the children's school fees. Without it, I know we would get by, we would make that extra effort, work harder on the farm, but the pressure is too much on us. With these loans, we're not forced to push ourselves beyond our capabilities."

It is hard to imagine anyone working harder than Dora or the other members of the women's association. But this is a cocoa-farming village, and it is hard to imagine another industry that requires as much backbreaking, gruelling physical labour as this one. From sunrise at six until sunset 12 hours later, men, women and children walk miles through thick forest to their family plots of

land to tend to the cocoa trees which bring them their livelihood and bring the rest of the world, the consumers, some of the best cocoa in the world. If all goes well, they, like the hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians who work in the cocoa industry, will earn a few hundred dollars each a year.

"Pa pa paa!" sing some of Dora's farming comrades, greeting each other with Kuapa's catchphrase meaning, "the best of the best of the best."

"There are 11 women in our group," explain Aminatu Kasim and Ama Kaa, the vice-president of the group. "We put the money we earn from the farm into the credit union and then use that money for other trading activities, like soap-making. Kuapa taught us how to develop good savings habits and be prudent with our money from the farm. They taught us how to re-invest the proceeds and not to spend all the profit."

Aminatu, whose cheeks are marked with scar patterns, says that the association has regular meetings where they discuss activities and how to spread the message of Kuapa.

"Before Kuapa, there was no women's group in the village and even now it is the only →

Co-operative members spread out cocoa beans to dry in the sun



DIVINE CHOCOLATE

women's association. When we meet our male counterparts, we can express our opinions confidently; we are not shy anymore. We feel in control and enlightened!" she says, her soft youthful face breaking into a glorious smile in the late afternoon sun. "Woma ama yen ani ate," she says in her mother tongue, Twi. "They have opened our eyes."

A fine morning mist hangs over the rainforest surrounding Bayerebon 3, and the warm damp smell of grass fills the air as two boys walk the few miles through the dense foliage of their grandfather's farm to get to the village school. They wear jeans and T-shirts for the forest part of their journey, changing into their brown and cream school clothes once they reach a neighbouring village, so as not to dirty their uniforms.

By the time Isaac Owusu arrives at school at 8.30am, he has swept the mud house and courtyard of his four-house "village", chopped and boiled yam for his grandparents' breakfasts, and washed the dishes with water drawn from the well. Isaac is only 14 but he already speaks almost perfect English.

"School is very fine," he says of the village secondary school, which was built partly with Kuapa funds. "When my grandfather sends his cocoa to Kuapa, we get a fair price and bonuses which we use to buy pens, erasers and books. The other cocoa companies don't pay bonuses so the farmers' kids don't have money to buy food or pay school fees."

The UK is Europe's biggest consumer of chocolate. Its chocolate market is worth £3.6bn, and the majority of the beans it consumes come from Ghana, the world's

second-largest cocoa producer. Without Ghana's smallholding cocoa farmers, Britain's chocolate industry would be on its knees. Three per cent of the cocoa beans that Kuapa sells is on the Fairtrade market, which means that farmers are assured a minimum price for their cocoa plus a social premium of US\$150 a tonne on top of that. Despite being a small proportion, more than US\$170,000 was paid to the Kuapa Kokoo Farmers Trust last year, which went to building schools like the one at Bayerebon 3.

But the school is about the village's only luxury. When Isaac gets home in the afternoon, he cooks and cleans again and then reads and studies until sundown. When darkness falls, and invariably with it the tropical rain that lashes the sides of his family's two-room cracked mud house, he carries on studying by the light of a lantern. When someone from his family gets sick, they gather leaves from the forest, grind them on a marble stone and apply them to the body; there are no pharmacies in the village.

Isaac's grandfather, along with Elias and 10 of their farming friends, sit around a vast pile of golden cocoa pods deep in the forest as the sun forces itself through the dense foliage of the cocoa trees. Perched on wedges of palm tree, they use machetes to split the pods, scoop the seeds out and lay them on freshly cut palm fronds to begin the week-long fermenting process.

"Today we come to this man's farm," says James Arthur, an ex-teacher who took up farming in his retirement. "We all help him here, and then tomorrow we go to another →

Right: 14-year-old Isaac Owusu at the village school, which was partly built using Kuapa funds. Below left: Elias Mohammed, the village's Recorder, who weighs the beans and checks them for quality



'Kuapa Kokoo belongs to the farmers,' says Elias Mohammed. 'They do not attend school so they cannot do the office work. That is why having English people working for us is good!'





Above: children playing football in the village. Left: loading bags of cocoa beans, which weigh 62.5kg each, on to the Kuapa Kokoo lorry



man's farm and help him." As the work co-operative, a natural part of this village's life, sit around chatting, they discuss animatedly what they saw at another man's farm the day before.

"The cocoa was black-black-black," says Elias, pointing with his machete at the man's imaginary ruined fruit. "He left it on the tree for too long and now the poverty will catch him. He will have to go to the moneylender, who will give him money at 100 per cent interest. If he was with Kuapa, he could go to the credit union."

For the majority, losing a whole season's crop means that if heavy rains bring a roof down, there is no money to fix it. If a woman becomes pregnant, there is no money for her to give birth in the hospital. There is no school, no clothes, and no capital to invest into next season's crop. It is why Ghanaians are living, on average, 20 years less than the British.

In Bayerebon 3, a family of eight live on \$100 a month (one child's secondary school fees cost half of that), medicine still comes from traditional forest remedies and farmers work in the forest sometimes barefooted, yet this is a community which has managed to work together to form something extraordinary. It

still keeps Wednesdays as its communal work day, when the whole village stops to work on a community project, and it still struggles to educate its children.

"I know that education is the best thing," says Elias, who himself had very little formal education. "Kuapa advises the farmers to send their children to school. If my son passes his exams he will go to university. If not, I will make him repeat the subjects he failed."

Most families in the co-op take out loans from Kuapa to pay school fees, which they can pay back when the cocoa harvest comes in. "Before," explains Elias, "the head teacher would send the children home to collect the school fees, but because there is no cocoa during July to September, I couldn't pay them. Now I can get a loan at 3 per cent interest."

Democracy, honesty, transparency, economic justice? Is it all too good to be true? "At the end of the day, the farmer is benefiting," says the managing director of Kuapa Kokoo, Kwabena Ohemeng-Tinyase. "And if farmers can talk about owning a 45 per cent share in a British company, it is the talk of the town!"

www.divinechocolate.com, www.papapaa.org