

Shipping to Make a Difference

Finlays support in shipping tea to the US is helping the Pennsylvania-based Ajiri Tea Company to make a real and lasting difference in several rural communities in western Kenya. Co-founder Sara Holby describes life in one of these villages. *Ajiri* means 'to employ'.



Yunes feeding grass to one of her new cows



The labels, all different, are small works of art, handmade, using dried bark from banana trees.

The piki-pikis (motorbikes) swerve sharply to stay on the narrow vein of tarmac, avoiding the sharp drop into potholes on either side. Finally, the tarmac ends and the dirt road begins.

The red dirt is flecked with white bits of the soapstone that provides much of the work for men in this region of Kisii, in western Kenya. A few kilometers down the road, past schoolchildren running home for lunch and women selling sugarcane and vegetables, is the small village of Nyagichenche. There is no sign, nothing to mark Nyagichenche other than the small cluster of mud huts surrounded by carefully tended farms and tethered cows grazing. Not even the power lines take note of Nyagichenche, passing directly above but not stopping at a single home.

Paying jobs are scarce for women in Nyagichenche. While most of the working men in the village quarry and carve soapstone, women are employed only occasionally to polish the carvings. Two years ago the Ajiri Tea Company began working with these women to create a sustainable cycle of employment and education. Today Ajiri Tea employs 63 women in five different women's groups in the area to handcraft labels for each box of tea. The women use dried bark from banana trees to create each label, and each one is a small work of art, showing different scenes of Kenyan life.

Yunes, a widow, was one of the first women to work with Ajiri Tea. She used her initial earnings to send her two children to an academy school, a privately run school that offers a good education. Then, she rented land for farming. She now has a small field of sugarcane, a field of maize, and another field of Napier grass. She sells the sugarcane for cash, uses the maize to feed her family, and cuts the grass to feed her newly purchased cows. She works on her farm all morning and, in the late afternoon, joins the other women from her village to make labels for Ajiri

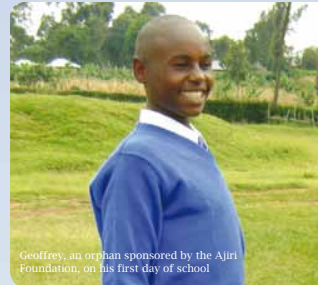
Tea. Sitting in her new armchair in her home, she says, "I never had seats in my house. Now, through the earnings I get every month from Ajiri, I have managed to do a lot of good things by myself." Many of these women, like Yunes, have reinvested their earnings back into their families and farms.

All profits from sales of Ajiri Tea are donated to the Ajiri Foundation to pay school fees for orphans in this area. HIV/AIDS has left more than 1.2 million orphans in Kenya, who are mostly cared for by family members. For many families, school fees present an insurmountable obstacle. The Ajiri Foundation purchases the school books, uniforms, and shoes for primary school students, and sponsors secondary school students by paying boarding school fees, exam fees, and purchasing books, uniforms, and many school supplies (including a mattress, a basin to store water, another for washing clothes, and toilet paper). This year the women selected a total of 19 students - seven in high school and 12 in primary school - to be sponsored by the Ajiri Foundation.

John is one of the orphans selected by the women from Nyagichenche. Last week John returned home to his village for spring break. John is in boarding school in Form II (10th grade). His father died from pneumonia when John was four years old, leaving John's mother as the sole carer for their five children. In John's backpack is a slightly crumpled report card with a below-average grade in maths. Walking through the middle of the village, he is surprised to see the women in their new workshop, built by pooling a few shillings apiece each week from their Ajiri earnings. In the shade of the workshop, the women are chatting and making labels. One of them spies John and calls him over. One by one, they examine his report card, and noticing his poor maths score, instruct him to work harder. As a group, these women selected John to be sponsored and now, as a group, they try to ensure that he performs well in school.

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Sara Holby



Geoffrey, an orphan sponsored by the Ajiri Foundation, on his first day of school



Above: Diana and her grandparents

Eleven-year-old Diana is in Class 5, and lives with her grandparents on the outskirts of Kisii Town. Across a rickety wooden footbridge and behind a rusty metal gate, the rows of homes are packed tightly together. Diana lives in the house with the bright blue door. She is shy, but always smiling and eager to tell what she's learned in school. Diana was born HIV+, and both of her parents died from AIDS when she was young. Now, Diana's grandparents financially support Diana and their 13 other grandchildren whose parents also died of AIDS. Though Diana sometimes has to miss school because she's feeling unwell, she performs at the top of her class each term. The Ajiri Foundation pays for her school uniform, books, shoes, a school bag and some toiletries. This helps to relieve some of the financial burden from her grandparents, who are then able to make sure that she eats quality food and has access to her necessary medications.

Finlays plays an important role in this cycle of employment and education in Nyagichenche and in other small villages in the area. Finlays ships the tea to the U.S. for Ajiri Tea. As a tiny company with a specialty product, Ajiri Tea's costs for shipment would be substantial. The less money and time spent on shipping, the more money Ajiri Tea has to donate to the Ajiri Foundation. Finlays' support is helping Ajiri Tea and the women to make a real and lasting difference in their rural communities.

For more information, please visit www.ajiritea.com and www.ajirifoundation.org.



Below: Rael, a member of the women's group in Nyagichenche sitting on new furniture purchased with money earned through Ajiri