

A mighty vision for Baobab

By Heike Pander

Baobab fruit from Africa has great potential as an income provider for rural people and as a health booster. The last years have seen an increase in demand for the fruit powder. Word is spreading fast about the health benefits of the fruit from the ancient and outstanding tree. The personal interview with Andrew Hunt (AH) below outlines the winding path of how he as a founder of Aduna in London made his vision for baobab come true.

HP: When and where did you see your first baobab?

AH: That would be in the Gambia. That's where I lived for three and a half years. Actually, I think before I knowingly saw a baobab tree I started drinking baobab juice. They make a traditional drink in Senegal and the Gambia which is served at naming ceremonies, weddings and any kind of family event. If you don't have baobab juice ready you'd be frowned upon. When I went to Gambia within the first day or two I was given baobab juice. I was living close to the beach. There were a lot of fruit shacks serving juices and smoothies to people and one of the fruits they would have was baobab. So it became kind of my favourite drink. Before I had even seen the tree.

HP: What did you think when you saw the first Baobab?

AH: Well, they are amazing trees. They are a prehistoric species and they look like that. And they look a little bit scary.

HP: Why is that?

AH: It is their demeanour. They have got that kind of gnarled bark at their trunk and spiky dry branches – they make a very striking silhouette. But then – the more you learn about them you realize that they are not scary – they are friendly.

HP: From the baobab areas you know – do you have a favourite area and maybe even know a special tree?

AH: My favourite baobab area is in the Gambia – not where we source our baobab from – but it is a village called Njawara. It is a very special village to me because I worked very closely with that community on a lot of different projects and in fact my team in Gambia came from Njawara. When I think of baobab that is where it takes me back to. In fact, the village was visited by the queen many years ago.

HP: What makes the baobab really special for you?

AH: It is this prehistoric sacred life giving tree and it is truly unique. When we do sampling and demos and I talk to people about baobab I always talk about the tree because to understand the child you have to look at the parent. The tree is a drought resistant and highly adapted species to survive in the savannah and the fruit is part of that adaptation. It is this extraordinary majestic iconic prehistoric special tree and there is nothing else quite like it. And really the fact that it has such a great potential and possibility for rural Africa. For communities. There is no such thing as a baobab plantation – all these trees are family owned and community owned. And they are already a source of life and they can be more to continue to play that role in a commercial world. And in a global commercial world these trees are a source of income and revenue for families.

HP: What were the reasons for you to be in "baobab-country" at all?

AH: That goes back a few years. I started off my career working in the advertising industry in London for big multi-national companies a long way from baobab country promoting products that I either didn't care about or actively disagreed with – like frozen ready meals. I was turning 24 and asking myself 'what am I doing with my life?' That questioning turned into an existential crisis. Nothing I tried in my desperation made a difference.

HP: What helped you out of it?

AH: One day I got a phone call from a family friend. He is a farmer in the UK and South Africa and offered me this opportunity to volunteer my marketing skills to projects in the Gambia. I had never been to Sub-Saharan Africa before. I wasn't really that interested in going but fortunately for me my friends and family put me on the aeroplane. I arrived in the Gambia which is known as the "smiling coast of Africa" – clinically depressed. The extraordinary thing is that after just 3 weeks arriving in the Gambia I came back to life and so instead of staying for the original six weeks I would be staying for three and a half years working with small scale producers with fruits and vegetables.

HP: Where did the baobab come in?

AH: At that time I was focused mainly on fresh produce fruits and vegetables and baobab was something I enjoyed personally. My Senegalese "Mom" who looked after me while I was in Gambia used to make baobab juice every week and leave it in my fridge for me. I used to mix it into my protein smoothies and that is how I got into baobab. It wasn't really into years later back in the UK when I developed the idea to do business with baobab. I did my MBA because I was interested to see how we could scale up the impact we were having with our activities in the Gambia and make it sustainable. I could see the direct impact the money had for the people we worked with. If we sold a lot of tomatoes or cabbages I could go back to those same communities two or three weeks later and the kids who were not in school were now in school. Or a household had built an extra room to that house and the whole family did not have to sleep in the same bed any more. So you could see the impact immediately. And that felt really good.

HP: Why did you go for a business model rather than engage in development work?

AH: I witnessed a lot of failed NGO-Projects. Immediately after my MBA I was offered a consulting job by the World Bank because I had somehow become the leading expert on horticulture and agro schemes in Gambia. I was to look at the potential for commercialising the wasted mango crop in Gambia and Senegal. I got very deep into that and because of my background with consumer products I started thinking about how to turn this mango crop into a consumer product. The quality was not good enough to sell as raw materials for the market. But what if we used it ourselves to make a consumer product and what could we put into that to make the product uniquely African? And that is where I started thinking more about baobab. So I went on a mission to the Baobab Fruit Company of Senegal who were at that time the first to professionally process and export baobab from Africa. I met them to learn more about baobab and when I started to hear of the nutritional values I thought it is an extraordinary chance. I ended up working with them for 6 months doing my baobab apprenticeship.

HP: Where did the baobab journey take you from there?

AH: I eventually met my co-founder Nick Salter. He was exploring the baobab opportunities independently and we started brainstorming together on how to take this fruit and scale it up to a billion dollar industry for Africa – which has the potential to be that. And eventually that led to the creation of Aduna.

HP: Now that you have seen the development with the baobab fruit – what do you think of it today?

AH: When Nick and I first started brainstorming it was after baobab was already given its novel food status and that happened in 2008/2009. But originally after that there was no progress in the market and one would think that once it was allowed in Europe that the market would just grow automatically but that is not the case. We diagnosed a vicious circle of obscurity. There was zero consumer awareness due to its lack of product development and it was not in anything that you can buy and then zero product development due to lack of consumer awareness. It did not make sense to produce a product saying "baobab" on it because nobody knows what it is. The only way that that is going to be broken is through investment in education and awareness building and that was the role we realized. Our business model is about demand creation. There is no demand for products that no one has ever heard of. The question was 'does the potential market size for baobab equal the potential market size that you are going to create?'

HP: So how did you go about "making baobab famous"?

AH: Before we started it was very difficult for us to get 'on the shelf' in the UK because there had already been a couple of baobab products that people had tried on the shelves but they had not supported their marketing and those products were still unsold when we were trying to launch ours. You could see that the packaging had gone yellow and the products had met their expiry date. The product was just not selling. We have taken a leadership role in marketing baobab not just in the UK but internationally. We have done shows all over the world promoting baobab with a lot of focus, creativity and chutzpa as well. That has made a serious impact and last year we had Marks & Spencer, Amazon and others launch products with baobab named ingredients on the front – that would never have happened a few years ago. That's because we created a health trend here in London and we took it from being vaguely obscure to being the bestselling super food in the leading healthy retailers in London. We have done a 'make baobab famous' campaign nationwide across the UK – we went on display basically everywhere.

HP: How does your work affect other baobab entrepreneurs?

AH: We had reports from Phytotrade - we are not a member because we are in West Africa - but we are 'brothers in arms' in our mission to make baobab famous. They reported back to us that all the producers at their last annual general meeting reported a significant increase of orders and enquiries for baobab after we ran our 'pitch to rich' and 'make baobab famous' campaign. So what we are doing is not only for us – it is the entire market. There is a lot more people producing baobab and there is a lot more products with baobab in it. In 2010 you could count the products and put them on one power point slide and today there are hundreds of products that have baobab in – so that is very positive. But we are still only scratching surface and the job is not done until we see 'Snickers with baobab'.

HP: How much baobab are we talking about?

AH: It is so difficult to know – but back when we started there were only two significant producers of baobab which is Malawi Tree Crops and Baobab Fruit Company in Senegal. And they were probably doing 100 Tons of baobab. Now there must be at least 5 or 6 producers but I could not put an accurate figure on it at the moment. With our company we have tripled our production in Northern Ghana where we work directly in partnership with community organisations to harvest, collect and process the baobab powder. The figures from last season to this season went from 50 tons to 150 tons – that is raw materials and not finished products. All goes into our consumer product since we do not sell in bulk.

HP: What happens to the 'resource baobab' once demand on baobab fruit increases? Does your company plan to engage in ecological protection or do you leave that to the producers in Ghana?

AH: It is something that we plan to do. We are still a tiny little start-up with limited resources. We recognize the need to look at propagation of new trees as well as domestication of the trees. At the moment a tree could take between 20 to 200 years to produce fruit at given estimates. Work has been done on domesticating and we have been in contact with a professor who believes that he can create a baobab fruiting tree in three to five years. That work - the sustainability in the industry - needs to be considered alongside. We are actively looking for funding for that piece of work. It is more of a development project that needs to be set alongside the commercial project to ensure that the trees continue to be propagated and looked after to ensure long term sustainability of the species.

HP: Do you have a personal motto or something that motivates you?

AH: I don't have a personal motto I have a favourite quote which is attributed to Goethe. It says "whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius and magic in it."

HP: I thought you would say something like 'making baobab famous' as your vision.

AH: Well, that is part of it, isn't it? It is about creating possibilities that inspire you and then taking actions consistent with the possibilities becoming realities and that is what we have done with baobab – we have created the possibility of baobab as an industry for Africa and we have put it out there. We are taking actions today that are consistent with seeing that becoming a reality. But there are many possibilities that can be created and that is not just baobab as an industry model – small possibilities and big possibilities. But the main thing is they should be inspiring.