

Shea can contribute to food sovereignty

Shea butter (or *karité*) is used in pomades and other cosmetic and pharmaceutical products worldwide. In Ghana, women use it as a cooking oil, for moistening their babies' skins and for their hair. Children love the fruits. Shea is a wonder product, also for the household economy.

Samuel Apiiga remembers well how his mother and her friends used to go into the bush around Bolgatanga to collect shea fruits. They always went together, as they were too afraid of snakes. As a boy, he loved to eat the pulp of the ripe fruits. The nuts inside were cracked, grounded and the oil extracted to process shea butter. The product was highly appreciated in rural areas, for harvesting of the fruits coincided with the hunger period, when food stocks were depleted after a long dry season and new crops were still not harvested. Actually, this situation is much the same today. In his work as agrarian advisor for the Ghanaian Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Apiiga now supports widows' groups in the Upper East region of northern Ghana, who collect and process shea nuts.



Photo: Kenneth Yussif

From nut to paste to butter.

the trees. Because of the long period it takes before flowering, women do not actively plant shea trees on their own fields.

A woman can harvest on average about 200-500 fruits a day. Shea butter is sold by women in the region to get cash to buy food and clothes, and pay school fees and medical bills. The butter is also used as a cooking oil and pomade, as well as for medical and spiritual purposes. Most rural women earn much of their annual income from picking the fruit, processing the nuts and selling the butter. There is huge export potential for the butter to the European Union, America and other African countries, where it is used in pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. The only known exporter of shea butter in Ghana is Kasaghan Industries in Tamale.

The shea tree is a very important tree, particularly for poor rural women. The monopolistic Kasaghan Industries, however, puts women in a vulnerable position. Traders come and buy shea nuts from the women just at the time they most need money to buy food, just before the time to harvest new crops. Moreover, shea trees are declining in number due to bush fires and tree felling for firewood and making charcoal. To safeguard the role of the shea tree in reducing poverty among poor rural women, marketing of the butter should be improved and women's capacities for organisation and negotiation strengthened. (MV)

Profit for all

Oxfam Novib and SNV-Ghana organised a multi-stakeholder meeting on 10 July 2009 in Wa, to set the pace for co-ordinated action in the Ghanaian shea industry. More than 50 participants in the sector esteemed shea to be a high-potential cash crop, considering that already 95 percent of the rural families (or 600 000 women) in northern Ghana derive their livelihoods from it. Shea contributes to the Ghanaian economy with an annual export worth 33 million dollars. Participants urged the government to give the shea sector the same level of support (for research, extension services and farmers' organisations) as other sectors have received, such as cocoa (www.ghanabusinessnews.com).

Good climate for the tree

Shea trees in this area are native trees, which have not been intentionally planted or cultivated by farmers, like the baobab and tamarindus. Some grow on cultivated farmlands and are owned by the farmers. The shea tree thrives best in the Sahelian Guinea savanna and in the transitional ecological zones of the Upper East, Upper West, Northern and some parts of Brong Ahafo regions of Ghana. It can survive on a minimal annual rainfall of about 400-500 mm, with temperatures of about 30 to 45 °C and a relative humidity of less than 10 percent. The tree is therefore drought tolerant, which explains its abundance in northern Ghana. The tree also does well in poor soil, where there is less than 5 percent organic matter.

The shea tree needs a long period (about 15 years after planting) before it starts flowering and giving fruits. Attempts to reduce this growing period by budding or grafting have not been successful. The tree flowers around January-April and fruits are ready for picking or harvesting between May and July.

Good product for the household

In the area where Apiiga works, each district has five women's groups who pick and harvest the shea fruits. Usually, they collect the fruit from trees on communal land and do not own

How to make butter in the bush

1. Sort and pick the sheanuts
2. Wash the sheanuts and dry them
3. Pound them roughly in a mortar
4. Roast the pieces
5. Pound them again
6. Grind the chocolate-coloured sludge on a stone
7. Gradually add cold water to the smooth paste and cool
8. Add small quantities of hot water
9. Add cold water in greater quantities as the mixtures lightens
10. Remove the gray mass (butter) that rises to the surface and heat this up
11. Skim off the white foam. The butter will be left at the bottom

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See our blog, where we highlight an interesting film on shea butter production in Burkina Faso. More information can also found be found at www.sheabutter.com