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## The Shea Butter Economy: Big Money and Exploitation



Photo courtesy of Rahama Wright

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Shea Butter is coveted by global cosmetic companies for its amazing moisturizing properties. As an increasingly sought after ingredient in everything from soothing and nourishing hair and skin care products to lip balms and exfoliating creams - the benefits of shea butter are in high demand across the globe.

The connotation of shea butter however is drastically different among the women of sub-Saharan Africa who harvest the nut of the Karite tree, from which shea butter originates. They are among the 1.2 billion people that live in extreme poverty. That equals one out of every five people on the planet living on less than a dollar a day.

To them shea butter is deemed as "Women's Gold" for the few extra dollars its yield affords. For in this region it is the women who manually collect, sort, crush, roast, grind, separate the oils from the butter and shape the finished product. It's all done during the scorching late spring early summer arid heat of the savanna. All done with the majority sold at "so-called" fair trade prices.

The contradictions of distribution

Processing of shea nuts often takes place within local cooperatives where between 100 to 800 women work every season. Cooperatives are mainly operated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or are small local businesses. The women employed via the cooperative either sell the nuts they collected from the communal lands where the Karite Tree grows or they process them into unrefined shea butter. It takes three kilos of shea nuts to create one kilo of shea butter (1kg equals 2.2 pounds).

Shea processing takes two routes. The raw nuts are sold to Asian oil companies in bulk who extract, refine and sell the oil to Europe for cosmetic purposes. Whereas unrefined shea butter is locally processed, certified organic, graded for purity then pushed onto the world market by upper level distributors. In both scenarios a hefty markup is added with none of the profits trickle down.

"Poverty pimps, that's all many NGOs really are," stated Dr. Samuel Hunter of the American Shea Butter Institute. "They claim that they are in the villages to help the people when in actuality their application of fair trade versus a living wage is often the biggest enabler of poverty for the women throughout this region."

The money generated from shea butter production is desperately needed. It pays for food, clothing, child school fees and the like; therefore fair trade compensation equates survival. But have no doubt, the women recognize based on its many uses throughout the generations that shea butter is a precious substance. They, as Dr. Hunter stressed just lack the resources to produce a superior product on their own that can be traded on the world market.

As a physician, biochemist and the founder/executive director of ASBI established in the early 90s, his organization provides organic certification, product testing and research concerning the benefits and various uses for unrefined shea butter - that from extraction has a shelf life of less than three years.

Shea butter's commercial value, Hunter explained, stems from its high bioactive fraction of six. This number distinguishes it from all other oils that merely coat the skin verses being absorbed. Unrefined shea butter is graded from A - F with "A" representing the highest active ingredients such as pro-vitamin A, K, vitamin E, fatty acids, triterpenes and anti-inflammatory agents that aid in the relief of various skin ailments.

In a nutshell, this is why shea butter is a global multi-million dollar industry. Last year an estimated 150,000 tons was exported with up to 23% of the total exports consumed by cosmetic companies. The women who collect the shea nut as part of their subsistent life are not completely naïve, but are unaware of its true market worth. This naiveté results in a continued undervaluing of the product, blind acceptance of pennies on the dollar and circuit poverty.

Learn the market or lose the market

Rahama Wright, founder of Shea Yeleen International, Inc knows full well the importance of teaching the sub-Saharan women involved in shea butter production how to learn and set the market instead of chasing it. She was first introduced to the product while an intern at the American Embassy in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Driven by her experiences and the inequalities she witness in the shea butter trade she launched Shea Yeleen in 2005.

Shea Yeleen promotes empowerment among women in rural West Africa by teaching them sustainable economic development through organizing and training women owned cooperatives to produce, market, and sell high quality shea butter themselves. "There are definitely a lot of brokers happy that women are making direct linkages with the distribution of shea from their production," said Wrihy. "We try to make women feel their own economic structure. One way is through teaching them the market so they know the real value of their product."



Some complain that Shea Yeleen is driving up local prices through their initiatives, Wrihy contends their efforts are actually leveling the playing field. Shea Yeleen works with women in cooperatives in Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali. Currently they are also working on prototypes to try and help automate some of the grueling work involved in shea butter production.

A process Devin Hibbard, co-founder of Beads for Life is well aware of. Her organization, founded in 2004 strives to lift women and their families in East Africa out of extreme poverty. BFL's initial income generating program stemmed from the sale of colorful, decorative paper beads crafted by women in sub-Saharan Africa and sold at bead parties worldwide.

BFL's latest initiative - shea butter production - started in early 2010 after much planning. Their Uganda cooperative employees 750 women who are trained to be self sufficient in the production of shea butter. BFL offers an array of shea butter based products with the majority of profits rolled back into local initiatives.

"We do all of our sales directly - either via our branded products of soap/body butter, lip balm, or our pure raw butter to cosmetics companies large and small," asserted Hibbard. "We don't currently work with a broker or agent."

Cooperative members are paid based on the total usable weight of nuts they collect. Hibbard says woman normally bring between 100 - 200 kilos during a three months period (June through August). BFL pays about 10 percent more than the local market weight. "We are not fair trade certified," she said. "Our mission at the end of the day is helping women escape poverty and our products are just a vehicle to help women do that."

The breakdown

Only the import of refined shea butter into the U.S. is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. This results in consumers never quite knowing what they are purchasing. Companies can make any claim without fear of retribution - even that they have "Super Grade A" unrefined shea butter when in actuality their product may be rancid.

"I feel like shea has gotten so main stream that people really don't know that much about it. A lot of people are relying on old wives tails about what it can do," said Wrihy. "That why it is so important to give a voice and visibility to shea producers and the actual benefits of the product."

This systemic lack of knowledge is bound to get worse before it gets better. Since the May 2000 signing of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which is like NAFTA for the continent of Africa, the worldwide export of unrefined shea butter has increased from an estimated 8000 to 150,000 tons per year.

As a component of The Trade and Development Act, AGOA provides tangible incentives for African countries to increase their efforts to promote open economic development, business investment and build free markets. The Obama administration plans to reauthorize AGOA which is set to expire in 2015, through 2025.

So next time you reach for a beauty product take a moment to browse the ingredients for Vitellaria, Nilotica, or Paradoxa - the chemical names for shea butter, and ask yourself: Whose getting your money, what are you getting in return and how does your purchase aid the actual producers. These answers are critical - for the quest for beauty has ramifications that are more than skin deep.

## Comments

Anonymous

Posted Jan 8 2012

Last papagraph... The question should begin Who's getting...not Whose.... the author needs to improve his English skills....

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New America Media, 209 9th Street, Suite 200, San Francisco, CA 94103

