

5 Sheanut



Crop type

The sheanut tree *Butyrospermum parkii* (or *Vitellaria paradoxa*) is native to Africa, occurring across the Sahel region from Senegal to Nigeria and further east in Sudan and Uganda. In francophone West Africa it is known as karité. The tree is a large and treasured species, not unlike oak in general appearance, providing the primary edible vegetable fat to people inhabiting an estimated 1 million km² of dry savannah lands. The green fruit consists of a thin pulp surrounding a large, oil-rich seed from which shea butter can be extracted. To obtain the butter, the pulp is removed and the nut shelled and crushed, using a mortar and pestle. The seed is then roasted and ground or pressed to extract the oils.

Throughout the Sahel, shea provides poor people with much-needed cash. A traditional food plant in Africa, the sheanut tree has potential to improve nutrition, boost food security, foster rural development and support sustainable land management. Sheanuts and other products from the tree provide an important part of rural family income in areas where there is little other employment and where agriculture is often difficult and yields unpredictable. Women generally collect sheanuts, extract the butter and sell this in local markets. The shea tree is estimated to provide more than half of women's income in the rural Sahel.

Cultivation and uses

Throughout Africa products from the sheanut tree are used extensively for food and medicinal purposes, and the fruit itself is a major source of dietary fat. It enhances the taste, texture, and digestibility of the major regional dishes. Shea butter is also used when frying fritters, griddlecakes and many other foods for use in the home or for sale in the markets.

Sheanut butter and oil is used commercially as an ingredient in skincare and other cosmetic applications, valued for its nutritive content and it is claimed to have anti-ageing, anti-inflammatory and skin-healing properties. The butter is rich in vitamin A and works excellently as a moisturizer. Sheanut butter is increasingly in demand by cosmetic manufacturers seeking high quality, natural ingredients.

In northern Benin, organic cotton farmers plant small quantities of food crops for home consumption in their cotton plots, such as maize, cowpea, okra, peppers and sorghum. Wild sheanut trees in the area are much appreciated and actively cared for and encouraged along field borders or scattered within a field. The trees are valued for their shade and for many useful resources. Fruits falling into the cotton fields are collected, rinsed, pulped and processed for household or local use. Eaten raw, the fruits, which are similar to a small avocado, are a favourite, creamy snack of rural children.



Sheanut fruits. Credit: PAN UK



Mangassa village in Benin is now entirely organic. Credit: PAN UK



Food crops grown by organic cotton farmers in West Africa

Processing and marketing

The Organisation for the Promotion of Organic Agriculture in Benin (OBEPAB) works with over 3,000 organic cotton farmers, almost half of whom are women. As prices for cotton, even the high quality lint produced by hand-picked organic cultivation, fluctuate widely on world markets, the Beninese farmers are keen to market their other food crops grown in the organic rotation.

OBEPAB and the farmer associations have identified sheanut as one of two food crops suitable for export. Although shea is a valued natural resource, the number of productive sheanut trees in cotton growing organic villages is far higher than the number currently harvested for local or export use (by private companies). There is therefore a huge 'sleeping' potential for the organic farmers to create additional income from collecting sheanuts and processing these.

So far, variable oil content and quality issues have prevented home-processed sheanut butter from being an attractive ingredient for cosmetic use in export markets. European companies using sheanut butter, often sourced from Ghana, have had to invest in processing technology and equipment. OBEPAB is therefore looking for business partners who would be willing to form a long-term relationship with the farmers and work together to test processing options. It is essential that business partners agree to work ethically and transparently with the farmer associations and return them a fair price for their sheanut.



Village scene, cotton zone, Benin, with sheanut trees. Credit: PAN UK



Organic cotton and sheanut trees. Credit: PAN UK



Fibre, Food & Beauty for Poverty Reduction is a joint project of PAN Germany, PAN UK, OBEPAB from Benin and Enda Pronat from Senegal. It aims to raise awareness about the many different food crops grown by organic cotton farmers in Africa and help them to find better marketing options for these, in local or export markets.

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<http://www.pan-uk/foodAfrica>

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