



INA NUTSHELL

NILOTICA SHEA BUTTER GRACES THE WORLD'S TONICEST SPAS, AND ITS EXTRACTION FROM A "MAGICAL" AFRICAN TREE PROVIDES VALUABLE INCOME FOR THE DISPLACED WOMEN OF NORTHERN UGANDA.

BY ROBIN CHERRY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESA VICK

FROM ALL THE GIGGLING, YOU'D THINK the seven women in the car don't have a care in the world. When we hit a stretch laden with potholes, Petra laughingly says, "Ugandan disco—shake your buns!" When the ride is bumpier, she says "Sudan," a reference to the fact that the roads (and everything else) are even worse in Uganda's northern neighbor.

In reality, Petra and the other women have all been displaced from their villages by the insurgency wrought by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has terrorized and traumatized this

remote, beautiful region of northern Uganda for the past 20 years. These women have seen dead bodies tossed callously along the side of the road. Some have lost husbands; others, brothers. Most have had their household possessions confiscated and seen rebels abscond with their farm animals. Their joyous spirit and ready smiles aren't just inspiring, they're astounding.

The women are all involved in the Shea Project, which provides income to a co-op of female farmers who harvest and process Africa's precious nilotica shea nut, found only in northern

Uganda and South Sudan, and also preserves the savannah woodlands by discouraging people from chopping down the shea tree for charcoal. It was started by American Eliot Masters, who'd established a nonprofit to support nongovernmental organizations and community service work in northern Uganda. His search for projects took him to Lira, where he was leaning against a shea tree when Anna Achen, who worked for the district, asked him if he knew about "this magical tree." He didn't, so she told him about its many important properties. Masters saw that



Opposite page: the prized nilotica shea nut. This page: women collecting shea nuts for drying.



shea nuts were an underutilized resource that could provide valuable income to the region. To get the qualifications he'd need to support the initiative, he went back to school and earned a degree in International Agricultural Development from the University of California at Davis. He then returned to Lira, where with Achen's help he founded the Shea Project in 1990, which has improved technologies for shea nut processing and led to the creation of the Northern Uganda Shea Processors Association (NUSPA), a cooperative of more than 2,000 members administered by the (mostly) female farmers themselves. With men in Uganda occupying most traditional agricultural jobs, the women take up other roles, including gathering wild fruits and nuts.

Shea butter has been prized for its moisturizing and healing properties since the days of Nefertiti; records reference caravans with clay jars of shea butter for cosmetic use. Shea butter is so pure it's also used for cooking. Pregnant women rub it on their bellies to prevent stretch marks; mothers massage their newborns with it. Nilotic shea butter is the best because its high concentration of olein makes it richest in bioactive skin-healing compounds.

Though Masters is working as a consultant with the World Agroforestry Centre to set up similar programs in West Africa, he still oversees the project and offered to take this journalist around and introduce her to the

farmers. Accompanying us are Petra Apili, the program's administrator who's in charge of the day-to-day operations, and Anna Awio, who oversees production.

We start in Lira, a sleepy town a few bumpy hours north of Uganda's capital, Kampala. Bicycles outnumber cars here by roughly 70 to one. The project's headquarters is a light blue, one-story building surrounded by lush gardens with a massive mango tree near the front gate. An outbuilding in the rear is filled with shea processing equipment from the outlying villages that the war made uninhabitable. Today, production is still concentrated in Lira, but, as families get ready to move home, preparations are being made to return the equipment to the villages. A few weeks earlier, the LRA and the Ugandan government renewed their cessation of hostilities agreement, and for the first time in two decades northern Ugandans can envision a brighter future.

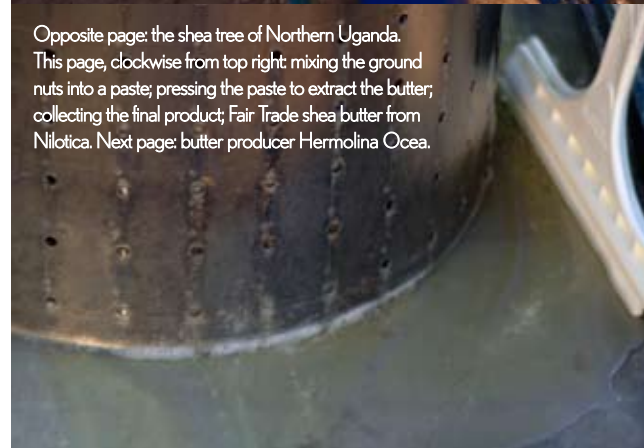
When we drive through the gates and long-time producer Juspanty Ocet sees Masters for the first time in almost a year, she lets out a cry of joy that could wake the dead. Over the next couple days, I'll hear that gleeful sound a lot, especially when we return to the major shea production site of Barjobi, which had been off-limits for the past five years.

We start with a tour of the process: After the tree's fruit is gathered, the nuts are removed from the insides and laid out in the sun to dry. Dried nuts are poured through a grinder twice to get a fine powder. The grinder can pulverize a 175-pound bag of nuts (which yields 40 pounds of shea butter) in 45 minutes; when the nuts were ground by hand, a single bag would take days, not minutes. After the nuts are ground, the powder is mixed with a small amount of clean boiling water, packed into new cloth bags, and laid onto a press, from which the valuable oil is extracted.

On our way to the villages where the shea tree thrives, we pass by many of the camps set up to accommodate displaced persons. Happily, several are in the process of being dismantled as families return home. As we enter the villages, we watch women reconnecting with friends they haven't seen in years. With Petra and Anna as my interpreters, I talk to some 30 producers. They all tell me how the Shea Project has helped them to pay for their children's school fees and medical care, to buy food and household goods and work animals. In Barjobi, everyone



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Opposite page: the shea tree of Northern Uganda. This page, clockwise from top right: mixing the ground nuts into a paste; pressing the paste to extract the butter; collecting the final product; Fair Trade shea butter from Nilotic. Next page: butter producer Hermolina Ocea.

laughs when Hermolina Ocen says she used the income to get a daughter-in-law (she bought a cow for her dowry).

The next day, we drive to Pader, where we're met by Leonora Okello, head of NUSPA. A former detective, Leonora left the force to raise her children and is now serving her second term as chairperson of the association. When the cooperative was set up, women were to make up two-thirds of the membership; today's reality is closer to three-quarters. Additionally, all five managers are women. Leonora mobilizes the members and coordinates the overall production for 50 shear-processing groups. Late in 2006, they finished the major task of earning organic certification, which enabled them to raise the shea butter's market price by 66 percent. Leonora has also traveled to Western Africa and South Sudan to share the success of the project and lead training sessions for other women.

Keren Okweny, who's been displaced from Adumara, has eight children, including one at Makerere University (the Harvard of Uganda) and one in medical school. Other women share similar stories of their children, several of

whom attend the finest schools in Lira. Leonora also tells me about Uganda's "child mothers," young women who were abducted by the LRA and forced to marry and have children when they were still children themselves, often before they were even in their teens. As they struggle to overcome these ordeals and raise their own children, the project provides income and support.

The Shea Project is also a vibrant expression of these women's identities as reflected in the names of many producer groups. Some, like Mon Tute (Women Struggle) and Ribe Aye Teko (Together We Stand), are serious; others are more light-hearted, like Ayero Nyero (If we don't follow through, you can laugh at us) and Kongo Tye Cente Pe (There's beer, but no money).

The days I've traveled the region talking with these women have been filled with joyous reunions and inspiring tales, but most of all they've been filled with laughter. When Leonora is asked how the people here have been able to maintain their positive outlook through war and tragedy, she smiles and in impeccable English says, "What can you do? The war has been going on for so long, we have gotten used to it. Why not laugh?" □

RESOURCES

Today, "shea butter" is almost a buzzword for moisturizers, though some contain as little as 1 percent shea butter, and many high-end products include only 10 percent. The Shea Project (www.thesheaproject.org) works with Nilotica Botanicals in Santa Cruz, Calif., which sells 100 percent shea butter at www.niloticabotanicals.com. The company is run by Alisa Puga Keesey, who studied with Masters at the University of California and spent several years with the project in Uganda before returning to the United States. Blended with essential oils like Orange-Vanilla and Nile Flowers, Nilotica Botanical shea butter is rich, silky, and luxurious. Keesey recently introduced SheaPet shampoos and coat-care treatments for pets. Celebrity pet owners Patricia Arquette and Jennifer Love Hewitt are fans. There are no direct flights to Uganda from the United States, but connections are available on KLM via Amsterdam and on Emirates via Dubai. The once stodgy Nile Hotel has been turned into a Pan-African fantasy by the Serena Hotel Group; rooms have original artwork, pottery, and stunning basketwork. The grounds and swimming pool overlook the seven hills of the verdant capital of Kampala.



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