Exports & trade

Shea butter products find market abroad

By Arnest Tumwesige

While many Ugandan entrepreneurs find challenges exporting their products, for Guru Nanak Oil Mills (GNOM) which specialises in organic shea butter products, it has become a normal routine.

The facility, which started at a nucleus level from a research house of shea butter nuts in 1997, has now grown to an industry that begun exporting a variety of products in 2006.

The local industry, which is located in industrial area, Lira municipality, produces 500 tonnes of shea butter that is used to manufacture products such as oils, cosmetics, lotions, creams, shampoos, laundry soap and toilet soaps to the US, Europe, Asia and Canada.

To achieve this standard, Jageep Singh Basra, the company's general manager, said every year, GNOM hosts an organic certification team from Ecocert South Africa that follows the processing of the products right from the farmers to the factory.

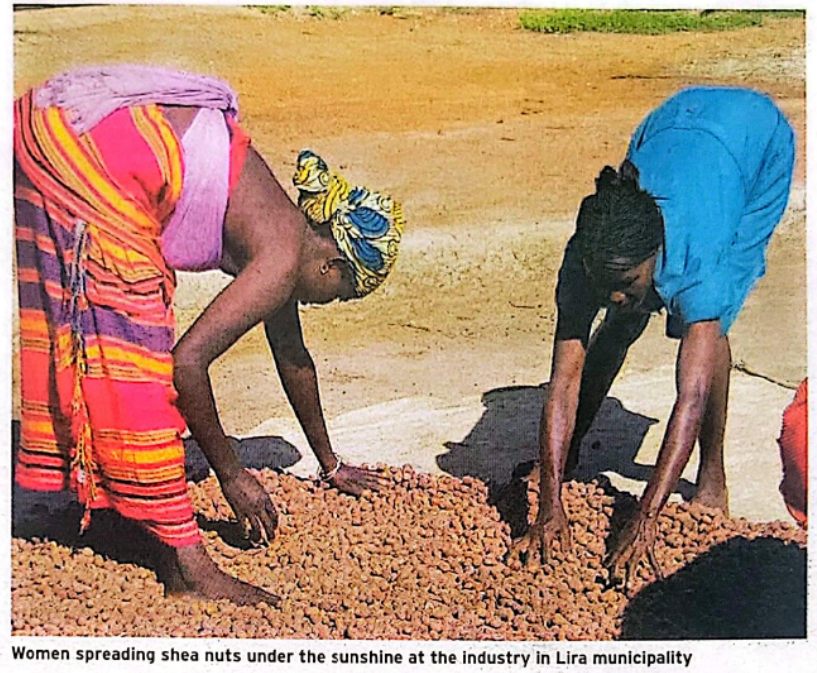
Ecocert South Africa is an international certification body that provides audit, inspection and certification services for organic agricultural products.

Jellie Awenu Muhuruba, the marketing and branding officer for Uganda Industrial Research Institute, said the certificate issued is an assurance that an organic product has been produced through clearly organic production methods and meets the required organic export standards.

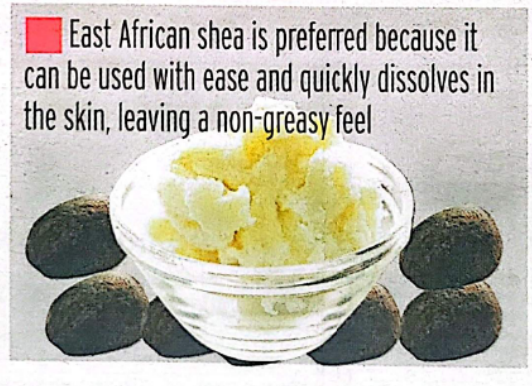
"An Ecocert logo, which is placed on the packaging, is well known and trusted by consumers in countries that import the products, hence giving it better visibility and commercial advantage," she said.

Jageep explained that to ensure the products are free of any foreign content, all the machines they use are stainless steel and packaging materials are also non-metallic.

"GNOM has installed a separate dedicated organic shea butter production line and modern machinery to minimise losses and contamination during the process of production, when the solid shea is separated from the liquid one," he added.



Women spreading shea nuts under the sunshine at the industry in Lira municipality



During her recent visit to the facility, Suzan Muhwezi, the senior presidential advisor on trade, was surprised to learn that shea butter products are not preferred in Uganda.

"We need to do a lot of sensitisation on how important these products are. Otherwise, it is embarrassing to note that people in other regions have a notion that because they are made from shea nuts, their quality is low," she said.

Conservation of shea trees

Shea trees are among the red list of trees highlighted in the International Union for Conservation of Nature as most endangered species in the world.

To ensure they are protected, GNOM conducts sensitisation campaigns to halt their destruction by land owners who seek to burn them for charcoal.

Equally, this has increased participation in the project and improvement has been registered in the post-harvest handling of the nuts to minimise losses.

Jageep said shea nut collection has become a key feature of households in some of the districts such as Lira, Pader, Kitgum, Abim, Agago, Otuke, Katakwi, Soroti, Alebtong, Amuria, Dokolo, Abim, Arua and Nebbi.

At the start, a kilogramme of certified organic shea nuts at the industry was sh800. Today, a kilogramme costs sh2,000.

"The industry is currently working with over 2,000 farmers indirectly, of which over 80% are women that collect the nut, dry it, clean it then it to the factory. They earn incomes from which they are able to support their families," the manager added.

About shea nut trees

The shea nut trees only grow in Africa and stretch across 19 countries from West to East Africa. As far back as the 14th Century, African women have extracted shea butter from shea nuts.

Shea butter is a yellowish golden fat extracted from the nut of the African shea tree. The shea tree mainly occurs wildly in West Africa, with a small proportion in a narrow belt in East Africa, northern Uganda and South Sudan.

There are two main varieties of the trees namely; Vitellaria Paradoxa and Vitellaria Nilotica. The shea butter from East Africa is distinct from the West African one. West African shea butter is hard, has a foul smell and is coarse-textured.

The East African shea butter, also known as Vitellaria Nilotica, is regarded as premium because of its mild scent, soft texture and high moisturising abilities.

It is preferred because it can be used with ease and quickly dissolves in the skin, leaving a non-greasy feel.

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