

## ETHNO-NOMENCLATURE OF THE SHEA TREE (*VITELLARIA PARADOXA* C.F. GAERTN.) AND ITS PRODUCTS IN THE SHEA ZONES OF UGANDA

Okullo John Bosco Lamoris<sup>1</sup>, Omujal Francis<sup>2</sup>, Agea Jacob Godfrey<sup>1\*</sup>,  
Mulugo Lucy Were<sup>1</sup>, Vuzi Peter California<sup>3</sup>, Namutebi Agnes<sup>1</sup>, Okello John Bosco Acot<sup>1</sup>,  
Okonye Godman<sup>4</sup>, Nyanzi Steven Allan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Makerere University, P. O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

<sup>2</sup> Natural Chemotherapeutic Laboratory, Wandegaya, Kampala, Uganda

<sup>3</sup> College of Natural Sciences, Makerere University, P. O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

<sup>4</sup> Department of English, College of Education, University of Juba, Government of South Sudan (GOSS)

\*Corresponding Author's Email: [agea@forest.mak.ac.ug/jgaga@gmail.com](mailto:agea@forest.mak.ac.ug/jgaga@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

A cross sectional survey was conducted in north-eastern Shea zones of Uganda to assess ethno-nomenclature of the Shea tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa* C.F.Gaertn.) and products. The largely qualitative study that involved a total of six different ethnic groups was analyzed using emerging themes and patterns. Findings collected through individual and group interviews revealed variations and similarities in the ethno names. There was a wide variation in ethno-names of the Shea tree/products across and within the ethnic groups. The variations are explained by differences in languages spoken as well as dialects across the ethnic groups. It could also be a reflection of extensive range of occurrence of the Shea trees. Some ethnic groups e.g. Acholi and Langi; Madi and Lugbara had some similarities in the ethno-names. The similarity seemed to be explained by shared historical background and frequent interactions. Migration, intermarriages and frequent trade interactions had a contribution to the similarities between the ethnic groups. This study, however, did not investigate into the meanings of the ethno names, an area that should be taken up for further research.

**KEY WORDS:** ethno-nomenclature, Shea tree, *Vitellaria paradoxa*, parklands, Uganda.

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## INTRODUCTION

Small-scale farmers in sub-Saharan Africa depend heavily on natural resources for food security and other socio-economic needs. Knowledge systems of these people that relate to the natural resources and non-timber harvested products for improved livelihood have never been well documented. Although such knowledge systems remain invisible to the developing communities and are not easily accessible to development practitioners operating in rural communities, they are vital in the search for solutions to community problems (Warren & Rajasekaran, 1993). The Shea tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa* C.F.Gaertn.) is one of such natural resources mankind has been endowed with in Uganda. This tree is a dominant species in agro-forestry parkland systems (Lovett and Haq, 2000; Okullo *et al.*, 2004; Okia *et al.*, 2005). The tree has been described as a “Green gift from God to mankind” (Guru, 2007), “sacred tree” for super natural powers and “Miracle tree” (CFC and FAO, 2005) because of its multiple uses. Bouvet *et al.*, (2004) describes *V. paradoxa* as economically and socially important plant species. In Uganda *V. paradoxa* is found mainly in northern, northeastern and West Nile regions (Katende *et al.*, 1995). The Shea tree is one of the most important sources of vegetable oil whose seeds are used for oil processing for home consumption and trading (PROTA, 2007).

Although the Shea tree is a nutritional and economic resource of great importance in these regions of Uganda, little has been systematically documented on the local community knowledge about this tree (tree characteristic, harvest preferences) and its harvested products (fruit, nuts, kernels, oil). Local knowledge and perception of Shea tree and its products is an important issue for rural development programs and ample experience has shown that communities’ local knowledge can differ profoundly from scientific knowledge in terms of significance for development (Chambers, 1997; Horton and Ewell, 1991; Nazarea-Sandoval and Rhoades,

1994; Steiner and Scheidegger, 1994; Warren and MacKiernan, 1995). It should have however be noted that both local communities’ and scientific knowledge have strengths and weaknesses. This is the case, for instance, if local communities’ knowledge that was valid in the past fails to adapt to the rapidly changing environment.

More than Western scientists, local people are aware of the weaknesses that may exist in their knowledge base (Warren, 1991). Eliciting these drawbacks can be imperative for the proper identification and definition of problems and for effective research and extension. Further, inputs targeting specific knowledge gaps can render information transfer more efficient, acceptable, and practicable for local people especially farmers (Bentley 1992; Sherwood, 1997). However, information transfer should occur in both directions. For most natural phenomena, local people have their own frameworks within which they interpret and explain observations and facts. Former extension approaches (Transfer of Technology, Training and Visit System), building on one-sided information transfer from the extension agent to the farmer, failed to recognize, acknowledge, and incorporate farmers’ concepts. This often resulted in negative self-esteem patterns for the farmers, though their knowledge and role as research partners are increasingly gaining recognition (Haverkort and Hiemstra, 1999).

It is hoped that the information contained in this paper will contribute to an understanding of local community knowledge on folk nomenclature about the Shea tree (tree characteristic, harvest preferences) and its harvested products (fruit, nuts, kernels, oil) in Uganda. The information were gathered based on local communities’ views and concepts based on their experience taking into account the ethnic variability in qualitative knowledge. Qualitative knowledge is a composite knowledge based on amalgamation of individual knowledge. As such the information presented here exceeds the individual knowledge by far.

## STUDY AREA AND METHOD

### Study Area

This study was conducted in the Acholi, Lango, Teso, Acholi and West Nile sub regions, Uganda. Specifically this was carried out in Pader, Lira, Katakwi and Arua districts respectively. These districts have got well established, reliable Shea stand populations and the community highly depends on Shea butter oil/fat for both food uses and other benefits. Fieldwork was conducted during several visits between July 2007 and January 2008 in the districts of Lira, Pader, Katakwi, Nebbi, Arua and Moyo. These sampled districts are in the Shea producing zones of Uganda. In these districts, there is high dependence on Shea butter oil/fat and other related products by the local communities.

These districts are also the ones where there are well established, reliable Shea stand populations and varied Shea butter processing technologies and processing practices in Uganda. As the local communities in these Shea parkland areas have not been adequately involved in any research or development activities targeting the Shea so far, they were very interested and eager to join exercises and discussions. Their willingness and curiosity to participate made the research an extremely pleasant task.

## METHODS

Several data-gathering methods were applied to gain a comprehensive picture of the local community knowledge system of the Shea tree and its harvest to validate information. The research approach combined methods including interviews, semi-structured questionnaires and free-listing. A total of 275 questionnaires were administered. For analysis, the data was transferred to a spreadsheet. The frequency of items mentioned across the lists and in the questionnaires was calculated by counting the total number of reports of each item among the respondents. It is important to note that the frequency of mention is a good measure for salience, although it does not consider the item's position within the list.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents from the Shea zones

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Majority of the respondents among Acholi, Lango, Madi and Lugbara ethnic groups were men as opposed to the Alur and Iteso ethnic groups. Most respondents interviewed were aged between 19 and 60 years and their main (90 %) occupation was subsistence farming. Very few respondents engaged in trade.

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents from the Shea producing zones**

Variable	% Response					
	Acholi	Lango	Iteso	Madi	Alur	Lugbara
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	72	69	47	02	37	63
Female	28	31	53	38	63	37
<b>Age</b>						
< 18years	00	09	03	13	00	04
19–37 years	43	37	44	53	50	38
38–56 years	42	46	44	34	42	52
>56 years	15	08	09	00	08	06
<b>Occupation</b>						
Subsistence farming	89	85	87	85	95	90
Trade	11	15	13	15	05	10

### Ethno-names of the Shea tree in the Shea parkland areas of Uganda

The ethno-naming of the Shea tree varied widely among the studied ethnic communities in the Shea parklands (Table 2). The Acholi ethnic group called the Shea tree *yaa, yao*; the Alur called it *yen yao, danyu, awa*; the Lango ethnic group called it, *yao*; the Iteso refer to it as *ekungur* while the Lugbara called it *awa* and the Madi ethnic group called it *awa, awa pati* and *kiwee*. The ethno-name *yao* was common to Acholi, Alur and Lango while *awa* was common to the Lugbara and the Madi ethnic groups. The meanings behind such naming was

however, not sought in this study.

### Ethno-names of the Shea tree products in the Shea parkland areas of Uganda

Just like ethno-names, the naming of the Shea tree products varied widely among the ethnic groups. For example among the Acholi ethnic group, the Shea fruit was called by different names such as *odua, eduu, kitigu* and *kiduu*. The Iteso called it *akungur, adanyoi* and *odu*, the Lango people called the fruit *adu, adanyo, kom yao* while the the Madi called it as *Awa udu, awa adu, aweki, awasodi* (Table 3).

**Table 2: Ethno-names of the Shea tree in the Shea parkland areas of Uganda**

Ethnic groups	Ethno-names of Shea tree
Acholi	<i>Yaa, yao</i>
Alur	<i>Yen yao, awa, danyu</i>
Iteso	<i>Ekungur</i>
Lango	<i>Yao</i>
Lugbara	<i>Awa</i>
Madi	<i>Awa pati, Awa kwee</i>

**Table 3: Ethno-names of the Shea tree products in the Shea parkland areas of Uganda**

Ethnic groups	Ethno-names of Shea tree products			
	Shea fresh fruit	Shea nut	Shea seed kernel	Shea oil
Acholi	<i>Odu, odua, eduu, kitigu, kiduu.</i>	<i>Yao magolo, yaa magolo.</i>	<i>Yaa/yao nyinge, nying yaa/yao, magolo yaa/yao koro.</i>	<i>Moo yaa, moo yao.</i>
Alur	<i>Dany yao, danyo, odanyo, adu, awa adu.</i>	<i>Awakorongo, dend yao, pok yao.</i>	<i>Nyinge yao, aweki.</i>	<i>Moo yao, awa odu, odu omoo.</i>
Iteso	<i>Akungur, adanyoi, odu.</i>	<i>Akungur.</i>	<i>Elemut, akungur Kiwee.</i>	<i>Akungur, alinyo moo yaa.</i>
Lango	<i>Adu, adanyo, kom yao.</i>	<i>Yao, yao agulu.</i>	<i>Yao koro, yao.</i>	<i>Moo yao.</i>
Lugbara	<i>Awodu, aswadi, awadu, odu, owodu, aweki.</i>	<i>Aweki, awasodri, awa ongolo awaongorobo awakorongo, awakini, iki ikiya.</i>	<i>Sundri, nyinge, den yao, awa gili, awa ogiri, awaikiki awasodi.</i>	<i>Odu, oduni, omo, ikuya awadu, awaa adu, ikiya.</i>
Madi	<i>Awa udu, awa adu, aweki, awasodi.</i>	<i>Awa echwi, awa ekwi, awa gili awa boroso awa obo.</i>	<i>Awa boroso, awa ekwi, ugalera, awa opalarekwi, awaikiki, awa gili, awa ogiri, awa opkolo, aweki.</i>	<i>Awa odu, awa adu.</i>

The Shea nut was also known by various names. The Acholi for instance called it *yao magolo* or *yaa magolo* and the Lango called it *yao agulu* while the Alur ethnic group called the nut as *pok yao*, *apoka yao*, *awakorongo* or *dend yao* (Table 3). The ethno-names of other Shea tree products such as Shea kernel and the Shea oil are also presented in Table 3. What is common is that there is immense variation among these ethno-names across the ethnic groups (Acholi, Alur, Iteso, Lango, Lugbara and Madi) in the Shea parklands of Uganda.

## DISCUSSION

Given that Shea tree and its products are very important in the livelihood of the rural poor, an understanding of the ethno-knowledge about the tree and its products is essential for its continued use and conservation. The findings presented in this study indicate that ethno-naming of the Shea tree and its products varied widely among the studied ethnic communities in the Shea zones of Uganda. Sometime during the previous century it was unfashionable to use vernacular names of plants. This happened (and still does) in the applied fields of plant ecology and botany. The rationale for this seemingly ‘reverse-xenophobic’ decision was that local people name and classifies plants differently from ecologists/botanists (Hashim, 2007). Nevertheless, it is still widely believed that vernacular names of plants could productively inform research on the conceptual categories of plants and their classifications, thus benefiting all of mankind- academic as well as practical use of the world's flora (Richard, 1994).

There are real enigmas which botanists cannot easily explain in the Ugandan recognition of "kinds" or "names" of Shea tree species which offer no morphological or otherwise tangible differences but which are well established and named in the native classifications. And this skill on the part of the Shea communities is manifested not only to the name of Shea tree and Shea products but to other wild plants alike. In some ethnic groups, there is more than one name of Shea tree or its

products (Table 3). The various ethnic communities in the Shea parklands of Uganda can, with no hesitation, name a Shea tree and even its products like fruits, nuts, oil and charcoal at a distance without any difficulty. We have tested the perspicacity of the Shea communities in different tribes and have rarely found them hesitant, doubtful or in error. And the same ethnic group living at appreciable distances from one another and in different tribes will give these many names with amazing consistency.

The variation in the ethno-names reported in this study could perhaps, be due to the differences in languages spoken by these ethnic groups or dialectical differences within an ethnic group. For instance the Acholi, Lango and Alur people speak the Western Nilotic languages which are found in the sub-sub phylum of Luo, closely related to the language of the Luo society in Kenya while the Iteso speak the Eastern Nilotic language called the Ateso (Byrnes, 1992; Nyeko, 1996). The Lugbara and Madi, however, speak the Central Sudanic languages (ITA, 2008). Many vernacular names used for Shea tree has previously been reported as a reflection of its extensive range of occurrence— nearly 5,000 Km from Senegal (west) to Uganda (east) across the African Continent (Shea butter, 2008). The historic-nomenclature and synonymy of this tree is said to have followed a very tortuous evolution since the oldest specimen was first collected by Mungo Park on May 26, 1797 (Shea butter, 2008)

The few similarities in ethno-names of the Shea tree and its products in the Shea parkland areas especially among the Luo speakers, and those among Lugbara and Madi ethnic groups could perhaps be attributed to the shared historical background, movement of these people, intermarriages or trade among them (Nzita and Niwampa, 1998). The Luo migration for instance, brought changes during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The Lango got mixed with the Acholi people and subsequent intermarriage resulted in the Lango losing their Ateker language and later migrating closer to Lake

Kyoga in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century after living for more than two hundred years in the Acholi region (Nzita and Niwampa, 1998). They lost their traditional lifestyle of pastoralism; started subsistence farming and began to speak Luo. The Luo migration also had influence on ethnic groups that already settled in the West Nile, northern and eastern regions of Uganda. They introduced their language and culture (Nzita and Niwampa, 1998). Therefore, these ethnic movements, intermarriages and modification of tribal languages could greatly account for the similarities in the ethno-names of the Shea tree and its products. However, there is still a big gap in our knowledge and understanding especially to the meaning of the various ethno-names of Shea tree and/or its products among the different ethnic groups as these were not sought in the study.

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings discussed above, it can be concluded that there was a wide inter and intra variability in ethno-names of the Shea

tree and its products among ethnic groups living in the Shea parklands of Uganda. This diversity of ethno-names is perhaps a reflection of the extensive range of occurrence of the Shea trees including ethnic movements, intermarriages and modification of tribal languages. There is, however, a need to investigate whether the meaning of the various ethno-nomenclatures are in anywhere linked to prototypes or conservation issues that can be used to enhance conservation of Shea trees in Uganda's parklands or beyond.

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