



# Japan “Welcomes” Shea Butter

**Yuko Morishige is empowering women in Burkina Faso through her efforts to bring locally produced soap and cosmetics made from shea butter into Japan.**

**TOSHIO MATSUBARA**

Yuko Morishige of A Dansé

**S**HEA butter is vegetable fat that is extracted from the kernels of shea trees, which grow naturally in the area known as the Shea Belt that spans West Africa and Central Africa. In Africa, fatty acid- and nutrient-rich shea butter has been used in applications such as food, chemicals and skincare for thousands of years. Yuko Morishige helps make soap from shea butter in Burkina Faso, where shea trees are abundant, with the aim of empowering local women.

“In Burkina Faso, it is often the case that women have received insufficient education and health care since childhood,” says Morishige. “To overcome this situation, the local women need to earn a steady income. This led me to the idea of enabling these women to make profits from shea butter.”

Morishige began to develop an interest in activities in developing countries when she visited Nepal as a university student. Upon witnessing issues such as poverty and human trafficking, Morishige found herself becoming motivated to do something to address the problems.

After graduating, Morishige worked in a private company for seven years before leaving to become

involved in support work for Nepalese women and children while also studying social work and AIDS prevention at university. She subsequently applied to participate in the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, and was sent to Burkina Faso in 2003 for two years’ service in the field of community development.

Morishige learned that shea butter was treated almost like a cure-all in Burkina Faso: it was used as skin cream, medicine and for many other purposes.



A fruit-bearing shea tree

A finished cake of shea butter soap

Fascinated by the rich scent of fresh shea butter and its effects on the skin, Morishige saw business potential in the material. In 2009, she established a company called A Dansé Co., which means “Welcome back” or “Welcome” in the local language of Dioula. In 2010, A Dansé launched shea butter soap, manufactured in Burkina Faso, in Japan.

Women in the residents’ group for forest management (referred to as GGF) from seventeen villages in Comoé in the western part of Burkina Faso make shea butter for the production of the soap. GGF ensures the sustainability of forest control and also seeks to improve the livelihoods of people engaged in practices such as shea butter production and beekeeping. The female members of Centre Rakieta de Lutte Contre le SIDA, a citizens’ group



heat,” says Morishige. “It cannot be made in large quantities, because this traditional method takes nearly a month to sufficiently mature the soap. Nevertheless, this method is irreplaceable when making high-quality soap.”

The soap gained the support of Marubishi Natural Soap Factory, a Hyogo Prefecture-based company that manufactures handmade additive-free soap. The president of the company has visited Burkina Faso to provide technical guidance and also invites persons involved in soap manufacturing in Burkina Faso to Japan for training.

Currently, several hundred women in Burkina Faso are earning an income through the manufacture of shea butter and its soap. The women are said to have grown in confidence through their work, and proactively express their opinions at GGF and the training center for soap manufacture.

In addition to soap, A Dansé currently sells accessories and bags manufactured in other African countries. They are available on the Internet and in department stores. Among the merchandise, shea butter and its soap has a good reputation for its effects in moisturizing the skin.

“It is very important for us not to compromise on quality and price. For this purpose, we hold regular discussions with the people in Burkina Faso and work alongside them. The manufacture and marketing of herbal soap have also been started on a trial basis,” says Morishige. “In addition, we explore the commercialization of products using ingredients such as cashew nuts, honey, dried mangoes and sesame. In the future, we will establish a system for making such products commercially available in Burkina Faso and its neighboring countries.”



Shea nut kernels are pulverized and processed to a paste from which shea butter is ultimately extracted.

for measures against AIDS, make soap from the shea butter. At the training center of the group, soaps are manufactured mainly by HIV infected women. The person responsible for soap production is a doctor of pharmacology in traditional healthcare who is very well known in Burkina Faso.

“Soap may be manufactured using several different methods. Our shea butter soap uses the cold process method, which involves no external

All photos: Courtesy of A Dansé