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BOOK REVIEW

Shea Butter Republic: State Power, Global Markets and the Making of an Indigenous Commodity. Brenda Chalfin. New York: Routledge, 2004. 295 pp.

Shea butter, produced from the fruit of the shea tree, has long been a staple of the domestic economy in the West African savanna. It has many household uses and was also prominent as a long-distance, luxury trade good in the pre-colonial era. First identified by the colonial administration as a useful tropical export, it is now also a global commodity. Until recently, however, it was very much a 'hidden' product, incorporated into chocolate as an unidentified cocoa butter substitute or used as a cheap, industrial raw material. In the past ten years it has risen to public notice as an ingredient in high end cosmetics, where it is touted for its 'natural properties.'

In this book Chalfin traces the variable commodity paths of shea butter and highlights the interplay between local rural production and shifts in the global economy. She seeks to demonstrate that the way tropical commodities are drawn into the world market is by no means an automatic process in which global demand determines the participation of suppliers. Chalfin argues that shea is uniquely suited to answer these questions precisely because it is not typical of tropical commodities as a whole. Unlike cocoa, it is indigenous to West Africa and remains central to the local rural economy, while its consumption patterns differ markedly from coffee and sugar. Also, it is not a plantation crop but is derived from the fruit of a wild tree. Supply is thus dependent on a network of procurers. The author draws on a wide range of sources in constructing her 'economic biography' of shea. These include: documents pertaining to the colonial era in northern Ghana; months of interviews and participant observation in shea butter-producing communities in and around Bawku in Ghana's Upper East Region; as well as copious reference to macro-economic data, internet sources, marketing materials and trade policy documents.

Over six chapters Chalfin provides a fascinating account of the ins and outs of shea production and trade as seen against the background of the various economic transformations – colonialism, liberalization, privatisation – that Ghana experienced in the twentieth century. She demonstrates the centrality of shea to the domestic economy and its continuing role as a local commodity despite its fluctuating fortunes on the international market. Also examined is the degree to which global demand impacts on the access that local producers have to their required raw material as they enter into competition with buyers for the export market.

This book also serves as a useful study of the gendered nature of production in West Africa and the place of women in the rural economy. Since her study encompasses shea production in both rural and town settings, it examines the different levels of shea production, whether for home use or sale in the market. Chalfin highlights the strategies used by women to gain access to the labor and capital required for bulk shea butter production, including the formation of cooperative work groups, negotiation with female kin and the use of credit arrangements. The most important point that Chalfin raises here, is that contrary to the prevailing perception, rural women's labor is not solely at the beck and call of their male relatives. Notably it is women who collect, process and sell shea for their own profit, even though the land the trees stand on 'belongs' to the men in their families. These gender relations have changed along with the new pressures of the export market as many men also seek to take advantage of the new opportunities. They find themselves, however, dependent on female expertise in entering this economic realm.

This book also contains an in-depth discussion about the wider economic and political contexts that have a bearing on shea. This discussion highlights the degree to which these 'out of the way' rural markets are in fact implicated within global economic processes. What links the two in this case is the machinations of the Ghanaian state in promoting and regulating international trade. In the 1980s shea featured as a key product in the Ghanaian government's negotiation of market reforms promoted by international financial bodies, and in their attempts to involve their northern constituency as economic

citizens. The trade was opened up to private buyers in the 1990s as the state first withdrew and then re-entered the shea market. Chalfin discusses the implications of these changes in economic policy for local producers and examines the manner in which governments can negotiate IMF-induced market reforms.

Where Chalfin is most skillful is in highlighting the contradictions of the globalized world in which we live and the implications for the people at the beginning of the supply chain. She explores this through a discussion of consumer trends in the modern world and the degree to which modern states can exploit global directives to serve their own interests. This is seen most clearly in the relationship between cocoa and shea, both key Ghanaian exports and both products that have been affected by global consumption trends that favor 'natural commodities', whether chocolate or cosmetics. It is still an open question as to what these global economic trends hold for the continued importance of shea in the local economy.

In short, Brenda Chalfin's book is a masterful treatise on globalization, the movement and marketing of commodities, and the interaction of local and global economies. This book will appeal to anthropologists, historians, economists, political scientists, historical archaeologists and anyone who is interested in how commodities become globalized. Those teaching a class on consumption, globalization, work, gender or rural economies would find Chalfin's work a welcome addition to the reading list.

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