DIARY OF A SHEA TREE

My name is Shea, which means ‘tree of life’.

I am a majestic tree born in the savannah. While I am not traditionally planted, I am protected in cultivated fields during field clearance for agriculture.

I give my first fruit after 15 years of life and I can breathe for over a century.

My closest partners are women and children. During the rainy season, they faithfully visit me and I gracefully share with them the best of what I have to offer; small, nutritious green fruits.

These are my treasured children, who carry within them a valuable nut.

Traditionally, women process these nuts into a smooth butter for their household’s consumption and for sale. In this way, I support the livelihoods of millions of women throughout the savannah, and have accordingly been called ‘women’s green gold’.

In addition, my fruits sustain men, women and children while they work in their fields during the lean season, and my shade protects humans and animals from the burning sun. My bark and roots serve as medicine and my leaves as fertilizer.

I also carry cultural significance; I play a symbolic role during funerals and am used as a fetish to protect humans from evil creatures.

I told you that women, in all their diversity, are my closest partners. Participatory research has shown that access to my fruits as well as knowledge of and preferences for my ethno-varieties vary according to gender, status of residence as indigenous or migrants, age, and ethnicity.

Indigenous residents have privileged access to my fruits in their fields, fallows and in woodlands whereas migrants can only access my fruits on uncultivated fields and have weak access to fruits on the fields they cultivate.

As my nuts and butter become increasingly prized internationally, harvesting pressure on my nuts has increased and access rights to my fruits have become stringently guarded, as fetishes and black magic are invoked to prevent thieves from collecting them.

New socio-economic trends are also changing the ways I am managed. In the south-west region of Burkina Faso, native residents are increasingly selling their land—including fields previously lent to migrants—to capitalized urbanites wishing to establish agri-businesses.

I am thus at great risk of being replaced by cash crops and exotic tree orchards, and the impoverished migrants that had cared for me for years are now barred from accessing my products so essential to their livelihoods. This adds to the plight of my young sisters and I, who are already suffering from the effects of climate change and from the adoption of tractors and ploughs that damage our roots.

Measures to protect and sustainably manage me will have to account for all of these factors and for the different needs and priorities of those who draw upon my products. For instance, because of the different uses to which I am put by women and men, women show interest and knowledge about the characteristics of my butter while men are more interested in the taste of my pulp.

Working with the diverse groups of women and men farmers who are my caretakers, researchers should build upon these differentiated experiences and reconcile distinct preferences for my goods to promote inclusive and locally-relevant land tenure laws, policies and technologies that promote my conservation.