



Curios crafted out of olive wood. Note the beautiful line pattern in the wood. (Photo KEFRI)

Extending an olive branch

Let's look at another tree of the Bible that is a symbol of peace, happiness, prosperity and glory

By Francis Gachathi

The first mention of olive (*Olea europaea*) in the Bible is the olive leaf that the dove from the ark returned to Noah, signalling the end of the great flood (Genesis 8:11). Since then, the olive branch became a symbol of peace.

Olive trees and places related to them are variously mentioned in relation to important events of the Bible. Olive trees are part of the crops that God gave to Israelites in the Promised Land after their return from Egypt (Deuteronomy 6:11). The Mount of Olives near Jerusalem is associated with several events in the life of Jesus. It is here that Jesus delivered the famous Sermon on the Mount that includes the Lord's Prayer and the beatitudes (Matthew 5-7). And it is from here that he ascended into heaven after resurrection from the tomb (Acts 1:9-12).

Olive trees are hardy, drought- and fire-resistant and can live for very many years. Their trunks become crooked, gnarled and often hollow as the trees age. Their leaves are narrowly oval and sharply pointed, dark-green above and silvery underneath. Flowers are small, white or cream-coloured, in branched heads. Fruits are



Cows feeding on olive leaves, Mukogodo in Laikipia district. (Photo KEFRI)

fleshy and egg-shaped, turning purple-black as they ripen. They are popular with birds and particularly pigeons.

Olea europaea has six natural subspecies distributed over several tropical and warm temperate countries. The trees, occurring from

Ethiopia down to South Africa, were previously thought a distinct species, *Olea africana*, but are now regarded as small-fruited subspecies of *Olea europaea* (subspecies *cuspidata*), the wild olive.

In Kenya, wild olives are found in montane dry forests and rocky hilltop forests in the drylands



The trunk of an olive tree. (Photo KEFRI)

often associated with cedar and podo. However, they are also found around Nairobi, e.g. Langata. Huge chunks of *Olea* forests between Nairobi and the Kikuyu Escarpment were cleared to supply fuel for the railway engines at the beginning of the last century.

Local names associated with wild olive include oloirien, (Maasai), mutamaiyu (Kikuyu), muthata (Kamba) and tamaiyai (Samburu). Commercial olives, common around the Mediterranean region are *Olea europaea* subspecies *europaea*. These have large fruits with thick oily mesocarp and have been cultivated since ancient times chiefly for their oil and fruit. Wild olives have smaller fruits with a thin mesocarp and are not used to produce oil.

Olive oil has long been considered sacred. It was used for the eternal light in the tabernacle, the portable sanctuary in which the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant of God (Leviticus 24:2). It was used in the holy anointing oil to consecrate the priests, prophets, kings and instruments of the sanctuary (Exodus 30:22-33). It was used for lighting lamps of temples and for the "eternal flame" of the original Olympic Games in Greece.

The garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus and his disciples prayed on the night he was betrayed and arrested (Mark 14: 32), means "olive oil press" in Hebrew. The most common use of olive oil was, and still is, cooking.

Olive wood is golden-brown with dark figuring, very heavy, hard, strong and durable. It polishes to a very beautiful finish. King Solomon chose olive wood to make doors and decorations for the most holy place of the original Temple of God (1 Kings 6:31-32). Locally, olive wood is used for small cabinetwork, carvings, fancy



A mature olive tree in Mukogodo, having been pollarded in the past for dry season fodder. (Photo KEFRI)

furniture, utensils and panelling. It is popular particularly with the Maasai for making clubs and walking sticks. It is the best and most valuable firewood, burning slowly and brightly with a lot of heat, little or no smoke and giving a good scent.

Olive leaves have long been used in many traditional religious and social ceremonies in different cultures. In Biblical times, olive branches formed booths for feast days (Nehemiah 8:15). Winners of the original Olympics were crowned with olive wreaths to indicate victory and honour. In ancient Rome, a crown of olive leaves was hung on the door when a baby boy was born.

The olive is an important ceremonial tree among the Maasai and Samburu. The Maasai burn green branches in most ceremonies for blessings, peace, good luck and prosperity. Burning olive sticks are used for smoking milk gourds for preservation, fermentation and flavouring milk. Twigs are used as toothbrushes while pieces of

olive wood are used to flavour meat soup, giving it a characteristic taste, improving digestion and appetite.

A decoction from the bark is taken against stomach rumbles and intestinal worms. It is used to treat malaria and various skin diseases. Recent scientific findings have shown olive to be effective in treating high blood pressure and enhancing renal functions, among other diseases.

During drought, olive trees come in handy to save livestock in the drylands. Trees are loped and leaves used to feed livestock. It is by far the most important tree species in Mukogodo, Laikipia District, saving thousands of animals in times when there is no grass, bringing peace, happiness, prosperity and glory to God.

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