

Azadirachta indica A. Juss.

Woodcarving

Kenyan case by Simon K. Choge

A valuable commodity

Devil's claw has been traded internationally for more than 50 years, with most exports going from Namibia to Germany. There has been a substantial increase in export volumes and about 600-700 tonnes, worth US\$ 100 million, are traded each year. Trade chains are complex and vary between countries. In most cases, harvesters supply local traders, who then sell the dried roots to local exporting companies. In some cases, non-government organisations (NGOs) help harvesters trade directly with exporters, or purchase material themselves for export. Five to ten companies - one of which controls 75 per cent of world trade in devil's claw - dominate the European market. Most profits are realised at this level: harvesters receive US\$ 1.20 per kg, and local exporters US\$ 1.40-1.80 per kg, while the retail price in the West is US\$ 140 per kg.

Trends

If managed well, devil's claw could: be harvested sustainably*, contribute to rural livelihoods and bring economic benefits to southern African nations. Some governments have good policies in place, but monitoring and enforcement is extremely difficult, especially in the remote areas where devil's claw grows. Harvesters lack good business and management skills, and there is insufficient cooperation among traders and the governments of exporting nations. There is virtually no value-adding within the region, and government policies to protect the species and monitor trade are confined to

nature conservation departments rather than the more strategic departments of trade and industry. At the international level, insensitive cultivation efforts and monopoly control of the trade prevent producers getting their fair share of the plant's commercial potential and profitability. All this, combined with the difficulty of competing against sophisticated Western companies, weakens the bargaining power of local traders and harvesters. Such issues could be addressed in part, through harvesters' associations.



Sometimes deep, wide holes are dug with a spade to extract the entire root. However, this harvesting technique is destructive for both the plant and its broader environment. A preferable method is to harvest only the secondary tubers whilst leaving the main tap root intact.

Wooden animals from Kenya: Leaving tracks around the world

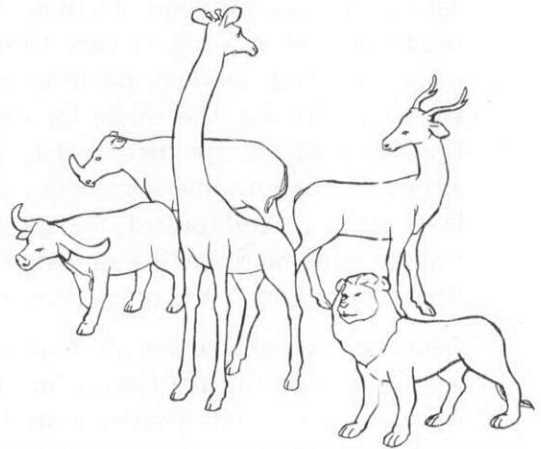
Kenya is world famous for its wooden carvings. Mutisya Munge, a muKamba man from Wamunyu, in the Machakos district, pioneered the production and trade of woodcarvings, as far back as 1919. Today, the waKamba people (muKamba=singular, waKamba=plural), who live in the drought prone, eastern parts of Kenya, create most of the country's carvings. They largely contribute to making Kenya the biggest producer of African woodcarvings for international trade.

Kenyan carvings are exported to countries like the United States of America, Canada, Japan, Spain, South Africa, Germany and the United Kingdom. Popular figures of wild game such as lions, giraffes, rhinos and elephants, along with many other types of wooden sculptures, are the end result of an often lengthy production and marketing chain, which all begins with the acquisition of wood.

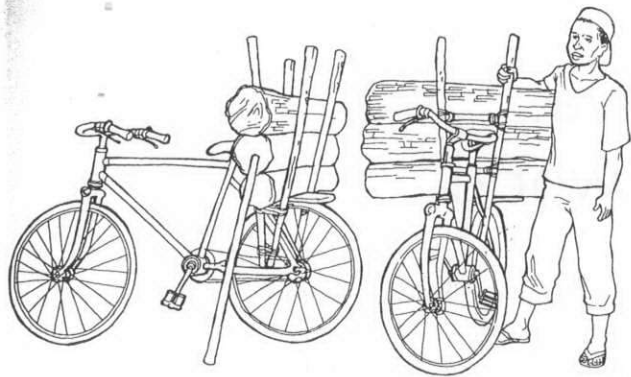
Carving out a living

Kenya is home to 60,000-80,000 carvers who in turn, generate the main source of income to support around 400,000 dependants. These carvers depend upon wood from forests, farms and bushlands and each year, about 50,000 trees are felled to supply the commercial carving trade. Unfortunately, only a relatively small number of tree species are suitable for quality carvings. Most of the preferred wood comes from very slow growing species found in forests and woodlands. However, due to intense harvesting their natural populations have been severely reduced. Many carvers living in depleted areas have since moved to other provinces (such as Central Kenya and the coast) in search of new raw materials and markets.

Over 60 per cent of woodcarvings are currently made from *Brachylaena huillensis*, known locally as 'muhugu'. However, it can take 100 years for these dry forest trees to attain a girth of around 40 cm and a height of 25 m. Supplies from these trees have been dwindling in recent years due to the high demand and long time span required for regeneration. As a



Carvings are created from the wood of various tree species.



Bicycles, handcarts and vehicles are used to transport the wood to carving centres.

result, alternative woods have been sought from species like *Azadirachta indica*, locally known as 'neem'. This introduced species* is widely distributed along the Kenyan coast and is increasingly being used for woodcarving. It is sometimes viewed as a weed due to its abundance and profuse natural regeneration but this abundance and its fast growth rate and good carving qualities make it an excellent substitute for the favoured but depleted indigenous* hardwoods*.

Wood for carving is usually harvested from forests, woodlands and farms, and is generally obtained with the aid of a power saw operated by a single person. Wood dealers, who are the main collectors, scout for supplies from both distant and nearby sources, buying from land owners and harvesting and delivering the wood to carving centres.

The commercial chain

Woodcarvers acquire their skills and training through working closely with experienced carvers for several years, learning how to specialise in certain types of products. The production of carvings is very labour intensive and involves several processing steps, including filing, sanding, painting and polishing. Products made from fresh or juvenile wood are dried in the shade for several days before the final touches are applied. The finished products are then sold to dealers or tourists. It is exclusively men who carve although women sometimes help with polishing and painting, particularly at a household level. With a trend towards the specialisation of activities, some carvers also contract out time demanding stages like sanding to skilled operators, whose work creates a nice smooth finish and results in the products fetching a higher price.

Generally, woodcarvers work in groups or co-operatives for the convenience of obtaining wood supplies and marketing finished products. Established groups sell their products through show rooms located at strategic places in towns and cities. Carvings are also sold in shops, at the entrances to game parks and along beaches and roadsides. Large quantities are exported to overseas markets as well. An increasing number of middlemen are getting involved in the carving marketing chain, buying products from carvers in a semi-finished state, for a cheaper price, and then adding value using skilled workers to sand, polish and paint these products. With a high quality finish, such carvings are destined for exclusive shops in major centres or for the export market.



Links in the chain

Many steps can be involved in the production of woodcarvings, with profits differing along the various stages of the production chain.

- 1) Wood is harvested and bought for US\$ 12-15 per m³.
- 2) Loading and transport charges are US\$ 2 per m³ and US\$ 0.1 per m³/km, depending on the species.
- 3) Semi-finished products are bought for US\$ 30-66 per m³ (about US\$ 1-2 per carving). Approximately 600 pieces are produced from 1 m³ of wood.
- 4) Skilled workers are hired to sand and polish the carvings, which are sold to middlemen or tourists at carving centres for US\$ 3-4.
- 5) Specialised middlemen and dealers arrange for further finishing and their high quality carvings are then sold in exclusive shops for US\$ 5-10.
- 6) Dealers fill export orders, pricing the carvings at over US\$ 20 each.

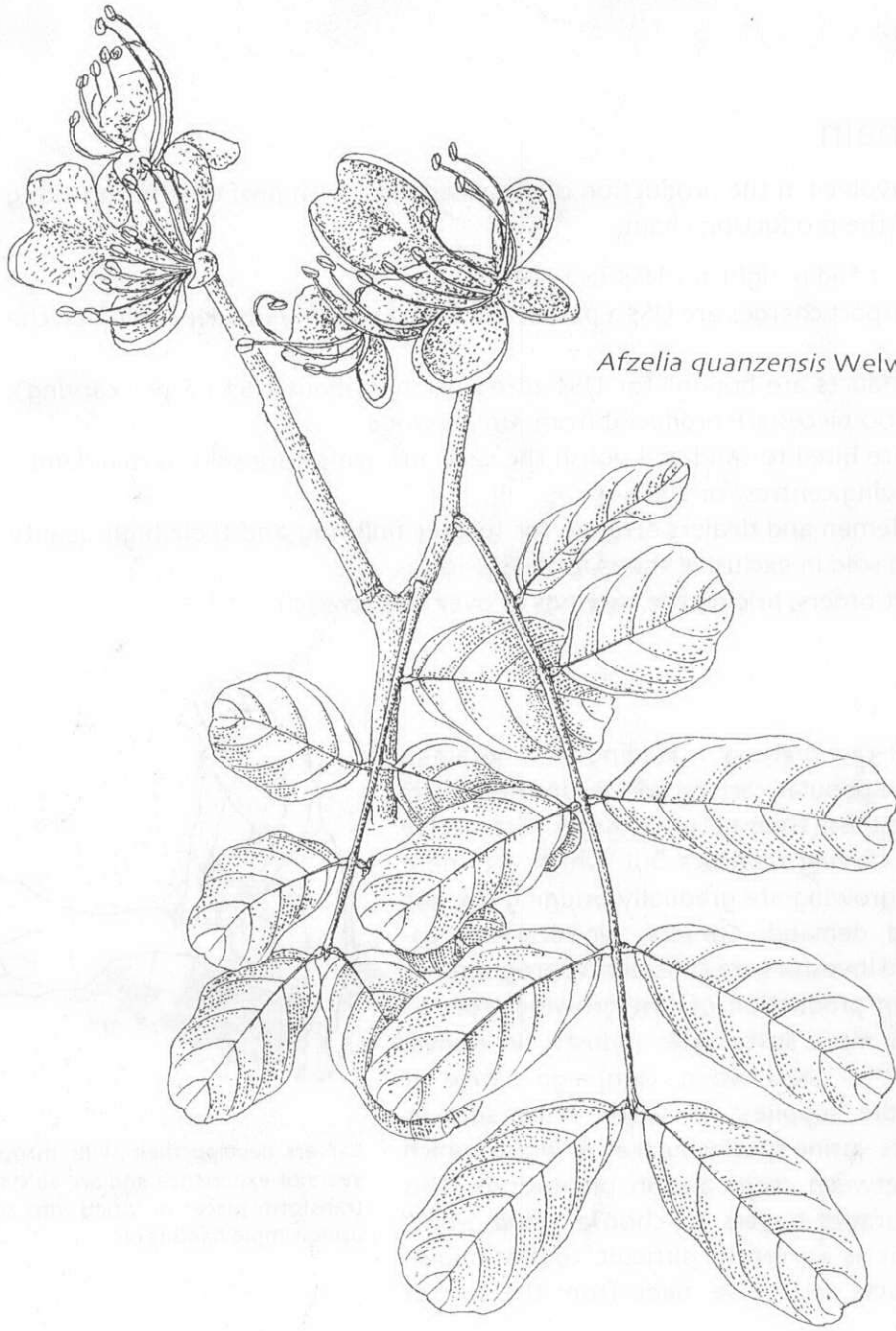
Trends

Increased demand for raw material is leading to widespread depletion of the more popular carving species in the forests and woodlands where these trees naturally grow. Alternative species with similar carving qualities but which are more abundant and faster growing are gradually bridging the gap between supply and demand. Carvers, woodcarving co-operatives and private investors are considering programmes to encourage on-farm production of fast growing trees to make woodcarving a more sustainable industry in Kenya. This is linked with the 'good wood' campaign aimed at developing sustainable supplies* of wood from sources outside natural forests - using species such as *A. indica*, which can be planted in between crops and in plantations. This campaign also encourages buyers to choose 'good wood' carvings. However, it is currently difficult to distinguish between these products and those made from the scarcer woods.

There is a clear need to assist both traders and buyers with the identification of carvings made from 'good wood'. This could be achieved through attaching labels from an independent certifier to carvings which are made exclusively from 'good woods' and/or are tied to a strategy aimed at supplying wood (both 'good woods' and indigenous species) from plantations and farms.



Carvers develop their skills through many years of experience and are able to quickly transform pieces of wood into sculptures, using simple hand tools.



Afzelia quanzensis Welw.

Woodcarving

Zimbabwean case by Wavell Standa-Gunda