

Mvule trees at Voi. (Photo: Francis Gachathi)



Mvule tree - a straight and beautiful stem, with excellent timber. (Photo: BGF)



Timber tree needs saving

Mvule, which produces excellent wood, faces a bleak future

BY FRANCIS GACHATHI

Mvule is a huge tree-growing to over 30 metres. It has a straight ash-grey trunk clear to 20 metres or more and 2-metre diameter. Mvule is among the tallest trees in East Africa. The crown is composed of a few stout, widely spread branches. The leaves are large, about 18cm, with 10 - 18 pairs of prominent veins and finely toothed margin. Flowers are small and dioecious, that is, male and female borne on separate trees; males in slender hanging spikes, females in stout erect spikes. The fruit is like a long, green mulberry.

The scientific name of mvule is *Milicia excelsa*, previously known as *Chlorophora excelsa*. It is in the fig family Moraceae, characterised by the presence of white latex in all parts. Members of this family include the fig trees and the jackfruit, locally known as mfenesi.

Local names for *Milicia excelsa* include mvure in Digo, muvuli in Kamba and murumba in Luhya. The Luo call the tree olua, the Meru mururi and it is known as mvule in Swahili. The tree is found in lowland moist relict forests and wooded

grasslands of the coast, Meru and Nyanza, at 1 to 1350 metres above sea level.

The dark, handsome heartwood of mvule is highly prized for furniture, panelling and floor

Trunk of a mvule tree. (Photo: Francis Gachathi)



parquets. It is traded under the names iroko, mvule and African teak. As a result of high demand for the attractive timber, mvule has been heavily exploited and has become very rare indeed. Its future seems bleak considering that it is a poor seeder, its seeds lose viability quickly and germination is slow and poor.

For propagation purposes, the caterpillar-like mature ripe fruits are collected from the tree crown. They are soaked in water overnight and crushed by hand to extract the seeds. Seeds are dried in the shade.

Under ideal conditions, seeds germinate within 25 to 40 days. Expected germination rate of healthy seed lot is 45 per cent on average. There are 450,000 – 550,000 seeds per kg depending on the provenance and the climatic conditions of the ripening year.

Mvule tree deserves extensive planting to allow sustainable exploitation.

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