

Hyphaene compressa

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: **Boni:** Medi, Qoone, Kone, Meeti; **Chonyi:** Mkoma; **Daasanach:** Kulidhe; **Digo:** Mkoma, Mkoma lume; **English:** Doum palm; **Gabra:** Meetti; **Giriama:** Mkoma, Mlala; **Ilchamus:** Lparruai, Lparrua; **Kamba:** Mukoma, Ilala (Mbitini, Kitui); **Kambe:** Mkoma; **Malakote:** Mokoma; **Mbeere:** Irara; **Orma:** Kone, Meti (young); **Pokomo:** Mkoma (tree), Mlala (leaf), Milala (plural); **Pokot:** Tangayween (plural), Tangayua; **Rendille:** Gey-i-khoona, Baar; **Samburu:** Iparwa, Malala, Lparwai, Nkujit ae nkeok; **Sanya:** Auwaki, , Lkonga; **Somali:** Baar, Qoona (fruit), Dabell (young tree); **Swahili:** Mkoma, Mkoche, Mlala, Mnyaa, Muaa; **Taveta:** Irara; **Tharaka:** Muruguyu; **Turkana:** Eeng'ol, Eng'ol.

DESCRIPTION: An unusual branched palm tree, to 25 m, each branch crowned with large, fan-shaped leaves, the tree often surrounded by bushy young growth. **BARK:** Trunk grey. **LEAVES:** Have a long spiny stalk supporting the fan of leaflets. **FLOWERS:** Male and female on separate trees. **FRUIT:** Orange to brown, hanging down in bunches, each fruit to about 10 cm long, 2 sides flattened, edible fibres below the tough shiny skin, one large hard seed.

ECOLOGY: Widespread in lowland arid Africa, Madagascar and the Arabian peninsula to India. In Kenya, widely distributed in hot areas. Common in dry northern areas along river courses and lakes (Turkana). Also very common at the coast. The most conspicuous tree palm along the River Turkwel near Lodwar and in parts of the north coast, especially along the Witu-Lamu road. At the coast, the tree tends to be branched while in north-western Kenya it remains single stemmed. This tree requires a high water table and a hot dry climate for good growth. In dense riverine forests, such as in lower parts of Tana River, the tree may easily attain a height of 30 m. Altitude: 0–1,000 m. Agroclimatic Zones II–VII (riverine). Fruit available most of the year.

USES: Firewood, timber (for cabinets), poles, posts, beehives (trunk), edible fruit (pulp, kernel), drink (palm wine from the stem, juice from young fruit), shade, baskets, mats, general handicrafts (leaves), roofing (leaves), dune

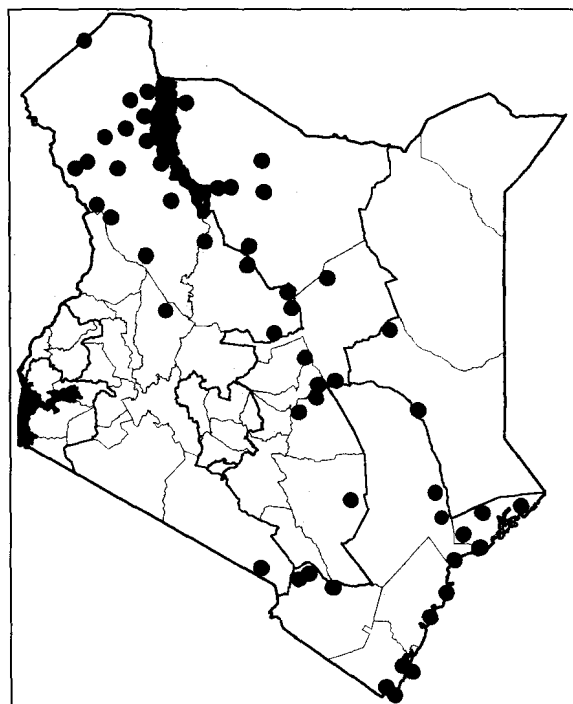
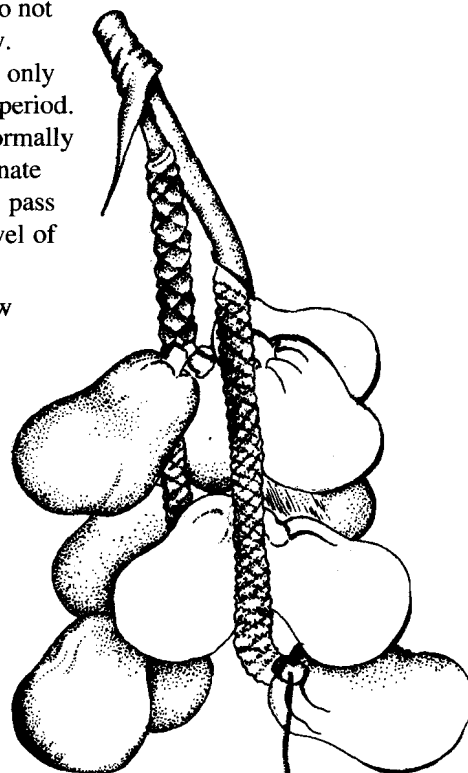
Arecaceae (Palmae)

fixation, fibre, live fence, dead fencing (spiny leaf stalks), fishing rafts, carpets, brooms, hammocks, buttons, beads ('vegetable ivory').

PROPAGATION: Direct sowing at site, either into carefully prepared pits or any other places where water collects naturally. Best sown in deep sand. Unsuitable for growing in nurseries since a long 'taproot' grows down to 50–100 cm before leaves appear. The 'root' will carry the embryo down into the ground, perhaps to the water table, then the first leaf will grow up to the soil surface. Suckers can also be used.

SEED: The seeds do not germinate easily. **storage:** Viable only for a very short period. Sow at once. Normally the seeds germinate naturally if they pass through the bowel of an elephant.

MANAGEMENT: Slow growing. Thinning to reduce



Hyphaene compressa (cont)

density; prune long spiny leaves for use as weaving material.

REMARKS: The fruit is heavily depended on as a source of food by the Turkana in times of food shortage. It can store well for long periods. Also an important source of thatch and handicraft material for the Pokomo and Turkana. Fruit are eaten by elephants and are a major food source for baboons and the endangered monkey the Tana River Crested Mangabey.

Another species, *H. coriacea* (**Boran:** Medi; **English:** Dwarf doum palm; **Swahili:** Mkoma wa pwani) is a much smaller palm, usually 3–4 m, and found in small colonies

on sandy beaches near the sea. Trunks are short and usually lean to one side. Leaves form a characteristic curve towards the tip. Fruit are smaller and widen suddenly at the middle to form an enlarged base and an overall shape reminiscent of a small gourd but with an irregular but smooth surface. The palm has similar uses to those of *H. compressa* but it is less popular. *Hyphaene* is a relatively small genus of palms mainly found in Africa, the Indian Ocean islands and South Asia.

FURTHER READING: Beentje, 1994; Dharani, 2002; Maundu et al., 1999; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Ruffo et al., 2002.

