

Strychnos henningsii

Loganiaceae

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: **Boran:** Karaa; **English:** Henning's strychnos; **Giriama:** M'bathe; **Kamba:** Muteta; **Kikuyu:** Muteta; **Kipsigis:** Maset; **Luhya (Bukusu):** Kumukhubwe; **Maasai:** Entuyesi, Oltipilikwa; **Mbeere:** Mutambi; **Meru:** Muchimbi; **Pokot:** Kapkamkam; **Samburu:** Nchipilikwa; **Somali:** Hadesa; **Tugen:** Turukukwa; **Turkana:** Yopoliss.

DESCRIPTION: A very variable shrub or small tree, usually dense and rounded to 6 m, occasionally to 20 m. **BARK:** Pale grey-brown then darker. **LEAVES:** **Leathery, shiny** above, quite sticky, **broadly oval to 6 cm, 3 prominent veins**, short leaf stalks. Opposite, with each pair of leaves at right angles to the next pair along the stem. **FLOWERS:** Small, cream-yellow, in dense heads. **FRUIT:** **Round or ellipsoid, fleshy, orange** then ripening to red, 1–2 cm long, the thin pulp contains 1–2 seeds, each **grooved like a coffee bean**.

ECOLOGY: Found in Sudan and Somalia south to South Africa in dry forests, along river banks, in scrub as well as coastal forests. Widely distributed in Kenya in dry *Podocarpus* and *Olea* forests, hillsides, thickets and *Combretum* bushland, 0–2,300 m. Very common in forests near Nairobi. Agroclimatic Zones III–V.

USES: Poles, tool handles, soup (stems and leaves), medicine (toxic alkaloid in roots, fruits and bark), live fence.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings; produces root suckers.

SEED:

treatment: Pulp should be removed from the seeds before sowing.

storage: Seed can be stored for some time.

MANAGEMENT: Pruning, coppicing.

REMARKS: Heavy, termite-resistant wood, durable heartwood used by the Maasai for building huts. Soup, called 'muteta', sold in some major hotels, especially in Nairobi. The right quantity of root should be used as they are bitter. **Care should be taken while collecting this plant in the wild as it can easily be confused with *Acokanthera* spp. used to prepare arrow poison.**

Another species, *S. usambarensis* (**Kikuyu:** Mutikani, **Tugen:** Kapkendogi) is a forest tree to 10 m, with layered branches, the leaves tapering to the tip, fruit to 1 cm, fleshy and yellow. Common around Nairobi, in Central Province and Kakamega.

FURTHER READING: Backes and Ahenda, 1998; Beentje, 1994; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Kokwaro, 1993; Maundu et al., 1999; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002.

