

Cry for the Music Tree— Saving the African Ebony

By Denis Gathanju

As the tropical sun gracefully shines on the scenic Mt. Kilimanjaro in northern Tanzania, a group of village women snake their way to a small field, singing celebratory songs to embark on the day's main activity – planting tree seedlings.

But this is no ordinary tree planting exercise; this is an exercise that seeks to restore the depleted African Blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), locally known as Mpingo.

Prized by instrument makers and African carvers alike, its dark, dense wood is highly stable under extremes of temperature and humidity, while its tight grain and oily nature take a durable polish. You most probably have never heard of the Mpingo tree, but you have undoubtedly heard its sweet, soothing music. Instrument makers use the tree to manufacture clarinets, oboes, piccolos, flutes and bagpipes.

Once plentiful across the continent, the numbers of the slow-growing Mpingo – it takes between 70 and 200 years to mature – are now in alarming decline as land is cleared for farming, and the valuable wood – at \$23,000 a cubic meter one of the most



Mpingo tree along the highway from Makuyuni to Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania, in early October 2006, towards the end of the dry season as the tree is beginning to leaf out after its period of dormancy. © 2007 African Blackwood Conservation Project

expensive timbers on earth – is cut down by people desperate to make ends meet in this impoverished country. It is estimated that fewer than three million Mpingo trees remain in Africa, yet every year more than 20,000 are felled in Tanzania alone.

Within Africa several generations of woodcarvers have relied on Mpingo for their livelihood, including the Kamba artists of Kenya and the Zaramo and Makonde artists of Tanzania. The Makonde carve intricate inspirational and creative works based on their religious and philosophical background. They are known for their “tree of life” sculptures that utilize a single tree trunk to carve a column of dozens of small intertwined ancestral figures, displaying the connectedness and interdependence of all human life. Makonde art is displayed in museums throughout the world.

African Blackwood is also used by U.S.

and European wood artisans who practice a rare form of lathework called ornamental turning. Their techniques rely on the excellent machining properties of the wood in order to produce the highly defined geometric patterns characteristic of the work.

In traditional African homesteads, the tree is important for domestic uses such as fuel, building materials, medicine and animal fodder. In the Miombo woodlands of East Africa, its natural range, it provides habitat and food for animals. It is important as a soil enhancer because its roots support bacteria that fix nitrogen in the soil.

These are the contributing factors that have brought the hardy African ebony and Tanzania's national tree to the brink of extinction. Neither the commercial musical instrument manufacturers nor the Makonde wood carvers replant the tree in the wild, probably due to its long maturity status. Following massive exploitation by wood

carvers and musical instrument makers, the African Blackwood, also popularly known as the musical tree, is now extinct in Kenya, parts of Mozambique and was, until a few years ago, taking its last kick to be completely wiped off the face of the earth.

However, due to the visionary work of Sebastian Chuwa, a respected Tanzanian botanist and an Mpingo expert, the tree is slowly regaining its place in the bush lands and homesteads of Tanzania. Says Chuwa, "It is amazing that when I was little I could not see the peak of Kilimanjaro from our home because there were so many tall trees everywhere ... This has worried me very much and I have resolved to spend my time in helping to correct the factors that have caused (this) to happen."

Chuwa long worried about the fate of the Mpingo, which seemed to have escaped attention. "In spite of its great importance, there have been almost no efforts to monitor or conserve it," he laments.

In the early 1990s, Chuwa embarked on an active campaign to correct environmental damage on Kilimanjaro by focusing on tree planting and environmental education. He established a tree nursery in his back



Dried, cut log, about 8" in diameter. The dense, blackish-purple heartwood is in sharp contrast with the straw-yellow sapwood. Logs are often riddled with defects, such as ingrown buttresses, heart rot, hollow pockets and checks, which make it difficult to obtain completely sound wood for woodworking purposes such as carving and the musical instrument trade.

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yard and began to distribute seedlings into the surrounding areas, educating his neighbors on the basics of conservation and reforestation.

Through his many years of conducting growth experiments with the tree, Chuwa has learned its optimum growth requirements. First, he sprouts the seedlings in a partially shaded seedbed and then plants them in successively larger containers until they are mature enough to be permanently transplanted. He has found that it takes about 15 months until the seedlings are of a size and vitality to resist the fires, drought, and insect depredation that threaten them in the wild. He has held a number of training sessions to teach nursery attendants and interested area residents about Mpingo cultivation.

He went on to establish the Malihai Clubs of Tanzania (MCT) in 1992, modeled after similar youth wildlife clubs in Kenya and Uganda. Meaning "Living Wealth," Malihai's objective was to teach students how to care for themselves and their surroundings while establishing sound conservation practices and coming to an understanding of the living communities in the African ecosystem and what is needed for them to coexist successfully.

The Malihai have focused on reforestation by establishing nurseries for indigenous tree seedlings, including Mpingo, and later replanting them in deforested regions. The project has been resoundingly successful when they celebrated planting their millionth tree in June 2004.

Says Stella Mang'anya, a leader of the Fonga Women's Group – one of the numerous interest groups initiated by Chuwa, "We discovered that we could combine our efforts, knowledge and experience to solve our difficulties. It was from there we started to clean up our environment because we realized we were surrounded by rubbish and plastic bags, etc." As a result, the group started holding a weekly "Clean-Up Day" in their village for purposes of beautification and sanitation and began to organize initiatives that would have social and envi-



Tree of Life carving by Makonde carvers of Tanzania. This style of carving depicts figures that represent the generations of people building upon the efforts of their ancestors.

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ronmental impact. Chuwa's quest to save the African ebony have seen him gain worldwide recognition and has won numerous awards that include an Associate Laureate Award from the prestigious Rolex Awards for Enterprise in 2002 for his design of a five-year program that would take his environmental programs into other areas of northern Tanzania, thereby widening the scope of his work. His work was also recognized by the Salt Lake City Olympic Committee, which awarded him for his exemplary conservation and environmental awareness campaigns. He received the award in Salt Lake City, Utah, during the 2002 Winter Olympics. ⚡