

# CONSERVATION AND CULTURAL ASPECT OF *Mkilau fragrans* Verdc PRODUCTS FOR WOMEN EMPOWEREMENT

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## Introduction

*Mkilua fragrans* Verdc belongs to the Annonaceae family and is part of the biological diversity of the coastal forests of east African coast region.



The Swahili and Digo communities of the kenyan coastal lowlands have engaged in traditional perfumery using various plants and *Mkilua fragrans* being one of the major sources. Drawing from the semi-structured interviews using questionnaires, open-ended focused group discussion that involved 30 *Mkilua* growers and enterprenuers of *Mkilua* products, residing in Kwale, Mombasa, Kilifi and Lamu counties of Kenya respectively. It was established that *Mkilua* enjoys a considerable *ex situ* conservation and the mkilua flower is known for its aphrodisiac power to keep men (husbands) indoors after sun-set. There are also beliefs related to *Mkilua*, one of which is the use of 'fish water' washings ("*maji ya samaki*") for fertilizing the *Mkilua* plants, which enhances the plant vigor, flower quality and its scent which was scientifically proven to show that indigenous knowledge have scientific basis; where culture meets science . However, among the growers, only a few consider their engagement as a commercial practice, despite the existence of an opportunity to use *Mkilua* to substantially contribute to domestic up keep as its products are heavily used in weddings and in political rallies.

## Conclusion

Opportunities for the Mkilua growing to turn commercial do exist, with potential to contribute to household economic inputs considerably. The challenge is identifying the markets and markets creation through value addition

The Research project has a chance here to ensure an indigenous knowledge and practice is maintained in the lives of the coastal communities, through value chain addition which will encourage growers and users, while at the same time economically empowering the women folk. The sale of the mkilua products creates employment which then contributes to the national growth

## Results and Discussions

The main plant part from *Mkilua* that was most valued and used was the flower. The flowers were used as a 'perfume' in bed-rooms, where women spread fresh, raw flowers on bed just before night fall. This activity was believed (by some) to have an aphrodisiac power and keep men (husbands) indoors after sun-set.

The growers shared the Mkilua (flowers) with friends, relatives and neighbours for free or at a very small fee that does not meet the threshold of commercial recognition, i.e., not contributing significantly to the household income. There were no permanent markets for most growers, except for those in Mombasa and Malindi urban areas where creative and artistic professionals make Swahili version of flower adornments known as *Kikuba*, *Kishada*, *Koja* and *Joho*. These are made from a collection of flowers including *Mkilua*, *Ylanglang*, *Jasmin*, *Rose*, and *Nargis*. A *koja* is an adornment of flowers worn around the neck" especially by brides during wedding ceremonies; and by special guests and dignitaries in celebrations and political functions. These intensely sweet, warm floral products provide potent aromas that are known to have antidepressant characteristics. These flower decorations are worn by brides or dignitaries during eventful occasions and ceremonies.



The users of *Mkilua* were said to be mainly women, and few men only use them by placing them under their Islamic hats (*kofia*) as shown in Plate 3 or inside their front shirt or *kanzu* (Islamic white robe) pockets

