



From Leaves to Furniture, The Story of a Furniture Builder

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Hyphaene coriacea (*minala* in the local language) is a multi-use palm, widely distributed in the coastal plains of southern Mozambique. Various parts of this species are harvested by local people to develop a range of products including traditional beverages from the sap, and leaves for roofing, fencing and weaving, all of which play vital roles in the livelihoods of local people. The strength and length of the leaf fibres characteristic of this palm (Fig. 1), make them particularly suitable for use as weaving material to produce baskets, sieves, mats, brooms, furniture and other utensils. Prior to being used for weaving, the leaves are collected before fully open, split into strands and then dried (Fig. 2). Raul Sebastião Nhancume is a furniture builder who makes a living using the leaves of this palm species.

Raul Sebastião Nhancume was born in 1982 in Maputo city, where he grew up and went to school. He completed 8th grade and had to stop his studies since he could not afford to pay school fees and to buy school supplies. In the beginning of the year 2000 he moved to Xai-Xai

city, in Gaza province, to help his parents in their fields. However, he did not adapt well to his new life, so in 2001 he decided to return to Maputo city. In 2002, he started working for his cousins to build furniture using palm leaves. He worked for about a year, during this period he learned to make furniture using *Hyphaene coriacea* leaves and started mastering this art. Since he was not getting a salary, in 2003 he accepted a job offer in Ponta de Ouro, a small tourist village in southern Mozambique, to also work in a furniture making enterprise using the palm leaves. He stayed in his new job for about two years. Because Raul Nhancume wanted to start his own business on furniture building, he saved part of his salary and bought a plot of land in 2005.

Since then, Raul Nhancume has been working in his own workshop and has two employees that help him manufacture the furniture. In his workshop, he manufactures sofas, armchairs, coffee and dining tables, chaises, shelves, beds and bedside tables (Figs. 3 and 4). He considers the sale of palm leaf furniture in Ponta de Ouro as profitable because there are very few other producers in the village and that it is frequented by many tourists from neighbouring South Africa, who are the main buyers of his products. To reduce the costs related to the furniture making, he had to learn to weld the iron framework on which the palm leaves are woven, so he would not need to hire a welder. He presently earns an average annual net profit from the sale of palm

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Fig. 1 *Hyphaene coriacea* palm whose leaves are used as weaving material (top) and *Hyphaene coriacea* unopened leaves (bottom)



Fig. 2 Splitting (top) and drying (bottom) the leaves



Fig. 3 Furniture set made with the leaves of *Hyphaene coriacea* palm

leaf furniture, ranging between 100,000 and 160,000 MZM (Mozambican Meticaais) equivalent to 1500–2400 USD per year.

The months of October, November and December, due to the high influx of tourists, are the most profitable with monthly profits around 25 000

MZM (375 USD), comparing with the 5 000-10 000 MZM (75-150 USD) of the remaining months.

With the profits he has earned from the furniture sales he can buy school supplies and uniforms for his two, school-age children. He has built a two bedroom brick home with a dining



Fig. 4 Raul Nhancume standing beside his work



Fig. 5 The small shop owned by Raul Nhancume which he wants to rebuild in the future to make it more attractive

and living area and has bought two radios and two televisions. He also built a small shop where he sells alcoholic beverages to supplement his income (Fig. 5), but the furniture sales provide by far the most income. In the future he would like to rebuild his small shop to make it more attractive.

By way of conclusion he stated:

I am very happy with the decision to open my own business and be able to earn a decent income. I think that I will always work in the manufacture of furniture using palm leaves.