

TALKING MATS GLOSSARY

TALKING MATS

INTERWOVEN HISTORIES - CONNECTING PEOPLES

This glossary brings together terminology related to the handicraft of plaiting, as collected by the Talking Mats (TM) Project team. It emerged from the collaborative workshop held in September 2024, where the encounter with a historical collection of mats in Berlin sparked deep conversations around the vocabulary and etymology tied to mat-making traditions. Participants - many of them native Kiswahili speakers - highlighted the significance of words, technical terms, and local variations when discussing the craft.

The reflections that followed revealed the rich linguistic diversity within Swahili-speaking communities and emphasized the importance of documenting and preserving this knowledge. Since that initial workshop, words have been gathered from various sources: shared by participants during the workshop, noted during field trips by TM team members, and referenced from the book "UKILI - The Art of Plaiting in Zanzibar" by workshop participant Antje Förstle (marked with a ✱ in the glossary).

This booklet presents a compilation of the terminology gathered so far and is intended as a WORK IN PROGRESS. It invites for further contributions - both linguistic and visual - to expand and deepen the lexicon. Visitors to the exhibition, as well as community members and practitioners are warmly encouraged to share additional terms, images, or stories. Contributions will be incorporated as part of a second release of the booklet and in the meantime can be added directly in the printed version or sent digitally to:

digitalesteam_em-aku@smb.spk-berlin.de

At the start of this glossary lies a reflection by Dr. Ahmed Yassin of the National Museums of Kenya and a workshop participant. His poem, inspired by the multiple meanings of the Kiswahili word *vua*, sets the tone for the glossary. *Vua* - which can mean "to take off," "to fish," or "to rain," among others - speaks to the layered, context-rich nature of language, and the many interpretations and associations it holds within Swahili mat-making traditions.

We perceive this glossary not as a final record, but as an evolving resource that will grow through dialogue, shared knowledge, and ongoing cultural exchange.

VUA - VUA (IN THE MEANING OF...)

Poem by Dr. Ahmed Yassin

Vua – open your eyes and look at me; not to discriminate against the blind
Let us advance and go forward, and we shall not contest truth
It is not fair; we shall not strangle, nor shall we pressure the weak (people)

Vua – throwing the fishing rod, low tide in the ocean
You will never really catch a fish, if you just stick a fish onto the hook
This is not an easy task, it requires a master of the sea

Vuana – is to fight each other, it is since time in memorial, not so currently
To throw sticks towards each other, like in the kirumbizi dance
To wrestle and strangle each other, never ending the vengeance

Vua – like taking off one's clothes – it is what an honorable person is told – if it slips off the body, one should stay calm, or it is an embarrassment
So, you must squat (if the clothes slip off the body); this message is for those who understand its meaning

Vua – to fry viholoso sweets, hamri buns and vitumbua
Very exulted breads; my fellow townsmen, you know them all
If you taste it, you want more, we have all experienced it

Vua – draw water from the well, we have enough water points
By the strength of the Merciful, so that we get fertile grounds
And the trees in the fields, let us harvest them and be satisfied

Vua – the rain falling torrential, in showers and with thunder
Lightning and many thunderbolts, exceedingly
This is a new wonder, it has misplaced the seasons

Vua in the meaning of killing, Zirail the angel of death is at work
Ua to kill, don't say it's a kilua flower, nor a rose or a jasmine bud
It is to stop breathing, the Benefactor taking what is His

Vua – meaning God will save me from this and from other calamities
Finally, vuvua – the groan of pain of an ill person, I have come to the end
To those who will solve this riddle, in plain words, let them reveal it!

Vua mato unienge, na pofu tusimtenge
Tushike mbele tusonge, la kweli tusilipinga
Si haki tusimnyonge, mnyonge tusimsonge

Vua kumbiria misi, mai mafu baharini
Katu hutotoma isi, kumwegesha kiovoni
Hili sijambo rahisi, yataka fundi wa pwani

Vuana nikupigana, kwa jadi si zama hizi
Mpweke kurushiana, ngoma kama kirumbizi
Koroto na kusongana, kisasi hawamalizi

Vua nguo kikuvuka, yaambiwa muungwana
Yataka kumakinika, ni aibu kubwa sana
Kututama ni hakika, waloelewa maana

Vua viholoso tamu, hamri na vitumbua
Mikate ilo adhimu, wanati mnaijua Kionda
huishi hamu, sisi sote twatambua

Vua mai kisimani, maziwa kwetu si haba
Kwa nguvuze Rahmani, ili tupate rutuba
Na mimea mashambani, tuvune tupate shiba

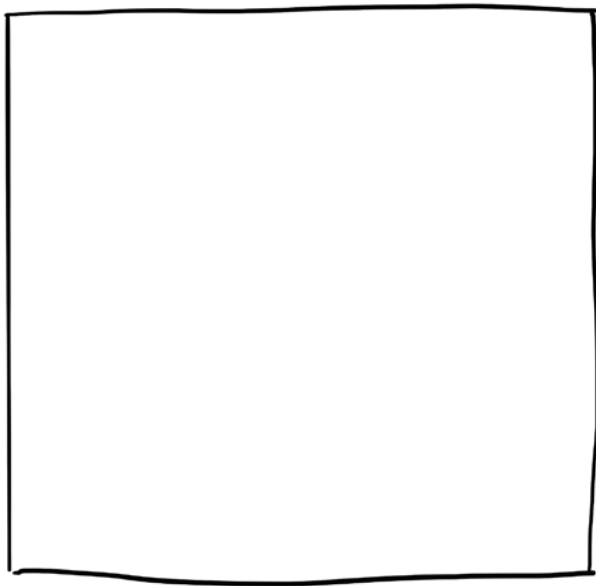
Vua hunya kwa konondo, mitilizi na ngurumo
Radi na wingi mishindo, imekithiri vipimo
Ajabu hii ni mwando, imehalifu musimo

Vua kwa maana ua, ziraili yukazini
Ua usambe kilua, waridi na yasimini
Ni kukoma kupumua, kutwaa chake Manani

Vua Mungu tanivua, anitoe na pangine
Kaditama na vuvua, sikubakisha mengine
Kwa ambaye tafumbua, kwa wazi na waya-nene

A GA

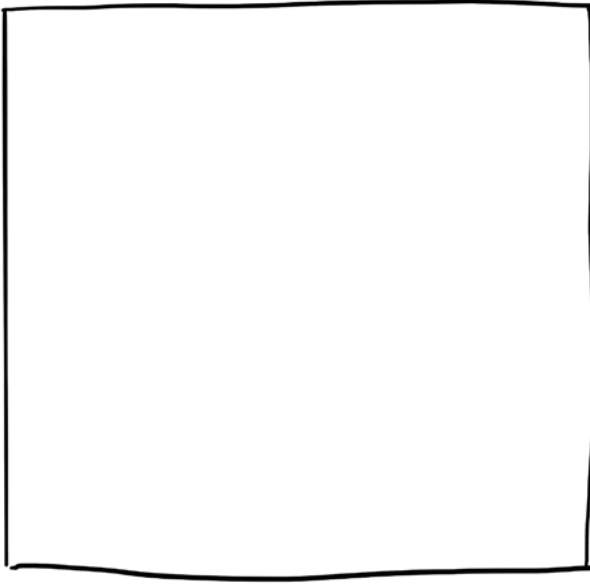
A decorative border woven into Swahili mats, often featuring geometric or floral patterns.



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AROSTO

A sun-drying process
used to prepare palm
leaves before weaving.

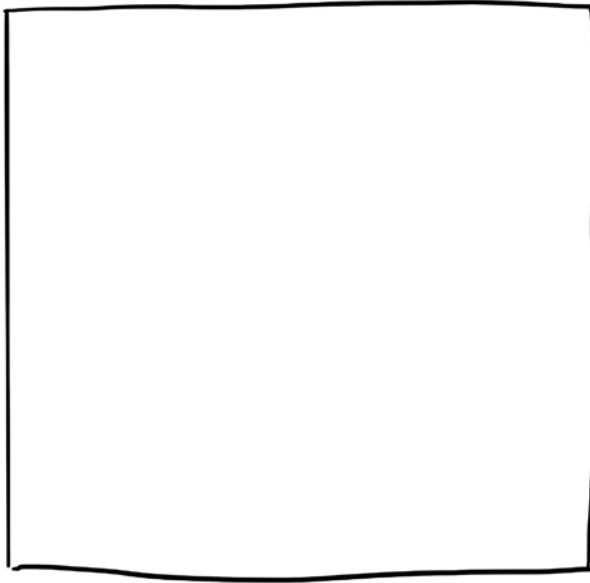


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BACHA LA MZAZI*

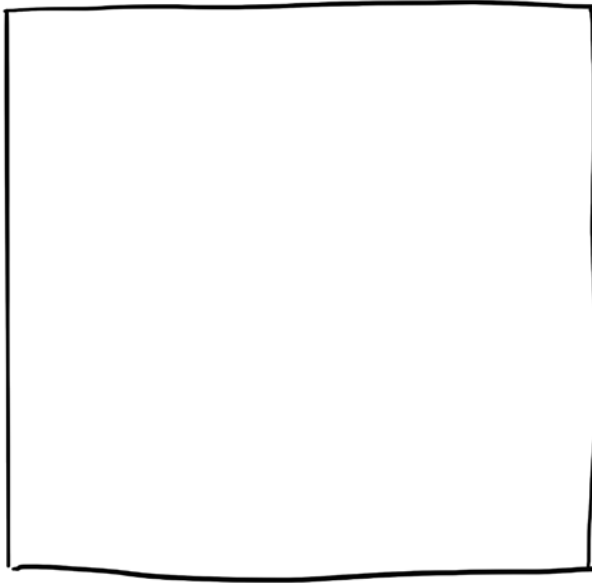
Piece of an old mat on which
women in labour lie or squats
in order to give birth.



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BEMBEA

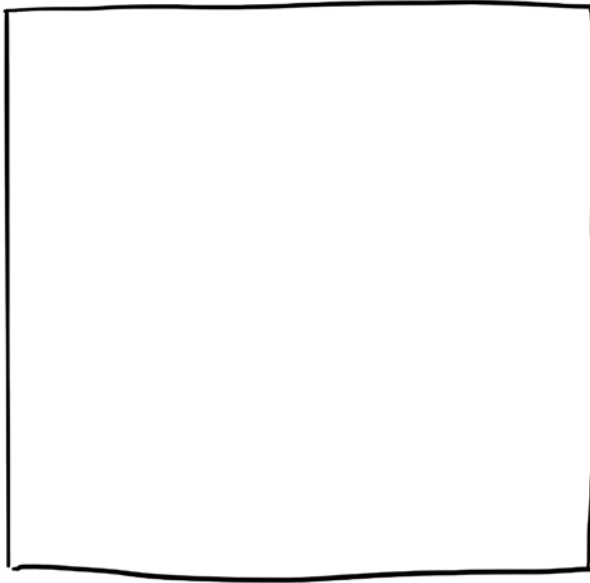
A rocking motion used by weavers to tighten mat fibers during the weaving process.



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B_{UNI}

A type of natural brown dye extracted from tree bark, used to color Swahili mats.

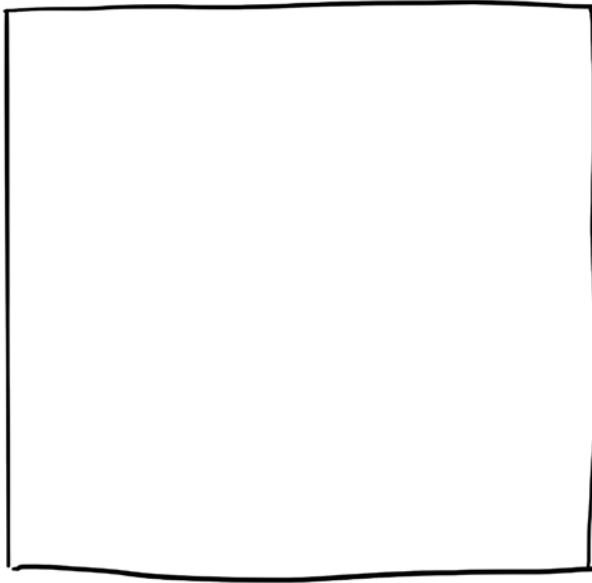


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CHANE*

Fine strips or strands of
the palm leaflet in the
plaited band.

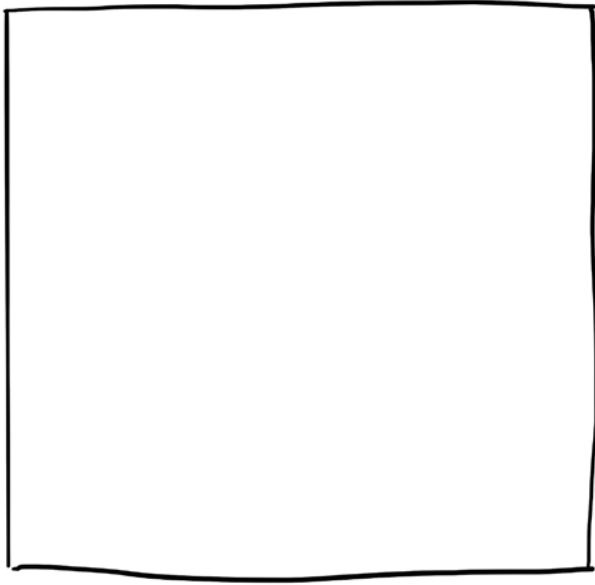


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CHANO

A Swahili term for the fine comb-like weaving technique that creates tightly woven mats.

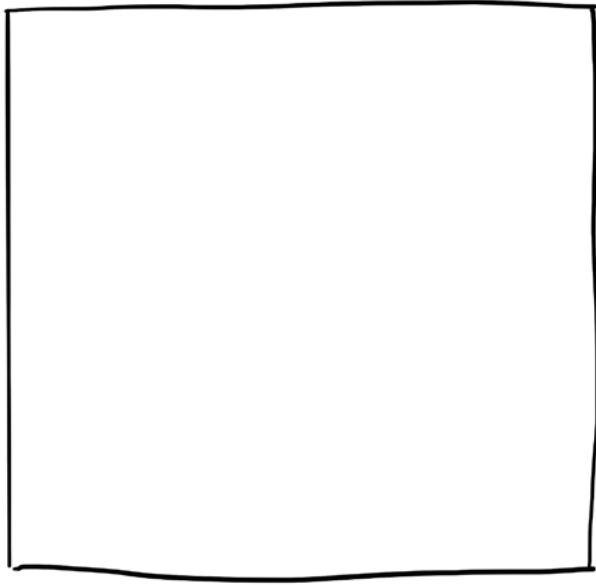


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C HUMA CHA MKEKA

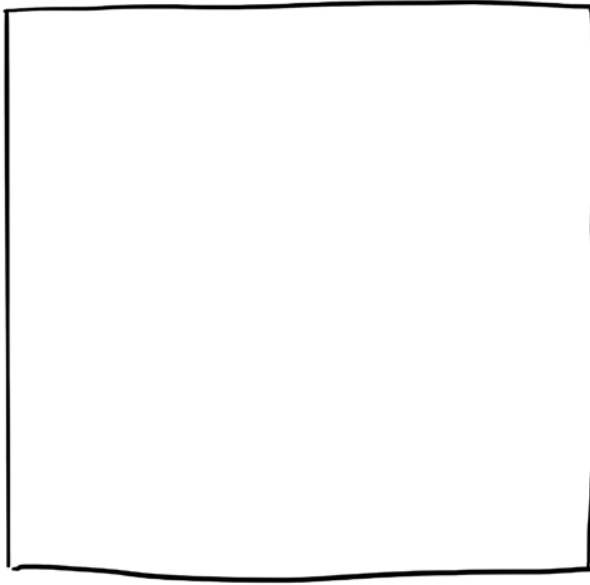
The reinforced edges of a
high-quality Swahili mat,
making it more durable.



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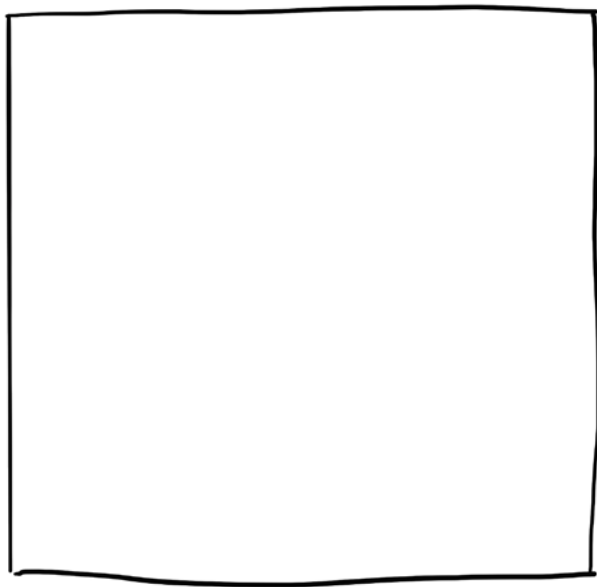
DARI LA MKEKA

A mat used as a ceiling cover
in traditional Swahili homes
to enhance ventilation and
insulation.



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E

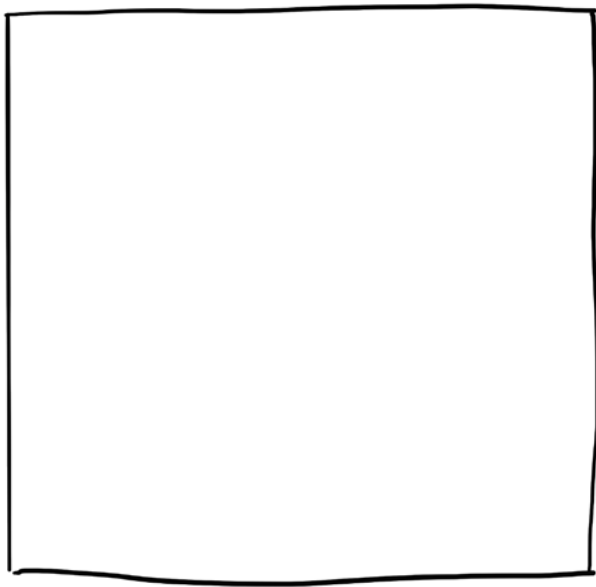


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FUMBA*

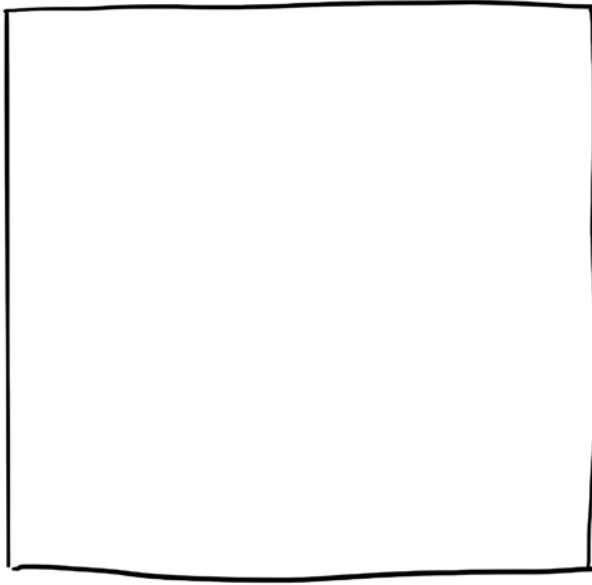
Long sack made from the leaves of the doum palm.



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FUNDO LA MKEKA

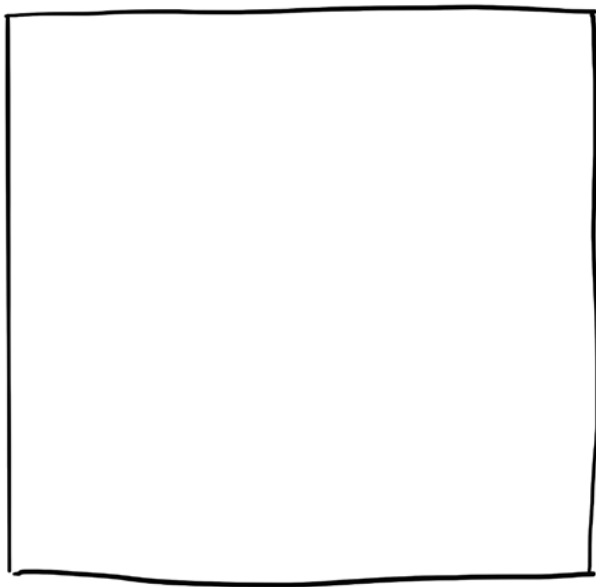
A knotting technique used to
secure woven sections and
create intricate designs.



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G

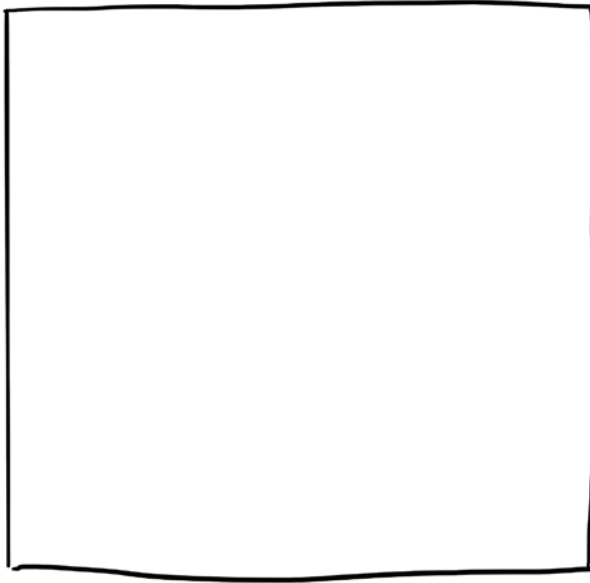


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HIDAYA MKEKA

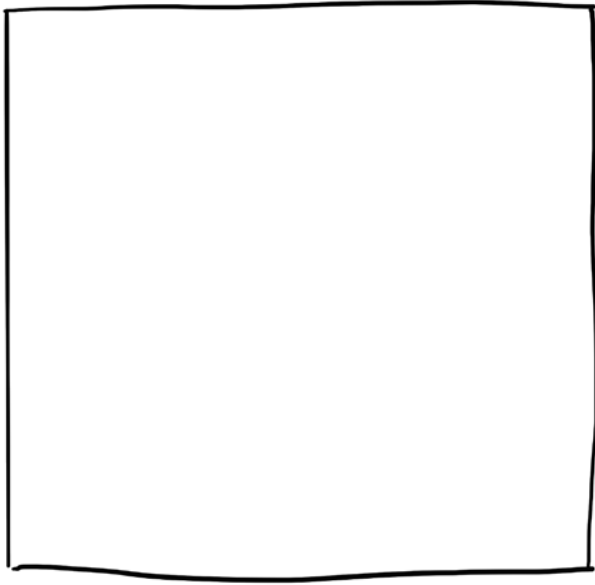
A term for ceremonial mats
given as gifts or dowries during
weddings and important social
events.



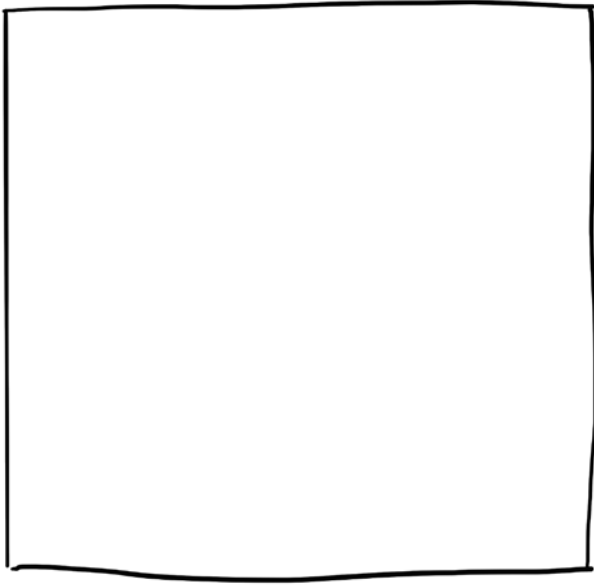
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HUSNI

The aesthetic principle in
Swahili craftsmanship,
emphasizing beauty and
cultural symbolism in mat
weaving.



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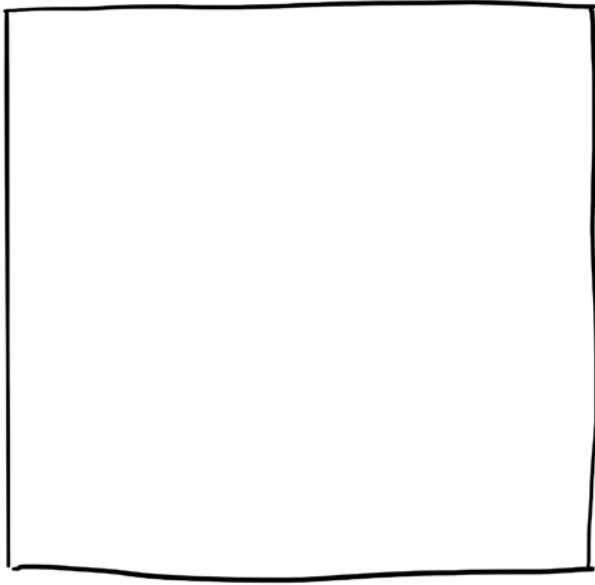


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JAMANDA*

Plaited, round basket with
a lid made from doum palm
fibres, formerly
used to store clothing.

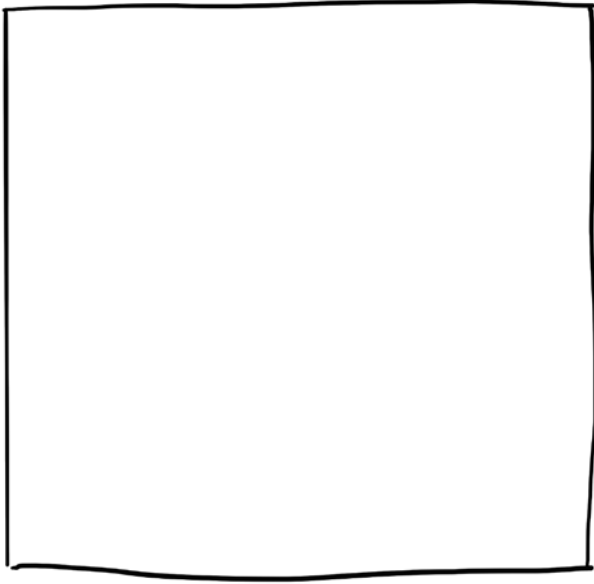


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JAMVI*

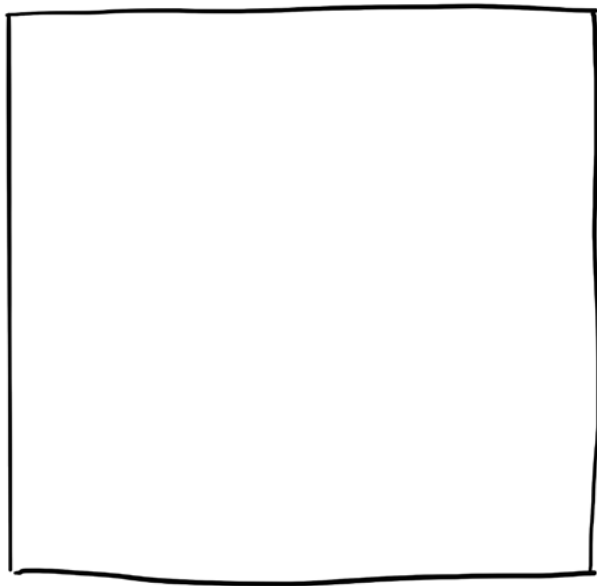
Rectangular coarse
mat made from
dum palm fibres.
See plural: majamvi



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JAMVI LA KIRINGO

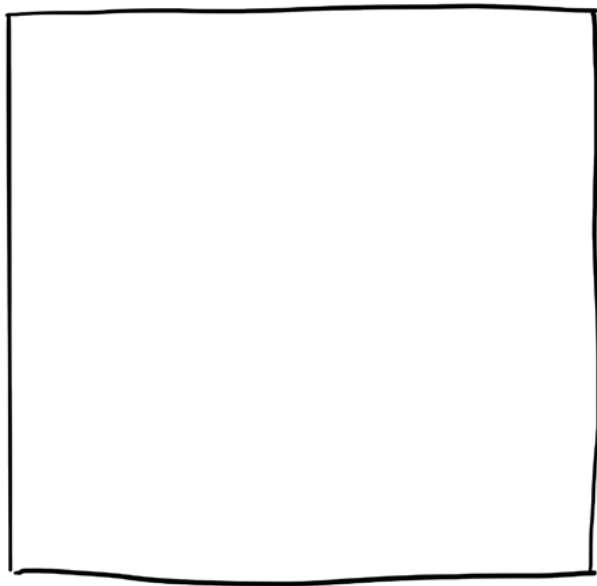
Round mat from
mkoma doum
palm fibres used
for everyday
meals.



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Jicho*

The eye; in the ukili context the strand at the edge of the band, making a kind of loop.



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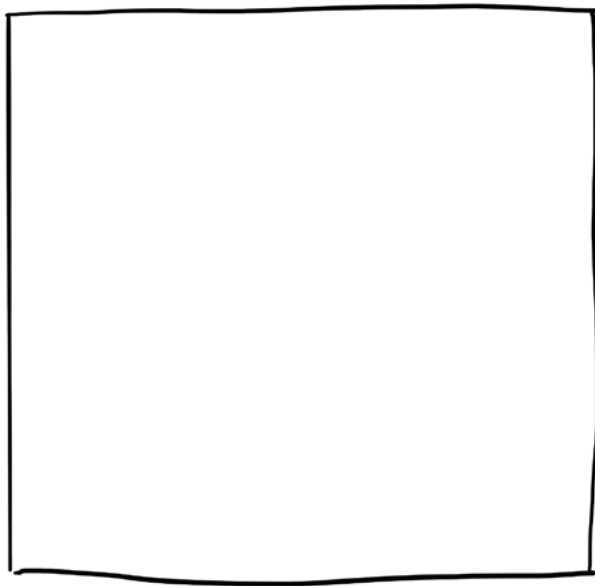


K

TJAA
TAA

ANDA*

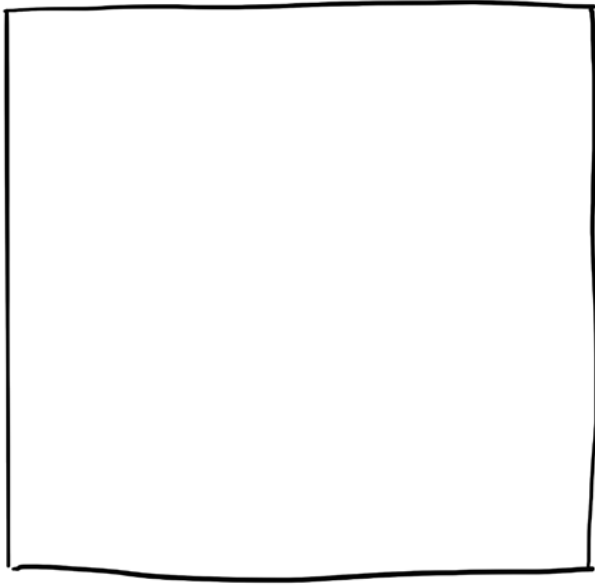
Sack plaited from the fibres
of the doum palm, which
is wide at the bottom and
narrow at the mouth.



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KAPU*

Big round basket
plaited from the
fibres of the doum
palm.

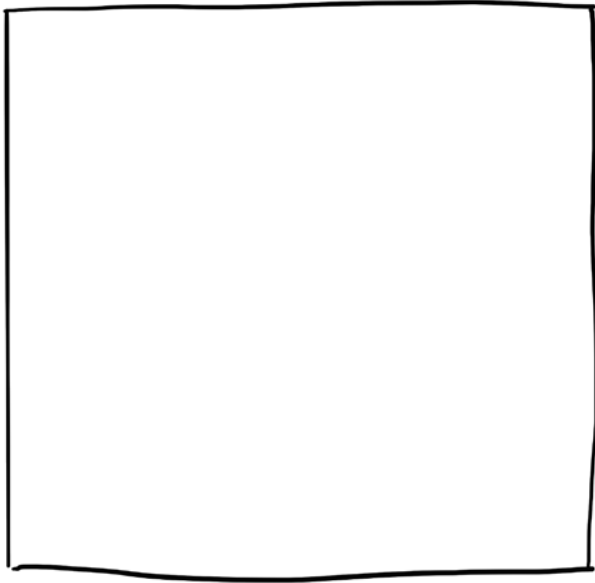


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KAWA*

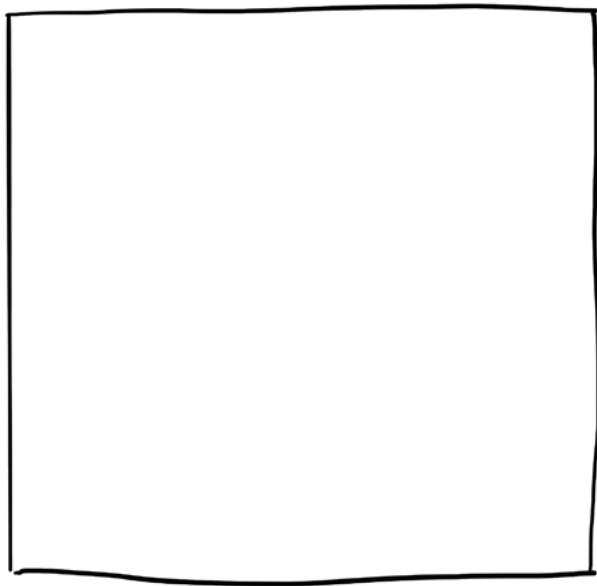
Food cover.



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KIBACHA*

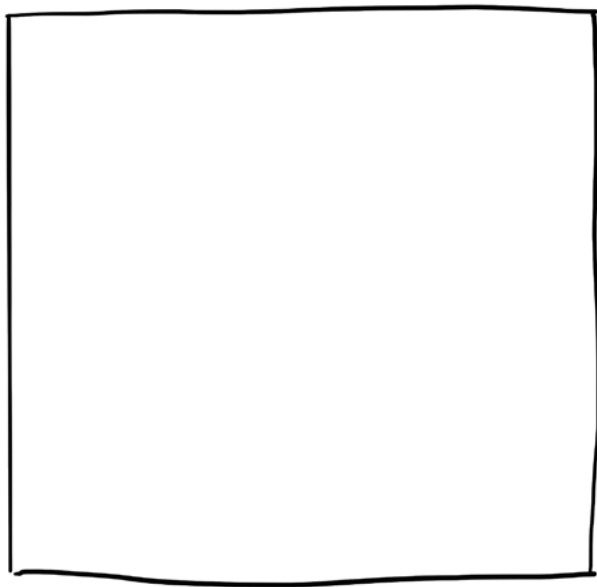
Piece of mat, ukili sewed
together.



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KIBAO*

Wooden box or board
serving as hold when
crafting bags or mats.

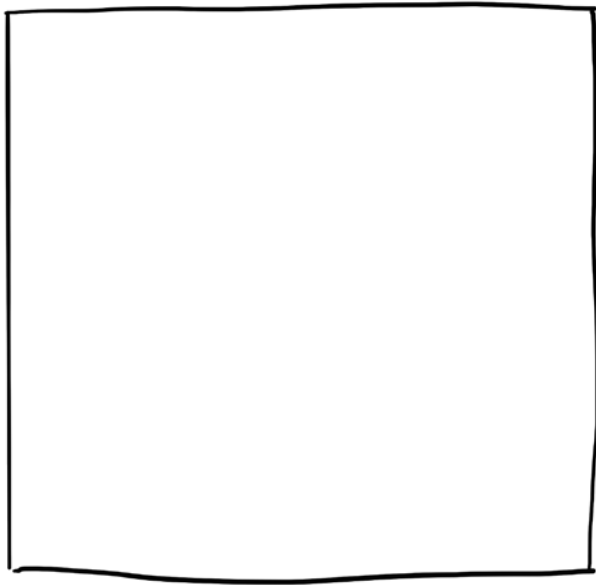


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KADOTI

A technique for creating embossed
or raised patterns on woven mats.

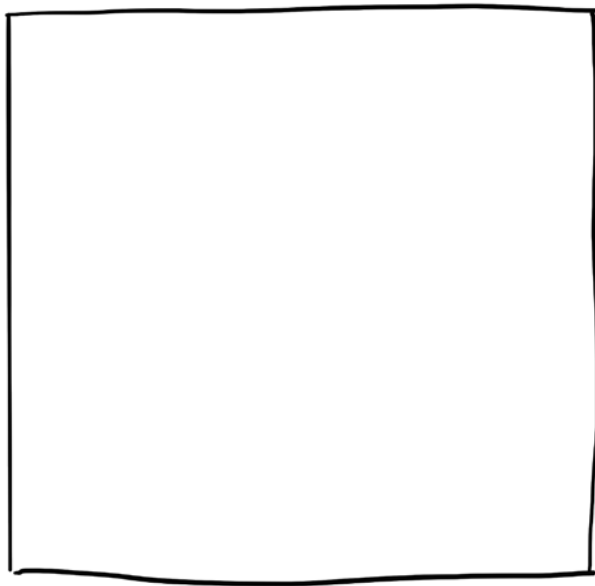


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KIJANI

The natural green color,
retained in fresh palm-
leaf mats before they dry
and fade.

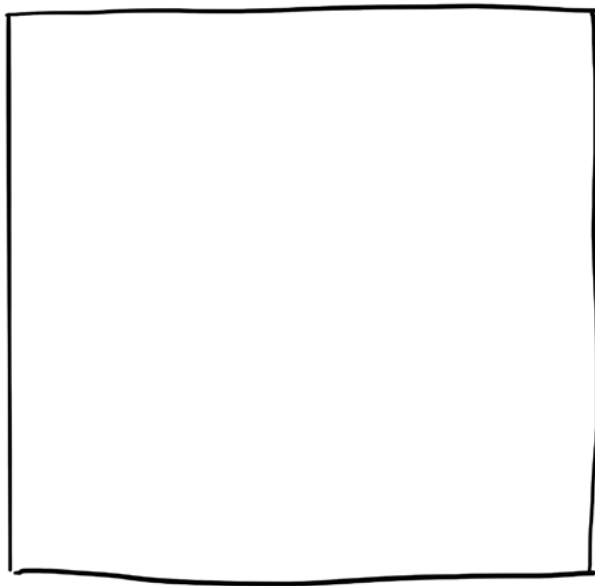


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KISAMVU

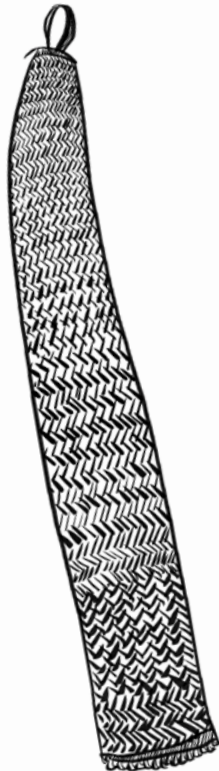
The soft inner part of
palm leaves used to make
high-quality Swahili mats.



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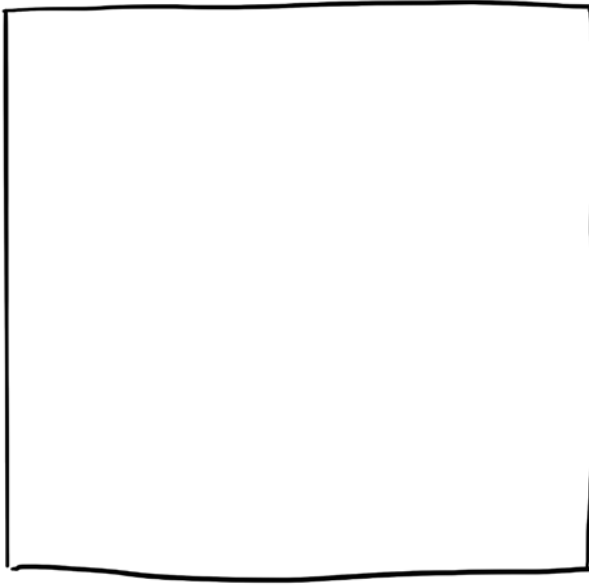
KIFUMBU

Round basket strainer made
of doum palm leaves for
squeezing coconut milk.



KIKATO IGEO

Patterned ukili in the
center of the prayer mat.



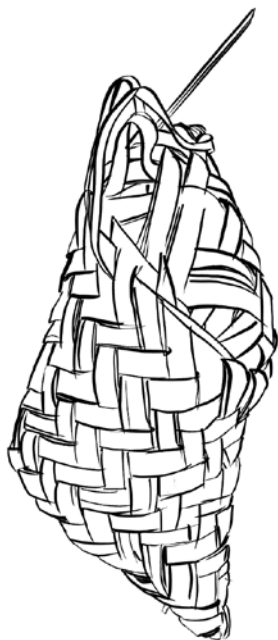
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K

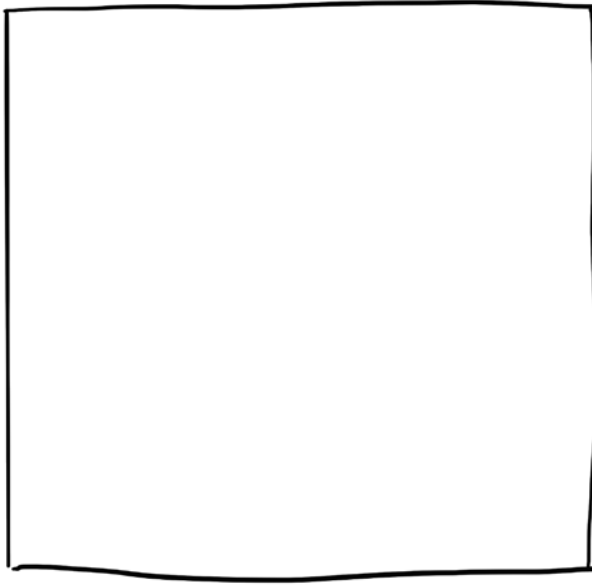
KICHAA
IHALIFA

Small sack made from the
fibres of the doum palm.



KIKAMBA CHA TATU

Three strands go under and over rather than the common two.

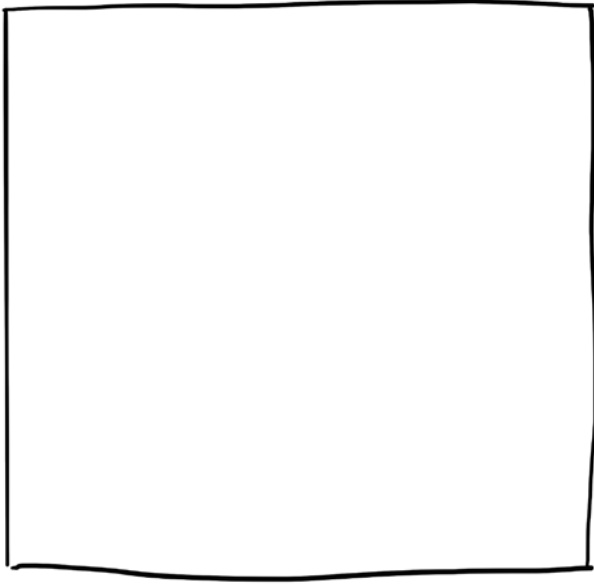


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KIKANDA

Small sack made from the
fibres of the doum palm.

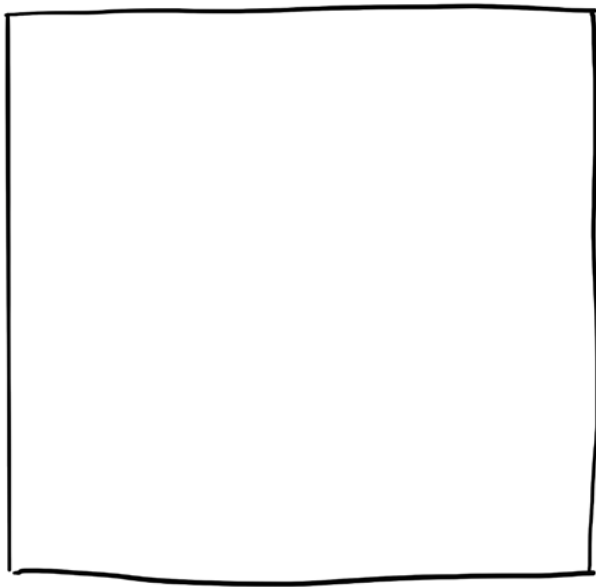


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KIKAPU

Small round basket.

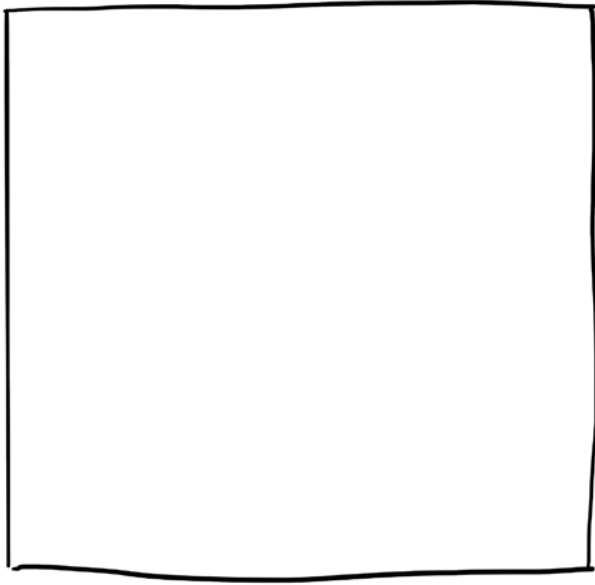


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KIPAKA

Little bag, broad at the bottom, but narrow at the mouth.

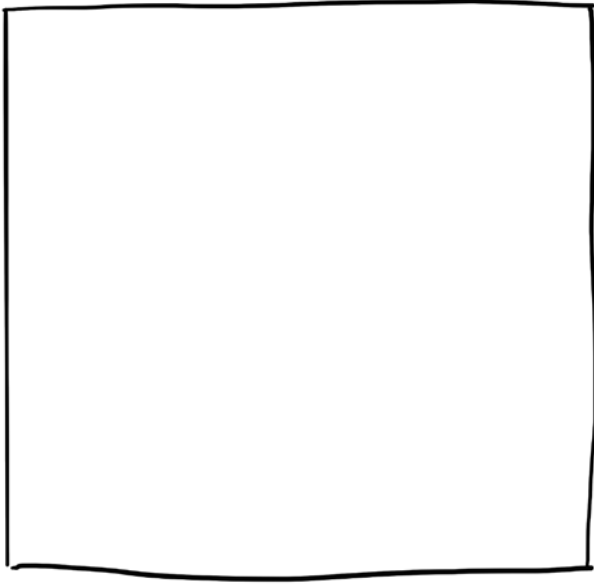


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KIPEPEO

Hand fan from palm fibres.



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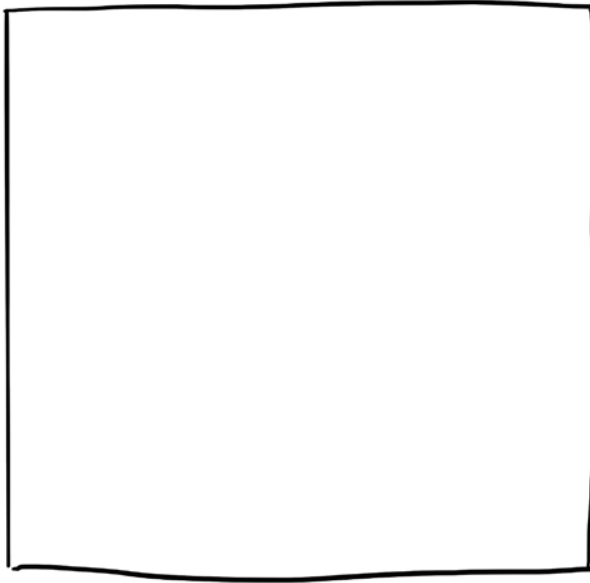


K

KUTAPASA

USUKA

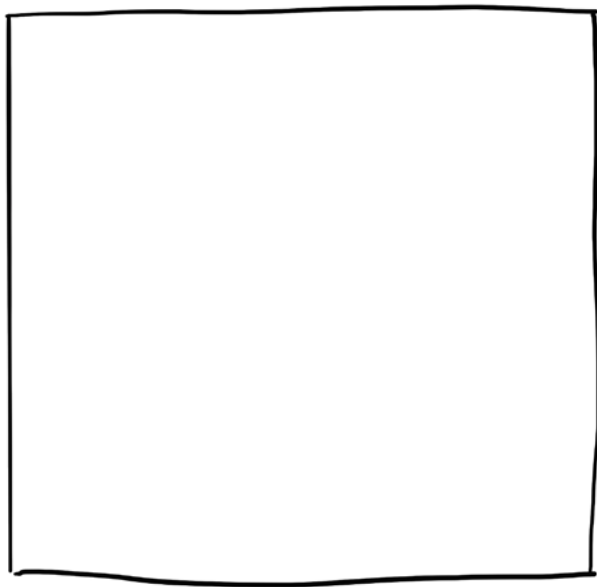
To plait or weave.



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L

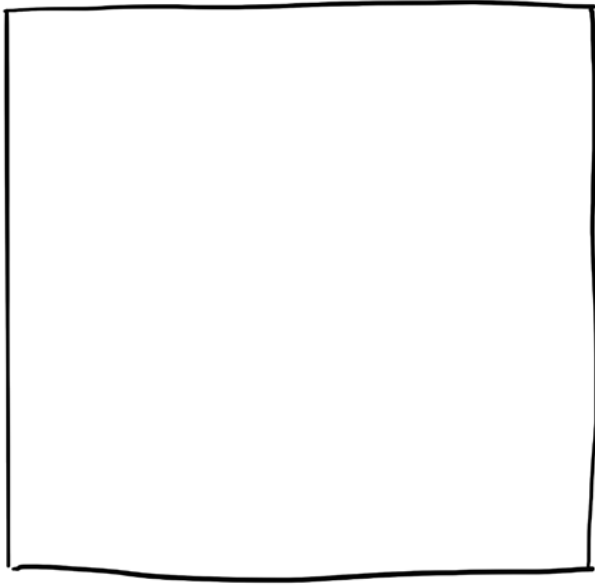


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MACHUPATU

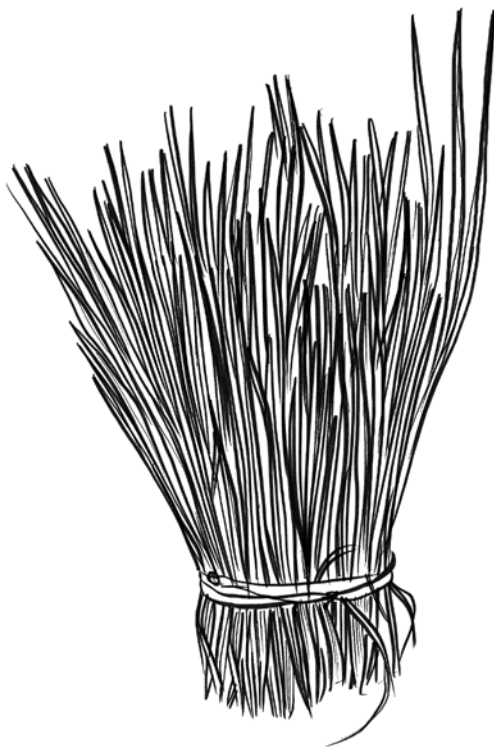
Thicker woven stripes out of doum palm fibres.



contribute with your own drawing here

MARARA

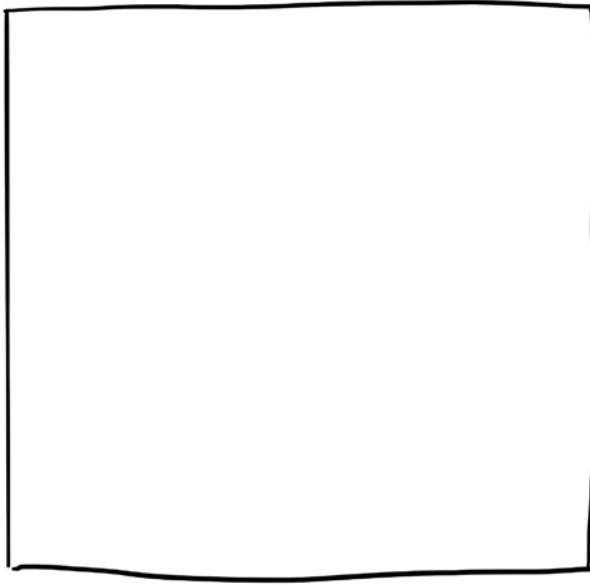
A bunch of doum palm fibres.
See singular: rara



M

AJAMVI

Rectangular coarse mats made
from doum palm fibres.
See singular: jamvi

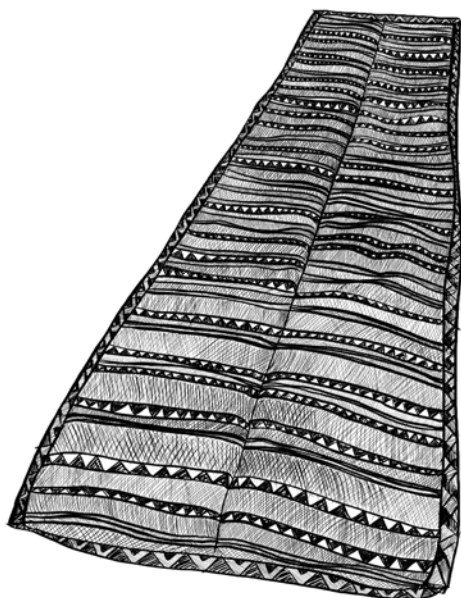
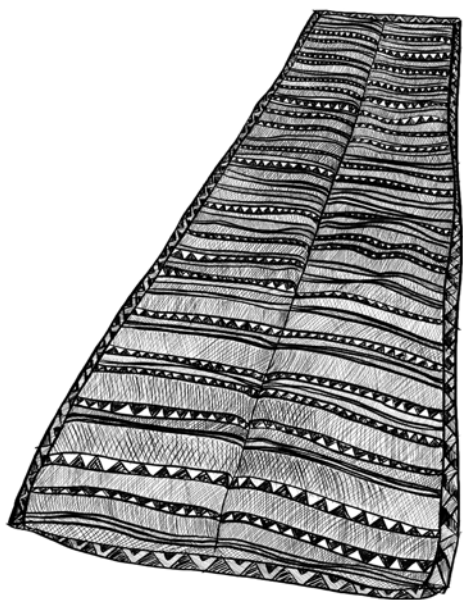


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MATANGA

Big mats, in the past used to lay on the bed beneath the mattress or another smaller mat. The very big mat was used as ship sails before the introduction of canvas sails.

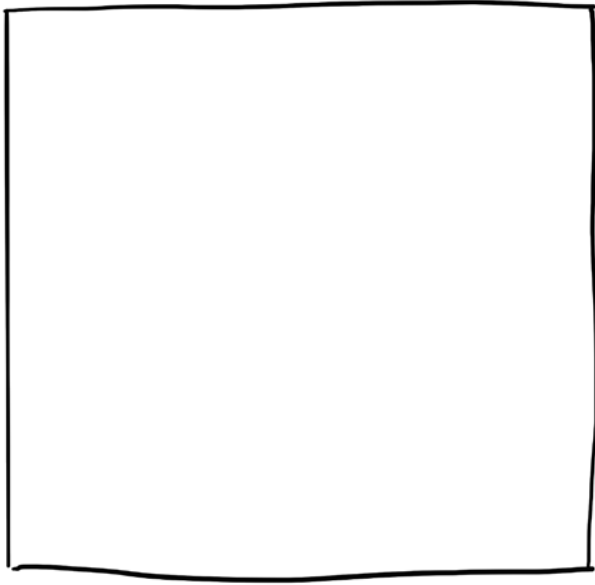
See singular: tanga



M

AZIMBA

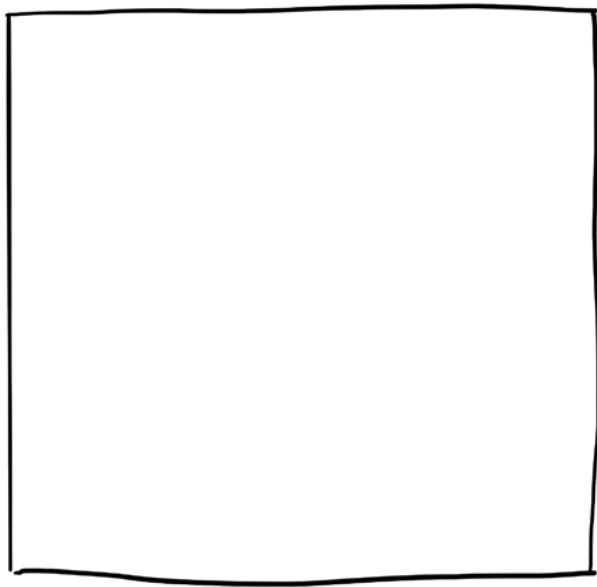
Hard part of doum palm stripes
that is not needed for plaiting, but
burned in order to protect cows
and mango trees from harmful
insects.



contribute with your own drawing here

M BUSTANI*

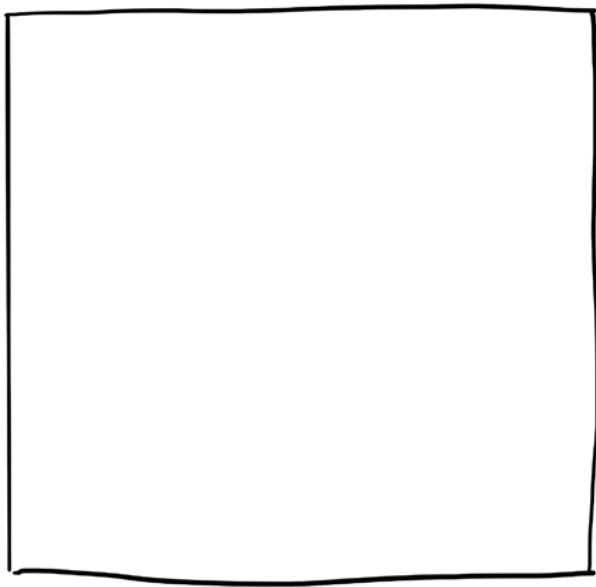
Local bush used for
dyeing a dark brown.



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M_{DAA}

Coral rag tree whose
roots' skin is used to
dye a dark brown.



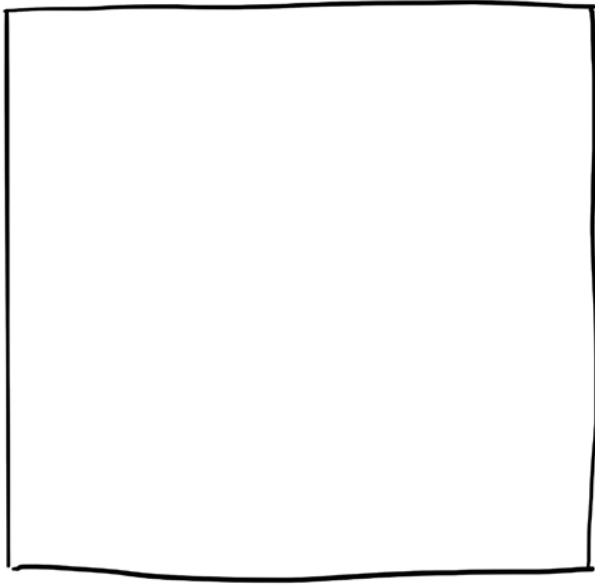
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M

MADAMBA
MSIZI

DAYA

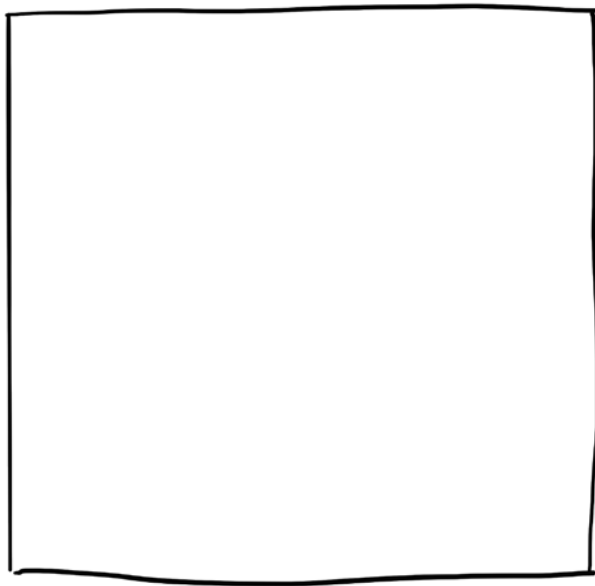
Dried leaves of the wild date palm,
which still contain chlorophyll.



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M MFUO
MFURU
FUU*

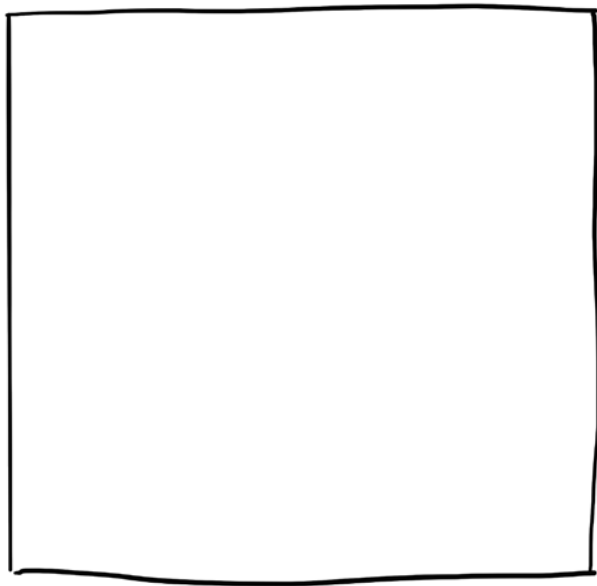
Tree whose leaves are used to dye
a dark brown.



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Mikeka

Mat plaited from wild
date palm fibres.
Plural: Mikeka

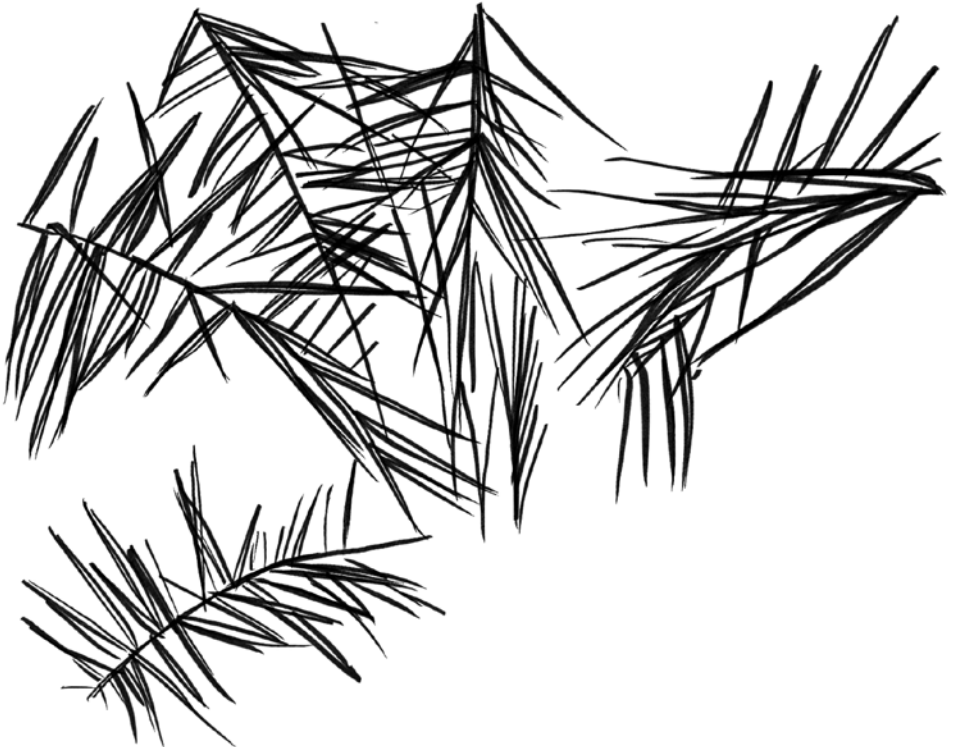


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M KIZAO KINDU

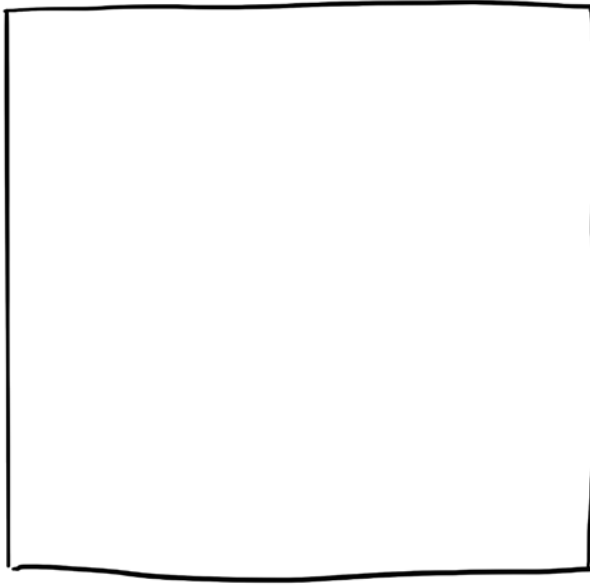
also referred to as wild date palm or Senegal date palm (*Phoenix reclinata*) is a species of palm tree native to Tropical Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Madagascar and the Comoro Islands. In addition to having edible date like fruits, the finely split fibers are used for the production of mkeka and other elaborately plaited artifacts.

Considering the fine weaving and the intricacy of their patterns, the mats held in the Berlin collections are thought to be principally made of mkindu.



M KEKA WA KAWAIDA

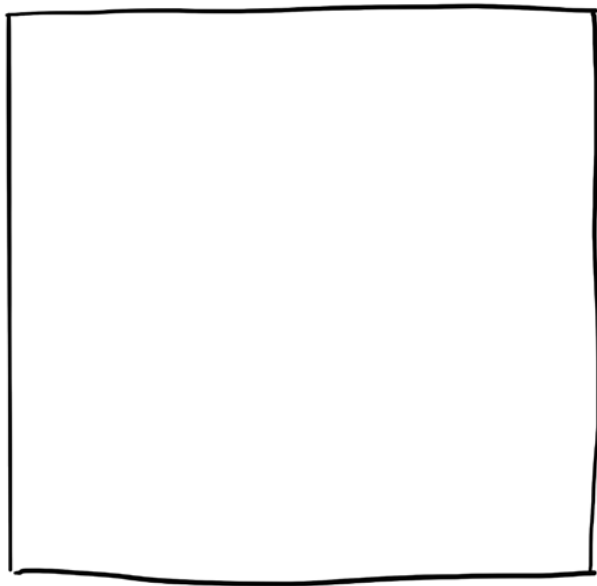
A standard everyday-use mat, often plain with minimal patterns.



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M_KOBA

Bag from any material.



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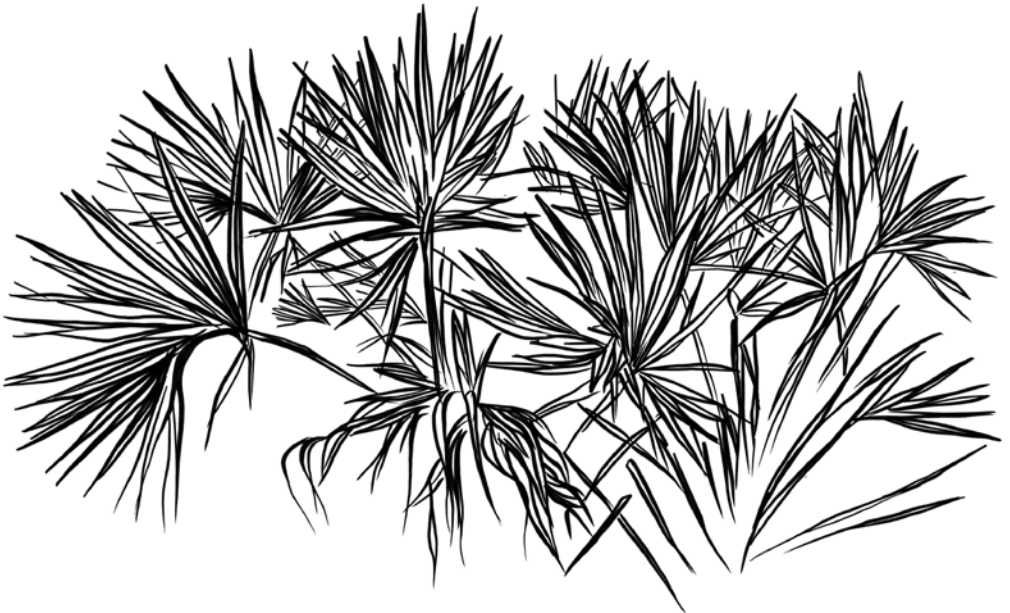


M

MWAA
MKOCHÉ
MLALA
MNYIA

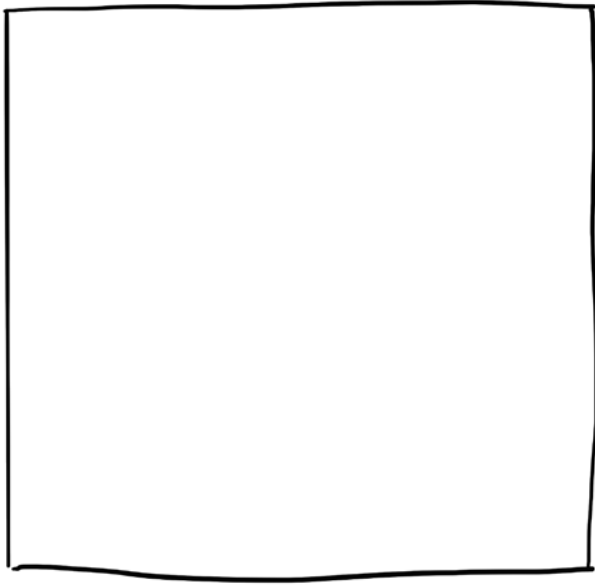
KOMA

Also referred to as doum palm (*Hyphaene thebaica*) is a species of palm tree found native to the Arabian Peninsula and the northern half of Africa, where it thrives and tends to grow where there is groundwater. Strips from mkoma fibres are used to make a variety of products, including large mats often used as flooring, such as majamvi or matanga.



MKONGOWELE*

Acacia used to craft needles.

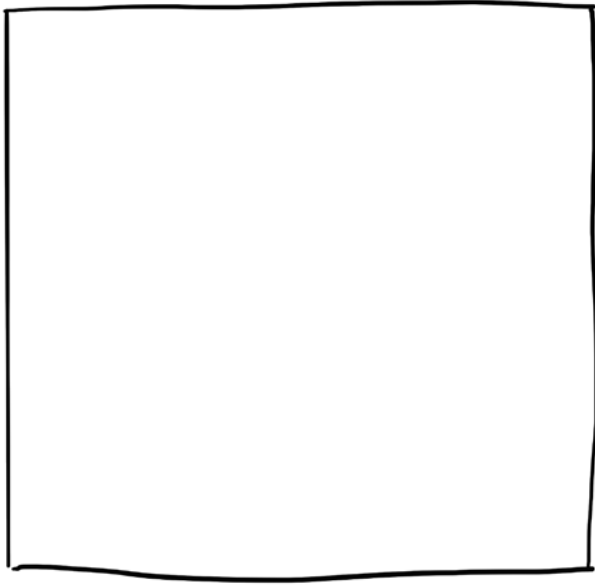


contribute with your own drawing here



MKONGE

A strong fiber derived from sisal, used in mat weaving for extra durability.

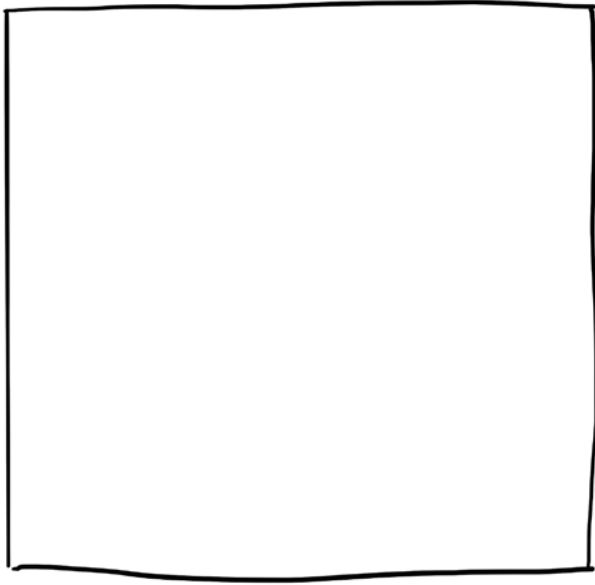


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MKURI

Variety of doum palm tree.

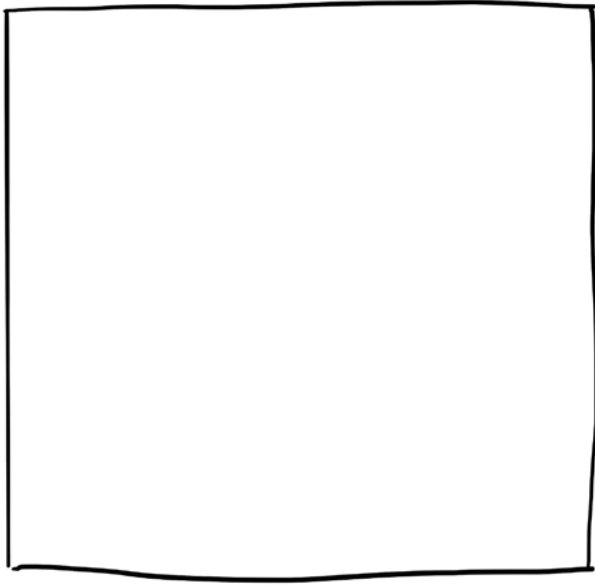


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MKWAMBA MAJI

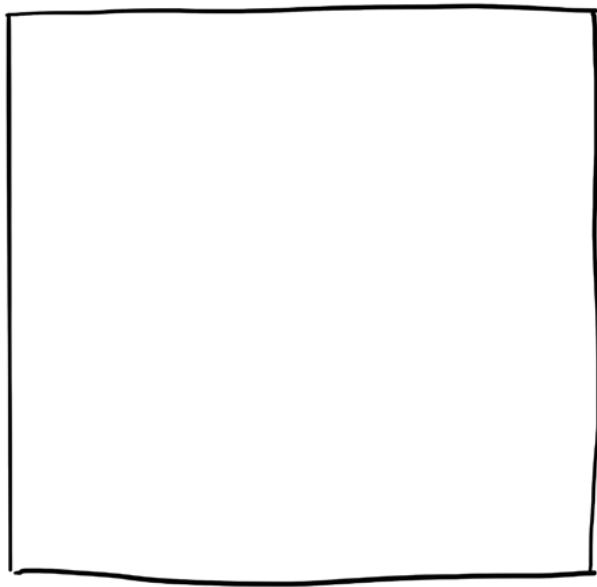
Bush whose leaves are
used for dying a dark
brown.



contribute with your own drawing here

M PINDO*

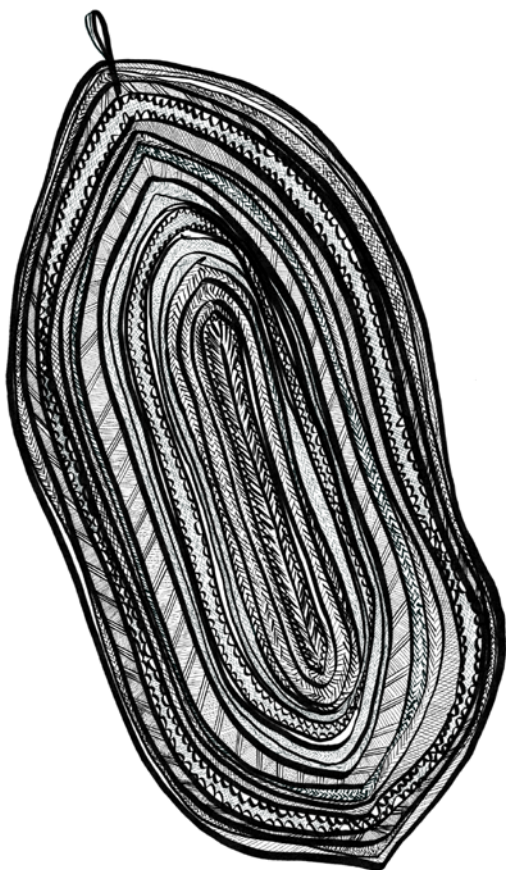
Plaited border or rim of
bags and mats.



contribute with your own drawing here

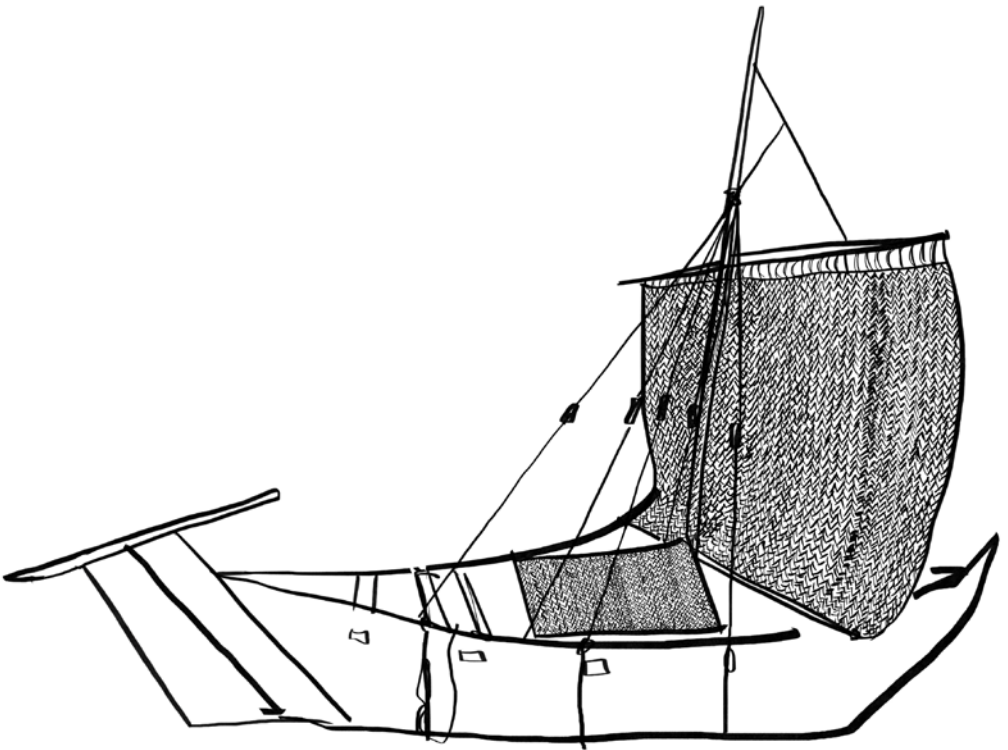
M S(W)ALA

Prayer mat, the natural colored
is used to wrap and burry the
dead.



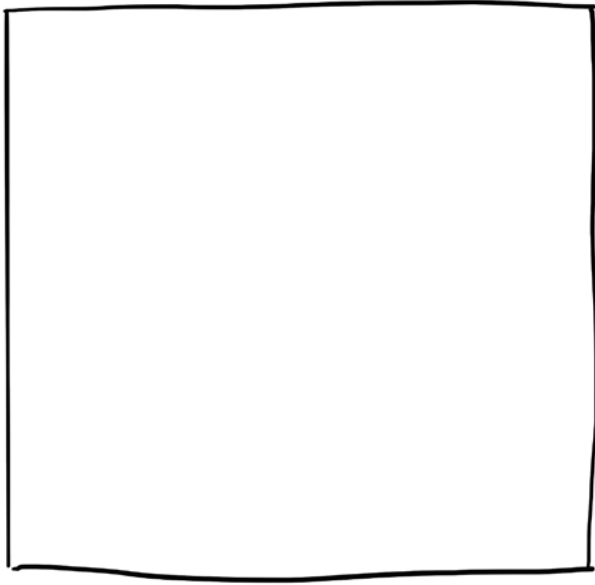
MTEPE

Ship which up to the 1930's
was a common vessel in the
Western Indian Ocean and
which used woven sails.



M_TUTI

Large sack made of the
fibres of doum palm.

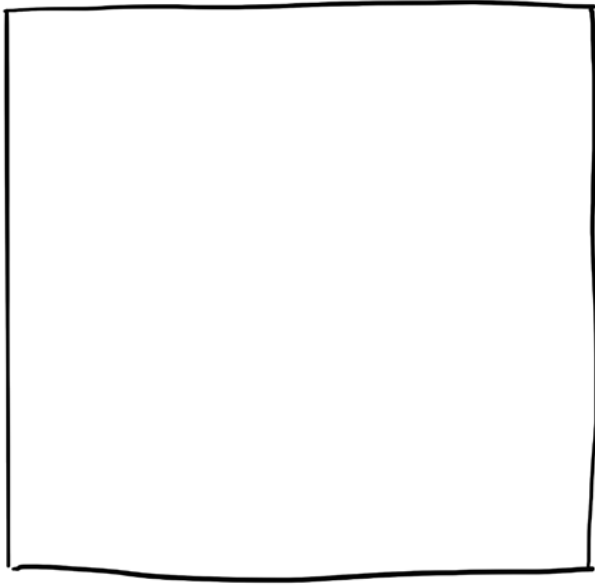


contribute with your own drawing here



MZAMBARAU

Tree whose purple fruits
are edible.



contribute with your own drawing here

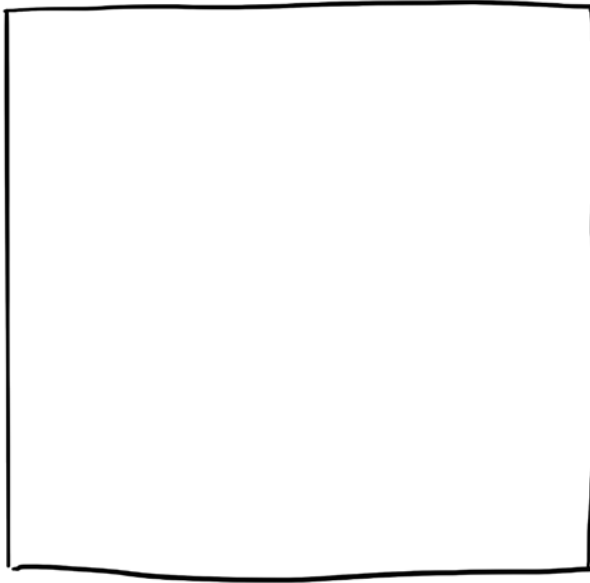


N

MANDASHO
MANYOYA
WATOTO

DASO

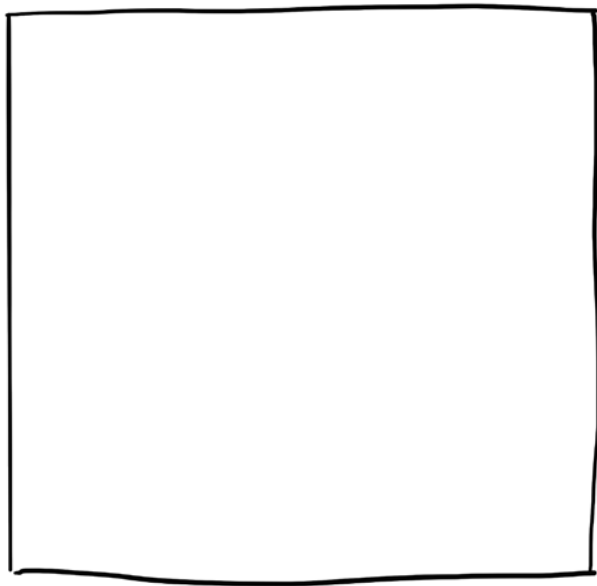
The overlapping or
untrimmed ends of the
plaited strands.



contribute with your own drawing here

N'GONGO

Thicker part of the
doum palm stripes that
are not used to plait,
but to sew together
plaited stripes.



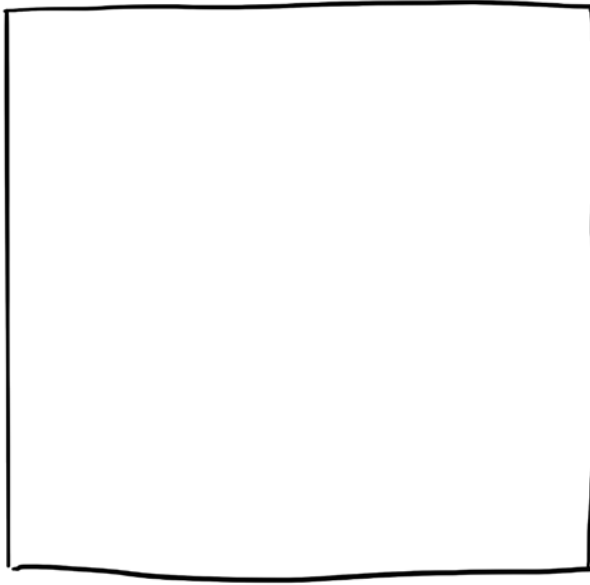
contribute with your own drawing here

N

MSHATU
MSATU

JIA

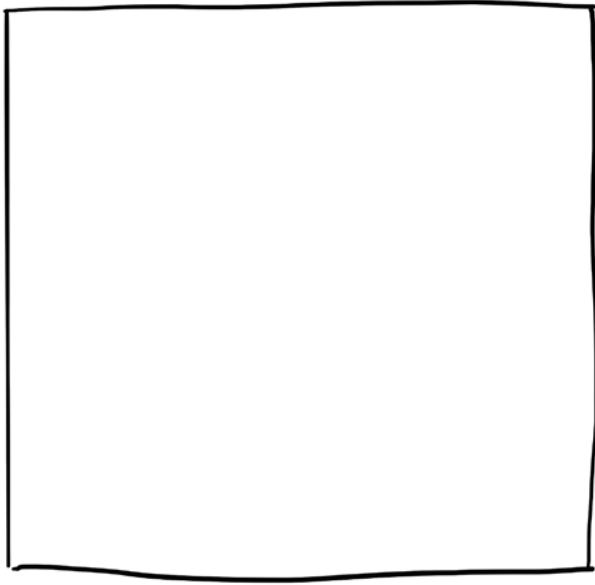
The 'way' where the
plaited strands criss-
cross in the ukili.



contribute with your own drawing here

N GUVU YA MSONGE

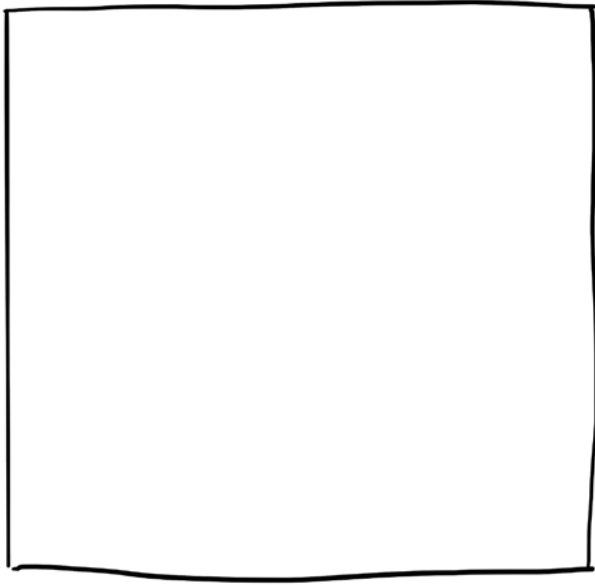
A phrase describing
the resilience and tight
weave of a well crafted
mat.



contribute with your own drawing here

Nyota

A star-shaped pattern commonly found in 18th-century Swahili mats, symbolizing prosperity.

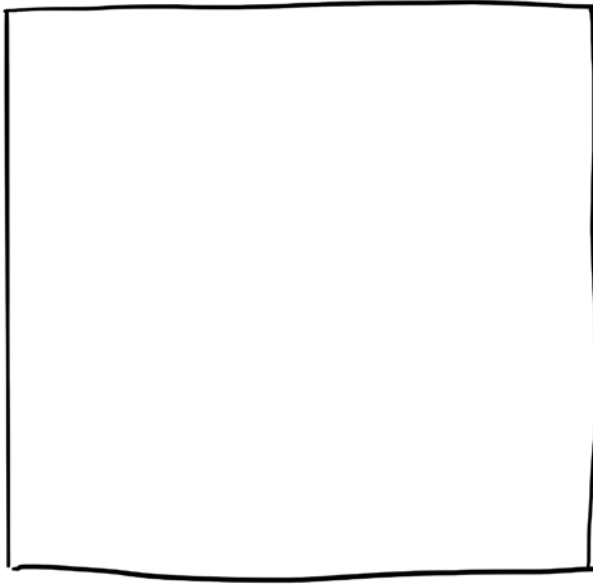


contribute with your own drawing here



N^{YUKUTI*}

The mid rib of the coconut
palm leaf.



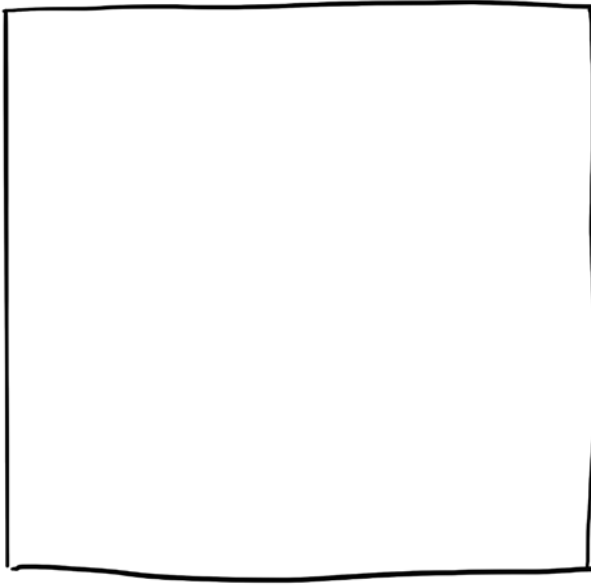
contribute with your own drawing here



N

YIZA*

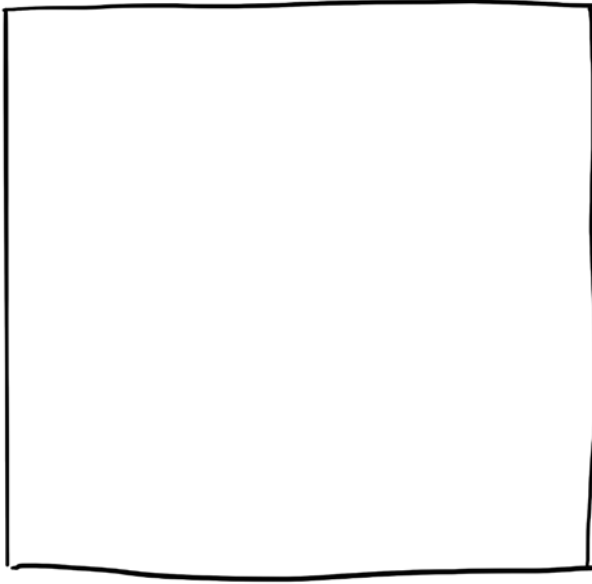
Leaf already split along the
mid rib into chane.



contribute with your own drawing here



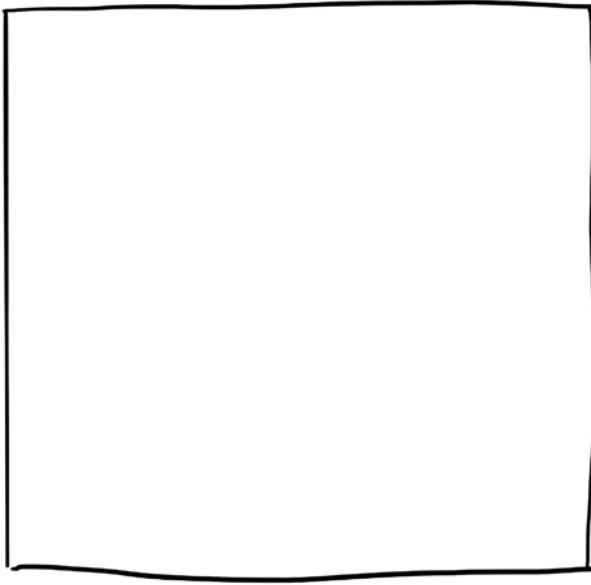
O



contribute with your own drawing here

P AMBA YA ASILI

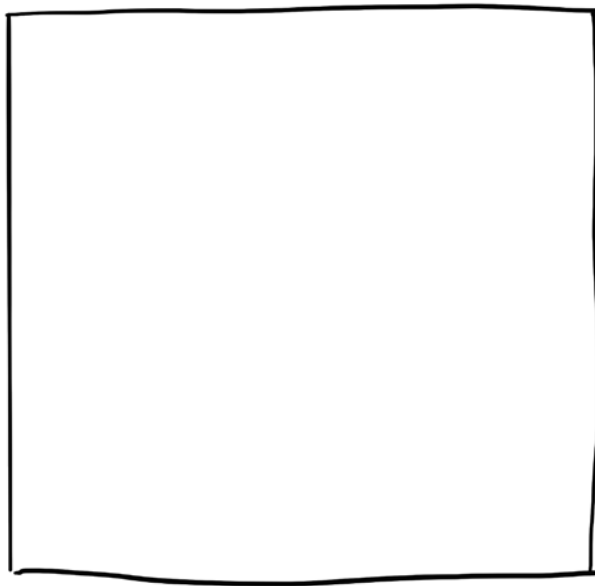
Naturally occurring cotton
fibers, sometimes mixed
with palm fronds for softer
mats.



contribute with your own drawing here

PIMA*

Measuring unit, approx. 160 cm.

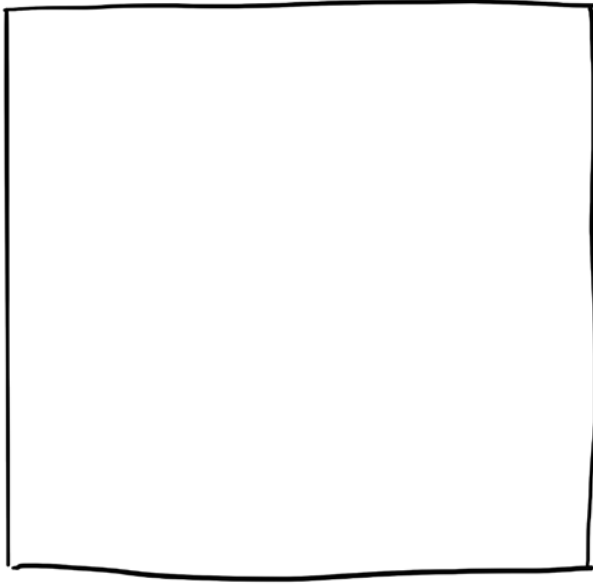


contribute with your own drawing here



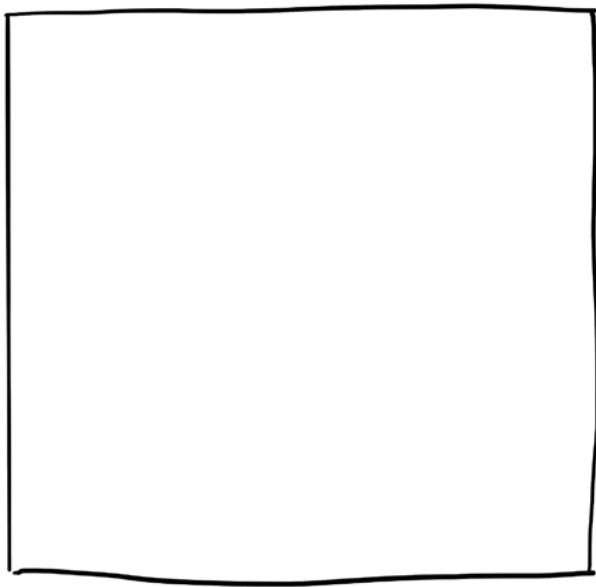
P INDO LA MIKEKA

A decorative fringe or border
on Swahili mats, made by
twisting or braiding the ends
of fibers.



contribute with your own drawing here

Q

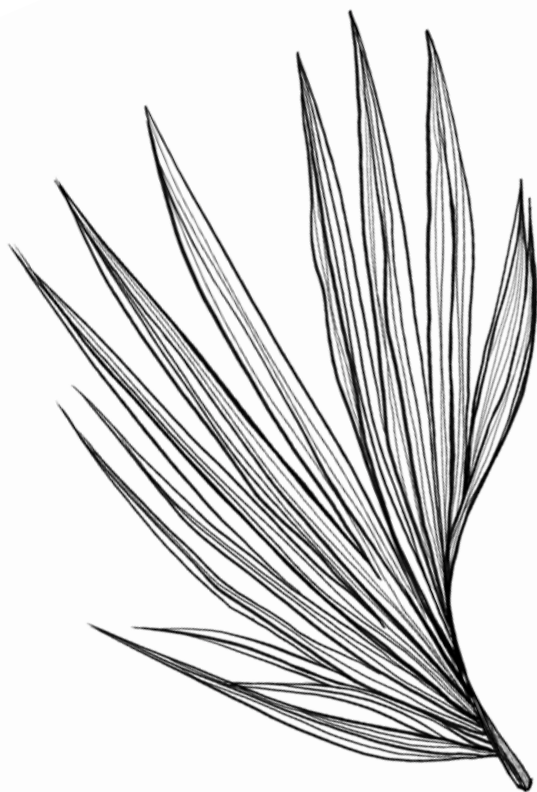


contribute with your own drawing here



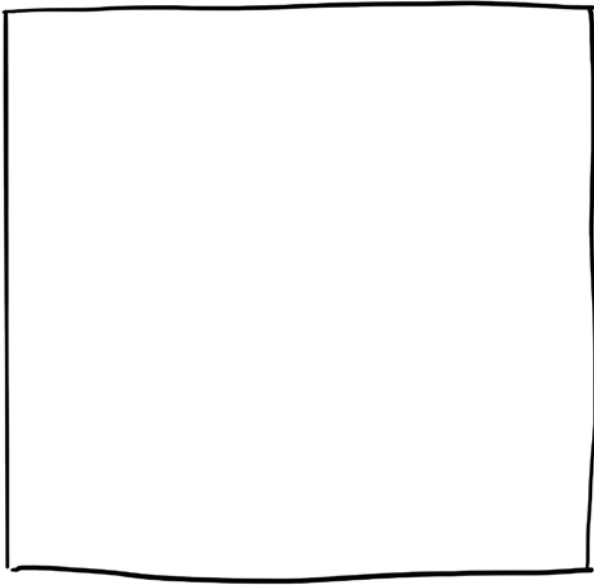
RARA

Doum palm leaf.
See plural: marara



SHAZIA*

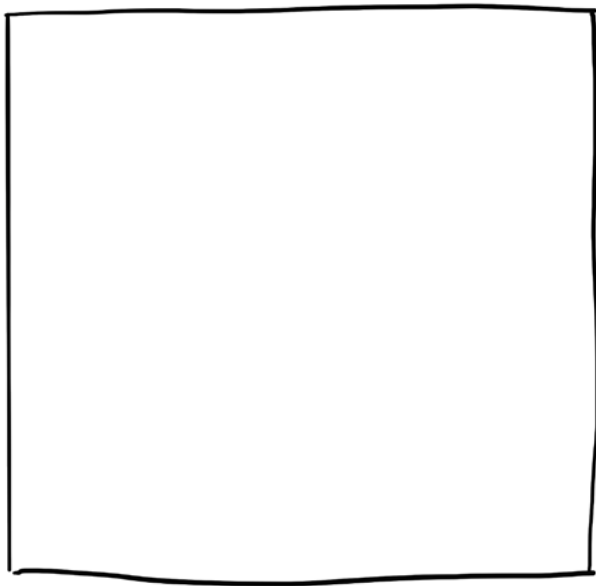
Large needle for sewing.



contribute with your own drawing here

S_{AFU}

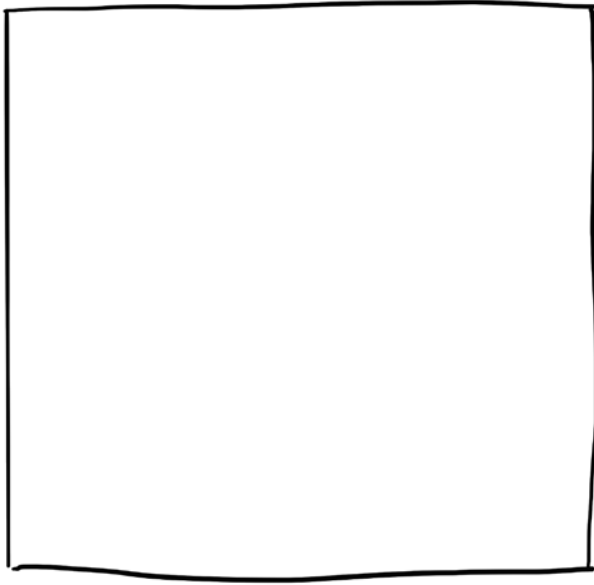
The rows or layers of weaving that determine a mat's density.



contribute with your own drawing here

SANAA YA MIKEKA

The artistic element of mat weaving, incorporating cultural symbols and storytelling.

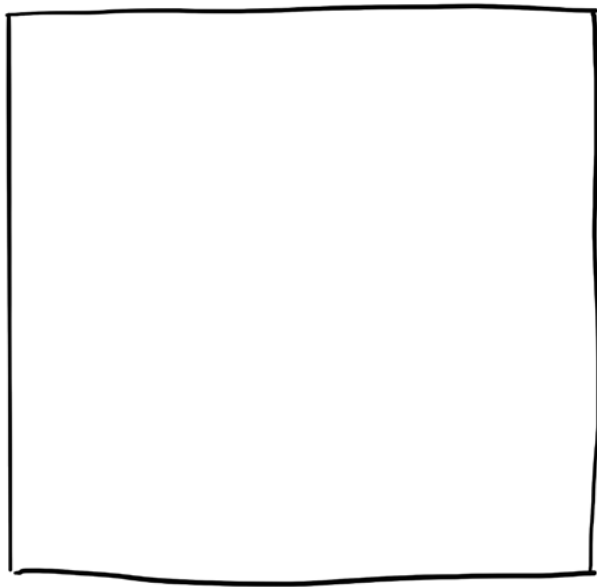


contribute with your own drawing here



SUFI YA MBAO

A wooden smoothing tool
used to flatten woven mats
for a polished finish.



contribute with your own drawing here

S

SOJI
SHOGI

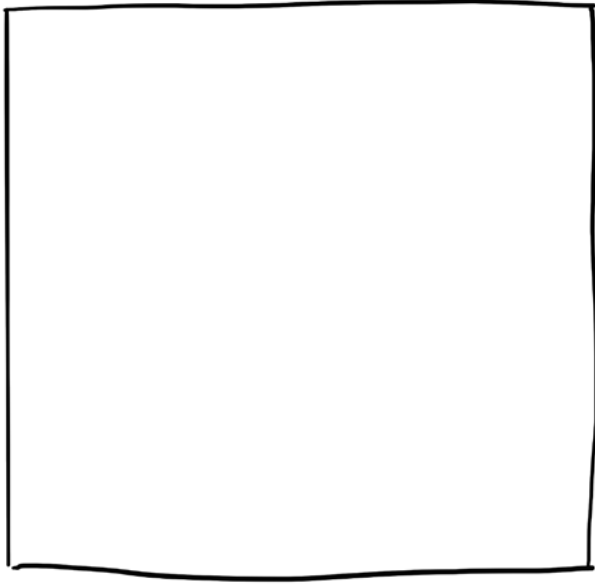
OGI

Large wide sack for
pack animals.



TALBIS

Long narrow mat made from
doum palm fibres fixed onto
a jahazi ship's rail.



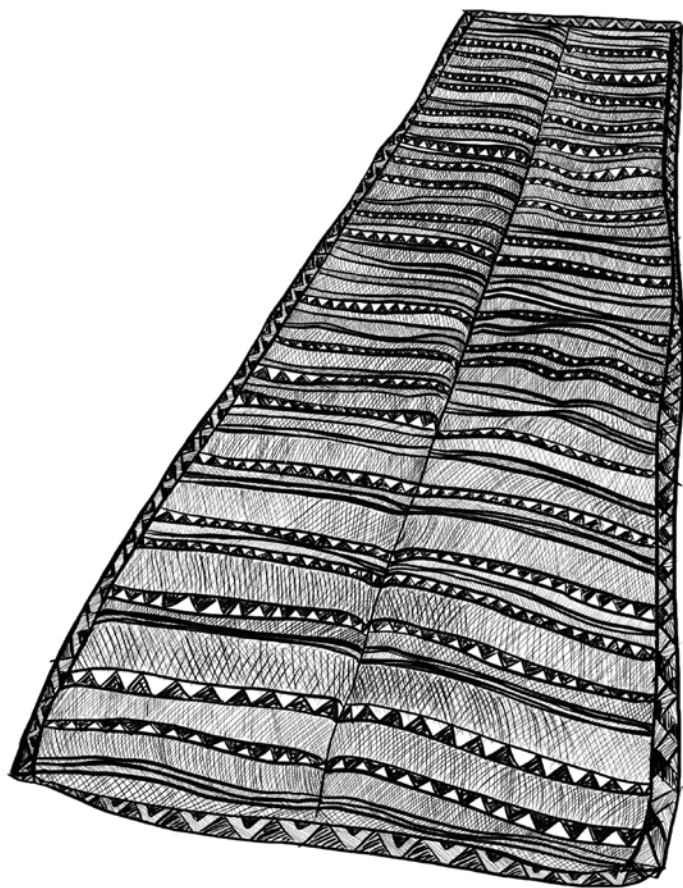
contribute with your own drawing here



T ANGA

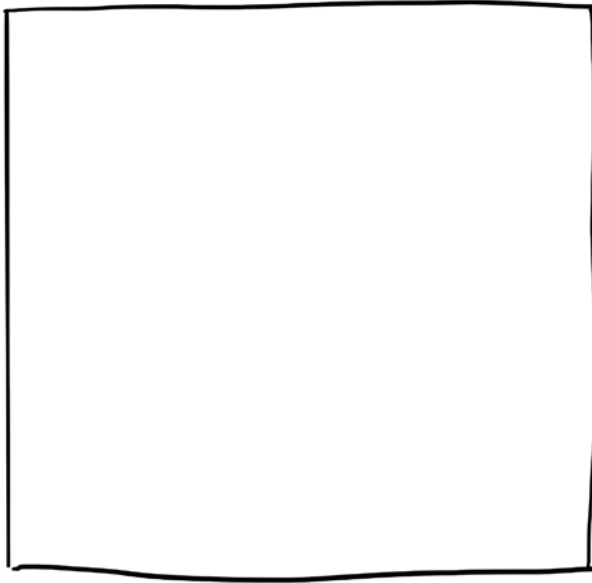
Bigger mat in the past used to lay on the bed beneath the mattress or another smaller mat; the very big mat was used as ship sails before the introduction of canvas sails.

See plural: matanga



TAMSHI LA MIKEKA

A blessing or poem often
recited when gifting a
ceremonial mat.

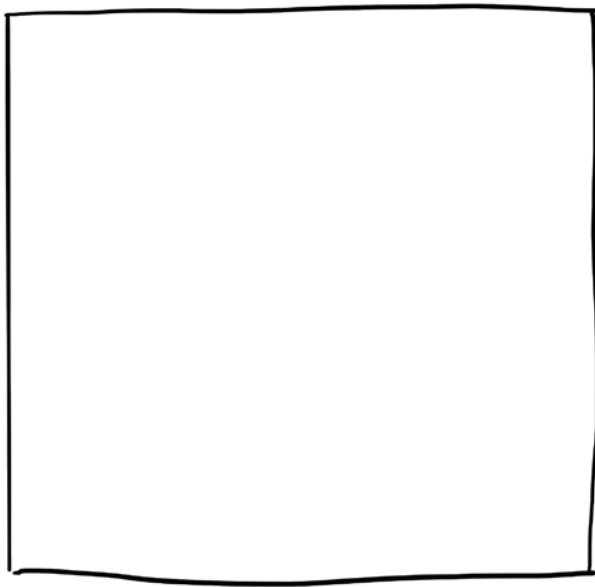


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UKAMBAA

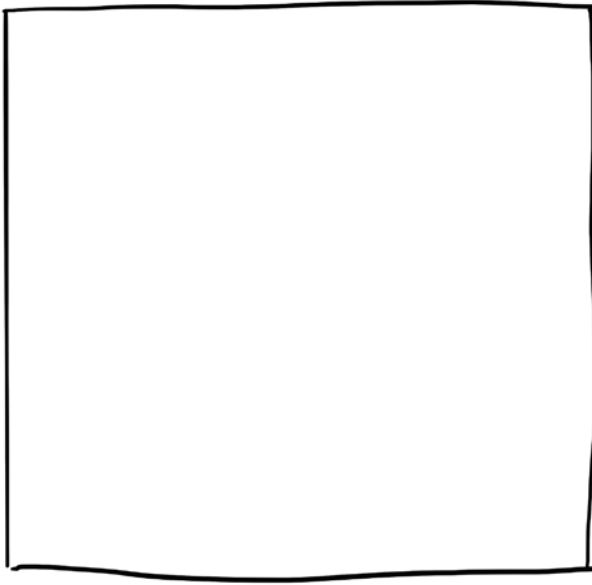
Rope, mostly from
coconut or sisal
fibres.



contribute with your own drawing here

UZI WA MKEKA

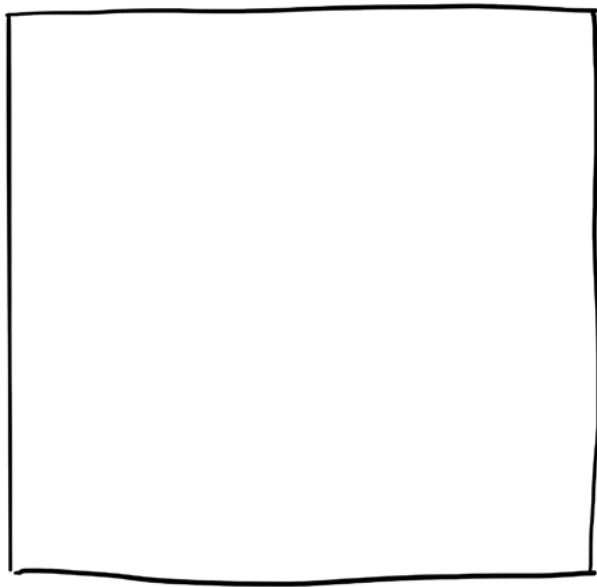
The fiber strands used
to weave Swahili mats,
usually sourced from
palm fronds or reeds.



contribute with your own drawing here

UKILI

Thin plaited bands
from wild date
palm fibres.

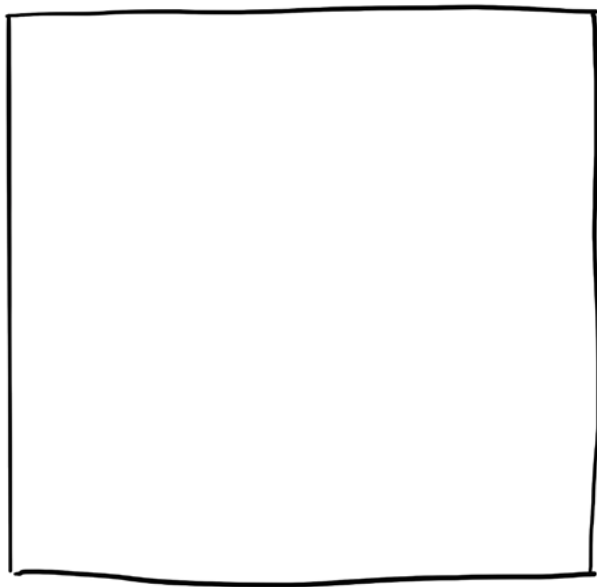


contribute with your own drawing here



U KINDU

Leaves of the wild
date palm already torn
off the leaf stalk.

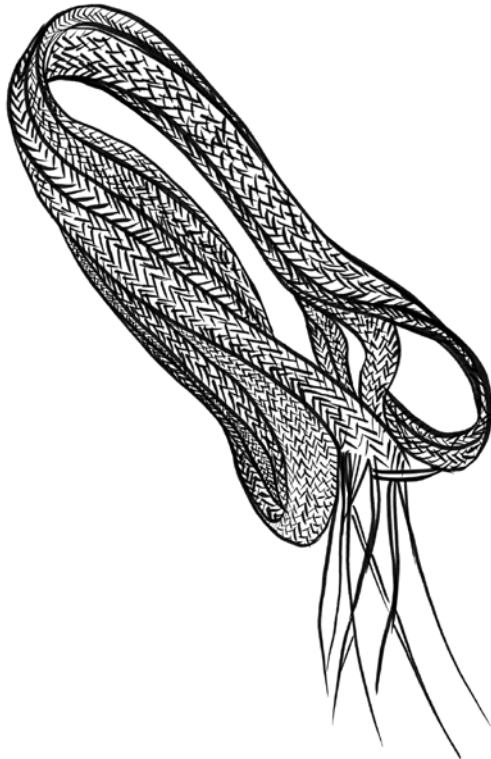


contribute with your own drawing here



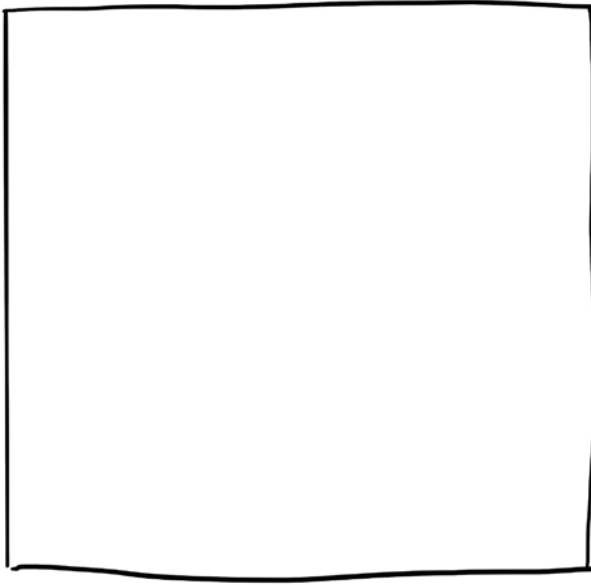
U USITU SUTU

Thin plaited bands
from doum palm fibres
to make beds and
chairs.



U TEMBO

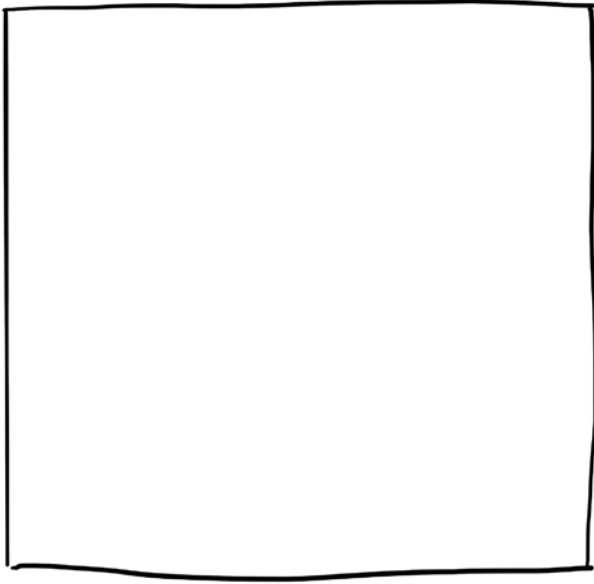
Bast from the raffia palm.



contribute with your own drawing here



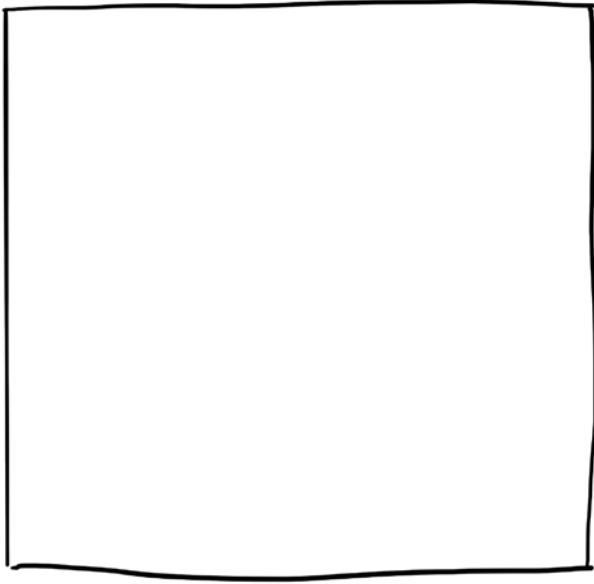
V



contribute with your own drawing here



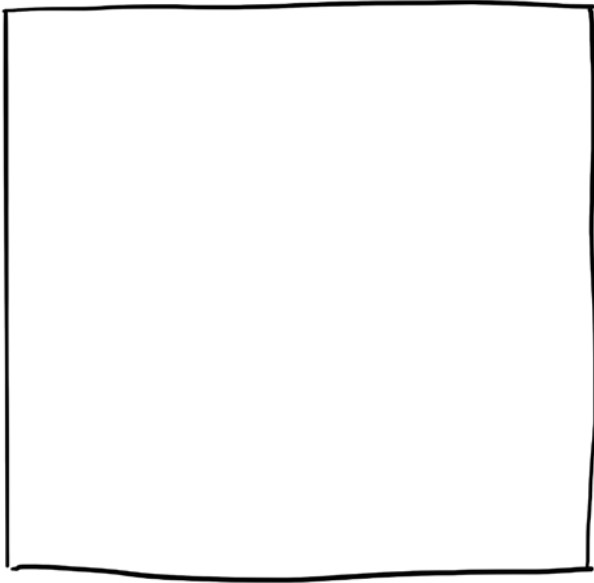
W



contribute with your own drawing here



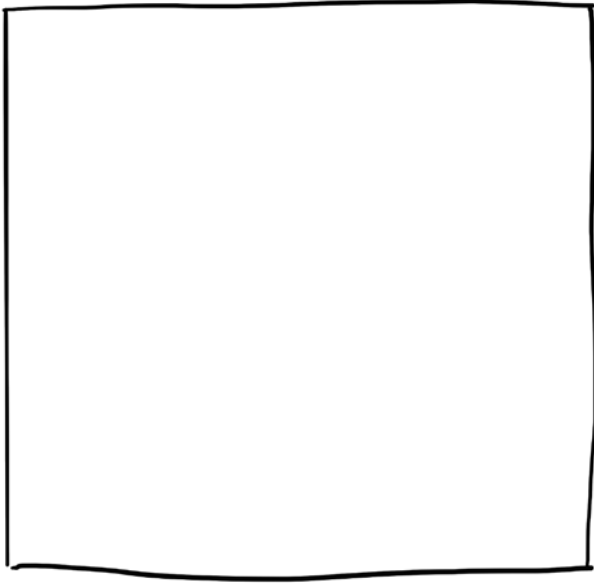
X



contribute with your own drawing here



Y

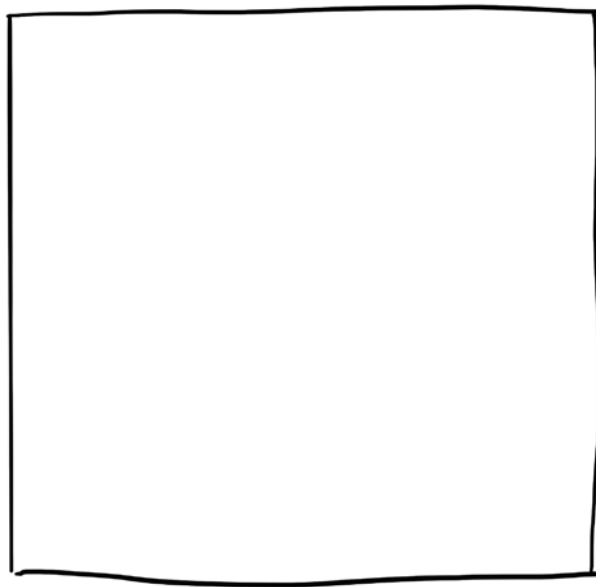


contribute with your own drawing here



ZULIA LA KAWA

A term referring to finely woven mats that served as alternatives to imported carpets in Swahili homes.



contribute with your own drawing here

TALKING MATS

INTERWOVEN HISTORIES - CONNECTING PEOPLES

is a cooperation between

Lamu Museums and Heritage Sites, National Museums of Kenya

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Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz

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Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (2023-2025)



**Ethnologisches Museum und
Museum für Asiatische Kunst**
Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz



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Illustrations, Design: Myriam Perrot

Terms marked with * have been collected from the book “UKILI - The Art of
Plaiting in Zanzibar” by Antje Förstle, published by solarafrica.network, 2006.

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illustrations) or texts.

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