

Development Impact of “Khat” (*Catha edulis* (vahl) Forsk. ex Endl)

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Tradition, Trade and Tragedy**

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Abstract

In recent years khat (*Catha edulis* (vahl) Forsk. ex Endl) export from Ethiopia expanded rapidly beyond the neighboring countries and reached markets in Europe (UK), USA and Asia (China). **The global trade in Khat is controversial.** The United States and most countries in Europe have banned it considering it a psychotropic substance. But it contributes significantly to farmers' livelihood in Eastern Africa. Cultivation of Khat in Ethiopia increased to account to 13 percent of total cultivated land, particularly, in east of the country, contributing 30-50 percent of farmers' total cash income. This study tried to explore issues related to “Khat” from a number of perspectives: sociological, economic and its panorama. In the sociological and economic perspectives, it focused on the place and role of khat in the society. And, in prospect, it discussed different scenarios, ranging from doomsday scenario to bright future. Therefore, as this study is exploratory in its nature, the paper raised more concerns than providing quick fix for the khat culture in Ethiopia.

Key words: Khat, khat culture, income, societal costs, Ethiopia

Introduction

Khat, (*Catha edulis* (vahl) Forsk. ex Endl), is a small evergreen tree, which, originated in Ethiopia. *Khat*, spread, until its use, covered a number of regions (Africa, America, Asia, Australia and Europe). In Ethiopia, the plant is cultivated and during 1990-2004 several tones around 87,000 metric tones of khat was exported and about 400 million USD was earned; the majority ending up in Britain. In twenty two years the government of Ethiopia collected 10.7 billion birr in revenue from taxing domestic and export trade in khat. According to Mustafa (<http://www.mustafakhat.com>), chief khat trader in Awaday, Ethiopia, khat is currently exported to the following destinations: Addis Ababa, Djibouti, Hargessa, London, and China. Yemen and Switzerland is currently approaching Mustefa to have it exported to them.

Khat consumption affects the human body in various ways. Largely *Khat* chewing produces not only physical and psychological effects on the user but also believed to affect the potency of male sexuality by reducing spermatogenesis and plasma testosterone concentration. However, the precise mechanisms by which *Khat* may affect the male reproductive physiology have not been elucidated. It causes insomnia followed by exhaustion that partially disables the ability to work the following day.

Khat is apparently taken socially to produce excitation, banish sleep, and promote communication. It is used as a stimulant to dispel feelings of hunger and fatigue. Equally important is to consider the stand point that chewing on social and religious grounds is being well rooted and deeply imbedded in the socio- cultural fabric of the countries in question such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Yemen. *Khat* chewing is a habit and does not cause physical dependence or withdrawal symptoms.

Khat: fuels and mediate conflicts: Khat abuses/ fuels, for instance, Somali conflicts (refer different sources over the Internet). Equally, khat has also been serving as a cultural ceremony in some Somali indigenous conflict management culture.

Khat: a tool to defy the recurrent drought: In stead of aggravating the recurrent east Hararghe drought, Awaday-Oromia-Ethiopia (The heart of Khat production and its trade to domestic as well as international destinations) has been accommodating those victims who migrated due to drought from near by rural vicinities, for Khat enabled the local people to secure their livelihood.

No promotional work for khat (a commodity that promotes itself): unlike other products and/or services there is none promotional work for khat. However, surprisingly enough its consumption is expanding both at the local and international level to the extent that it currently seemed difficult to reverse the trend.

Research design; this research employed both qualitative and quantitative data and information, from primary and secondary sources. It reviewed the available literature. Moreover, own experience and observation has also contributed a lot in articulating the existing situation.

Discussion Points:

Socio-Economics/perspective

Though officially discouraged, *Khat* stands among the most important cash crops in Ethiopia, with strong markets domestically as well as in neighbouring Somalia, Djibouti, Yemen and the Gulf State. The farming population had increased, land and live stock holding had decreased slightly, and that crop production was under increasing threats from various scourges, notably pests, weeds, and diseases. In the face of these changes, farmers continued to search for alternative strategies, and the major trend noted was the shift towards naturally growing and cultivated tree and shrub, which include *khat* (3).



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As a crop, *khat* is very attractive to farmers for it generates very high income with minimum production input furthermore, demand for *khat* continuous to increase and farm gate prices have accordingly continued to rise. Indirect evidences suggest that the Ethiopian farmer's income from *khat* (in the south eastern part of the country) is now more than ten times than that from coffee. The main *khat* growing areas closely correspond to the major sorghum areas where displacement of the sorghum crop by permanent *khat* plantation is more common. In contrast to other cultivated woody perennial cash crops such as tea, coffee, etc, *khat* enables farmers to grow food crops under the inter-cropping system, particularly during the *khat* "establishment stage". Unlike coffee, *khat* has less specific site requirements and grows in a wider range of environmental conditions (Mitiku and Abdu, 1994). Farmer's preference for *khat* which greatly reduces the farmer's effective working hours, also, often enables him to purchase food with the extra cash he may get from *khat* sale.

In areas of sever weather of limited rainfall such as those region with under 800 mm per year, yields are low and periodic irrigation is required to attain a high level of crop yield and hence *Khat* is becoming an important cash crop in terms of land occupation and its contribution to household income and foreign currency earnings. The growing export and local market for *khat*, the adverse physical and biological limiting factors, such as climatic hazards, disease and insect problems, as well as the relatively low labour and input requirements for its production appear to be the main reasons for the growing fast trend in the expansion of *khat* particularly in the south-eastern regions of Ethiopia. The value differentials of *khat* and other crops might have also pushed farmers to allocate more land, labour, manure, and irrigation water to *khat* than to other crops.

Khat is changing the fate of individuals, and also the fate of rural towns. In this regard, Awaday - the heart of *khat* in Ethiopia is changing rapidly (at least in terms of physical infrastructure) as the result of *khat* revenue. Due to the income generated through *khat* trade there are a number of modern buildings constructed in the town (though most of their rooms are vacant or not rented, because the type and level of

buildings and the **development** of the town could not grow correspondingly). Moreover, Awaday is, now, one of the special towns in Oromia regional state, Ethiopia, basically for it's now a day's becoming a high revenue earning town.

Khat is also cited as part of the problem for the economies of Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti and others in part because, statistics suggest, nearly every family spends one third of its disposable income on *khat* in 1993, the average family income in Yemen was \$700 a year. *Khat* can cost up to \$20 per person a day. In 1992, the LA Times reported that Yemeni's spend an estimated \$2 million a day to consume *Khat*. Ultimately, the "most important point is that people do not pay as little as they can [for *Khat*], but as much as they can afford. In U.S.A., street researchers have been informed that *khat* is being sold for \$300-\$400 a kilo, with a bundle of leaves selling for \$28-\$50.

As farmers could not produce enough food from their holdings to feed their families, expectedly off-farm and non-farm activities would be important. However, excepting small village shops and petty trade activities, other **employment opportunities** were still rare (Eshetu M. and Habtemariam K., 2001).

Policy Matter

Some argue that *khat* harms the economy by encouraging laziness and absenteeism. Special attention is however required to the observed threat of displacement of food crops by *khat* due to the increasing trend of expansion of *khat* fields. The socio-economic aspects of the crop is a more sensitive issue, mainly as *khat* growers and those involved in trading *khat* fear the imposition of heavy taxes.

Position of Ethiopian government on Khat

- *Khat* is among the leading exportable agricultural commodities in Ethiopia next to coffee and hides in 2006 - 2008.
- The Ethiopian Statistics Agency (ESA), five years ago, did not mention much about *khat*, but currently statistical figures about *khat* in Ethiopia are available in official government documents. The Ethiopian government seems to be latently admitting *khat*'s contribution towards securing foreign currency via **Khat global trade**.
- **Would the Ethiopian government provide land for those who might invest on *khat*-industry in Ethiopia???**, one could say, it may, probably depending on the *khat* industry's "**Development Impact**" in the future and in significant terms to the **national economy**.

Conclusion/Prospect

As a crop, *khat* is very attractive to farmers for it generates very high income with minimum production input furthermore, demand for *khat* continuous to increase. Even though documented information on the trend of the volume of *khat* production is lacking, it is becoming an important cash crop in terms of land occupation and its contribution to the household income and foreign currency earnings. Under these conditions, it is unrealistic not to expect expanded cultivation of *khat* particularly in the absence of control, or guidelines, which are not enforced.

Bold facts about khat

- “Khat” consumption and its business ranges from remote rural areas to different foreign countries.
- “Khat” is changing the life of the farmer in many ways. First and foremost, the farmer became able to send his children to good schools and to detach them from farming. This in turn helped these students to engage fully in their learning activities. In this regard the case in point is that, in *Gende mude (Rural village in the near by of Haramaya University)* in 2009, several students got three (B and above) grade point average which placed them to joining university education. At a national level it will have an impact in achieving an increased number of **educated and civilized citizens** who are **assets** for the nation (**Knowledge Bank/Economy**).

In view of the limited works on *khat*, in the Ethiopian context, much more empirical data is required to substantiate the subjective view on the plant. Despite these limited works on the Ethiopian context, the common stand point of many researchers, particularly those working on the socio-economic implications of *khat* cultivation, is that the economic incentives of *khat* growing and trade are, at the present time high and no other common agricultural crop can replace it effectively.

Production and consumption of *khat* and the resulting market chain is growing as an industry by itself with limited or no interest and capacity to managing its trend both at country and international levels. Thus, in concrete terms little is known as to how best to manage the trend and reduce the associated risks of the *khat* culture and **orient/direct** the overall business around *Khat* towards contributing to the **“National & Global Development Schemes, if there are any?”**

Information presented in this paper, therefore, is aiming at developing an understanding of the subject, paving the way for future research & development by development agencies, researchers, extension agents, policy makers and other interested stakeholders. The paper essentially presented established arguments about the prevailing situations in the world at large for depicting the existing reality in Ethiopia regarding how the main stakeholders, the *Khat* farmers, those engaged with *Khat* business and those which depend on its use, view the plant. Knowing these views is necessary to draw the future strategy of *Khat* in Ethiopia that should also take into account short term economic benefits and long term societal interests.

The attempt of this work was also to demonstrate the lack of preparedness at household and at national levels for any sudden changes in export markets or policy shift regarding khat production and marketing.

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