

# Khat use in East Africa – psychosocial effects

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Misuse of Catha Edulis (Khat) in a Changing World:  
Tradition, Trade and Tragedy

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# Background

- Khat
  - Endogenous to East Africa
  - Kenya: legally cultivated in Kenya, mainly around Mount Kenya in Meru district: main cash-crop
  - Variety grown in Kenya said to contain the highest amount of cathinone
  - Uganda: grown legally
  - Tanzania: illegal
- From Kenya it is mainly exported to the Somali and other countries in the region



**Khat farmer**



**Khat bundles**

# Packaging and sale

- ?30 tonnes of khat harvested daily in Meru district, Kenya.
- Harvested every 20 – 28 days from the same plant
- Pick-up vehicles driven at high speeds through the 200Km winding road to reach Nairobi with fresh products
- ?3,000 Kg of khat flown to Somali capital everyday from Wilson airport, Nairobi
- Petty trade in the drug occurs throughout the country and is especially prominent where there are populations of Somalis – hence found in all major towns of the Kenya
- Sold in bundles of 10 x 20 shoots (kilo) in roadside stalls
- Locally a low potent kilo costs US \$ 5 rising to US\$15 in the high potency variety
- Amount spent per month by a khat user in Nairobi (KES 6,000 – 12,000 (US\$ 75 – 150))

# Prevalence of khat use

- Studies from Nairobi and surrounding districts: the third commonest psychoactive drug after alcohol and tobacco but with a much lower prevalence rate
- Use not widespread but confined to certain groups of people (80% in Ijara, North Eastern Kenya)
- Low prevalence in most of the studies done in learning, institutions, health facilities (some instruments not designed to pick up khat use)
- Recent PRA work in a community at Kariobangi, Nairobi did not show khat to be problem (alcohol is the main problem especially in PLWHA)
- Other workers have found high rates of use in Somali communities within Nairobi



# Main consumers

- In Kenya: mainly Somali and Muslim community members
- In Uganda (Thunwo et al., 2004 report high use among students, transporters, and law-enforcement officers)
- Its use has spread outside the traditional society to include young Muslims who combine its use with alcohol and other drugs (Boasher 1980, and Haji 1985)
- Long distance lorry drivers
- Night shift workers (watchmen, commercial sex workers in urban areas)
- The youth in the urban areas also use it mainly for recreational purposes and often combine it with alcohol.
- Studies suggest that it is the drug commonly used by the 10 - 14 years age group in Kenya.
- Street children have higher incidence of use - 12% of children sampled used khat (Othieno et al., 2000).
- A recent study in the slum community found that the main abusers of khat are youth who have nothing to do
- Low use among University students

# Khat uses

- Socialisation
  - Use in ceremonies
  - Recreation
- Medicinal properties
  - To treat influenza, gonorrhoea, and asthma
- Wood for fuel and for fencing as it is resistant to termites

# Effects of khat

- Psychostimulant
- Alleviation of fatigue and reduction of depression
  - Euphoria , excitation , high activity and mood
  - Increasing levels of alertness and ability to concentrate .
  - Increasing of confidence, friendliness, contentment and flow of ideas
    - Users claim khat lifts spirits, sharpens thinking .
      - Increases motor activity
      - Positive sexual effects (regarding the desire and duration of sexual intercourse according to the type and source of khat).
      - Dispel feelings of hunger
      - Advocates of Khat use claim that it eases symptoms of diabetes, asthma, and stomach/intestinal tract disorders.
- Socially: promotes communication, as it's used to meet people, socialize, communication problems solving.

# Psychological effects

- Psychological
  - Intoxication
  - Withdrawal
  - Depression
  - Irritability
- Psychotic reactions (personal views, case reports)
  - Paranoid psychotic states
  - Khat induced psychosis

## Diagnosis among patients referred for psychiatric assessment at Kenyatta National Hospital, Kenya

Diagnosis	Male	Female	Total
Alcohol related disorders	157 (28.86%)	21 (5.20%)	178 (18.78%)
Acute and transient psychiatric disorders	96 (17.65%)	80 (19.80%)	176 (18.57%)
Depressive disorders	50 (9.19%)	70 (17.33%)	120 (12.66%)
Dissociative and conversion disorders	26 (4.78%)	47 (11.63%)	73 (7.70%)
Dementia	31 (5.70%)	23 (5.96%)	54 (5.70%)
Schizophrenia	27 (4.96%)	20 (4.95%)	47 (4.96%)
Delirium	16 (2.94%)	10 (2.48%)	26 (2.74%)
Anxiety disorders	5 (0.92%)	19 (4.70%)	24 (2.53%)
Childhood disorders	11 (2.02%)	3 (0.74%)	14 (1.47%)
Cannabis related disorders	11 (2.02%)	1 (0.25%)	12 (1.27%)
Unspecified organic psychoses	3 (0.55%)	9 (2.23%)	12 (1.27%)
Bipolar disorders (mania)	8 (1.47%)	2 (0.50%)	10 (1.05%)
Other somatoform disorders	2 (0.37%)	6 (1.49%)	8 (0.84%)
Cocaine	3 (0.55%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.32%)
Inhalants	1 (0.18%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.11%)
Anorexia nervosa	0 (0%)	1 (0.25%)	1 (0.11%)
Miscellaneous	92 (16.91%)	53 (13.12%)	145 (15.30%)
Mental disorders not elsewhere classified (NEC)	5 (0.92%)	39(9.65%)	44 (4.64%)

## Substance use among patients with schizophrenia at Mathari Hospital, Kenya (2004)

Substance use	Male	Female	Total
Tobacco	48 (35)	7 (8)	131 (58.5)
Alcohol	46 (33.6)	14 (16.1)	60 (26.8)
Cannabis	32 (23.4)	4 (4.6)	36 (16.1)
Opiates	9 (6.6)	2 (2.3)	11 (4.9)
Sleeping pills or sedatives	4 (2.9)	1 ( 1.2)	5 (2.2)
Amphetamines/stimulants	4 (2.9)	1 (1.2 )	5 (2.2)
Hallucinogens	1 (0.7)	---	1 (0.4)

# Physical problems associated with khat use

- Heavy khat users have more medical and psychological problems than non-khat users (Haji, 1985)
- Constipation
- Dental caries (tooth decay)
- Gastritis
- Impotence in men
- Loss of weight

# Adverse psychosocial effects

- Psychological
  - Intoxication
  - Withdrawal effects
- Physical
  - Decreased libido
  - Spread of diseases due poor handling and hygiene conditions
  - Loss of weight.
- Marital problems
- Socio-economic problems such as
  - family discord
  - economic drain (a user may spend £60 to 120 per month)
  - prolonged absence of father from the family, malnutrition and poor educational performance in children.
  - Waste of productive time



# Adverse psychosocial effects cont.

- Family neglect and low libido among men leading to marital discord reports from local media
- Children also abandon school to harvest the khat or to trade in it
  - Children are used to harvest the crop since they are agile and light and will not break the fragile branches

# Benefits

- Cash crop
  - Better alternative compared to coffee or tea; less input and ready market and good price
- Income generation
- Source of foreign exchange
- Employment
- Wilson airport in Kenya handles most of the khat traffic
- Recreation

# Associated problems

- Crime
  - Sale in premises likely to harbor criminals
  - Antisocial activities
  - People from the Meru said to have quick tempers: relationship to miraa not clear
- Security and terrorism concerns
  - Trafficking of humans and guns into the region through planes flying into and out of conflict areas in the horn of Africa
- Road traffic accidents
  - Speeding the drug to the market
  - Fatigue among long-distance drivers using the drug
- Increased use of other drugs (especially tobacco)
- Increased Alcohol use
  - Increase in disposable income (Meru district has one of the highest beer sales in Kenya)

# Associated problems

- Sexual promiscuity (? Cause or co-occurrence)
- Mental illness
- Diversion of family income
- School dropout (boys work in the farms; small and agile and can easily harvest the twigs)
- Increased road traffic accidents

# Control of khat use

- Ban of use from certain social places including bars – largely confined to the suburbs and Eastleigh area with high population of Somalis
- Ban of sale in certain municipalities - tried unsuccessfully
- Taxes levied on transporters
- Conflicts between traders

# Conclusions

- More studies needed to monitor the use of khat
- Disadvantages and the benefits of khat differ depending on individuals and interests
- Efforts to limit its use in Kenya have been met by strong opposition from the farmers who see it as more valuable than even coffee as a cash crop
- More research is needed to document its use and psychosocial effects

Thank you