

Aftermaths of Khat Prohibition in Somalia

ABDULLAHI MOHAMED AHMED

Somali National University - Mogadishu

Khat (*Catha edulis*, Family Celastraceae) is a plant whose shoots and tender leaves are chewed for attaining stimulation and euphoria in several countries of Eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Its use is a remote habit and initially it was limited to religious groups in Western Somalia to keep themselves alert during the night to study the Koran.

Gradually, the habit reached the northern regions of the country where only few people adopted it. Drivers and musicians were the first groups to grasp the habit due to their need to be alert for long periods. However, khat chewing has increased during the last twenty years and has interested nearly all social groups of the country. Khat consumption among women was considered shameful, but later they consumed it as men did.

The rapid increase of khat chewing may be due to different factors such as the increase of internal and external communications and the high rate of urbanization with its social and cultural effects.

Since khat is prone to abuse, researchers and international organisms began to investigate its chemistry and pharmacology. Cathine (nor-pseudoephedrine) and recently cathinone (alpha-aminopropiophenone) were isolated from it (Szendrei, 1980). Both compounds are phenylalkylamines, structurally similar to amphetamines. The available pharmacological data confirm that both compounds are amphetamine-like and are responsible for the psychostimulation and insomnia obtained after khat consumption (Zelger et alii, 1980).

Similarly, administration of khat to volunteers showed amphetamine-like effects. In fact, khat activated the sympathetic tone and produced endocrine effects like those of amphetamines. Incretion of ACTH and growth hormone was observed whereas prolactin was not affected by either of them. The psychological effects of khat chewing consisted of elation and euphoria in a group of consumers and dysphoria in others. This type of response was also seen in the amphetamines. Furthermore, we have observed that tolerance develops to the sympathetic and endocrine effects of khat in humans (Nencini et alii 1984 and Nencini et alii 1983).

From the analogy of structure and pharmacological activities between khat components and amphetamines, we can conclude that khat is a natural amphetamine.

Many social, economic and medical problems were related to khat chewing. Among the social problems were family disintegration, increase of delinquency among children, encouragement of prostitution, decline in educational level and

deterioration of public administration. The economic damage can be understood from the fact that Somalia had imported khat from Ethiopia in 1982 with U.S. \$ 57,000,000 which represents 5.7% of the Gross Domestic Products (GDP) (Saman-tar and Bullaleh 1984). Some of the health problems of khat can be malnutrition possibly due to the anorectic effects of phenylalkylamine compounds, indigestion and hepatic injuries that can be related to the tannins present in the plant and encouragement of sexually transmitted disease. Psychosis due to khat chewing has been reported in different areas.

In Somalia, the use of such a plant has increased widely and its problems were felt by everyone. Consequently, the Somali government prohibited consumption, cultivation and commerce of khat in the Somali territory in March 1983. Many people welcomed this less enthusiastically with mass demonstrations. Sudden improvement of some social and economic problems related to khat were reported.

The law is vigorously applied and recently the imprisonment and the fine against its transgressors were increased. However, there is still a considerable quantity of smuggling. Actually, the National Committee for Khat Eradication has reported in the third anniversary of khat prohibition that in three years time 255,580 kg of khat and 5374 persons involved in the crime were captured.

Moreover, abuse of psychoactive drugs such as ephedrine and benzodiazepines among young children is a new emerging phenomenon.

The use of marijuana was for a long time limited to Lower Juba areas like Kismayo and Bajuni Islands. It was imported from the neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. In the last decade, the use spread to other regions, especially Benadir, Lower and Upper Shabelle and Bay. Previously, the use of marijuana was limited to some labourers and jobless people, but now it has covered more social groups, even young students. Sometimes, cultivations of small quantities of marijuana are seized.

Recently, small amounts of opium and cocaine were captured by the police although it was reported that the merce was in transit to other countries.

Besides the above known drugs, some people are abusing psychoactive traditional products. The use of these products was limited to certain zones for therapeutic purposes. In a recent research on the traditional psychoactive products, more than 90% of the interviewed people said that the use of these products is increasing. Among the products commonly abused are SHALABOW (CAANO BAAR), latex of a palm tree and GEED JINNI (BELJI), *Datura Stramonio*.

SHALABOW (CAANO BAAR): It is the latex of a palm tree. Its traditional use was to cure anemia in pregnant women and gonorrhea in men. In order to gain a sense of drunkenness, the latex is fermented for a week. It is then sold at high prices. Initially, the use of Shalabow was limited in areas along the Juba River, but now it is reported that it is also spreading along the Shabelle River where palm trees grow.

GEED JINNI or BELJI (*Datura Stramonio*): Traditionally asthmatic patients smoke the flowers and obtain a quick relief because of antispastic activity. But the youngsters add the fried and powdered seed to their drinks. The children experience euphoria and later hallucinations.

Discussion

Since the isolation of cathinone from khat, the scientific data on it has increased. There is evidence for the similarity of khat and amphetamines from chemical and pharmacological points of view. Moreover, the international organisms have focused their attention on this abused plant. In fact, in 1985, a WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence discussed the assessment of 28 phethylaminen, including cathine and cathinone, two active principles from khat. The Committee stated that both compounds met the criteria in article 2, paragraph 4, for control under the Convention on Psychotropic Substances. They proposed cathinone to be placed in Schedule I and cathine in Schedule II of the Convention (WHO Technical Report 1985).

Therefore, the prohibition of khat in Somalia was a sound decision. But once a drug consumed for centuries is legally banned, certain deviations to other drugs may occur. In such a way we only change the pattern of the drug abuse.

We have pointed out that during the last few years abuse of other drugs like marijuana, synthetic and natural psychoactive drugs is increasing. Besides the khat prohibition, other factors may participate in this phenomenon such as:

- urbanization: many young people are continuously coming to big cities and wandering without jobs;
- increase of tourists and expatriates;
- young Somalis with the habit returning from abroad.

In conclusion, we know that legal prohibition of a drug is not enough to eradicate the habit. It is necessary to study and solve the basic social and economic factors connected with drug abuse. Also much attention should be given to the underhand spread of illicit drugs in our country.

References

- Giannini, A. and S. Castellani 1982, « A maniac-like psychosis due to khat (*catha edulis*) », *Journal of Toxicology*, 19: 455-459.
- Nencini P., M.C. Anania, Abdullahi M. Ahmed, G. Amiconi, Abdullahi S. Elmi 1983, « The physiological and neuroendocrine effects of khat in man », *Proceedings of First International Conference on Khat. The Health and Socio-economic Aspects of Khat Use*, Antananarivo, Madagascar, pp. 148-152.
- Nencini P., Abdullahi M. Ahmed, G. Amiconi, Abdullahi S. Elmi 1984, « Tolerance develops to sympathetic effects of khat in humans », *Pharmacology*, 28: 150-154.
- Samatar, M.S. and M.E. Bullaleh 1984, « The effects of khat on national economy », M. Hamud (ed.), *Studies on khat: Its Social, Economic and Health Effects*, State Printing Agency, Mogadishu, pp. 43-53.
- Szendrei K., 1980, « The chemistry of khat », *Bulletin on Narcotics*, 32: 5-35.
- Zelger J.L., H. Schorno, E. Carlini, 1980, « Behavioural effects of cathinone, an amine obtained from *Catha edulis*. Comparison with amphetamine, norpseudoephedrine, apomorphine and nomifensene », *Bulletin on Narcotics*, 32: 61-81.
- WHO, 1985, *Assessment of twenty eight phenethylamines*, Technical Report Series 729, 8-9, Geneva.