

A Historical Overview of Khat Production in Ethiopia

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Abstract: This paper tries to study the history of Khat production and expansion in Ethiopia. Khat has been consumed in Ethiopia for long period of time. Some sources moreover, mention Ethiopia as the origin of Khat production and the country that takes the lion share of Khat export to the rest of the world currently. The above mentioned notion has triggered the researcher to look at the history of this herbal and its production, consumption and contemporary use in Ethiopia. Different qualitative data collection techniques have been employed to get in to the bottom of the abovementioned topic. Here the researcher has conducted interview with elders who are believed to narrate the history of Khat, farmers who primary production has been Khat and consumers who use to consume Khat for long period of time. Moreover, secondary source of data like books, articles and term papers are also used to grasp the necessary information. After extensive data collection scheme and analysis, the researcher has reached into a conclusion that ancient Ethiopian rulers have been presented Khat as a gift for leaders of the south Arabia and this led the researcher to conclude that Ethiopia is one of the origin places of Khat if not the only country. Ethiopia is still the biggest Khat producing country with immense varieties that are mentioned inside this paper. Ethiopia could also be mentioned as the country where Khat is consumed immensely.

Keywords: Khat, Khat Production, Khat Consumption and Khat Varieties

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

khat¹ is a herbal that has stimulating effect to its consumer. This plant is mainly produced in the eastern part of Ethiopia [1]. Contemporarily however, plating khat has become common in almost every parts of the country. Due to this reason production of other agricultural products have become decreased and given less attention by the farmers. Hence, consumption of khat is very high and equally the production is getting increased from time to time [2].²

khat is known under many names, such as khat, kath, qat, qaad, chat, quat, tschat, mirra, Kus-es-Salahin, bushman's

tea, African tea and African salad [3].³ The size of the plant varies from a small bush (ca 40 cm tall) to a high tree (which can be up to 6 m tall). The largest commercial growing areas are by tradition to be found in the Haare Province in Ethiopia, on hillsides in Jebel Sabr Mountains close to Taiz in Yemen and in the Nyambene area in the Meru district in Kenya. The Khat plant thrives upon fairly humid hillsides at altitudes from 1 100 to 2 500 meters, depending on the latitude [4].

The size of the leaves varies between three and twelve centimeters. The flowers are small and white, and the fruit is oblong and dark brown. The fresh leaves produce the desired intoxication. The leaves are being chewed but can also be smoked or prepared as tea [5]. Khat is prohibited in the Arabian world. Immigrants who abuse Khat smuggle it into countries such as the Emirates or Saudi Arabia, e.g. by pulverizing the Khatleaves. They sell the powder and make a considerable profit from it. Elderly people or those who lack teeth can have Khat mixed with tea or water, and the mixture is then imbibed or sucked with a drinking straw like juice [6].

1 There are more than 20 types of khat. Farmers in Hararghe use the Oromo word Jiima to call this plant. I will use the term khat because it is usually used by the scientific literatures and institutions. For details, see Greenway, "Khat," *The eastern African Agricultural Journal*, 1947

2 Taye Hailu Feyisa and Jens B. Aune (2003), described that khat is becoming the main product that farmers of the harargh zone are wanting produce. Hence, land that was used for producing other cash crops is now used for producing khat.

3 These all are names that khat herbal is named in different countries.

The use of khat occurs mainly in the growing areas. In recent years, major plantations have been laid out primarily in Kenya, and also in Ethiopia. Traditional coffee growers have switched to growing khat. The demand has spread all over the world and increased the export in a dynamic way [7].

Khat is the biggest source of government revenue in Ethiopia next to coffee. However, no government official dared to say anything about Khat. Despite the country is earning huge amount of money from Khat taxes, nothing is explicitly known about the policy of the government regarding Khat in Ethiopia. And yet scanty number of researchers wrote about Khat while majority of the scholars in the country ignored the historical and socio-economic impacts of this herbal. Despite a very minimum attention given to this stimulating plant, Khat production is growing rapidly; Khat export is becoming huge trade exchange between neighboring countries like Djibouti and the number of Khat consumers increased in an alarming rate.

By taking the above mentioned background and the lack of sufficient scientific research on the topic, this research tries to assess the historical development of Khat production in Ethiopia.

1.2. Research Objectives

1.2.1. General Objective

The general objective of this research is to assess the historical development of Khat production and export to the neighboring countries.

1.2.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this research includes

- a. To assess the early history of Khat production in Ethiopia
- b. To examine the expansion of khat production in Ethiopia
- c. To analyze contemporary usage and varieties of Khat

2. Methods and Methodologies

2.1. Methods

As far as methodological position of this research is concerned, this research is a qualitative study focusing on the history of khat production and contemporary consumption of khat in the country. This is due to the nature of the objectives of this research that need to see existing facts and realities on the ground than measuring the behaviours of variables.

Qualitative research focus in inductive, from the group up, rather than hand down entirely from theories. Hence, this research tried to present realities within the society ahead, as it dictates the theory that is best fitting to it. Moreover, the research question have been changed in the middle of the study to reflect better the type of questions needed to understand the research problem. In response to that, the data collection strategies were continuously modified to accompany the semi-structured questions that are prepared

for this particular research project.

Among the five qualitative approaches to inquiry like narrative approach, phenomenology, grounded theory approach, ethnography and case study, this research's approach to inquiry is ethnographic approach and therefore, this research could be seen as an ethnographic research. As far as qualitative and ethnographic research is concerned, the researcher has gone and collected data from the places where Khat is abundantly produced and elders who are believed to know the history are located.

2.2. Methods of Data Collection

This research is conducted under the umbrella of qualitative research methodology where different primary and secondary sources of data were collected, described and analysed for the better presentation of this study. Techniques of data collection are described below.

2.2.1. Primary Sources of Data

Qualitative method of data collections are employed to collect data. Here methods of data collection like interview (semi structured interview), focus group discussion and informal conversations were employed.

- i. Interview: This method is basically selected as it helps to grasp data in which informants could describe it verbally. Hence, based on the expected verbal descriptions of different elders, semi structured questions, with few open ended questions were prepared and contextually used during the field work. Interviewing sessions and semi-structured questions were prepared in two sections. One section was prepared for informants who are currently producing and trading khat and the other one was prepared for elders who are believed to provide data which are relevant for this research.

Moreover, the researcher has selected those informants on the basis of their attachment to the production of Khat, their background as Khat reader and their knowledge of history regarding the topic under study. Age factors were also considered since information could be distorted because of aging factors.

Interviews with informants are documented after each and every interviewing sessions. After each interviewing sessions therefore, each interviewees' response are summarized and documented for the convenience of organizing data at hand. Here, some key informants were interviewed more than once and summaries are prepared for them as per the number of interviewing sessions the researcher had with them. Semi structured questions were prepared in English language and informants are asked mostly in Amharic language.

- ii. Informal Conversation: An informal conversation was also employed as a method of data gathering. Although this method was not planned to be employed before the field visit, it has emerged as a best data gathering technique during my field work activities. This is because; some informants were preferred informal conversations than the one which is formally prepared

and interviewed. Moreover, informants were uncomfortable of speaking about Khat because they fear the researcher is spying them for government.

- iii. Focus Group Discussion: This data gathering techniques was selected because of its importance of crosschecking, reaffirming and drawing elaborated data from the group dynamics. It is believed to show the range of inconsistencies and variations of ideas and opinions that exist among informants. Based on the above rationale, two focus group discussions were organized. The first FGD group had 7 participants and the second group had 8 members. All participants of the groups were selected purposely based on their knowledge of the history of Khat production and their affiliation with Khat production and distribution.

2.2.2. Secondary Sources of Data

Literatures which are published, unpublished and online sources are also used to have some sort of data on different key concepts, background of the study area and key findings on similar topics. Such data are used to have backgrounds, make comparison and have better presentation of empirical data gathered from the field. In that, the researcher has used different books, researches, non- Wikipedia on line sources, archives and institutional and governmental documents.

3. Results

3.1. The Discovery of Khat

There is very scanty information on how Khat was discovered. However, a close look at to some documents might lead us to the conclusion that this herbal was discovered by a shepherd who was waiting his goats around certain mountain. According to this folk, a shepherd observed when one of his goat stumbled to eat a Khat plan in the mountain. He further noticed that one of his goats was frequently eating this plant. Moreover, he observed difference between the goat that eat Khat and the other who didn't. The difference was that the goat that was eating Khat was more active and alert while other are not. After a frequent study of his goat and the herbal that his goat used to eat, the shepherd has tried the plant himself. And according to legends, the man felt good, stimulated and become very active and tireless though out the day he tasted the Khat.

Contrary to this tale, some scholars see the beginning of this herbal with religious institutions who claim the plant as a leaf of God. Here, the plant is believed to be used during prayer time and religious rituals. Even though the use of Khat has now become discouraged by Muslim leaders recently, many non-Arab Muslims consider Khat as one of sacred leaf that followers of the religion must use during prayer time.

3.2. The History of Khat Production in Ethiopia

Khat plant has been famously in use in some parts of Ethiopia, particularly in Harar and its surroundings. Because

of a massive production, consumption and distribution of Khat in Hararge⁴, some historians consider the area as the birthplace of Khat [5].⁵ Contrary to that there are other written accounts which deal with the subject of the beginning of Khat consumption and production. A document entitled pharmacy in the healing Art suggests that Khat was known in Turkistan and Afghanistan as early as the beginning of 11th Century [8].

Even though some scholars stated Ethiopia as the birth place of Khat, despite scholars of the Middle Eastern country believe otherwise. Many scholars put southern Arabia and the red sea coast⁶ as the birth place of Khat [9]. The roughly stated geographical setting includes the old Ethiopian Kingdome called Axum. However the chronicle of Emperor AmdeTson suggests the observation of Khat by the emperor during his invasion to Ifat kingdom I 1330.⁷ In the emperor's chronicle the king of Ifat by the name Sebra'din is quoted as saying "I will take my residence at mar'ade⁸ and I will plant khat there because the Muslimwant that plant for medication". The story suggests the use of khat was familiar practice among the Muslim communities in east central Ethiopia in 14th century [10].

IbnFadil Allah al-Umari has also wrote about khat consumption in Ethiopia in his account *voyage of the eyes in kingdoms of different countries*. IbnFadil has described khat as

"A tree bearn no fruits, but one eats the young tender shoots. It stimulates cleverness ang gives happiness: it allows one to almost go without eating, drinking or having sexual intercourse. Every one eat it, but specially those who searching for knowledge, or those who have serious problems, or those who seek to prolong their wakefulness so as to make a journey or to carry out a work"

He further stated as the plant was presented to the then king of Yeman by Abyssinians⁹ by saying

".....a muslims from Abyssinia...went to Yemen and was presented the king (al-Mu'ayyadDa'ud) who accepted him as a friend the Abyssinian entreated him to ask a favor, and the king requested some leaves of the qat tree; he forthwith sent someone to Abyssibnia who brought back a stalk. This was planted in Yemen and flourished. When the time came to harvest the leaves, the king asked the Abyssinian how the plant was used and he explained to him the effect it produced....[11]"

4Hararghe is the name derived from the city of Harar. The area covers massive land in between Chiro, western Hararghe to Harar and its surround areas, eastern Hararghe.

5YerasworkAdmase (2017), the conundrum of khat in Ethiopia: Socio-economic Impacts and Policy Directions, Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa. A traveler called Sir Richard Burton (1856, Vol I.) has clearly mentioned Hararghe as the birthplace of Khat production.

6 The Ethiopian side of the red sea, which currently owned by Eritrea, a country that used to be a province under Ethiopian territory.

7Ifat was Muslim state that flourished in central Ethiopia from 1285 to 1415 in the fertile uplands of eastern Shewa.

8Mar'ade was the capital of Ifat during the period of Sebra'din.

9 Ethiopia was used to be called as Abyssinia in ancient times especially by Arab traders and Greek writers.

Here, from the above description we can learn that Ethiopian Kings were presenting Khat leaves for leaders of the neighboring country. The presentation of Khat leaves for leaders of neighboring leaders implies the production of the herbal inside ancient Ethiopia.

Recent rhetoric and public understanding concerning the

production and consumption of Khat in Ethiopia entails as Khat has been produced first in eastern Part of the country and consumed only by peoples around that corner of the country. However, different evidences show that khat was rather started to be planted and consumed in the other side of the county, Northern Ethiopia [12].



Figure 1. Hararghe area where khat is abundantly produced and exported to different market places both inside and outside the country. Consumption of khat is reportedly high in this region.

From the 1840s on, we find constant references to Khat and its use in various parts of Ethiopia. In 1843, Charles Beke¹⁰ reported that coffee and Khat were growing wild in southern Ethiopia. Beke also identified Khat as a favorite Arab intoxicant used as some sort of tea, suggesting an infusion was made out of Khat and consumed as beverage. Moreover, the usage of fresh leaves of khat as an astringent medicine, boiled with milk or water and as a beverage was also common in mid nineteenth century [13].

One of the more widely cited works of the mid-nineteenth century Harar is Richard Burton's First footsteps in East Africa (1894). Burton characteristically provided a detailed and insightful account of Khat chewing party in Harar. He reported that Khat chewing sessions took place every day between 9 and noon, and describes one such party thrown by the treasurer of the Emir of Harar and attended by several dignitaries. At this chew session, fresh khat leaves were pounded in a wooden mortar and the paste was distributed among the attendees who rolled the substance for consumption purposes. This mode of usage had not been witnessed in other khat chewing areas and must have been peculiar to Harar and its surrounding areas. Burton's description suggests that the custom of chewing was largely practiced by the elite class or groups. Here, Khat was

described as "food for the pious" and an intellectuals' rationalization that it had special properties of "enlivening the imagination, clearing the ideas, cheering the heart, diminishing sleep, and taking the place of food" [4]. These statements show that different social groups chewed Khat for different reasons.

During the Egyptian occupation in 1887, khat was still widely used among the wider community of Harar. Mohammed Moktar, officer in Egyptian army reported as the people chew an intoxicating leaves of a tree called Khat. He further noted that the people believe that the as the leave has the ability to strengthen the body to repel sleep and they attribute aphrodisiac qualities to it. They have a curious manner of using it [15].

3.3. The Expansion of Khat Production

At the beginning of the twentieth- century, chewing was evidently rife but largely confined to the affluent Harari elite who had surplus income to spend of Khat. The price which the city dwellers paid for Khat was relatively high compared to other cash crops. Nevertheless, farmers kept growing food crops and planting coffee. At least three factors explain the continued cultivation of coffee, vegetables and food crops around the city of Harar instead of the lucrative Khat. First the number of consumers who did not grow their own supply was too few to create a rise in demand of the product. Second, the lack of rapid transformation prevented Khat from

¹⁰Charles Beke, on the countries south of Abyssinia" Journal of the Royal Geographical Society 13 (1843), page

reaching a wider consumer pool [16].

In 1910, khat chewing was a widespread practice among the Oromo people in eastern Hararghe areas. The leaf quickly attained positions of social, cultural and religious importance. Non-Muslims, however, considered Khat chewing as a sign of conversion to other religion. In 1916, one of the accusations leveled against LijIyasu was his alleged indulgence in chewing Khat during one of his visits to Harar in the early 1910s. This allegation clearly shows that the substance was highly neglected to be consumed by any member of the non-Christian community [14].

During his appointment as governor-general of Chercher, Teklehawariat has ordered the khat producing farmers to uproot their Khat plant and replace them with coffee trees. He also placed a high sales tax on Khat to discourage any khat-producing farmer. However, despite the fear of the newly appointed governor the leave continued to be produced in adjacent areas of the region especially in Garamuleta and also continued to be an export item to Dire Dawa and Djibouti where different Khat consuming foreigners are available [16].

There is no available statistical evidence that shows the amount of khat exported from Harar prior to the late 1920s. Oral sources confirm that until the turn of the century, fresh Khat leaves were sold in local markets and because of the absence of a speedy means of transportation, only the dried leaves were exported to places far away from the areas of production. It was only after the Addis Ababa- Djibouti railroad reached Dire Dawa in 1902, that small amount of fresh khat began to be exported to Djibouti and then to Aden.

Gradually the amount of Khat exported to Djibouti seems to have caught the attention of the government so as to appear in the official trade statistics of the French colony. There the majority Khat chewers were Arab merchants and employees of the port facilities. Khat was also exported to British Somaliland was also grown across the border by over land transport.

The increase in Khat trade in late twenties was assisted by the construction of roads that connect several areas of the Khat production to the railway terminal. Beginning in the mid-twenties, rasTafari, then de facto ruler of Ethiopia, took personal interest in promoting road building in several areas of the empire, but mostly in the eastern part of the country where he was born and raised. Hence the construction of roads that are connecting Dire Dawa, Harar, Hargessa, DaderGaraMula'ata and other small districts of the eastern corridor have immensely contributed for the production of more Khat because of the accessibility of transportation and huge demand among consumers of the above mentioned areas.

4. Discussion

The demand of Khat in major cities of the country has been incredibly increased. One can observe series of Khat shops in major cities of the country especially in eastern parts of the country. Moreover, it is common to see market places

where Khat is the only product that available in the market. Despite the growing of Khat demands, cultivation and harvesting methods have remained unchanged over the centuries.

Seedling can be planted year round but most cultivation occurs between January and March. The plant could grow to a height of approximately four feet. A properly cultivated plant could give its first yield within two to three years and remain productive as long as sixty to seventy years. Cultivation and harvestings are mostly done by hand. Especially during harvesting, the farmer cut the Khat ready for consumption used his hand individually. Most of the time the khat leaves is cut with their buds so that consumers can easily hold the Khat and chew.

Khat shrubs thrive in highland areas. The plant can be raised at elevations ranging from 5000 to 8000 feet above sea level. Optimum conditions include cultivation at ranging 5000 50 6500 feet above sea level, an average temperature between 65° and 85°F and good draining. Khat ecology is best suited to the cultivation of coffee. Unlike coffee Khat however is less susceptible to diseases and insects that regularly attack coffee and other highland crops. However, continues harvest and over raining could kill the plant in the long run. Hence during rainy season it is uncommon to see farmers harvest their Khat and go to the market for exchange. Due to this reason Khat supply decreases during rainy season. Khat farmers prefer to engage themselves in planting other products during rainy seasons in their homestead plots. Because of the extensive damages happening to the Khat farm during rainy seasons, farmers prefer to preserve their Khat with hoeing than harvest and further damage it.

Until improvements in transportation facilities opened up market outlets in some neighboring countries, most of HarargheKhat went for domestic use and markets. The price that consumers pay for the Khat is different according to the type and market brand of the Khat. The type of Khat that has effectiveness in producing hilarity and stimulation are highly needed and tagged relatively higher price. Farmers however identified two basic varieties of Khat these are *Dima*, medium- sized reddish leaves and *Dalotta*, a small, pale, yellowish leaves. *Dalotta* is less acidic in taste and is preferred by local chewers for its greater stimulation and effectiveness. The *Dimma* variety is said to be sturdy and more lasting than the *Dlotta* and as the result came to be expanded in general quantity than the *Dalotta*.

At the market place, khat is classified under a variety of names signifying quality. The long, tender leaves which bud after the previous year's harvest are referred to as *Uratta* and may be harvested at any time of the year. The young tender shoots are known as *UrattaQuerti*, and the slender, leathery one are called *Uratta-quddaa*. When for some reason the *Uratta* is left unharvested for more than months, the new shoots grow to be a new market brand known as *Haddaara*, or *haafaa* or *Ijaanaaqqaa*.

Leaves that are grown to full maturity are called *quertii*. Sometimes a leafhopper called *Quddaa* feeds on the khat

leaves at the querti stage and retards the maturing process. The farmer then stimulates new growth by maturing, weeding and shoring up. The renewed leaves are called *Quddaa*, which is considered of high quality and therefore has a very high market value. A poor quality khat with older leaves is left on the tree so that women may harvest and retail them in local markets. This type of khat is called *Faaqaa* or *Tacharo* or *Chaballa*. If the rains stop before the young shoots, the *Uratta*, grows to maturation, the plant becomes retarded and start to die out. If, however, the rains come back or irrigation is made possible, the plan resume growth, but no longer is considered to provide the high quality *Urattakhat* but *Kara-bulla*.

As far as usage is concerned, the common method of consumption is chewing. Fresh khat, that are harvested less than not more than 12 hours and have kept its moisture are highly demanded by the consumers because the more tender and juicy the leaves are the easier to be chewed and the more testy it is. When khat supply arrived late in the market and become unconsumably freshly, they are left dried and the dried leaves are boiled and drunk. Very rarely is khat smoked as tobacco or cannabis, although the ends of the twigs and leaves are sometimes crushed and rolled in cigarettes.

Khat has historically served the same function as such mild stimulants as kola in West Africa and coca among the indigenous people of Latin America. It is mostly chewed to reduce fatigue and create sensation of hunger and thirst. When relatives come to certain family for visit hosts usually provide a handful of the leaves called *Rabssa* to their guest as a sign of hospitality. During births, marriages, religious festivals are celebrated by chewing khat and on occasions such as funerals and naming ceremonies, khat leaves are presented as a gift. Among the Oromo people of Hararghe areas, during *Wadajaa* ritual-a ceremony of group prayer performed at times of illness, death, or calamity-large amounts of khat are consumed by participants. Khat is chewed during such occasions for prayer and tufta,

According to frequently consumers, khat is usually chewed until the consumer experience a pleasurable state of mind called *mirqana* so that he could participate in the activities continuously without any sign of fatigue that hinder the chewer to consume the other day. Khat could be consumed here time in a day. First, I could be consumed in the morning. Chewing Khat during this time is names as *Ije-Benna*, meaning opener of a morning eye. IjeBana time chewing is held with small group of people who are working the same task together near their working place. Secondly, khat could be chewed just after having lunch, consumers name chewing during this time as a *Bercha*. *Bercha* is held mostly within the house or if it is hot season around the gates of one's house. Thirdly, one could consume in the night as *Ija Chufa*, meaning closing eyes. *Ije Chufa* is consumed basically for letting the person fall in sleep.

Khat chewing is always accompanied by the drinking of water or a locally prepared tea called *Hoja*, an infusion of coffee husk and milk. Contemporary chewers especially in

major cities of the region use soft drinks like coca cola to accompany their Khat.

5. Conclusion

Khat is a herbal that has stimulating effect to its consumer. This plant is mainly produced in the eastern part of Ethiopia. Contemporarily however, plating khat has become common in almost every parts of the country. khat is known under many names, such as khat, kath, qat, qaad, chat, quat, tschat, mirra, Kus-es-Salahin, bushman's tea, African tea and African salad. The size of the plant varies from a small bush (ca 40 cm tall) to a high tree (which can be up to 6 m tall). There is very scanty information on how Khat was discovered. However, a close look at to some documents might lead us to the conclusion that this herbal was discovered by a shepherd who was waiting his goats around certain mountain. According to this folk, a shepherd observed when one of his goat stumbled to eat a Khat plan in the mountain. He further noticed that one of his goats was frequently eating this plant. Moreover, he observed difference between the goat that eat Khat and the other who didn't. The difference was that the goat that was eating Khat was more active and alert while other are not. After a frequent study of his goat and the herbal that his goat used to eat, the shepherd has tried the plant himself. And according to legends, the man felt good, stimulated and become very active and tireless though out the day he tasted the Khat. In the contrary to this tale, some scholars see the beginning of this herbal with religious institutions who claim the plant as a leaf of God. Khat plant has been famously in use in some parts of Ethiopia, particularly in Harar and its surroundings. Because of a massive production, consumption and distribution of Khat in Hararge, some historians consider the area as the birthplace of Khat. In 1910, khat chewing was a widespread practice among the Oromo people in eastern Hararghe areas. The leaf quickly attained positions of social, cultural and religious importance. Farmers however identified two basic varieties of Khat these are Dima, medium- sized reddish leaves and Dalotta, a small, pale, yellowish leaves. Until improvements in transportation facilities opened up market outlets in some neighboring countries, most of Hararghe Khat went for domestic use and markets. According to frequently consumers, khat is usually chewed until the consumer experience a pleasurable state of mind called *mirqana*. Khat could be consumed here time in a day. First, I could be consumed in the morning. Chewing Khat during this time is names as *Ije-Benna*, meaning opener of a morning eye. Secondly, khat could be chewed just after having lunch, consumers name chewing during this time as a *Bercha*. Thirdly, one could consume in the night as *Ija Chufa*, meaning closing eyes. *Ije Chufa* is consumed basically for letting the person fall in sleep. Khat chewing is always accompanied by the drinking of water or a locally prepared tea called *Hoja*, an infusion of coffee husk and milk.

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