

Illicit Brews in Kenya: A Case of Chang'aa

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Abstract

Prevalence of consumption of illicit brews in Kenya, specifically Chang'aa, has been on the limelight for several decades because of its effects on not only its consumers, but the families of consumers and the society at large. Despite the repeated visible effects, mostly reported through the media, not much research has been done to uncover in specific the effects that chang'aa, and one of the illicit brews in Kenya among others has on its consumers. This paper therefore interrogates the effects of this illicit brew, based on various researches in different parts in the country by scholars. The paper adopted a descriptive research design. The data was collected from secondary sources, majorly, research reports from thesis, publications from journals and e-books. It involved a review of these research reports in order to document the findings on the effects of chang'aa. It was then found that, chang'aa, has led to deaths of several hundreds of people, health problems, environmental and economic effects. These effects were both positive and negative on the social and economic perspective, but the negative effects outweighed the few positive effects.

Key words: Changaa, illicit brew, potent brew, effects

Introduction

Illicit brews in governments across the globe has been a matter of concern, Kenya being inclusive because of the social, economic, health and psychological risks of the unstandardized alcoholic beverage (Kariuki, 2010). Illicit brews are known to cause health risks to its consumers (Muturi, 2014). According to Okaru and Kibwage, (2017), illicit brews consist of all the unrecorded home-made surrogate alcoholic beverages. The production and consumption of illicit brews has been a source of methanol poisoning in the United States (Levy *et al.*, 2003). In the global perspective, the rampancy of illicit brew accounts for a larger portion of all distilled brews and are characterized by evasion of tax and are unregulated by government (Akala *et al.*, 2016). In Kenya, illicit brews account for the bigger percentage of all alcohol. It is rated at 60% and is a very common occurrence throughout the country (Mutisya and Willis, 2009). There are of several kinds of illicit brews existing in Kenya, depending on its ingredients and method of manufacture as well as the community. Some of these illicit brews are for example, mnazi, busaa, muratina, mti ni dawa and the distilled spirit, chang'aa (Kipchumba, 2017). As noted by Okaru and Kibwage (2017), these illicit brews have been associated with several methanol poisoning outbreaks in the country. It has caused hundreds of deaths (Kariuki, 2010).

Chang'aa, is one of Kenya's lethal illicitly distilled spirit (Munira, 2000, Mutisya and Willis, 2009, Bodewes, 2010). It's the most popular drink (Bodewes, 2010) and due to its danger when consumed, has attained the name 'kill-me-quick' (The Economist, 2010, Munira, 2000, Akala *et al.*, 2016, Levy *et al.*, 2003). Its origin, according to Kampelmacher (1981), is said to be traced to the distilled alcohol manufactured by the Nubians, the Sudanese soldiers who were attached to the Kings African Rifles before the world war one. It is thus sometimes called the 'Nubian gin' because it is believed to have been copied form them.

Statement of the problem

Illicit brews in Kenya have been a problem for several decades, especially with the occurrences of death episodes blamed on the consumption of *chang'aa*. The brew has been a subject of government and the general population outcry due to its effects. Although it is known that the traditionally brewed spirit is sometimes adulterated and leads to methanol poisoning, there are a few studies that analyze the effect of *chang'aa* in specific. The literature on the brew are scattered and scanty, a gap that this paper aims to curb by providing the effects associated with the illicit brew in Kenya.

Methodology

The study will utilize secondary data, from books, journals and thesis, to provide qualitative analysis on the effect that *chang'aa* causes to the Kenyan population. The reviewed papers will include documents that touch on the topic across the country.

Conceptual understanding of chang'aa

Chang'aa as a concept has many perspectives in terms of its definitions, there are contentions among authors as well as agreements on what *chang'aa* is. Some define *chang'aa* based on their content during manufacture, some based on its potency and effects or the scale of its manufacturing. It has also been conceptualized based on its targeted consumers. There seems not to be a single agreed upon definition of *chang'aa*.

Perspectives of Chang'aa

There are several perspectives in which *chang'aa* has been describes. To understand *chang'aa* as an illicit brew in Kenya, these perspectives have to be noted and understood. They include the following

The Content of Chang'aa

Several authors have conceptualized *chang'aa* with regard to the ingredients used before it is distilled. Marcus and Mark (2009) defined *chang'aa* as 'a cornmeal based gin'. Bodewes (2010) noted that *chang'aa* is 'a potent distilled spirit from fermented maize or sorghum. Meffe (2014), not only talked about maize and sorghum, but also added millet as the source of the distilled brew. According to Akala *et al.* (2016) apart from maize flour and sorghum, yeast and sugar is also part of the content used in the manufacturing of *chang'aa*. *Chang'aa* is an illegal alcohol that is widely known for its methanol content and is derived from yeast and molasses (Levy *et al.*, 2015). It is also said to be an 'artisanal spirit' that is obtained from fermented maize grains (Okaru *et al.*, 2017). It is very clear therefore that *chang'aa* is not distilled from a single ingredient but can be distilled from different kinds of grains, with sugar and yeast being part of the additives in the process. To qualify as a dangerous brew, it is because some industrial chemicals are added into the distillate in order to enhance its potency. Among these dangerous chemicals are methanol (levy et al, 2015, Ntalami, 2000, Taeka, 2015), jet fuel and formalin (Akala *et al.*, 2016).

The Potency of Chang'aa

Potency means the power of something. Some authors explained and viewed *chang'aa* based on its power or strength to intoxicate. It is commonly referred to as a Kenyan distilled brew and sometimes known as 'kill-me-quick'(Munira, 2000, Kelly *et al.*, 2015, Smedth, 2009, Taeka, 2015, Ntalami, 2015) because of the lethal effects that it has caused in society. The name kill me quick has now become common across the country because the effect of

methanol laced *chang'aa* kills its consumers in no time. This has been supported by a study carried by Akala *et al.* (2016), where they indicated that, due to the thirst of individuals to get a drink that can intoxicate them faster, unscrupulous Kenyans, with the soul aim of getting profit add jet fuel to the already illegal brew. *Chang'aa* is approximated to have an alcoholic content of between 25-69% v/v (Kampelmacher, 1981). According to Silberschmidt (1999) *chang'aa* contains 60-70% pure alcohol. Some have an alcoholic content as high as 98% (Munira, 2005). This therefore makes the alcohol too potent be consumed by human beings, hence its name, related to the impact of its potency; kill me quick.

Manufacture of Chang'aa

Chang'aa is a locally brewed alcohol, sometimes known as local bootleg (Levy, et al., 2003). It is manufactured by small scale operators in the informal setting (Bodewes, 2010 and Ritu, 2001). *Chang'aa* is produced with a target on consumers living in impoverished conditions and are basically not capable of affording the legal standardized beer (Silton, 2017). Illicit *chang'aa* trade is mostly carried out by individuals from areas characterized by low economic class, with a greater likelihood that they are illiterate (Silton, 2017; Ntalami, 2011 and Ongaya, 2007).

Chang'aa consumption is rampant among people with very low income, especially in the rural setting as well as in the urban slum areas (Chweya and Ouya, 2014; Silton, 2017). It is also a local brew because it is not carried out in a large scale and in an industrial manufacturing setting but rather in homesteads by use of locally available materials like pots, calabashes and plastic containers.

Legality of Chang'aa

Chang'aa as an illegal brew in Kenya although there are some provisions for traders in the commodity to legalize it if they meet certain pre-determined criterion. The illegality of *chang'aa* emanates from several legal provisions which do not allow its manufacture, sale and consumption in the country (Kipchumba, 2017). The illegality of *chang'aa* has also been aired by several scholars as an illicit alcoholic beverage (Okaru *et al.*, 2017; Taeka, 2015; Okaru *et al.*, 2017; Mutisya and Willis, 2009, Silton, 2017). It was not until the year 2010, when the famous Alcoholic Drinks and Control Act was passed in law. The Act provided avenues to which the brew could be legalized, after meeting the required consumer standards and qualified for licensing (Opiyo and Omanga, 2010). This has though not been the case because most *chang'aa* traders are poor (Ntalami, 2011) and could not afford to pay for all the required procedures and meet the high standards required among them and strict quality control rules (Opiyo and Omanga, 2010).

Chang'aa, can therefore be said to be an illicit brew in Kenya, a distilled spirit made locally in small scale, is unstandardized and has been known for its adverse effects due to its adulteration with methanol and other industrial chemicals, mostly brewed and consumed by the poor people in society who cannot afford to buy the standardized alcohol. It has acquired several names, for example, kill-me-quick, Nubian gin, kali, mulika, among others.

Changaa has several effects. Both positive and negative but experience has proven that the negative effects outweigh its positive effects by far. These effects are either social, economic, psychological health related and environmental. Bodewes (2010) noted that, *chang'aa* poses health, safety and long-term disruption of development in communities and is the cause of all the main social, economic and health problems.

Literature Review

Social Effects

The social effects of *chang'aa* vary in intensity. It affects both the brewer, the consumer, families and the community at large. Several studies have reported the social effects of the killer brew. According to Mutisya and Willis (2009), in their study in two Kenyan towns; Naivasha and Mombasa, they noted that, *chang'aa* causes vulnerability to both the trader and the drinker. This is because they will both be subject to regular police actions. This in turn leads to anxiety in normal business days because of fear of being caught. This has also been reinforced by the findings of Bodewes (2010) who reported that, the brew has led to an adoption of a pattern of corruption by the government officials who may have either participated or benefited from the drink. This behavior ends up lowering the dignity of the officers and consequently leads to the expansion of the illicit *chang'aa* trade because of the policy implementers' moral decay (Lutta, 2016).

Chang'aa has also been reported to make children vulnerable by exposing them to hunger (Bodewes, 2010). This is because parents who consume the brew spent most of their time in the *chang'aa* dens at the expense of providing food for their children. The exposure to hunger leads to malnutrition (Muturi, 2014) and disrupted social life of children and might lead to school dropouts and low self-esteem among other social interaction defects. *Chang'aa* disrupts child upbringing by bringing in parental disorders and lack or absolute absence of parental guidance (Sirera and Mwangi, 2014). Another study by Munira (2000) on illicit brew and its implications indicated that, *chang'aa* disrupts families. It also leads to serious child social development because of resultant abuse and child neglect (Makhubele, 2017)

Kariuki (2010) and Ntalami (2011) in their separate studies argued that, apart from the disruption of family happiness *chang'aa* affects the peace of societies. It causes family break ups (Munira, 2005; Ongaya, 2007 and Ntalami, 2011), domestic violence, and petty crimes (Munira, 2005; Makhubele, 2017 and Gustavo, 2013) and role exchange in families (Bodewes, 2010 and Ahmad, 2000). During domestic violence, both genders are affected, as well as the children, leading to separation of families. Petty crimes are carried out by offenders in order to get cash to be able to purchase the brew. According to Gustavo (2013), *chang'aa* is catalyst of single parent families.

Chang'aa consumption encourages promiscuity among couples due to impotency by the men or their unavailability to their wives (Muturi, 2014). Sirera and Mwangi (2014) in their study on effects of alcohol abuse also reported that men who are *chang'aa* consumers spent most of their time in the illicit brew dens instead of being home. Their absence therefore becomes a basis for their spouses to resort to infidelity.

Chang'aa has some positive effects. People engage in its drinking when they are frustrated to forget their problems and brings the drinkers together, creating a form of social unity (Ongaya, 2007 and Kanere, 2009) because in the traditional societal setting, *chang'aa* is reported to enjoy cultural patronage (Akala *et al.*, 2016). The brew is also used in every traditional rituals like circumcision and marriage negotiations, as well as during peace settlement talks (Kipchumba, 2017).

Economic Effects

Chang'aa affects the economic sphere of its consumers, their families as well as the community. According to Akala *et al.* (2016) in their study noted that illicit trade has helped the women in Vihiga County to support their families from the earnings. This was also noted by Ongaya (2007) who reported that, the trade brought in some income especially to the womenfolk who were unemployed and due to its gains, the women were able to take their children through school.

On the negative perspective, *chang'aa* affected the economic aspect of families because, the drinkers, at the expense of the needs of their families, spent the little finance available on the drink (Sirera and Mwangi, 2014) and Siltan, 2017). This diminishes the family income (Kelley *et al.*, 2015) and contributes to poverty (Kanere, 2009 and Bodewes, 2010). The consumers of *chang'aa* spent their energy and resources on the illicit brew, neglecting their responsibilities at home. The drinkers then become dependent on others for their survival (Munira, 2000).

Changaa affects badly on the employment of its consumers. There is noted absenteeism (Makhubele, 2017). It diminishes the prospects of the male consumers from getting employed while those on employment end up forgetting their occupational duties (Kanere, 2009). Hence an increase in employment related problems (Bodewes, 2010), leading to demotion or being fired. The users get into trouble while on-job due to absenteeism and lateness. This accumulates to serious diminishing level of productivity of individuals (Sirera and Mwangi, 2014).

Nationally, the professional effort required to treat and rehabilitate alcoholics, which have been reported that addiction emanates from illicit brew among them *chang'aa*, costs a great fortune of the Kenya's tax payers money. In Kenya, over 2.5 million people are in need of treatment and rehabilitation (Maina, 2015). To recover from alcoholism, an individual cost is rated at one hundred and forty thousand, which will be a great financial cost for the county.

Death Blindness and Hospitalization

Chang'aa is blamed for several incidences of death, blindness and diseases (Bodewes, 2010). It is a lethal brew with serious impacts on beings and it has gained its popularity because of its responsibility in annual loss of hundreds of lives (Levy *et al.*, 2003; Kariuki, 2010). *Chang'aa*, has in the current times deviated from its traditional ingredients because some unscrupulous profit minded people have adulterated the brew with industrial chemicals (Jenkins, *et al.*, 2015).

Because it has been laced with methanol (The Economist, 2010, Ntalami, 2011), *chang'aa* becomes a death bed. It is sometimes tainted with dangerous chemicals for example Formaldehyde aiming at reducing its production time and increasing the strength and potency of the brew (Ntalami, 2011; Carey *et al.*, 2015). Jet fuel and formalin is added to *chang'aa* to enhance its potency and reduce its distillation period (Akala *et al.*, 2016) while other brewers adulterate the brew with additives such as fecal matter, decomposing animal bodies, fertilizers and embalming fluid (Carey *et al.*, 2015),

Methanol is a chemical product that is usually used in products such as anti-freeze (Ntalami, 2011). It is 'a highly flammable and poisonous type of alcohol which when ingested even in small quantities, as ten milliliters can cause permanent blindness and a hundred milliliters can be fatal' (Business Directory, 2018). 10-20ml of methanol to an average person can cause blindness while over 20ml can cause death (Kelly *et al.*, 2015).

Deaths caused by methanol poisoning have been reported not only in Kenya, but also other countries for example, in United States, its last occurrence was 1981 and involved 44 inmates in Chicago but since then, it has had annual reported cases of about 3200 (Levy *et al.*, 2003). In July 2015, India lost about a hundred individuals at the slum of Mumbai after consuming an illicit brew named *hooch* (Kaplan, 2015). In Uganda, seven people lost their lives and eleven others were hospitalized after consuming methanol laced illicit brew locally known as *waragi* between September 11 and 25 in 2009 despite their legal status in the country (Ubalert, 2009).

Kenya has had its share of *chang'aa* related years deaths for several decades. Eighty people lost their lives in Nairobi in 1998 after consuming methanol poisoned *chang'aa*

(Munira, 2005). In the year 2000, Kenya witnessed the loss of life by one hundred and forty people due to the consumption of methanol laced *chang'aa* named 'kumi kumi' in two slums in the city of Nairobi; Mukuru Kwa Njenga and Mukuru Kayaba. Hundreds of the consumers were hospitalized while a few lost their eyesight (Ntalami, 2000). In November 2000, five hundred and twelve people got admitted to Kenyatta National Hospital for *chang'aa* intoxication (Munira, 2005). Out of the 512, 137 lost their lives, 20 lost their eyesight while others became physically impaired. In the year 2001, fifty people were died due methanol laced *chang'aa* in Kiandutu, Thika (Gustavo, 2013).

In the year 2005, Kenya experienced another *chang'aa* poisoning in Machakos, with a brand name 'mulika' laced with methanol and with an alcoholic content rated 98 % (Munira, 2005). The lethal brew killed 51 people (Gustavo, 2013). In the same year, June, 49 people in Nairobi's Shauri Moyo lost their lives, while 174, were hospitalized (Kwambai and Kimutai, 2017). There was another episode of such deaths in July 2010 and it claimed the lives of 15 people and took away the eyesight of 10 persons (Munira, 2005 and Kwambai and Kimutai, 2017).

The deaths become sorrow to the widows, widowers and orphans who are left behind to face the harsh reality of losing the loved ones. Parents have also lost the lives of their potential sons to the illicit brew, causing depression. It has caused unquantified suffering to its consumers because of diseases related to the potent brew. Its consumption, leads the adoption of risky sexual behaviors (Silton, 2010). Such behavior comes with unwanted pregnancies and illegal abortions. A *chang'aa* is blamed for the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections due to risky sexual behaviors (Muturi, 2014; Kanere, 2009 and Mmbali, 2016). This happens when people get intoxicated and lose their moral grip and rational judgments. Excessive consumption of alcohol causes liver cirrhosis (Taeka, 2015 and Muturi, 2014), causes cancer and fatal kind of diseases (Taeka, 2015), blindness, kidney failure and extreme malnutrition (Muturi, 2014). *Chang'aa* is the root cause to failing health (Merecia and Mwangi, 2014) especially to its consumers. It exposes them to mental problems (Ntalami, 2011). The reproductive ability of individuals is also affected by the consumption of *chang'aa* (Muturi, 2014). Men become impotent (Kariuki, 2010). In some communities, nursery schools have been shut down because there are no children to teach, and this is blamed on the impact that *chang'aa* has had on the male population to an extent that children are no longer being born (Muturi, 2014). Human organs are also affected by the brew such as the eyes (Kanere, 2009, and Kelley 2015).

Environmental effects

The environment suffers from the business of *chang'aa*. According to Akala *et al.*, (2016) in their study on reconciling *chang'aa* distillation with climate change, they reported that, the business of *chang'aa* manufacturing affects the environment. It causes air pollution and eventually climate change because during the process of distillation, the production of carbon dioxide is not regulated hence the destruction of the ozone layer. They also noted that most of the *chang'aa* distillation is done by the use of wood and this causes deforestation.

Discussion

Chang'aa is lethal illicit brew that has been adulterated from its original traditional form into a poisonous alcoholic brew by individuals who are only interested in achieving economic ends. Because of the need for survival financially, most women, especially from the low economic rural and slum areas turn into the lucrative business that is cheap to begin in terms of it capital investment, and does not need any kind of prior technical knowledge to manufacture the illicit brew. It is a local alcoholic spirit which has defied decades of its control in Kenya. It has been controlled for over a century but to date; *chang'aa* is the most

popular alcoholic beverage in the country. The effects of the brew has been treated by the government with great intensity and propagated by the media through nationwide reports of *chang'aa* poisoning. This has not deterred the consumers from turning into the potentially lethal brew on a daily basis.

Despite the wide sensitization on its effects, knowledge of the consequences and morals that govern rational human being, adulteration has become a normal practice and the effects of the brew are felt not only in the family, but at the societal and national level. The use of methanol, jet fuel, fertilizers, among many other dangerous chemicals mainly to either shorten the brewing period or increase the strength of the drink, is a major source of the effects felt by consumers from drinking *chang'aa*. Addition of such chemicals is against humanity and legal provisions.

More effects felt from *chang'aa* consumption are also blamed on its ingredients during its manufacture. The incorporation of rotten grains such as maize, known to contain a toxic chemical blamed for causing cancer is a part to look into. The manufacturing environment that ends up causing contamination also add up to the health hazards experienced. This brew, because of its illegality, is stored in unhygienic places like riverbeds, sewer lines and bushes exposing it to more dangerous contaminations.

The deaths are robbing the country potential manpower, robbing societies of their populations and giving families sorrow and grief, especially when bread winners die due to the brew. This in turn causes an economic blow, leading to poverty, hence trapping individuals in the vicious circle of poverty, exposing young girls to early unintended marriages. It is thus evident that the killer brew absolutely disrupts family set ups, and its effects are long lasting. Wives end up being widowed, men, widowers, children orphans.

The health effects are myriad, beginning from diseases like liver cirrhosis due to high alcoholic content in *chang'aa*, to the spread of the epidemic sexually transmitted diseases for example HIV/AIDS. This is because, once drunk, people lose their judgmental capacity and engage in promiscuous behaviors, like rape and unprotected sex leaving them exposed to the high risk of contracting the disease. This in turn adds up the burden to the government, especially in their effort to stop more infection from the virus and the provision of drugs to patients.

Those who end up becoming disabled through blindness become a burden to the society because, for the rest of their lives, they will become dependent even for their basic necessities, reducing the number of economically able hands to provide for their families. Diseases drain family resources too through unintended treatments. Hence, the high rate of poverty among *chang'aa* brewers

Conclusion

The effects of *chang'aa* are myriad. If not controlled, many people will remain poor and many area underdeveloped. The HIV pandemic will not be controlled and many lives will be lost. The popularity of *chang'aa* should therefore be reduced through the application of strict measures to be able to overcome the problems brought in by the illegal business of *chang'aa* manufacture, sale and consumption.

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