



Miraa Is Unstoppable: The Case for Sorting out Kenya's Convoluted *Catha Edulis* Agro-Industry

By Paul Goldsmith



Meru, Kenya - OILING THE WHEELS OF COMMERCE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The American explorer William Chanler set up base in the Nyambene Range in 1893. He found a thriving local economy that attracted traders from across the region; a unique feature of this market was the use of the narcotic reddish-green twigs of a tree (*Catha edulis*), known as miraa locally, to seal deals and cement relationships among traders in a convivial atmosphere. He commented on their mildly pleasant effect. For visitors who came from as far as the hinterland of Lake Turkana, the botanical stimulant was a rare treat reinforcing ties of fictive kinship connecting their diverse communities.

Miraa, known as khat throughout the Middle East, has been intrinsic to the region's prosperity ever since. It should be contributing to Kenya's prosperity as well. The fact that it is not mirrors larger problems of colonially induced confusion and the failure to recognise Africa's adaptive cultural economies. Like coffee and tea, Kenyan miraa should have been another lucrative generator of post-Independence agricultural capital.

The same origin story is invoked to explain the discovery of miraa and coffee in Ethiopia and Yemen. Concerned over the occasional disappearance of his goats, a herder follows their tracks to a forested glade. He finds them contentedly munching on wiry shrubs. So he tries chewing the twigs (or berries) himself, and finds he is refreshed and energised. You hear the same story in Meru, although the plant's domestication and the area's sophisticated ethno-pharmacological tradition is clearly a legacy of interaction with ancient hunter-gatherer clans.

The transition of *Catha edulis* and *Coffea arabica* from cultural consumables to market commodities has followed parallel but contrasting trajectories. Both commodities' migration out of their traditional milieu initially generated religious opposition and political condemnation

The transition of *Catha edulis* and *Coffea arabica* from cultural consumables to market commodities has followed parallel but contrasting trajectories — although the 48 hour half-life of the former restricted its circulation until the era of modern transport. Both commodities' migration out of their traditional milieu initially generated religious opposition and political condemnation. Coffee was banned in 16th century Mecca and subsequently labelled 'the drink of the devil' by Europeans.

THE PENNY UNIVERSITIES OF EAST AFRICA

The beverage surmounted these barriers and by the middle decades of the 1700s, coffee houses around Europe and the Middle East were providing an alternative to the recreational role of alcohol. Coffee houses became focal points for sober discussions of economics, politics, religion, and the issues of the day. The sobriquet 'Penny Universities' recognised coffee's contribution to the European Enlightenment.

Today, *Catha edulis* facilitates the exchange of information in the same way, but the 'Tree of Paradise' rarely receives acknowledgement outside academic circles for promoting integration and mediating social change. Rather, it is routinely demonised and banned where regulation and social controls would work better.

In Yemen and across the Horn of Africa, users praise its medicinal qualities. The plant's two active alkaloids, cathine and cathinone, are organic versions of ingredients used in many over-the-counter cold and flu medicines. Such attributes are obviously not the primary drivers of its consumption. Miraa is stronger than coffee, and considerably so in the case of certain varieties. Its highly variable stimulatory effects are one of the more complicated differences between drinking the bean and eating trees.

There is no fixed standard for khat, miraa, chat and other local varieties of the plant. Rather, the variegated morphology of *Catha edulis* makes it a one-species exemplar of diverse bio-morphology. Wildlings growing in full canopy forests can reach seventy feet, but the diverse domesticated kinds of chat found in Ethiopian markets can appear as different as the celery, broccoli, and basil sold in your neighbourhood supermarket.

Quality is a function of a number of factors such as differences among sub-varieties, altitude and climate, and place of cultivation. The plant usually appears as a wiry but leafy shrub whose branches are harvested several times a year. At maturity Meru miraa resembles the old olive trees of the Middle East, and age is a primary determinant of quality.

THE MOST SOPHISTICATED EXAMPLE OF AFRICAN PERMACULTURE

The *mbaine* miraa from the older trees was formerly reserved for ceremonial occasions, marriage negotiations, and featured in the deliberations of *njuri* elders. Adult men were only allowed to join these sittings and chew after fathering their first child.

Meru's miraa agriculture presents the continent's most sophisticated example of African permaculture. In contrast to Ethiopia and Yemen, where it is usually mono-cropped, Meru miraa is cultivated within a sophisticated agroforestry system. The typical miraa farm features a multi-storey ensemble of indigenous species providing food, forage, human and animal medicines, and other household use products. Where its lifespan does not exceed 50 years elsewhere, a Meru miraa farm is a multigenerational enterprise that only reaches adulthood after half a century.

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These agro-jungles include trees that conserve soil moisture and fix nitrogen, while the miraa trees are manicured and shaped as they grow to maximise exposure to sunlight and to minimise the space they occupy. It is an extremely efficient system in agro-ecological and economic terms: Meru trees continue to produce even during extended droughts.

While people obviously chew miraa for the buzz, consumers across the region value the milder and less edgy varieties both for their more subtle but superior high and minimal side effects. Formal analysis has yet to quantify variations in the physiological state induced by chewing the diverse spectrum of local varieties, but they are significant and market prices usually provide the best indicator of consumer preferences.

Multiple variables influence potency; quality and strength are not the same thing in this instance. In general, *Catha edulis* grown at lower altitudes and in drier settings is stronger, longer lasting, and less expensive. Kenya's *mbaine* miraa can now sell for over Ksh5,000 ngs for a bundle where young *mithairo* miraa from the same locale may fetch one-tenth the price.

Veteran chewers are the most reliable source of information on the stimulant's ridiculously diverse variations and comparative psycho-physiological effects. But localised environmental factors can make evaluation a tricky business. I once found miraa growing on the grassy knolls high up in the Chyulu Hills that looked like a spikey version of crab grass. Ingesting several of the short red-green stalks cost me a night's sleep.

When it comes to the idiosyncratic characteristics of this Afro-Arab commodity, indigenous knowledge is paramount. Yet such arcane insights, including the oft-noted quality of suspending differences of race, religion and identity in gatherings where it is chewed, has been of little consequence outside the cultural universe of *Catha edulis*.

Historical and anthropological studies illuminate the role social commodities like coffee, tea, chocolate, sugar and other non-food consumables play in the process of socioeconomic transition. Miraa is clearly following a pathway similar to coffee's spread in Europe, but remains controversial due to a combination of spurious criticism and biased science, including clinical findings isolated from the social and long-term context of khat consumption.

For decades, most of the commentaries proffered by European explorers like Richard Burton and other early Western observers deemed the act of chewing and its unique social dynamics as a

curious if innocuous practice. Systemic biases, some of which can be traced to its historical association with Muslims, often punctuate contemporary critiques of *Catha edulis*. Regardless, the contested merits of chewing and khat commerce were a non-issue for governments until recently.

A MARKET COMMODITY IN ITS OWN RIGHT

The miraa trade was originally a by-product, and not the centrepiece, of this cultural-agricultural complex. Miraa was shifting from a facilitator of regional trade to a market commodity in its own right by the onset of colonialism. Modern commercialization took off during the late 1950s, after the Mau-Mau curfew was lifted.

In Kenya, the 48-hour economic half-life of Meru's miraa limited colonial era circulation to Nairobi and Mombasa. Nyambene traders migrated to urban centres across the country after Independence, drawing in a new generation of aficionados from non-chewing communities. Kenya's Anglophile Attorney General, Charles Njonjo, lobbied for its ban.

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Around the same time, Saudi Arabia hosted an international conference on *Catha edulis*. Results of the papers presented were published in 1967 as a bulky compendium. The Kingdom subsequently criminalised the consumption and import of khat. Decades later, an Ethiopian participant in the Saudi conference told me the Saudi's anti-khat agenda was clear from the onset, and that the Western scientists present were happy to play along.

Back in Kenya, a Meru delegation visited president Jomo Kenyatta to argue the case against prohibition. Mzee raised a bouquet of 200-year old *mbaine* to signal his recognition of miraa's cultural legitimacy and economic role in the rural economy.

Since that moment, socioeconomic controversies and calls for legal control at home and elsewhere have mattered little to the Nyambene Meru, who remain comfortable living in their bucolic wooden cottages surrounded by miraa trees, some of which predate the Industrial Revolution. When queried on the possibility of legal impediments disrupting the ever-accelerating flight of their economic flagship, the standard response was '*miraa haipingiki*' — miraa is unstoppable.

For years, there was little evidence contradicting the *haipingiki* thesis. After all, in the end, prohibition usually fails and the twigs wrapped in the leathery green leaves of the false banana (*Ensete ventrilosum*) had been conquering new markets for the past half-century.

Everything became more complicated after miraa became mixed up with the multinational Somali population. Somalia's infamous president Siad Barre banned imports in 1982, then allowed the surreptitious smuggling of miraa to reward loyal clan militias. Their opponents chased him out of Mogadishu 10 years later. The civil war erupting after his 1993 exit ignited an exodus of Somalis into neighbouring Kenya and beyond — with major ramifications for Meru's miraa.

Thousands of refugees transiting through Nairobi or settled in the world's largest refugee camp in Garissa came into contact with miraa for the first time. 'It helps us process the upheavals overtaking our lives,' one told me; I heard similar sentiments from aid workers coping with the chaos in Mogadishu.

The backstories were ignored by tabloid journalists more interested in branding khat as a drug of war. The US secretary of state for Africa chipped in by referring to combatants as 'khat-crazed Rambos getting pumped up for evening raids.'

Agents supplying antagonistic Somali warlords, however, coexisted peacefully in Maua. Displaced Somalis flocked to Maua looking for work, some of them sleeping under trees at the edge of town. Before long, more organised entrepreneurs replaced the clan buyers and agents, their fleets of immaculate Land Cruisers speeding out of their loading bays every evening en route to destinations across the stateless region.

THE REAL ACTION FOLLOWS THE SOMALI DIASPORA

The real action followed the Somali diaspora. Refugee Somalis pioneered lucrative new export destinations in London and Holland that served as depots for other northern markets. The high prices the lower-grade export miraa fetched abroad turned some of the new khat merchants into overnight millionaires. It also created new frictions. Two boycott in Meru designed to deprive the Somalis of direct access to miraa in 1996 and 1999 underscored the souring relations between producers and exporters.

The second action coincided with the death of a popular Meru political activist, Nkururu wa Ntai, who collapsed while dining with Somali friends in London. Kenyans claimed he was poisoned. His brother dismissed the conspiracy theory, informing the large crowd gathered at the funeral that his Somali associates were ordering miraa from Nkaruru to help him pay for his higher degree studies.

THE SOMALIS RETURN, BUT LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN

The rumours persisted. Some Meru politicians from outside the miraa zone exploited the confusion by inciting youths who set up roadblocks and stoned miraa vehicles. An angry mob converged on Maua as the Somali community left for Isiolo in two large convoys. The local Meru business community, who for the most part appreciated the Somalis' cosmopolitan presence, saw the politicians as opportunists manipulating the issues in order to take over the London trade.

Their gambit collapsed and the Somalis returned, but these events marked a new phase in the commercialisation process.

Several decades of commercialisation had spawned an efficient economic monoculture that was also eroding the smallholder agroforestry permaculture. Their ability to efficiently manoeuvre among the maze of spindly miraa branches made adolescents the harvesters of choice, while the high wages earned discouraged educational progress beyond basic written and numerical literacy. The economically abusive practice of renting miraa farms from cash-hungry farmers increased. Decreasing on-farm self-sufficiency and easy income combined with demographic increase to create a developmental cul-de-sac.

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The new markets had only partially alleviated the problem by the time the rising foreign-exchange returns from miraa began to garner belated recognition of its benefits for Kenya's national economy.

A 2011 survey reported that miraa exports, growing at a rate of 9.7 per cent annually for several

years, were now generating Ksh.16.5 billion (\$231.7 million) annually — and represented 54 per cent of the fresh produce Kenya exported to other African countries. Earnings from the 12 tonnes exported to London and Amsterdam no doubt exceeded the value of the 20 tonnes of miraa exported to Somalia every week. Kenya is still the primary market and some 40 tonnes are consumed at home.

NUMBERS ABATE THE NOISE

It is not exactly surprising that the noise associated with miraa abated in the presence of such numbers. But the miraa export industry was facing formidable new challenges in the form of Wahhabi Muslim reformers and other Islamist opposition.

Miraa powers open discussion and information sharing. Users in Kenya often comment on the propensity of miraa gatherings to vaporise differences of race, class, and ethnicity among the participants. Researchers in Yemen and Ethiopia note the same, corroborating its role as social glue mediating social and class divisions. This makes it anathema to many Islamists.

In the UK, the government launched an enquiry supported by independent research. In 2009, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs concluded that most arguments against the substance were overstated; criminalisation would create more problems than it would solve.

Although Al Shabaab attempted to suppress miraa and chat consumption in areas under their control, they later quietly relaxed this stance in favour of taxation.

But the issue resurfaced and the UK banned *Catha edulis* in 2014, ostensibly because the government did not want London to become the transit point for smuggling khat to neighbouring countries where it is banned.

In both instances, the Kenya government did next to nothing to intervene on behalf of producers' interest. No Kenyan organisation attempted to counter the arguments behind the ban, although the largest miraa producer association (Nyamita) eventually produced a quaintly worded although ineffective statement in defence of the commodity.

In Meru's traditional miraa producing areas, informants estimate miraa now employs seven out of 10 people. The UK ban has flattened the economy in adjacent areas linked to the European markets. 'In this area, ten out of ten people earn their living from miraa,' one prominent trader from the area opined, 'and under prevailing market conditions it is only a question of time until our people become poorer than they ever were in the past.'

In April 2016, President Uhuru Kenyatta announced the creation of a Ksh1 billion fund to assist farmers affected by the UK ban. The news came out of the blue, and the locals were suspicious, especially after an official statement referred to 'amendments to the Crops Act giving the national government authority to establish mechanisms for promotion, production, distribution and marketing of miraa as a cash crop.'

Kenya's smallholder producers have for decades struggled to assert greater control over cash crops like coffee and tea only to become dependent on buyer-driven commodity chains controlled by large international retailers. The more autonomous Nyambene Meru, in contrast, after years of longing for official acknowledgement of their indigenous cash crop, now face an economic double-whammy in the guise of new taxes and potentially negative forms of government intervention.

WAS BILLION SHILLING COMMISSION A POLITICAL SLUSH FUND?

The qualifications of the members appointed to the commission exacerbated these suspicions, and

the preliminary findings of their work confirmed the flawed assumptions operating underneath the surface. These findings, surfacing in the press recently, reveal a basic ignorance of the dynamics of the miraa agronomy and agroforestry — especially the recommendation to provide miraa farmers with fertiliser.

Not only does this run counter to the organic synergies of miraa permaculture, fertiliser applied to miraa trees actually makes the twigs unpalatable and impossible to consume. Placing more trash receptacles in places where the heavy leaf-clad twigs are sold was the most practical recommendation on offer. Miraa growers, who saw the billion shilling commission as a political slush fund from the onset, are demanding that the full proceedings of the commission be made public.

The focus of the Nyambene agricultural system began to shift after the value of miraa passed the value of food crops during the early 1970s. Discouraging monocultural cultivation and promoting the traditional biodiversity-based production model would be a positive intervention from both an agronomic and household economy point of view.

This is not the first time a Kenyan government commission has raised more questions than answers. It is hardly surprising that Coastals are demanding similar support for the problems behind the precipitous decline of coconut production, while climate-stressed pastoralists are asking similar questions about the state's lack of investment in lasting solutions for the aperiodic but predictable droughts ravaging their animals and settlements.

The civil war erupting after Siad Barre's 1993 exit ignited an exodus of Somalis into neighbouring Kenya and beyond — with major ramifications for Meru's miraa

That some farmers formerly selling to the European export market report they are now making better profits by selling to regional markets reminds us that the regional market has always been the driver of miraa commoditisation. At the same time, the case for educating the larger public about the unique qualities of the Tree of Paradise is long overdue.

A proper long-term strategy would address Western prejudices, refute the findings of bad science, document its history as a legitimate African social institution that forges ties among communities, highlight the ecologically sustainable practices of Nyambene miraa cultivators, and share the cross-generational knowledge informing proper consumption, including the cultural controls limiting its abuse.

EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO A RATIONAL POLICY

The Somali are both the most successful pioneers of new miraa markets and the primary source of opposition to its consumption. An educational initiative as discussed above — including support for investigating the role of *Catha edulis* as an antidote to religious radicalisation - would help rehabilitate the prejudicial portrayal of the commodity supporting its ban.

This will take time. Policies regulating the sale to minors at home and the type of miraa sold abroad represent a more useful approach to reverse the problem than the current state-based methods to rescue the situation.

The arguments featuring here are not intended to minimise the problems that come with the spread of *Catha edulis* consumption. But sorting out the issues of a socially interactive botanical stimulant is a more feasible proposition than parallel efforts to combat the considerably more serious problems of drugs and criminality plaguing the region, like the [heroin scourge](#) and criminal networks

associated with it recently reported in these pages.

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