

KHAT IN THE LIFE OF YEMEN*

Pavel V. Gusterin

*Center for Asia and the Middle East of
The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS)*

Khat¹ is a tropical evergreen plant of the Magnoliaceae family. Khat was mentioned for the first time in the XI century by great encyclopedist Abu Rayhan Mohammed bin Ahmed al-Biruni.

Modern scholars believe that Khat was brought to Yemen from Africa during the Ethiopian domination in the VI century. Khat became widespread in Yemen in late XIV - early XV centuries, as early as 1543, according to the Yemeni historian Yahya bin al-Husseim, the ruler of Yemen, Imam Yahya Sharaf al-Din (1507-1558) forbade the use of this plant.

After the finding of independence from the Ottoman Empire by the North Yemen in 1918, Zaidi imams, who took the reins of government, have encouraged the cultivation and consumption of khat for their political purposes, reasonably believing that khat distracts people from social problems and political struggle.

Khat is consumed in two ways: as a tea, that is quite rare (hence its other names are “African tea” or “Arabic tea”) and, mainly, as a plant mass resulting from prolonged chewing, which is kept near the cheek for some time. Thus some alkaloids are extracted, light drugs providing amphetamine effect. Sometimes the cheek is cut from the inside to provide the quicker absorption. The process of keeping khat near the cheek is called “tahzin” (keeping near the cheek).

To bring the chewing of khat in compliance with Shariah, khat in Yemen is not considered a drug or a plant containing any prohibited substance and is recognized as a “useful product”.

Soviet specialist on the Middle East Genin Israel said: “Despite the high value of Yemeni coffee there is no tendency in the country to expand plantations, high taxes that coffee growers often must pay make it more profitable to grow narcotic plant khat”² and further “Khat is tightly connected with life of Yemenis... Yemeni authorities patronize the trade of this narcotic plant, considering it as a significant source of revenue for the royal treasury”³.

For the past 50 years Khat became an integral part of the socio-economic system in Yemen for the following reasons. Firstly, in Yemen are favorable social conditions for its cultivation. Rapid growth of population has exacerbated social problems. The rural residents try to benefit from cultivating khat because it can bring significant income quickly and with low expenses. For instance, 1 ha of coffee brings

* This article is provided by the author in accordance with publisher policies. Translated and edited by Arabinform. Please cite the published version.

1 Catha edulis — «khat edible» (Latin).

2 Genin I.A. Yemen. M., 1953, p. 29.

3 Item, p. 30.

revenue of approx. 3.5 thousand USD annually and 1 ha of khat - approx. 15 thousand USD. Thus, in 1970s the khat plantations occupied an area of approx. 8 th. ha, in 2000 - 103 thousand ha.

Secondly, from the 60s of the XX century the khatofagia⁴ has become a social phenomenon, a kind of evidence of wealth and prosperity. Despite the fact that Yemenis explain the chewing of khat as a physiological need (due to the heat, high altitude, etc.), the main factor is psychological, i.e. the desire to be like everybody else and not worse than others.

In part, this explains the custom of “khat meetings”, which takes the part of working and free time of Yemenis of all social groups and layers. Slowness in everyday life, one of the characteristics of the Arab mentality, also contributes to frequent friendly gatherings with indispensable khat chewing.

Treating with cut is one of the customs of the Yemeni hospitality. If the foreigner refuses to consume khat this will be treated with understanding and waiver will not cause offense to hosts. But if you decide to try khat then don't show the displeasure from unusual taste and do with the plant what the Yemenis advise you.

Khat meetings is one of the main forms of communication in Yemen. During these gatherings many life important issues are solved: purchase and sale of land or other property, the terms of the marriage, tribal disputes, etc.

Undoubtedly Khat meetings help people to exchange information, make soothing beginning at the interpersonal level and thereby contribute to the unity of the nation. We can say that Khat is the assertion of Yemeni national identity. Obviously, that khat consumption is one of the halfmarks of the national identity of Arabs of Yemen.

A feature of khat consumption is impossibility of its storing, the dried khat is not possible to chew. This explains the local use of the plant. Despite the fact that khat is also cultivated in the Horn of Africa and Kenya, namely in Yemen it became an integral part of everyday life. Yemeni people spend more than 15 hours of work time for khat meetings.

Another important problem connected with khat is a huge waists of water for its irrigation. For this purpose, more that 50% of all water intended for irrigation of agriculture land is spent. Taking in account the small volume of water resources in Yemen and their rapid expenditure, it is obvious that khat aggravates the problem of water availability in the countryside.

According to the World Health Organization, forbidden insecticides and herbicides, which are often the cause of cancer, are used during khat cultivation.

Despite the fact that khat doesn't cause physiological addiction, but is rather a bad habit, many Yemenis realize negative health consequences, that may arise due to the khat chewing and consciously reject it.

According to the Center for Strategic Studies of Yemen Republic khat plantations occupy about 10% of all cultivated land in Yemen, which allows to annually get more than 750 million servings of khat (in the 1970s the number didn't exceed 40 million in the North). The expansion of khat plantations was made due to the reduction of crops of other plants, mainly of coffee. Especially a lot khat is grown in mountainous governorates Amran, Dhamar, Ibb, Saada, Sanaa, Taiz, Hadji, Ad Dali' and Al-Baida, - irrigated by monsoon rains at an altitude of 1500-2000m. More than 18% of economically active population of the country is involved in the khat industry, that is approx. 25% of Yemen population engaged in agriculture.

4 Literally— «eating khat». Here-«the use of khat».

According to the researches of Yemeni sociologists, khat is used by 70-80% of the population of both genders aged 16 to 60 years on average three times a week. Daily khat is chewed approximately by 75% of males and 50% of females.

According to the World Bank, now Yemenis daily (!) spend around 4 million dollars for khat consumption. The price of one serving of khat depending on its type and quality varies from 1 to 15 dollars. Thus, in 1994 the population of Yemen spend for khat approx 1 billion dollars and in 2004 1.5 billion. And the population grew by $\frac{1}{3}$.

An average Yemeni family spends 17% of its incomes for khat. Often poor Yemenis don't purchase essentials to consume an excess portion of khat. The author was a witness of situation when fishermen from Aden explained the lack of gloves for the protection of their hands by the "necessity" to buy khat.

The fact that Yemenis do not pinch pennies on khat made it relatively expensive "pleasure". A vicious circle was formed: part of population which was connected to the khat industry tried to improve its financial status thanks to another part which worsened its financial situation. In general, all Yemeni society suffered.

The attempts to legally restrict the use of khat in the Yemen Arab Republic in 1972 and Southern Yemen in 1976 backfired, because the inhabitants of each state perceived it not as a struggle for the health of the nation and strengthening of the economy, but as an attempt to change the lifestyle that influenced the national consciousness of the people. The reverse reaction has led to spreading of khat consumption even among more Yemenis.

In times of two Yemeni states, khat from Yemen Arab Republic was exported to the Southern Yemen. After the unification of Yemen in 1990, khat became widespread in the southern provinces, where it wasn't known before (in Hadramaut and Al-Mahra) due to the influence of the north.

The government of the Republic of Yemen made some reasonable efforts to eradicate harmful to all Yemeni society habit trying to impose restrictions on the consumption of khat in public institutions, as well as in working time. However, as before, it didn't bring desirable results. Nowadays, taking in account the previous experience in dealing with khat, the top authorities of the country limits its actions by declarative statements about the socio-economic difficulties in the development of the country associated with khat and by the promotion of healthy lifestyle in media.
