

**CHANG'AA DRINKING IN KIBERA SLUM:
THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF CONTEMPORARY CHANGES IN THE
PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF TRADITIONAL SPIRITS**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the harmful effects of drinking chang'aa, an illegal spirit produced locally, in Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya. The negative impact of chang'aa on the community's physical, social and economic life is traced, in part, to contemporary changes in consumption patterns as well as the production of chang'aa during the late 1990s. This article also analyzes the efforts of a local Catholic parish to launch a campaign to raise awareness on the dangers of chang'aa and to lobby the government to enforce its ban on the sale and use of the illicit brew. The parish was limited in its efforts primarily due to fears of violent reprisal by local government officials and chang'aa sellers who profited from the illegal, but lucrative trade.

KEY WORDS: Chang'aa, Kibera, Kenya, traditional drinks, spirits, alcohol

INTRODUCTION

Chang'aa is a potent spirit distilled from fermented maize or sorghum made locally by small-scale operators in the informal sector. Served in old tins, plastic tubs or reused bottles, it is the most popular alcoholic drink in Kibera, Nairobi's largest informal settlement, as well as the city's other slum areas because of its affordability and potency. A glass of chang'aa cost five times less than a bottle of beer and has an alcoholic content similar to distilled whiskey (Kamande, 2000).

Although chang'aa has been drunk for generations in Kibera, in 2002 parishioners from

the Catholic Church recognized that changes in its production as well as drinking patterns had turned it into a growing threat to the community's health, safety and long-term development. At the request of parishioners, the parish's human rights ministry undertook a campaign to raise awareness on the dangers of chang'aa drinking and to lobby government officials to enforce the law prohibiting its manufacture and sale. However, it quickly became apparent that the parish was powerless to overcome entrenched patterns of corruption by the local government officials and police who participated in and profited from the illegal chang'aa trade.

METHOD

The author's personal history provides the background for this study. In 1997, after practicing as a lawyer for seven years in the United States, I joined a Catholic lay mission group, and was assigned to Nairobi, Kenya where I worked as a full-time volunteer lawyer in a local legal aid clinic. In December 2001, I was invited to coordinate the human rights ministry of Christ the King Catholic Church located inside Kibera slum. I held this position until February 2006 when I turned the office over to a team of Kenyan lawyers. The data in this study was gathered during my tenure as coordinator of the parish's human rights office as well as during interviews and fieldwork undertaken when I returned to Kenya in 2008. I conducted many of these interviews in Kiswahili and translated them into English. While I am grateful for the insights of my informants, the paper reflects my personal interpretation of events in which I was actively involved.

Kibera Slum

Kibera is the largest and most densely populated slum in Nairobi. Though precise figures are difficult to obtain, in the early 2000s it was estimated that 600,000 people lived in the 500-acre settlement. The vast majority lives in stark poverty earning less than \$1 per day in the informal sector. Most residents live in temporary structures made of mud and wattle. Lacking access to sanitation, drains, rubbish collection, clean water and electricity, the living environment is polluted and unsanitary.

Christ the King Catholic Church is located in the heart of Kibera and caters to over 3,000 Catholics. During 2002-2003, the parish pastoral team of the parish undertook an extensive social analysis of the parish in order to develop a more systematic and holistic long-term plan for 2003-2008. For two years, members of the pastoral team met regularly with parish groups including the choirs, prayer groups, job seekers, health workers and others (about 300 parishioners) to discuss, pray and reflect on their living conditions, African traditions, Christian

values and the key socio-economic and political issues facing the community. During the group discussions, parishioners consistently identified the sale and use of chang'aa as the primary cause of Kibera's most serious economic and social problems.

The historical evolution of the chang'aa trade in Kibera

The production and consumption of locally-made spirits started in Kibera during the early 1900s when retired Sudanese soldiers (commonly referred to as Nubians) first inhabited the area (de Smedt, 2009). Using traditional distillation techniques, Nubian women successfully commercialized the production of Nubian gin by the 1920s. With the nearby army barracks and growing town providing a sizable market, Kibera quickly became infamous for its illicit liquor dens (Parsons, 1997). During the late 1960s and early 1970s, new migrants copied the Nubian distillation techniques and produced their own spirits which they called chang'aa.

Despite the popularity of chang'aa, not only in Kibera but throughout Kenya, in 1980 the Moi government criminalized the manufacture, sale and consumption of chang'aa and gave police wide powers to enforce the prohibition. President Moi, a strict teetotaler, regarded the drinking of chang'aa as an affront to modernity and orderly development; in his view, men who spent all day in chang'aa dens were unable to school their children, and some could not even feed or clothe their families (Willis, 2003). However, notwithstanding periodic crackdowns and stern public pronouncements, the chang'aa business was far too lucrative to be banned effectively by the law; it generated profits five times larger than the legal trade in bottled beers, wines and spirits combined (Onyango, 2002). Moi's prohibition merely drove the illegal chang'aa business underground where brewing was done in hidden, domestic environments. Facilitated by multiple tiers of corruption and local political patronage, councilors, chiefs and the police used their control of markets to create space

for clients to produce and sell chang'aa in exchange for a percentage of the proceeds.

During late 1980s as the population expanded, the production of chang'aa within Kibera gradually came to an end. Lacking sufficient room near the rivers to operate their stills without detection, most Nubian distillers closed their gin businesses and started investing in house rentals (de Smedt, 2009). In their absence, chang'aa distillers operating in the slum area of Mathare Valley located on the eastern side of Nairobi and in the rural areas of western Kenya Kibera quickly took over the Kibera market. To facilitate the transportation of their spirits to Kibera, manufacturers created an elaborate smuggling ring, paying police bribes at every road block in exchange for safe passage.

In the late 1990s, drinking norms in Kenya started to change as more and more people experienced acute economic hardship. Many, especially the poor, began drinking chang'aa less as a social drink and more as a coping mechanism; premium chang'aa was considered to be the kind that caused the drinker to black out with as few drinks as possible. Motivated by a desire to boost earnings, manufacturers increased the potency of chang'aa by adding substances such as formaldehyde, sisal juice, fertilizers, alkaline battery content and even airline fuel, substances that also contained poisons like lead, copper, mercury, DDT and cobalt (Kamande, 2000). Local names given to the enhanced chang'aa reflected its increased strength: Kill Me Quick, El Nino, Tornado, Tarzan, Medusa and Jet.

Instead of trying to curb the unscrupulous manufacture of adulterated chang'aa, the police exploited the booming black market. Corruption in the chang'aa trade was no longer limited to extorting protection fees paid in exchange for turning a blind eye. Many members of the Kenya police joined the lucrative trade and began acting as the main transporters of the illegal brew, using their police vehicles to smuggle jerry cans of chang'aa during the early morning.

Drinking chang'aa turned even morth lethal in the early 2000s when manufacturers

started adding ethanol, an industrial-strength substance intended for the production of legal spirits as well as vehicle fuel. On numerous occasions chang'aa manufacturers, unable to tell the difference between ethanol and methanol, a wood alcohol used in varnishes and anti-freeze, mistakenly added methanol to their chang'aa batches causing the death and blindness of hundreds of Kenyans and serious injury to thousands more ("Deadly New Content," 2002). The rash of chang'aa-related deaths provoked a national outcry as the illegal brew was blamed for a broad range of Kenya's social ills including an increase in illness, death, road accidents, domestic violence and infertility. Chang'aa was also characterized as a drag on the economy with alcohol-related inefficiencies and absenteeism causing businesses millions of shillings in losses.

Not all Kenyans shared the same view about chang'aa. Some, including Anglican Bishop Otieno Wasonga, argued that chang'aa should be legalized so ordinary people, including the poor, could afford to drink ("Poverty Link," 2000). A group of opposition politicians called for the legalization of chang'aa on the grounds that the number of alcohol-related deaths would decline if the brew was regulated and inspected for minimal quality standards. Some also asserted that chang'aa should be legalized as part of the country's poverty alleviation plan since the trade generated much needed jobs and income for marginalized women living in the slums ("Kenyans Are Drinking," 2002). Despite the emerging movement in favor of legalizing chang'aa, in 2000 President Moi characterized traditional liquors as "doomsday drinks" and ordered officials to enhance their efforts to clamp down on the production of chang'aa, but the state was too fractured to suppress the illicit trade (Onyango, 2002).

THE IMPACT OF CHANG'AA IN KIBERA

Although the drinking of illicit spirits had always been part of Kibera's social make-up, during the social analysis many parishioners,

especially the women, voiced growing alarm about the harmful effects of the chang'aa trade in the community. While they identified many of the same concerns raised in the national debate, they also revealed a more nuanced analysis of the negative impact that chang'aa had on their day-to-day lives.

Virtually every parishioner complained that the number of chang'aa dens had grown exponentially during the late 1990s. According to a 2002 survey undertaken by parish health workers, there were 441 chang'aa sellers within the parish boundaries, most were women who sold chang'aa out of their houses. For many, it was a lucrative business. Most retailers purchased pure chang'aa in 20-liter containers from one of the handful of large distributors in Kibera and diluted it with boiled water and sugar or honey to double the batch size and sold it in small tin glasses for 5-15 cents, earning anywhere from \$15 to \$150 a month depending on the number of their regular customers.

Parishioners also complained about the dramatic rise in the number of chang'aa drinkers, but it was not possible to know how many or what percentage of parishioners drank chang'aa. No one was willing to admit to drinking the illicit brew out of fear of being reported to the authorities or ostracized by the priests and parishioners. However, most parishioners agreed that the soar in the number of drinkers was a result of increased household poverty. Declining economic opportunities, particularly chronic unemployment, led to a sense of hopelessness that caused many to seek refuge in alcohol. One parishioner observed, "Many people don't want to go home after looking for work all day and face their kids and wife struggling so they just go to a bar and drink" (Parish Social Analysis, 2004). Some also observed that drinking had become so pervasive that it was common to find drunken men passed out face down on the muddy paths, a situation that was unheard of in the past.

Parishioners expressed concern not only about how much people were drinking but, more importantly, about who was drinking. Chang'aa was no longer a drink just for men; women had begun drinking chang'aa too. Ac-

ording to one parishioner, "We are now seeing more and more women drinking because life is so difficult. Most of them are single mothers who can't find work and can't cope" (Parish Social Analysis, 2004). The most emotional discussions concerned the fact that, in recent years, the chang'aa sellers had violated an unspoken rule that prohibited the sale of chang'aa to young people, including boys and girls in primary school. Many parishioners shared personal stories of how they had "lost" their children to the illegal brew. Many of these youth were school leavers with little access to employment. Chang'aa drinking, however, was not limited to the uneducated. One parishioner explained:

Young boys, even well-educated ones who have degrees but no jobs, are drinking chang'aa. They have used up their family's resources to go to school and they have nothing to give their parents in return. So now they are desperate and drink until they black out and many of these have become addicted to chang'aa (personal communication, September 22, 2008).

Parishioners were also angry about the fact that chang'aa was exposing their children to prostitution and greater risk of AIDS. About three-fourths of the chang'aa sellers incorporated prostitution into their businesses, paying young girls (from 13 to 20 years) a small commission to engage in commercial sex with chang'aa drinkers.

In addition to its negative impact on the youth, chang'aa was identified as the root cause of the community's main economic, health and social problems. The most serious consequence was that it increased the level of poverty in many families. One parish leader observed, "People are using money meant for food, rent and school fees for drinking. Children end up sleeping hungry because parents are too drunk to take care of the family's needs" (Parish Social Analysis, 2004). Numerous people related personal stories about friends and family members whose addiction

to chang'aa had led to missed rental payments, causing families to fall apart and forcing children to live on the streets.

Chang'aa drinking also was blamed for a host of employment-related problems. Numerous young men in the parish had been fired for drinking on the job and this had led to more unemployment and poverty. Drinkers were also paid lower wages because of missed work and decreased job efficiency. Some turned into full-time idlers who could no longer contribute anything to their families.

After the economic impact, the next greatest area of concern was the effect that chang'aa drinking had on people's health causing untold illness and even death. It was also blamed for the spread of HIV and AIDS. For example, a parishioner observed, "More and more people are drinking and roaming around at night and AIDS is spreading because of this. We are living in the dark and don't care about what happens in our lives" (Parish Social Analysis, 2004). Chang'aa drinking was also identified as the cause of family break ups and divorce. Parishioners complained that men who drank heavily were likely to be unemployed and unable to take care of their families thereby leaving women to survive on their own. Many parishioners said that there was more domestic violence because men who came home drunk frequently beat their wives. Drinking had also led to an increase in petty crime as drinkers, desperate for money, stole whatever items they could find to pay for their drinks.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY: EFFORTS TO STOP THE CHANG'AA TRADE

At the completion of the parish social analysis in mid-2003, parishioners asked the parish's human rights ministry to organize a campaign against chang'aa. Staffed by four parishioners, a volunteer Kenyan lawyer and an expatriate missionary, the human rights office launched a campaign to raise public-awareness on the dangers of chang'aa and to lobby local government officials to enforce the law prohibit-

ing the sale and use of chang'aa. However, once funding for the campaign was attained, the vast majority of parishioners were not willing to get involved because they were afraid that the local officials would retaliate against them.

As it turned out, the parishioners' fears were not unreasonable. The police and low-level government officials not only protected the illegal trade, they also participated in and profited from it. One parishioner explained:

We all know that it is the government car driven by police officers that is bringing in chang'aa every morning between 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. If we try to report it, the police might even arrest us and put us in a cell just because we have complained about the chang'aa (personal communication, August 5, 2008).

The threat of incarceration was a legitimate concern; Kiberans who were arrested routinely stayed in the cells for days without being charged; they were often denied food and beaten. In addition to the police, parishioners were afraid that the local chiefs and the elected city councilor, all of whom were known protectors of local chang'aa distributors, would send gangs of youth to harass or evict them if they complained about chang'aa.

Parishioners were also afraid to speak against chang'aa publicly because they feared reprisal by the sellers, most of whom had close contacts with the corrupt officials and police whom they regularly bribed to facilitate their trade. They were also closely linked to local criminals in the community who frequented the chang'aa dens. Many were also afraid that there would be retribution against the church if parishioners spoke out against chang'aa. Their fears were justified. In August 2005, an armed gang hired by a group of local chang'aa sellers raided the parish in the middle of the night and ransacked its offices in order to intimidate the parish to dropping the chang'aa campaign.

Fear was not only the deterrent to parishioners' involvement. Some avoided the campaign because while they might condemn

chang'aa publicly, in private they were willing consumers and did not want to jeopardize their access to cheap liquor. Others did not want to take sides; they preferred to remain neutral and not get involved in a controversial issue. There were also some who felt the campaign was a futile endeavor because chang'aa drinking was so deeply engrained in the community's social life. Some also were friends and neighbors with the sellers and did not feel comfortable telling them to stop selling their brews or reporting them to the police.

Since the parishioners were at too much risk, the lawyers took the lead in lobbying the government to enforce the ban on chang'aa. After sending the parish's findings on chang'aa to the government's top officials responsible for Kibera, the District Officer (DO) ordered the Administrative Police, a parallel police force directly answerable to him, to arrest the chang'aa sellers. Within 6 months, over thirty chang'aa dens had been closed. One of the 3 area chiefs also increased his surveillance and arrests of chang'aa sellers in his region. As a result of the heightened surveillance, people accustomed to drinking chang'aa reduced their consumption because they were afraid of being arrested in one of the frequent raids.

Despite the closure of numerous chang'aa dens, the gains made were short-lived and had only a limited impact in curbing the chang'aa trade. Since the DO lacked jurisdiction over the regular police force, the police ignored the directive and the early morning drops of chang'aa continued unabated. Moreover, the other chiefs ignored the DO's order to arrest the sellers and the DO could do nothing to compel his corrupt subordinates to follow his directive; they were political employees whose job security was dependent on their personal loyalty to the president, not on whether they performed their jobs. Local politicians who benefited from the trade also blocked the DO's efforts. For example, the area councilor sent a youth militia to attack and beat the chief who tried to crack down on the chang'aa trade. At the councilor's connivance, the chief was falsely accused of malfeasance and placed on

indefinite leave without pay. A few months later, the DO was transferred and his replacement refused to get involved in the chang'aa problem. Not surprisingly, the parish's lobbying efforts gradually waned and eventually came to an end by late 2005.

Although most parishioners felt powerless to confront the chang'aa trade because of the risk it posed and the lawyers were limited in their lobbying efforts because the people who distributed and sold chang'aa were protected by powerful and corrupt officials, the campaign was not futile. Citing their desires to be fully accepted in the church, 2 parishioners who were among the largest chang'aa distributors in Kibera voluntarily closed their chang'aa dens in late 2006. Thus, even though the impact of the parish's attempt to curb the chang'aa trade was limited, the campaign was an important step in giving voice to the community's on-going opposition to the harmful brew, particularly the role played by the police and corrupt officials in protecting and profiting from the illicit trade.

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