

MARUNGI (GHATT - MIRAA)

A LAMENTABLE AND RUINING SCOURGE

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The National Muslim Education Seminar was held at The Islamic Center, Mombasa, from 7th to 9th August 1986 and attended by a large number of Muslim scholars, educationists, teachers, leaders, both ladies and gents. One of the several thought-provoking papers presented was by Dr. Hassan Attas on the subject of Drug Abuse in Mombasa with particular emphasis on Marungi also known as Ghaat or Mira'a.

The learned speaker took pain in presenting a grim picture with statistics of the widespread consumption, financial loss and harmful effects to the chewers of Marungi. Besides other parts of Kenya, there are no less than 15 places in Mombasa alone in high density of Muslim population, where Marungi is distributed and chewed daily. An estimated 30-50,000 people here consume some 3 tons worth Sh.750,000 to Ksh. 1 million daily. Bearing in mind that chewers have to take soda, sweets, nuts and lot of cigarettes as adjutants the sum of money spent becomes staggering.

What is Marungi ? It is actually the leaves and young twigs of the tree *Catha Edulis* which is cultivated mainly in Meru area of Kenya, Ethiopia, probably Somalia and Yemen. The habit is to chew the leaves, the twigs and the bark stripped with the teeth. When taken in large amount, it causes nausea and vomiting. To camouflage pungent bitterish taste, it is commonly chewed simultaneously with sweets, gums, nuts or drinking of sodas.

Originally the Somalis and Yemenis Arabs were major consumers and the Merus the main suppliers. But now the consumption has become widespread.

Its Effect Explaining the out coming effects, Dr. attas has experienced instances of how reputed personalities ruined their careers as a result of this habit, whose harm far exceeded that of alcoholism.

Psychological effects, he says include euphoria, unnatural sense of well-being artificial joviality, excitement, indifference, carelessness. Later on apathy depression and anxiety could develop. Dependence on the drug is frequent and can be very strong with users developing 'the dropout syndrome!' They walk out on their families and friends, stop working, neglect their appearance, eat poorly and lose all their former interests, becoming solely concerned on how to satisfy their addiction. Those unable to afford the high costs of this habit, beg or borrow, steal or sink even lower. They become completely human wrecks and outcasts of society.

A chronic marungi chewer gradually starts losing interest in everything. He hovers and loiters near Marungi shops begging for a few twigs when he has no money in his pocket. Many lives have been shattered, families made to disintegrate and promising careers lost as a result of this addict.

Besides Marungi chewers may ultimately develop serious physical complications like liver damage, brain damage etc. It has virtually no nutritional value and can lead to anemia and depressed appetite. It has also been experienced to cause temporary impotence due to erection failure and resultant sexual frustration.

But why is that Muslim in this country are the major consumers? Because of the myth and false belief that Marungi is not intoxicating, says Dr. Attas. To the contrary, he asserts that Marungi closely resembles Coca leaves from which cocaine, one of the popular drugs in the West, and by its action belongs to the group of intoxicants such as alcohol, marijuana (LCD) and the like.

### Widespread chewing forecast by the Prophet

At the Muslim Education Seminar, where I was present, The discussion on this subject of Marungi had become sensational and I was trying to find the reaction to the facts presented by Dr. Attas in his address. Most of those present appeared convinced and were pondering upon ways and means to be proposed for the eradication of this scourge.

Suddenly, a grown up Muslim stood up to express his opinion in a rather strange fashion. He introduced himself as an old-time chronic Marungi addict saying that whilst he agreed with the need to prevent this habit from younger generation, he could not understand why grown up people like him should be. His shameless behaviour and his nonsensical arguments before the large audience subjected himself to ridicule. I on my part became even more convinced of the relationship of shamelessness with Marungi chewing in the following prediction of the Holy Prophet:

"Day of Judgment is not to come except when shamefulness would have disappeared from youth and women and when 'Magatheer' (bitter plants-herbs) would be widely chewed the same way as green vegetables is done" (Biharul Anwar v.2 p.315)

1400 years hence today since the above prediction, we see the consumption and chewing of Marungi as well as other drugs spreading like bushfire in many parts of the world particularly among the young. Millions are spent by the West in order to check the supply and consumption but with little success.

A subtle reference worth noting herewith is the use of word 'Magatheer' an Arabic word meaning bitter plants in the above quoted hadeeth. Marungi is a bitter plant and that is why those chewing it have to sip soda water or eat sweets to counteract its bitterness.

During 1983, President Siad M. Barre declared a total ban on the use of Marung<sup>1121</sup>. It is mentioned that this ban came about as a result of the presentation made by delegation of women to the President, complaining of impotency and neglect of their men-folk, who spend day and night out chewing the herb. Since then in order to intensify the ban, he even declared that he would confiscate properties of those dealing in Marungi.

Henry Mutua, prominent Marungi businessman in Nairobi, when interviewed by a Daily nation correspondent said that most of his customers agree that this has the same effect as alcohol i.e. it is intoxicating.

The East African Medical Journal of Feb, 1981, in the course of publishing the findings of a recent research states "As the stimulation (of marungi chewing) lasts for a short time, the user must chew the leaves almost continuously. Animal tests have shown that its constant use can cause chronic gastritis, hemorrhages, damage to kidneys, constipation, insomnia, restlessness and increased wakefulness and can cause ejaculation without erection."

If the present and future generations of Muslims are to be saved from ruin, then a war must be declared against consumption of Marungi and widespread propaganda about its ill-effects must be undertaken now before it is too late. Muslim leaders, scholars, teachers, parents and many others have a great and dutiful part to play in the battle against this scourge.