

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOL AND ADDICTION

SUBSTANCE USE: YOUTH AND CULTURE IN NAMIBIA

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This abstract will not deal with the theory of substances as such but with substance use/abuse as been practiced in Namibia, as part of tradition and by the youth.

1. BACKGROUND ON NAMIBIA

Namibia is the last colony in Africa to attain Independence. The Republic of Namibia, lying across the Tropic of Capricorn, has a population of about 1.8 million and covers an area of 824.292 sq km. It is bordered by South Africa in the south, by Botswana on the east and Angola on the north, while the narrow Caprivi Strip in north east extends Namibia's borders to the Zambezi river and a short border with Zambia. The name Namibia was officially adopted by the United Nations in 1968. It replaced the colonial name of 'South West Africa'. The name derives from one of the oldest deserts in the world, the Namib. The desert forms a narrow plain 65-16km wide and extending 1 600km along the coast, separating the rest of the country from the south Atlantic Ocean. The fine sand of Namib forming huge sand dunes cover one fifth of the country. Namibia's major resource, diamond and uranium, is to be found in the fine sand of the Namib desert. However, the area is almost devoid of vegetation and therefore near to uninhabitable. The eastern parts of Namibia is covered by a semi-desert, the Kalahari, where there is some vegetation. In Ovamboland, the northern parts of the Kalahari, crop cultivation is possible, due to a network of watercourses known as 'oshanas'. In between the Namib and the Kalahari deserts lie the Central Plateau with an average elevation of 1100m above sea-level. It covers one half of the country. "The Plateau stretching the full length of the country, is Namibia's most fertile area and thus most suitable for human settlement. In its northern parts, the Plateau is suitable mostly for cattle-rearing but also for crop cultivation on a limited scale. The southern part is much dryer, covered with shrub steppe and it is unsuitable for anything but cattle, goat and/or sheep-rearing. Average annual rainfall is 270mm and droughts are frequent. Namibia has the driest climate south of Sahara." (Strand: 1991).

The implication of the above mentioned is that vineyards cannabis coca plant or opium poppies is not cultivated in Namibia, and that all substances of abuse are imported.

2. INTRODUCTION

The information shared was retrieved from a qualitative study done by an anthropologist as part of a country wide survey on "Substance Use: Youth and Culture in Namibia". The main theme of this research is the use/abuse of alcohol and the use of drugs among the youth, and adult women and men in Namibia.

Alcohol and drug abuse has become a major problem in Namibia, where 20% of school learners, 75% of out-of-school youth and 40% of adults regularly abuse alcohol over weekends. The most widely consumed alcoholic drinks are home-brewed beers, in combination with commercial beers. Many young people learn their drinking habits from home and the community. They visit the 'shebeen' - a small bar - at an early age and see alcohol consumption as a normal way of life (Masterplan: 1993:95).

Related to the alcohol problem is the use of drugs, especially among the youth. The drug most commonly used is dagga, a derivative of the Cannabis plant, followed by Mandrax, the commercial name for methaqualone, which is mixed with dagga and smoked.

Namibia has also become a market for smugglers, entering from neighbouring countries, trading in harder narcotics, such as cocaine, heroin and designed drugs such as ecstasy. The mentioned hard drugs are used on a very limited scale at the moment.

3. **THE SHEBEEN**

In order to understand the drinking culture in Namibia, the physical structure, economic function and social pattern of the shebeen will be discussed.

The 'shebeen' is part of the squatter house, 2-3 metres wide and 5-6 metres long. People stand inside at a counter, or they sit outside on the ground. Some 'shebeens' even have billiard tables for the younger men.

The income out of the 'shebeens' ranges from N\$60 to N\$350 (US\$12-US\$72) per week, but some owners say that they don't count their money, they only buy some food and supply for the next week. The income is considerably higher during weekends and at the end of the month. Most of the 'shebeens' owners are women. Their only income is from the 'shebeen' to support their families of 4-6 children.

The most regular customers are men from 20 years and older and middle aged women. Young people mainly visit the 'shebeens' during weekends. They prefer bottled beers, wine and liquor. At these meetings everybody know each other and the atmosphere is that of acceptance and friendliness, with a lot of laughing and shouting. More than half of the customers gathered at the 'shebeens' are unemployed. One problem is that the children of the 'shebeen' owner are expected to do the selling. Many times their young daughters are exposed to harassment and rape.

4. **TRADITIONAL BREWS**

The most popular traditional beers are Tombo, Epwaka, Jabula, Magou, Kashipembe, Owarende and 'Deepkeel'. Conventional methods of making the beer are used and prepared mainly by women. Tombo is made from sorghum stirred with brown sugar and plenty of water. After 10 hours there is a caramel coloured liquid and 10 hours later the Tombo is ready for use. It tastes somewhat between wheat flavoured fruit juice and vodka and is quite sour and acid. Sometimes it is mixed with lemon or whiskey. Epwaka has a lower alcohol percentage than Tombo. The main ingredients is the outer part of the corn

of “mahangu” (like maize), adding brown sugar and water. It is stirred to mix and takes 8-10 hours before it can be drunk. It is also given to children.

The traditional brews are served in plastic mugs containing up to two litres. One mug costs 40-50 cents. A loaf of bread costs three times that much. For people who have little or no money, home brewed beers are often the first choice for food. Traditionally minded people stress the nourishing value of these brews (Sandborg, 1998:50), encouraging the use thereof by young and old and a typical Tombo drinking ritual where a person will buy a mug of Tombo, and the seller takes the first sip before handing it over to the buyer. This is confirmation that the Tombo is clean from poison or witchcraft. This gesture also shows friendship and peace. If the seller is a woman and the buyer a man, she makes a slight bending of her knees while handing over the mug. The buyer drinks and passes the mug to a friend. The friend will drink some and passes it back to the buyer. This mug will now be passed to other people nearby. The mug of traditional beer is shared by several people and if one of them has money, he will buy the next round. This process can continue for a whole day.

This ritual has symbolic meanings such as:

- i. “You are a friend and included in a group of solidarity”, evoking a feeling of nearness, of being seen and of acceptance.
- ii. “Feel secure, we are equals”, evoking a feeling of belonging and of identity.
- iii. “We are unified, with a common history sedimented in the ritual act of drinking Tombo”, reproducing a tradition (Sandborg, 1998:51).

Tombo drinking stimulates sociability and creates an alternative social reality with less restraints and immediate pleasure.

5. ALCOHOL

The use and abuse of alcohol among the youth in Namibia shows continuous growth. This is an alarming phenomenon because 71% of the countries total population is under the age of 30 years. Statistics show that 21.4% of 13 year olds actively partake in alcohol abuse, and up to 33% of the 16 year olds take alcohol excessively at occasions between the ages of 18 and 30 years 75% of Namibian youths abuse alcohol occasionally of which 10% have developed dependency.

Most young people do not mingle in adult drinking parties, they rather gather in groups at discos, shebeens, empty houses or simply in the streets.

During the fieldwork the main reasons for the abuse of alcohol were poverty and unemployment - the unemployment rate among the youth in Namibia is between 40 and 60%. The youth is at risk in the period when they have finished schooling because parents cannot afford to pay for further education and many young people are unable to get jobs. To be excluded from further education or a job can influence the person's image of

him/herself and the feeling of selfworth is threatened. Poverty will also influence the type of alcohol used by a person (economical means).

The influence of modernization and a westernized life style is clearly seen in young people's drinking habits and tastes. There is an association between alcohol consumption and cultural orientation, one facing the local traditional culture, the other an imported, global culture. Acuda (1996) states that "Sub-Saharan Africa has, both through colonisation and today's globalisation processes, been under strong external cultural pressure. Literature on changes in the role of alcohol in Africa points clearly to the strong cultural influence from Europe or the Western world. In this acculturation process the outcome at the individual level is changes in identity, values, attitudes and behaviour patterns." In the urban areas drinking is becoming a private matter, a matter of personal choice and taste and a way to achieve pleasure (Sandborg, 1998:54).

In Namibia much has been done to share information on the negative and harmful effects of alcohol. Therefore, ignorance cannot be seen as a cause for alcohol abuse. The question, still to be answered, is whether prevention strategies through information only will change people's attitudes towards alcohol use/abuse. The information strategy is the only one employed towards the out-of-school youth in Namibia at the moment.

6. CANNABIS SATIVA AND MANDRAX

In search of 'paradise' young Namibians - 11.8% of them - are increasingly using the illegal drug of 'dagga'. Dagga is the Namibian concept for marijuana, which is made from the cannabis sativa plant. Dagga is cultivated illegally in many parts of the world, including Southern Africa (Lesotho, South Africa and Swaziland), from where the dagga is regularly smuggled into Namibia (Masterplan: 1995).

Dagga users roll cigarettes or smoke the dagga in a pipe (bottle neck). It is also mixed with tobacco or Mandrax, the latter a common phenomenon in Namibia. A lot of discussion is going on in Namibia around the historical use of the dagga plant for medical purposes.

Dagga sellers use the following in their defense: the constraint of poverty and unemployment "to give my children a better life than I had" or "this is the only way to earn money". Another theme is the benevolent effect which dagga has on people, "it prevents husbands and fathers from behaving violently towards their families" and dagga is seen as a problem solver "they make us feel good and forget the bad" (Sandborg, 1998: 111).

A ritual is taking place when dagga is smoked. Firstly, there are rules on how to obtain the dagga. The one who has some money will buy and share with the group. Secondly, the 'bomb' is rolled in a specific manner. Thirdly, there are unwritten laws for how long each one can smoke and how it shall be passed, i.e. to the one sitting on your left side in the circle. The process of sharing is slow with lots of patience. The inhaling of the smoke is done in the same way by everyone. After inspiring into the lungs some smoke is left to float around the nostrils and face while the eyes are closed. This ritual is a symbol of

fellowship, commonality, feelings of better self-understanding, a deeper experience of reality, a good memory and pleasure. It reduces feelings of tension, anger and anxiety.

Mandrax is, second to dagga, the most frequently abused illegal substance in Namibia. Ten percent of the dagga smokers have had access to Mandrax, a tablet which is crushed and sprinkled over the daggaleaves when smoked (white pipe). Mandrax amplifies the effects of the THC in dagga and leads to an intensive 'high' and to severe withdrawal symptoms (Masterplan: 1995).

7. CONCLUSION

In 1996, the Namibian Government adopted a Masterplan on the combating of Alcohol and Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking. Six of the nine identified objectives of the Masterplan deals with prevention.

Considering the direct link between AOD and HIV/AIDS, poverty and crime, political pressure on the social and health sectors in society must be kept high. Unfortunately political contexts in the developing world only manage to address the effects and not the causes of problems such as alcohol abuse. In practice, Namibia could also put more resources into prevention.

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