Short communication

Concerning kif, a Cannabis sativa L. preparation smoked in the Rif mountains of northern Morocco

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to present information about a kif preparation smoked by the Moroccan population. Results are considered as an advance of our actual investigations undertaken in the Rif zone to observe an improvement in night vision after smoking kif [Ethan et al., 2002. International Cannabinoid Research Society (ICRS) meeting, in preparation]. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ireland Ltd.

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1. Introduction

A Moroccan proverb says that the kif is like fire: ‘It scalds little and burns a lot’.

At the present time, the area of cultivation of Cannabis sativa L. in the Rif Mountains of Northern Morocco approximates 100,000 ha, although in the 1970s this area was concentrated in 100 km² in the Ketama–Chaouen–Targuist triangle (Mikuriya, 1967).

There is no precise date as to the introduction of cannabis in Morocco. The historian Al-Bakri (11th century) did not indicate its presence in the Maghreb. Neither Al-Maqrizi, nor Ibn Al-Baytar (13th century) mention its existence in Morocco, but they extensively described it in Egypt. It is certain that its consumption was quite diffuse among the Moroccan population in the 1800s for, by the end of the 19th century, the Sultan Moulay Al-Hassan issued very strict laws to combat the trade in the drug. During the period of the protectorate (1926–1956), its sale was officially legalized under the monopoly of the tobacco grower, ‘Régie des tabacs’ that prepared the kif, in its companies in Tangier and Kenitra, and commercialized it. This situation lasted until 1953, the date that sale of kif was prohibited by an initial decree, followed by a second one on 24 April 1954 that prohibited its production and the consumption (Merzouki, 2001).

The most probable hypothesis concerning cannabis in Morocco would be its introduction by the Arab conquerors, who spread the Islamic faith, at the end of the 7th century. We believe that its cultivation was practiced during the golden epoch of the Islamic civilization in Andalucia between 11th and 15th centuries, which was followed by its dissemination in North Africa with the settlement of Arab and Jewish populations who escaped from Andalucia during the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Catholic kings.

2. Methodology

Research concerning cannabis crops in the Rif region (northern Morocco) has been undertaken since 1991. Many aspects were studied: taxonomy, biology and ethnobotany of Rifian cannabis (Merzouki et al., 1994a,b; Merzouki and Molero Mesa, 1995; Merzouki et al., 1996a,b,c; Merzouki and Molero Mesa, 1997, 1999; Merzouki et al., 2000a; Merzouki, 2001).

Selected regions in the Rif (Bouhmed, Zoumi, Chefchaouen, Bab Taza, Bab Berred, Jebha and Ketama) were investigated. Local populations were interviewed about kif preparation and consumption. Ethnobotanical

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methodology applied in the Rif has been reported in previous studies (Merzouki et al., 1997, 1999, 2000b).

Three hundred informants classified by age classes were interviewed.

3. Results and discussion

Kif was and continued to be the traditional manner of smoking psychotropic cannabis, until the 1970s. Kif is prepared from the female flowering tops, which are harvested at seed maturity, dried, and conserved in plastic bags (Fig. 1).

Preparation of the kif is an exacting labor, always undertaken by men of advanced age and experience. It consists of carefully cleaning the branches of the plant, separating the leaves and bracts from the shafts. The material is finely cut with a knife and sifted, recovering vegetable material of approximately 1 mm diameter. From time to time during the cutting activity, the knife is cleaned, removing the resin that adheres to it. According to the experienced men, this resin is considered toxic. Once this cutting phase of cannabis material is completed, the preparation of tobacco that is added to the cannabis proceeds. Cannabis leaves are never smoked alone. It is said that without tobacco, kif is Messouss, or insipid (it lacks salt). They maintain that cannabis consumed without tobacco causes cerebral damage, leading to dementia and madness.

The ‘salt’ of the kif preparation is the Tabba beldi, wild tobacco from Nicotiana rustica (Fig. 2), originating in Andean South America. It is grown in a very restricted area (dozens of square meters) because its cultivation is as persecuted as that of cannabis. Different local varieties of tobacco are found in Morocco in the areas of cultivation: Ghawara, Wad Nún, Chtúka, Ghzawa, Ktamiya. The Moroccan historian, Al-Oufrani (Bellakhdar, 1997), indicates that tobacco cultivation was introduced in Morocco in the 16th century, shortly after the conquest of the Sudan by the Sultan Saâdi Al-Mansour in 1591. Leaves of N. rustica are powdered to prepare tobacco snuff, Tanfiha, or cut for chewing tobacco, Achamma, whose use continues to the present time in Algeria and eastern Morocco, as does its mixture with cannabis in kif preparation.

The second phase of the preparation of kif consists of the preparation of tobacco. The petiolate leaves of N. rustica are dried in the shade and kept in plastic bags to maintain their humidity (Fig. 3), before being crushed in a manner similar to the cannabis. Previously, each tobacco leaf was rubbed by hand, ‘to give it heat’, it is said. The proportion of tobacco added for kif preparation is one third (2/3 crushed cannabis and 1/3 tobacco).

The kif is gathered into leather bags, and its quality is confirmed by groups of three or four persons. This ritual is carried out at dusk while drinking Moorish tea (infusion of green tea with mint). The experienced maintain that the tea is necessary to alleviate the throat dryness caused by kif smoking. Smoking is undertaken with characteristic pipes called sebsi, made from a thin wooden cane of traditional manufacture, of 20–40 cm length, and small terracotta bowl, called chkaf. The wood used to manufacture the sebsi derives from Jasminum fruticans L., Nerium oleander L. or Viburnum tinus L.

The consumption of kif (Fig. 3) follows a rigid ritual. The first smoker fills the pipe and lights it, taking an inhalation, and with a rapid hand movement, passes the
sebsi to his neighbor to smoke it completely (between three and four inhalations), and remove the ash. Having carried out this procedure, the empty pipe is returned to the first person, who repeats the operation with the second smoker. This confirmation ritual is practiced daily by kif smokers. In the small groups of consumers, each one takes out a bag of kif and their sebsi, the concept being to prove to all the quality of the kif and the sebsi of each individual.

Among the population of the Rif, the most appreciated form of cannabis consumption is that of kif. The other beneficial uses cited by Rif informants as medicine refer solely to kif preparations, and never to hashish (cannabis resin) (Merzouki and Molero Mesa, 1999; Merzouki et al., 1999). To date no scientific work on the medicinal potentialities of the hemp has made reference to the added effects produced by the chemical components of N. rustica.

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References


