

BIG

Uganda enjoys the unenviable medal as one of the top alcohol-consuming countries in the world. With easy access to cheap booze in sachets, a number of people are drinking any where and at any time of the day, writes Joshua Kato

In Gulu, the local administration banned the drinking of 'kaveera' booze



Some of the shanty structures in Katanga, Kisaasi in Nakawa Division

Crude alcohol brews poverty

I was 7:00am and I was already dead drunk and tipsy. Not drunk with alcohol, but drunk with an urge to go out and look for the real drinks.

Three days earlier, the Ministry of Trade and Industry had issued a statement banning the picking and selling of booze in sachets. The statement was issued on November 23, 2016. But as I wandered around these drinking spots, I was left with no doubt as to why Uganda has maintained her near top spot among the leading alcohol consumers in Africa.

Katanga of Kisaasi

Katanga is a small, popular spot in Dunga zone, Kisaasi, Nakawa division. It got its name from the famous Katanga sham of Wandegaya, because both have shanty houses and, of course, drunkards.

It is patronised by those who drink, especially cheap booze. However, the area is also frequented by those who do not drink.

Security officers believe it is a den for criminals. The shanty town is largely self-contained because besides all tribes of liquor, there are food joints, pork kiosks and restaurants.

There are hordes of sex workers and a video hall. One of the prostitutes, a tall, artificially light-skinned woman wriggles her behind before two men, perhaps as a bargaining chip.

Inside the bar

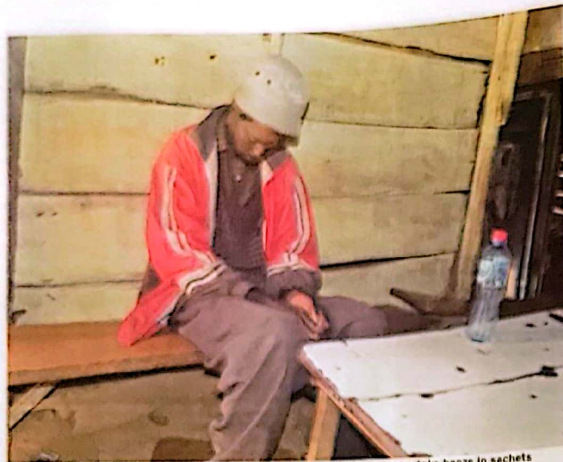
One of the loudest bars seemed to have only songs related to alcohol. When I entered, the song *baazala mu baala* (loosely translated as we were born in a bar, by Dax Kartel), was playing. Of course, several drunkards were dancing.

I walked over several empty sachets of Kioko, Empire and Champion, all liquor.

In a distance of just 100 metres, I picked 50 empty sachets of the corrosive substances that pass for alcohol. The several garbage dumps were filled with empty sachets.

"Anybody who wants to get spoiled by alcohol goes to Katanga," said, Ssalongo Moses Busulwa, a shop owner in the area.

The trade ministry had just banned



One of the people in the bar early in the morning. Most people in Katanga take booze in sachets

sachet *waragi* but in Katanga, it seemed, like nobody had even heard about the ban or if they heard, they did not care.

Alcohol and unemployment

Moments later, I met a young man, commonly known as Kanyankore.

He was wearing a faded yellow NRM T-shirt, with a hazy picture of President Yoweri Museveni. Kanyankore got several T-shirts earlier in 2016, during the Presidential campaigns. However, it seemed they were the only possessions he had at the time.

"He used to work as a casual labourer around the shops but booze has weakened him," Samuel Ssebana, a resident said.

Ssebana pointed at a group of young men whose lives had been laid bare by tows.

Kanyankore still does some casual tasks such as carrying bunches of bananas at between sh300 to

sh1,000. In a day, he can carry at least five bunches, earning between sh5,000 and sh4,000. However, according to Ssebana, all this money is spent on alcohol.

During his earlier years, Kanyankore acquired some household property, a mattress and a bed. He has since sold them off to buy alcohol.

Even that one," Ssebana said while looking at a fairly well-built man, with a wide chest.

The man, had unkempt hair, dirty clothes and an overgrown beard. But of course, this appearance could not stop him from smiling. And when he smiled, he flashed dirty, yellow teeth.

"He does not only take tows, he also smokes marijuana," Ssebana said.

A walk through Ki-columbia

My next destination was Ki-columbia, another place in Kisaasi trading centre. Just like Katanga, which is about 2km away, Ki-columbia is self-contained too. The name Ki-columbia was derived from the fact that smoking drugs is openly done here. Other than the readily available cheap brew, there is a hall, salon, small restaurants, and of course, cheap sex workers. There is also an area for playing cards for cash.

Gravity Omurunga's song, *Winer, played in one of the bars. Young men dance away as they tipped their booze in sachets.*

There were many empty *kaveera* (sachets) scattered all over the place. These included Champion, *waragi*, Empire, Kioko, Coffee Spirit and band 7.

"Many of them work in the taxis that park here. Whatever little money they get is spent on booze, gambling and sex."

"It is a vicious cycle of poverty for these young men. Every shilling they get is spent immediately," explained Police officer Richard Semugwa, who, for years, fought alcohol and drug abuse when he was in charge of Universal Police, Kisaasi.

Drinking nation

It is not surprising that Uganda has many young men

engaging in a result of drinking. A closer look shows red lips, a sign of excessive drinks as the alcohol they consume.

Uganda enjoys the unenviable medal as one of the top alcohol-consuming countries in the world. While Uganda is among the top 10 countries in the world, she beats every other country in Africa.

Of the alcohol consumed, just 4% is processed beer and 2% wine, with crude or semi-processed brew contributing 94% of the consumption.

According to records at the Uganda National Bureau of Standards, there are 40 registered alcohol producers in the country. The other producers are not known.

Known alcohol producers are united under their umbrella association, the Uganda Alcohol Industry Association (UAlA).

"There are many elusive alcohol producers. Most of them use lethal substances and must be dealt with as we accept the ban on sachets," said Augustine Nduhura, the vice-chairman of UAlA.

HEALTH EXPERT

More cases of blindness result from alcohol consumption

Dr Sheila Ndyabangi, the principal medical officer in charge of mental health and control of substance abuse at the health ministry, said 23.9 litres of pure alcohol consumed by the drinkers in Uganda every year is quite high.

"However, the more worrying thing is the high levels of consumption of unlicensed, unregulated alcohol. The problem with this is that they are more likely to be adulterated. Most of the incidences of deaths and blindness we have had from the past have involved people drinking those brews. Sometimes they contain methanol which is harmful," Ndyabangi said.

She added that the findings do not bode well because it is harder for the Government to regulate unlicensed alcohol. "It is easier to regulate the manufactured alcohol and ensure standards are kept. We need regulate this informal industry in order to protect the drinker," she said.

Ndyabangi

Ndyabangi

Ndyabangi

Ndyabangi

Ndyabangi

Ndyabangi

Because it is too cheap and everybody can afford it



Residents going about their business in Katanga

among Ugandans

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Booze could cost you sh7.2m a year

Clay Okeito, a personal finance consultant, said with most people spending sh3,000 on a bottle of beer, it would come to over sh500,000 per week or over sh2,000,000 per month and annually, which is almost sh7.2m.

Let us look at the budget of someone who goes out twice a week - once during the work week, and once on a Friday or Saturday night. When he/she goes out to a bar during the week, he will usually go with a friend. And with most people ordering between five and six drinks, you are looking at around sh40,000-sh60,000 for the evening. This, of course, does not include transport and other expenses.

On the weekend, a typical night out at a bar is a little different. You will most likely order several drinks along with snacks. You may also order cocktails, shots or other specialty items to make it a good night. You will be looking at around sh100,000 for the evening, depending on where you go.

Do the maths: sh100,000 per week or roughly sh400,000 per month, can easily be spent by someone who enjoys six or five drinks a week when they go out to bars. It is, in fact, similar to the amount of money that would be spent on alcohol by a hardware dealer. By going out just a couple of nights a week and drinking moderately, you are spending over sh7.2m a year.

To make matters worse, few drinkers budget for the amount of money they will spend in a bar," Okeito says.

What happens is that a person simply enters a bar, sometimes with his and of month salary and drinking commences.

The cumulative picture for the country is that excessive alcohol consumption has a negative impact on the achievement of the key human development outcomes in education, health and nutrition, and is a key driver of chronic poverty.

94%

Percentage of crude alcohol consumed by Ugandans. Only 4% is processed beer and 2% wine.

40%

Percentage of declared alcoholic content in sachet waragi compared to beer at less than 13%.

Sh500

One sachet of alcohol costs sh500 compared to beer, which goes for between sh3,000 and sh5,000.

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A man carrying booze in Kisaasi. Photos by Umara Nsubuga

Situation around the world

- The global consumption average has risen from 6.1 litres to 6.2 litres per capita per year, according to the 2011 Global Status on Alcohol and Health report.
- The highest consumption though is still in the developed world, largely in the European nations, although the report indicates the percentage of total drinkers has dropped from 68% to 64%.

Ban on sachets

In Gulu, the local administration banned the drinking of sachet booze.

"We have realised that *kaveera* (sachet booze) is too cheap and because of this, everybody can afford it," said Gulu district chairman Martin Ojara Mpendu. And he is

night, since the Government has also followed suit.

"Sachets are very cheap, easy to move around with, hence the increasing abuse," said trade minister Amama Mbabazi.

The hope is that an increased price will keep many people off. But then,

the regular drinkers of beer safer socially and economically?

According to a research by the Chemical Poverty Research Centre (CPRC), apart from the money which is spent on drinks, heavy drinkers often suffer other economic problems such as lower wages and lost employment opportunities.

They also incur increased medical expenses and decreased eligibility for development opportunities which are available at the local levels such as micro-finance loans and Operation Wealth Creation incentives.

Also, for a certain proportion of heavy drinkers, the amount they spend on alcohol exceeds their income, implying that their households will struggle with getting basic needs.

Children growing up in affected households may also lose out on education and be stigmatised.

It is not the time the liquor is consumed that got a problem. It is the kind of liquor that people drink reasoned Rukana, North MP Moses Kasabante, who admitted that he drinks.

Kasabante proposed that rather than controlling drinking hours, the authorities should regulate what people are drinking.

Kasabante and others holding a similar opinion are right, if one considers the following case: Tom Mugulana, a boda boda rider at Kabira stage Bukuru, carries his *kaveera* in his jacket, just like Moses Barwaa, a taxi taxi at Kisaasi.

There are many others who do same. No need to sit in bars, just stop to buy from. This means it even if they are stopped from sitting in a bar, they will still take it.

This certainly shows that it is actually not the time people drink but rather what they are drinking.

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