

The Khat Nexus: transnational consumption in a global economy

Project team:
David Anderson
Axel Klein
Susan Beckerleg
Neil Carrier
Degol Hailu

Khat is a plant based psychoactive substance that has recently become globalised. The international trade has benefited from 1) the integration of transport facilities allowing khat to be marketed while fresh; and 2) the dispersal of refugees from the Somali civil war. While Somalis are the most prominent users, khat is exported mainly by Kenya and Ethiopia, where it provides the foundation for rural livelihoods, and a source of tax revenue and foreign exchange. Over recent years khat has become the second most important export cash crop in Ethiopia. After reviewing the evidence, including this research, the Home Office has confirmed in January that khat is to remain a licit substance in the UK.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Across the UK khat is available from shops and mafrishi or khat cafes, supplied by extensive import and distribution networks that shift an estimated six tons of khat per week. Exports from London supply clandestine markets in North America and Scandinavia where khat is prohibited.

1 There is no organised crime involvement in the

import and distribution of khat in the UK.

- 1 Opinions over the costs and benefits of khat are divided in Africa as well as in the diaspora
- 1 Khat is spreading across Africa into new markets, often pioneered by Somalis and people from other cultivating regions like Meru in Kenya.
- 1 Khat is implicated in complex gender politics – women’s groups in the UK are prominent in campaigning for the ban on khat, yet most of the retailers in Africa are women.
- 1 The khat economy has been achieved without any external assistance in one of the least developed regions in the world
- 1 Khat is a hardy crop that requires lesser labour input. Prices are steady in contrast to fluctuations in the price of cereals (domestically) and coffee (internationally).
- 1 Foreign exchange earnings and tax revenues make khat a major source of development finance.

HIGHLIGHTS

The khat nexus stretches from the highlands of East Africa and Yemen into the mafrishi or khat cafes of Tower Hamlets. The mafrishi dedicated to the consumption of khat, soft drinks and socialising is the latest social institution to arrive in the UK. It allows for social interaction without compromising traditional values. Mafrishi are most popular with immigrant groups from Somalia, followed respectively by Ethiopians and Yemenis, and retain such features as seating arrangements along floor cushions, the

Khat kiosk on the Mombasa–Nairobi highway, Kenya
Photo: Susan Beckerleg



removal of outdoor footwear, the segregation of the sexes, and a ban on alcoholic beverages. They revolve around the leisurely consumption of khat consumed a bundle at a time over several hours. Dynamic import and distribution systems shift an estimated six tons of khat a week, much of it destined for export to countries that have prohibited khat. While in the UK khat is traded as a vegetable providing an important basis for the rise of Somali entrepreneurship and the formation of capital, in countries like Sweden and Canada there is a growing link between the khat trade and crime.

In East Africa khat is also moving from traditional areas of consumption, close to the production areas, into new markets. This can give rise to concern among local elites who associate khat use with anti-social behaviour and immorality, particularly among the youth. There is some evidence of uncontrolled and problematic khat use, particularly in the refugee camps in Northern Kenya. Young men are most vulnerable to chronic use, with adverse consequences for family cohesion and household budgets, as funds are diverted from food purchases for the children to fund khat habits. Yet, most khat retailers are women supporting their own

families through the sale of khat. Less expensive than alcohol, khat provides a focus for socialisation in growing urban centres, where chewers from different ethnic groups, social status and religion come together to form new communities of consumption.

The supply of domestic, regional and international markets is providing a boost to rural producers across East Africa. The entire commodity chain is in the hands of regional entrepreneurs, in contrast to coffee, tea and cocoa, where multinational companies possess monopoly over export and processing. Khat is not cultivated in developed countries, hence agricultural subsidies in the developed world are inapplicable. Though farmers in Ethiopia do not receive direct support from government institutions, the khat industry has become the second largest foreign exchange earner nationally, and the first in eastern Ethiopia. Khat tax revenue as a share of GDP in Ethiopia averaged 1.7 per cent for the 1990s while public health expenditure as a share of GDP averaged 1.2 per cent, which means khat revenues finance health expenditure. Nationwide, the contribution of khat to development finance and employment opportunities cannot be overemphasised.

Table 1: Value of the five major exports of Ethiopia and volume of exported khat

Period	Value in thousands of Birr					Volume in metric tonnes Khat
	Coffee	Khat	Oil seeds	Hides & skins	Pulses	
1984/85	466,269	15,903	15,640	95,408	16,875	1,380
1995/96	1,724,008	174,444	41,938	309,701	77,224	3,698
2000/01	1,520,101	510,506	269,598	633,752	72,800	11,982
2001/02	1,393,809	418,674	278,738	474,426	281,409	9,377
2002/03	1,418,324	497,866	395,565	448,003	171,244	6,106
2003/04	1,926,679	758,878	712,738	375,844	194,679	7,825

Source: National Bank of Ethiopia *Quarterly Bulletin* (various issues)

“

...most khat retailers are women supporting their own families through the sale of khat. Less expensive than alcohol, khat provides a focus for socialisation in growing urban centres, where chewers from different ethnic groups, social status and religion come together to form new communities of consumption

”

Retailing khat in Mbale, Uganda
Photo: Susan Beckerleg



MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

In the course of the research project the status of khat in the UK was reviewed by the Home Secretary. A special committee was formed by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to review the evidence and make a set of recommendations to the government. The committee set against the background of growing calls for tough controls by the shadow Home Secretary and several other members of parliament, the description of khat as a ‘legal form of crack cocaine’ in some newspapers, and a campaign by Somali activists. The research team was able to attend the deliberations of the ACMD as expert witnesses. The dispassionate presentation of the project findings was a significant factor in swaying the committee towards maintaining the current status of khat as a legal substance. Equally the ACMD took on the project team’s recommendations for greater information and the improvement of hygiene and safety standards in the mafrishi. The report was endorsed by the Home Secretary allowing for this ESRC-AHRC funded research to impact directly on government policy.

The experience of Sweden and Canada provides compelling arguments for the failure of prohibiting khat in addressing the basic problems of Somali immigrant communities. The poverty, social isolation, and the disorders resulting from post traumatic stress disorder have been wrongly attributed to khat and following the ban remain unaddressed. There has also been a diversification among khat traders in these countries into other illicit substances and the formation of a Somali organised crime networks. It is strongly urged that the status of khat be reconsidered in both countries.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Khat Nexus: transnational consumption in a global economy was funded by the ESRC-AHRC Cultures of Consumption Research Programme and ran from October 2003 to March 2005 (grant number RES-143-25-0046). The project team was David Anderson, Axel Klein, Susan Beckerleg, Neil Carrier and Degol Hailu.

The original research team began working on khat across Eastern Africa in 1997, as consultants for the United Nations drug control programme. It was felt that the work by international agencies was poorly informed about the economic, cultural and development issues regarding the dynamics of production and the culture of consumption of khat. Given the growing interest in

the UK, there was an urgent need to meet the information gap on khat by integrating research from the source countries with data from the diaspora. In this way the researchers could contribute to discussions at policy level in different settings.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Anderson D., Beckerleg S., Hailu D. and Klein A. *The Khat Controversy: Stimulating the Debate on Drugs* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006).

Anderson D. and Carrier N. 'Flowers of Paradise' or 'Polluting the Nation'? Contested Narratives of Khat Consumption', in Brewer J. and Trentmann F. (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), chapter six.

Klein A. and Beckerleg S. 'Building Castles of Spit – The Role of Khat Chewing in Worship, Work and Leisure', in Goodman J., Lovejoy P. and Sherrat A. (eds), *Consuming Habits* (London: Routledge, in press).

CONTACT

Dr David M Anderson
St Anthony's College
Woodstock Road
Oxford
OX2 6JF
telephone
+44 (0)1865 284 735
facsimile
+44 (0)1865 310 518
email
david.anderson@sant.ox.ac.uk



CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- 1 to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- 1 to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- 1 to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- 1 to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- 1 to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- 1 to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

or contact

Dr Frank Trentmann
Programme director
telephone +44 (0)20 7079 0603
email esrcConsume@bbk.ac.uk

or

Stefanie Nixon
Programme administrator
Cultures of Consumption
Research Programme
Birkbeck College
Malet Street
London WC1E 7HX
telephone +44 (0)20 7079 0601
facsimile +44 (0)20 7079 0602
email esrcConsume@bbk.ac.uk