Khat and cultural ambiguity in Somaliland

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Working on khat

• Chewing as a method
  – Research on the return of the diaspora: how, who, why, effects on SL?
  – Chewing gives access to networks, knowledge, etc. and is necessary in order to do research
  – Part-time chewing

• Chewing as a development problem
  – UNDP Somalia, Joint Needs Assessment, 2005/06
  – ”Find out why they chew, and help us make them chew less”
  – Somaliland, Puntland, South-Central Somalia
Arguments

• Khat is linked to the formation of SL
  – Well-functioning trade/distribution network; resource base for the state
  – Local form of doing politics (‘democracy on khat’)
  – Underpins and challenges socio-cultural fabric of society

• Diaspora returnees claim governance
  – Don’t chew (as much) khat
  – Consume ‘modern products’
Somaliland
• Declared its independence in 1991
• Institutions and symbols of a nation-state
  – Army, policy, parliament, house of elders, national anthem, national memorial days, monuments, etc.
  – Democratic and peaceful as opposed to rest of Somalia
Khat in Somaliland

- Chewed by most men every day
  - Culture of consumption is challenged
  - Where the social action is; only drug in town, wide availability; encouraging environment; network society based on khat
  - Important social lubricant, access to information, etc.
  - Remittances
  - Consumption among women is low/stigmatised/taboo

- Hargeisa as khat capital
  - Wide range of types catering for rich and poor
Khat Economy

- Drain around US$50 mill
  - Passivity, poor health, lowers investments
  - But trade on Isaq hands
- Important income for the state
  - US$5.5 mill or 10% of national budget
  - 18% taxation on khat imports
  - Municipal tax on khat vendors
- Drain on households
- Employment opportunities
  - Transporters, retailers, water/tea/cigarettes...
Politics on Khat

- More than violence and war
  - Peace and viability of Somaliland
- Chewing as political practice
  - "Meetings of the night are more important than the meetings of the day"
- Chewing as everyday political practice
  - "Grassroots democracy"
  - Secures a participatory/egalitarian political environment
Positives of Khat Culture

• Strengthens ties; trust; reciprocity; exchange; belonging
• Is an anti-depressant; keeps them from killing themselves and others
• Khat makes them strong (boosts semen – why do you think we have so many babies?)
• Khat illustrates that we are not Islamic fundamentalists
• Khat feeds nationalist sentiments and quest for independence
• Khat shows that we are the guardians of authentic Somali culture
Negatives of Khat Culture

- Loss of culture; chewers are goats; closer to nature; reacting only to instincts/cravings
  - 'Blood khat'; adultery; crime, HIV/AIDS, ”run-away-marriages”, etc.
- Customary law/elders are affected
- Livestock suffers; milk-khat nexus
- Destruction of families
- Men: loss of potency; loss of semen; present in feminine/private space
- Women: impure language; present in male/public space; prostitution