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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, police, 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





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